

THE IMPORTANCE OF GEOGRAPHY IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Dear Educational Decision-maker:

This pamphlet explains the importance of geography in the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools in Canada. Its goals are two-fold: (1) to convince parents and educational decision-makers such as you of the importance of supporting geographic education and (2) to provide some ideas about how the first goal might be accomplished.

The Canadian Council for Geographic Education (CCGE) is indebted to our colleagues at the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) in the U.S. who developed the original version of this pamphlet. The NCGE graciously gave permission for the CCGE to adapt this information for Canada.

Since this pamphlet is intended for decision-makers working in a wide variety of settings, not all of the arguments for geography instruction may apply to your situation and not all of the suggestions for promoting the teaching of geography will be appropriate. It is recognized that in many parts of Canada, geographic concepts, knowledge and skills are often integrated into social studies courses. Nevertheless, we believe that the information contained in this document should aid you in initiating or improving the instruction of geography within your jurisdiction.

The members of the Canadian Council for Geographic Education welcome your involvement in stimulating more and better quality teaching and learning of geography. We believe that geographic education is important for our students and for our future. We invite you to contact the CCGE if we can support efforts to improve your geography curriculum and instructional program.

Sincerely,

Dickson Mansfield
Chair
Canadian Council for Geographic Education

What is geography?

For many people, geography means knowing where places are. It is true that knowing where places are and something of their characteristics is important, just as knowing the alphabet is important for reading or the multiplication tables for arithmetic; but geography involves far more. Geography is the study of places on Earth and their relationships with each other. Often the study of geography begins with one's home community and expands as a person gains greater experience. Thus, geography provides a conceptual link for children between home, school and the world beyond. Geographers study how people interact with the environment and with each other from place to place and they classify the Earth into regions in order to draw generalizations about the complex world in which we live.

Because it deals with where and how people live, geography is rich in material that relates to international understanding, multi-cultural concerns and environmental education.

The tools of geography help us understand places. The tool most frequently identified with geographers is the map but they also use different kinds of statistical information, photographs and images of many kinds and a wide variety of data collected by other methods. They also rely upon their own observations and those of others found in such sources as descriptive geography texts, histories, diaries and journals.

How do Canadian students compare in terms of geographic knowledge and understanding?

Surveys show that the geographic knowledge of Canadian students leaves much room for improvement. This is especially so when compared with nations such as Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany. In many cases geographical knowledge has declined over the years, so that many of our children cannot read maps or locate provinces, territories, cities or important physical features. This lack of geographical knowledge is more than an embarrassment; it is a threat to Canada's status in the world community.

Geography helps us understand the world

Geography teaches students important skills

Through the study of geography, students learn to read maps and interpret information at geographical scales, from local to global. They are able to use data from maps, tables, graphs and texts to recognize patterns and solve problems. Students also can integrate concepts from many different areas of science, social science and the humanities and apply critical thinking to understanding and dealing with current issues of local, national and international importance.

Geography helps students learn about the world

Knowing something about where places are and what they are like is important. As a major import and export nation, with significant commitments across the globe, Canada needs citizens who have basic knowledge of other parts of the world as well as our own country. We also need to understand international relationships and the role Canada plays in them.

Geography contributes to international understanding

The world's economies are increasingly linked in an international network of trade and exchange. If our competitors know more about us than we do about them, they have an advantage in serving our markets and negotiating trade agreements and we are placed at a disadvantage in reaching their markets. Well-planned geographic education at all grade levels will help to make us more aware of other countries and cultures and prepare our students to take their place in the global community.

Geography helps us understand our own country

Geography and citizenship

Knowledge of geography helps us be better citizens. Through geography we learn to locate important events. We can understand the relationship between geography and national or international policies and we can use geographical knowledge to make informed decisions regarding the best use of the nation's resources. Finally, geographic knowledge helps us to ask important questions about policies that lead to changes in landscape and land use. Geographically informed students will be effective leaders for our country.

Geography and economics

There is a close relationship between geography and economics. The location of natural resources, the shape of transportation networks and the technology they use, the level of industrialization or energy production and many other geographical factors influence the kind of economy a country or region will have. Trade patterns are fundamental elements of both geography and economics.

Geography and history

Geography provides important clues to the past. Landforms and climate are related to migration patterns, land use and the rise and fall of civilizations. How people use the land also has a strong bearing on the economic progress of countries and regions. Thus, knowing what the landscape was like in the past is important for understanding historical processes, as is knowing who lived in a place, how they lived and how they used the land.

Geography and the environment

Many human geographers examine the relationship between humans and the environments in which they live and physical geographers are concerned with how natural systems work. Geographers conduct research to understand the impact of environmental factors on individual and group behaviour, to identify the ways in which humans change the environments in which they live and to determine the long-term environmental impacts of social processes such as population growth and technological development. These are key issues for determining government and private sector environmental policies with which citizens should be acquainted.

