

THE CLASSROOM AS THE FIELD FOR STUDYING GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. Recent attempts by U.S. politicians to reform the nation's schools have shifted the goal of education to school accountability as assessed in standardized testing. Such an emphasis undermines geographical education in schools because of geography's superficial representation in tests and in the social studies curriculum. Fieldwork done in the classroom can point to means of circumventing this dilemma. Collaborative fieldwork between college faculty members and public-school teachers has the potential for adding geography to the social studies curriculum in a substantive way. Work conducted jointly by Hartwick College and the Oneonta (New York) Middle School exemplifies such a partnership. *Keywords:* collaboration, fieldwork, geographical education, schools, spatial intelligence, standards.

As political and educational leaders in the United States are turning their attention to reading skills, mathematics instruction, and test scores, geographical education is being relegated to the lower rungs of the kindergarten-to-twelfth-grade (K–12) curricular ladder, where it struggles to maintain a place of any prominence in elementary and secondary education. Although the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Public Law 103–227, signed into law on 31 March 1994) and *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards* (GESP 1994) moved geographical education into the limelight in the mid-1990s, their prominence was short-lived. The need for resilient geographical education, which can survive this directional change, is apparent.

In the 1990s many academic geographers designed models and materials for furthering the study of the elementary and secondary-school geography curriculum and of geographical education in general (Palmer-Moloney 1991, 1997; Hill 1992, 1994; Bednarz and Peterson 1994; Marran 1994; Gay 1995; Salter and Salter 1995; AAG 1999).¹ However, the ideas and programs of the 1990s failed to anchor geography in the K–12 curriculum of the new millennium. Emphasis in education has shifted from process—problem based, creative, and infused with critical learning—to product—high achievement and accountability on the part of students, teachers, and administrators.

To gain an understanding of the learning environment, the students, the teachers, and the administrative and political demands that either support or undermine geography, the classroom must be recognized as a valid and necessary venue for field study. Fieldwork in schools exposes obstacles to and possibilities for the implementation of a solid geography curriculum. Regardless of time spent in the field, many academic geographers miss nuances in the classroom that affect geographical education.² Most academic geographers have neither scholarly research agendas nor firsthand experience in K–12 curriculum and instruction.

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