



“Modern geography is very different from the geography that most of us experienced in school. It is not about facts and descriptions. It is about planning, problem-solving, and decision-making in a complex world.”

Geography and “Generation G”

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Volatile global economies. Bouncing fuel prices. International food shortages. Our world is changing, not always for the better. Yet we are doing too little to prepare young people for troubled new realities. As we enter a new era in American politics, it’s time to ask how we fix this problem.

The children in school today are America’s first global generation. They make up what I call “Generation G.” Gen-G inhabits a planet in which our generation’s assumptions no longer hold. Just as the generations preceding ours were wrenched from their isolation by world wars—and we from our insulation by 9/11—the lives of America’s children are being transformed by the world’s increasing interconnectedness.

Problems such as terrorism, climate change, and the global economic crisis show us clearly that we can no longer behave as if change elsewhere does not affect us. This new reality may, in the long run, be good for America. But unless we prepare Gen-G for all its dimensions, the adaptation will be painful.

Are we teaching Gen-G students what they need to know about their world in order to succeed in that world? Are we, for example, creating workers who know how to minimize the use of energy in making and transporting goods? Are we preparing citizens to make decisions about how to use scarce fresh-water—whether to irrigate wheat or to provide habitat for salmon to spawn? The stark answer is that we are not. The K-12 curriculum contains shockingly little instruction about either the social, cultural, and political world or the world of the physical environment.



“Generation G” students need innovative geography education.

A 21st-century education will teach Gen-G students information such as how the distribution of natural resources on Earth influences economic opportunities in different places and how their drinking water gets to them and what the cost of transporting it is.

Fortunately, much of the foundation for reform in geography education has been laid. For 25 years, dedicated geographers and educators have been working out of the public eye to modernize the discipline. These researchers and practitioners have banded together in “geography alliances”—grassroots professional-development and advocacy organizations committed to the cause of geographic education—in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

These coalitions of academic geographers and K-12 practitioners have succeeded in designing an engaging, purposeful approach to geographic education that bears almost no resemblance to the shower of trivia most of us experienced in school. They have helped to create national geography standards that embody the new approach, and to establish geography standards in all 50 states.

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