Ways to improve geography teaching

Implement Geography for Life: National Geography Standards

Over the past five years, our colleagues in the United States have led the development of a "world class" document of geography standards for grades 1 to 12. These standards were developed with input from outstanding educators and geographers from around the world. The resulting document, *Geography for Life*, was released in late 1994. Copies of this document have been made available to Ministries and Departments of Education across Canada as well as to all Faculties of Education. Copies may be purchased through the CCGE office or through the National Council for Geographic Education in the U.S.

These geography standards are benchmarks against which the content of geography courses at all grade levels can be measured. They have the potential to affect the education of all children in Canada. We strongly encourage you to consider adapting these standards as part of your school, board or provincial/territorial educational program.

Encourage geographical learning

Nation-wide geography competitions such as “The Great Canadian Geography Challenge” (level 1: grades 4-6, level 2 : grades 7-9/10) as well as the senior-level competition, supported by the Canadian Association of Geographers, offer students the opportunity for recognition. In addition, many local jurisdictions organize geography-related competitions or fairs to showcase exemplary student work. Students in your school should have an opportunity to participate in these competitions.

Work with teachers to make geography an integral part of students’ education. Encourage the use of suitable maps and computer applications. The integration of appropriate geographical concepts in other elementary and secondary school social science and science programs can enhance students’ learning opportunities and assist them to see the world in a holistic manner.

Depending on the grade level and overall program outcomes, encourage school decision-makers and teachers to set aside certain days or weeks for the study of specific geographical areas such as a province/territory or region within Canada, as well as countries or regions around the world. Activities might include preparing posters and maps, presenting facts about an area or bringing typical articles such as clothing, handicrafts or foods to school. Students coming from other countries can be encouraged to present information and perspectives on their homeland. Guest speakers could be invited to talk about regions and countries as well. One special time in the school year to consider these type of events is during “Geography Awareness Week” which, in Canada and the U.S., is celebrated each year during the third week in November.

Hire qualified teachers

Look for teachers with formal geography training; do not assume that any teacher can pick up enough geography to teach the subject. Teachers with training in geography should know their subject and should be enthusiastic about teaching it. Would you hire a teacher with no math courses to teach math? Why hire teachers without geography training to teach geography?

Provide opportunities for teachers to upgrade their geography knowledge

There are many ways for teachers with a limited geography background to improve their knowledge and skills or for those with training to stay abreast of new developments. Most provinces and territories have a geography or social studies teacher association. In addition, Canada has a nation-wide “geography alliance” which is linked with the parallel state-based alliance program in the U.S. In Canada, the “alliance” is known as the Canadian Council for Geographic Education (CCGE). The CCGE divides Canada into five regions with teacher representatives on its volunteer board. The CCGE produces and distributes teaching materials as well as sponsors workshops and summer institutes on teaching geography. Encourage teachers to enrol for summer or evening courses in geography at a local university, college or community college. Make sure school libraries subscribe to important publications for geography education. Some of these include:

- the geography or social studies teacher publication in your province/territory – contact the CCGE office for a current listing of addresses;
- *Journal of Geography*, from the NCGE in the U.S.;
- *Teaching Geography*, from the Geographical Association in the United Kingdom;
- *Canadian Geographic*;
- *National Geographic*.

Insure that geography classes have proper equipment

All classrooms where geography is taught should be equipped with up-to-date globes, atlases and wall maps of the world, Canada and world regions or continents. Simple maps and atlases may meet the needs of the early elementary grades, but senior elementary and secondary school classrooms require more advanced materials.

Depending on the grade level and type of geography being taught, flat maps of various types such as Canadian topographical maps as well as special purpose or thematic maps may be needed. A modern geography classroom should be equipped with at least one computer with appropriate programs. Access to computer labs for the active manipulation of data bases and research should be a regular and frequent part of all geography programs. For early elementary grades, this might include simple computer geography games and map programs. For upper grade levels, more complex programs with mapping and database manipulation functions and network access are needed.

Make learning geography interesting and exciting for students

Encourage teachers to use creative approaches to teaching geography. Use examples from the school area in teaching and for student projects. For example, geography students might make maps showing local flood plain areas, indicating the directions in which the city or town is growing or showing land uses along highways or major streets as an aid to understanding how cities develop. In class, games can be created to help students learn to identify places on a map or to identify areas that are in the news such as Japan, Mexico or Bosnia. Hold a school district or regional geography fair to encourage students to explore geographical topics in depth.

To obtain additional information about geography education

Improving geographical knowledge and skills is important to our nation and its future. We hope that you agree and that this brochure has provided some ideas to help you achieve this goal. We encourage you to contact the CCGE to obtain additional information on the discipline of geography or on geographic education. *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994* and other publications are available from the CCGE or the NCGE at the addresses indicated below.

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