

No Teacher Left Behind: The Implications of Porter and Rossbach

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The North Carolina Geographic Alliance is a grass-roots organization of teachers, geographers, and university educators committed to geography and geographic education. Since 1987, the organization has regularly hosted teacher-training programs while also developing and distributing educational materials. The Alliance recently sponsored a meeting in Burlington entitled "No Teacher Left Behind." The theme was a calculated response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which places great emphasis on student testing in reading, math, and science. Although the George W. Bush Administration has focused on how this new policy will benefit children and parents, there has been less discussion of its impact on teachers and the burden they will bear in terms of accountability, qualifications, and preparation. The phrase "No Teacher Left Behind" is a useful device for reminding us not to forget the often-overlooked needs of our state's public school teachers.

These are particularly uncertain times for geography teachers given that most of North Carolina's geography curriculum is taught in the area of social studies, and the No Child Left Behind legislation excludes social studies from its list of tested subjects. Fearing that they will be asked to focus on testable skills at the sacrifice of social studies, educators are exploring ways of integrating more geography into the teaching of reading and math. The Alliance meeting in Burlington addressed this very issue. Another possible strategy is for the geography education community to focus more attention on the discipline's earth science tradition and giving physical geography the same instructional importance as the other natural sciences. Again,

however, pursuing this approach requires us to assess and address the instructional needs of teachers.

The preceding research article by Porter and Rossbach takes on great importance when one considers the educational challenges I have described. The authors found significant differences in the degree to which high school teachers are prepared, intellectually, to teach earth science. Moreover, many high school teachers who teach earth science lack an understanding of basic geographic concepts. Although preliminary, their findings could help the North Carolina Geographic Alliance and other organizations identify places where teachers are perhaps being left behind and hence in need of training opportunities. The Alliance regularly holds summer institutes or workshops for K-12 teachers, often drawing a representative sample of participants from as many of the state's regions as possible. Perhaps it is time to think about tailoring and directing more of our teacher development programs toward specific populations or regions of teachers. Porter and Rossbach not only establish the need for more teacher workshops that address earth science topics, but also the necessity of ensuring that a significant share of workshop participants come from smaller schools and school systems.

Teacher preparation is not simply a product of coursework, although this is clearly important. As most educators would point out, the intellectual and pedagogical development of teachers is an ongoing process that, in some ways, only begins with graduation from college. In this respect, the knowledge limitations identified by Porter and Rossbach are correctable through collaborative

training and partnership with professional geographers. Borrowing from Hillary Clinton, who popularized the proverb that “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child,” I would suggest, “It Takes a Whole Discipline to Train a Teacher.” Addressing voids in teacher knowledge falls on the shoulders of all geographers and not just our colleagues in the College of Education. This includes the North Carolina Geographical Society, which could serve as an excellent source of content facilitators and leaders for training programs offered by the Alliance and the state’s Department of Public Instruction. By carrying out the goal of not leaving any teacher behind, we are in effect not allowing the field of geography to be left behind either.