

DEFINING A HIGHLY QUALIFIED K-12 GEOGRAPHY TEACHER

A Position Statement of
Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP)ⁱ

1. **Endorsement of the Need for a “Highly Qualified” Definition**
 - 1.A. Every K-12 student in the United States who studies geography deserves a highly qualified teacher who is well prepared in the discipline—a teacher who recognizes that, as an essential school subject, geography offers a powerful analytic framework for students to understand the people, places, and environments of Earth and the connections to the students’ own lives.ⁱⁱ
 - 1.B. The No Child Left Behind Act establishes that highly qualified teachers are those who:
 - (1) hold a bachelor’s degree, (2) have demonstrated broad content and teaching skills by successfully completing an undergraduate major (or advanced certification) in their subject area(s) or passing a State test and (3) hold a license to teach. For current practitioners, the option is added to hold a bachelor’s degree and either meet the 2nd requirement or pass a State test of academic subject areas.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - 1.C. GENIP believes that a highly qualified geography teacher understands the geography content, perspectives and skills necessary to the discipline as presented in *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards* (1994). We believe that if students are to learn standards-based geography well in school; if improvement in student achievement is to be documented on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other measures; and if our graduates are to be prepared for life-long geography learning, it will be necessary to implement the definition of a highly qualified teacher provided in the No Child Left Behind Act, primarily by requiring specific undergraduate coursework and ensuring specific “content pedagogy” skills.
2. **Definition of a Highly Qualified K-12 Geography Teacher**

Highly qualified teachers demonstrate appropriate content and pedagogical mastery to ensure high student achievement in geography.

 - 2.A. *Content Competency*

The geography education community expects highly qualified teachers to have achieved the following content preparation appropriate to the grade level in which they practice as professionals:

 1. High School teachers should have successfully completed course work or the equivalent to a content major in geography (at least 30 credits).
 2. Middle School/Junior High School teachers should have successfully completed course work or the equivalent to a content minor in geography (at least 15 credits).
 3. Elementary School teachers should have completed course work or the equivalent of a minimum of three content courses (nine credits) introducing Earth’s physical and human systems.

2.B. *Instructional Competency*

In addition to content mastery, geography teachers at the elementary and secondary levels must possess the following instructional competencies necessary to effectively convey geographic knowledge and skills and to make instruction and inquiry engaging for students:

1. Planning and organizing units of study in geography, using current geospatial technologies where appropriate;
2. Developing daily lesson plans that actively engage students;
3. Accommodating instruction so that it is responsive to different learning styles and to the increasingly diverse populations that characterize schools in the United States;
4. Preparing assessments that evaluate students creatively and authentically at a variety of levels;

2.C. *Professional Development*

Highly qualified teachers regularly renew their initial teacher preparation by participating in professional development to enhance their geographic content knowledge, classroom technology, curriculum plans and instructional practices in meaningful ways.

3. **Closing**

A highly qualified geography teacher has a solid grasp of the discipline of geography and its content; promotes a mastery of knowledge about place and space, scale and context; and practices the principles of sound pedagogy, implementing best practices so that students can learn to think geographically. The highly qualified geography teacher creates a classroom culture where students move beyond knowledge of the facts to develop an informed worldview, a proficiency in geographic skills, and an awareness that the value of geography lies in its problem-solving applications.

ⁱ The Geography Education National Implementation Project

GENIP is a consortium of four national geography organizations: the American Geographical Society (professional community), the Association of American Geographers (academic community), the National Council for Geographic Education (K-12 and college/university educators), and the National Geographic Society (public awareness and enrichment). GENIP is governed by a steering committee which meets to discuss policies, share information about the educational plans and programs of the member organizations, and develop projects and strategies to achieve its mission to promote standards-based geography instruction as an integral part of every student's educational experience.

ⁱⁱ A statement further defining geography and providing additional information about its value follows this document.

ⁱⁱⁱ GENIP strongly endorses efforts to define—in a functional way that school systems can meet—what it means to have a highly qualified teacher workforce.

WHAT IS GEOGRAPHY?

Geography brings together the physical and human dimensions of the world in the study of people, places, and environments. Its subject matter is Earth's surface and the processes that shape it, the relationships between people and environments, and the connections between people and places. Geography enables us to find answers to questions about our world-about where things are and how and why they got there.

The world facing students graduating in the next decade will be more crowded and more diverse, the physical environment more fragile and more threatened, and the global economy more competitive and more interconnected. Understanding that world, that environment, and that economy requires high levels of competency in geography. Geography makes us aware of the roles of place and location; of scale-from local to global; of patterns and movements-of people, goods, ideas, and capital; of resources and conflicts; of maps and geospatial technologies-such as remote sensing, geographic information systems (GIS), and global positioning systems (GPS).

WHY GEOGRAPHY?

People need to know about the nature of their world and their place in it. Geography provides the concepts, skills, and tools for learning about the world.

- Geography is *important*: we must know about the places, peoples, regions, and environments of the Horn of Africa, for example, in order to understand what is happening in Darfur or Somalia and we must know about tropical storms and global wind patterns to understand the hurricanes that impact the southeastern United States.
- Geography is *useful*: it lets us understand the location of fast food restaurants in our neighborhood or analyze the potential impact of global warming on coastal cities.
- Geography is *powerful*: with tools such as GIS, we can create maps of the shortest route home or the changing spatial distribution of tropical forests.
- Geography is *fascinating*: we can learn about the connections among traffic volumes and the incidence of childhood asthma in cities or the way that William Faulkner used Mississippi as the basis for his Yoknapatawpha County.
- Geography is *integrative*: its great strength lies in its overarching qualities as a bridge between the humanities and the physical and mathematical sciences.
- Geography is *fun*: we can make our own maps of Tolkien's Middle Earth or of the spread of starlings from a breeding pair released in New York City's Central Park a hundred years ago.

Geography enables people to understand their place in a complex and ever-changing world, to comprehend the connections between places, to recognize how local actions affect the global environment and vice versa, and to bring a spatial view to life situations. A geographically informed person is empowered to make wiser decisions in life contexts ranging from the school and family, the local community and society at large, and the workplace and civic government. Geography is for life: lifelong, life-sustaining, and life-enhancing.