

# Geography, A Life Long Journey

by  
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Ms. Graphia sat at her desk. The end of the school year has arrived. However, Ms. Graphia still has a huge pile of papers to grade, end of the year reports to do and a whole stack of national standards waiting for her attention. She wonders how she will ever get ready to check out for the summer. It would certainly be helpful if someone would give her a clue as to how she might use all this standard stuff with her class.

She picks up the most colorful of the standards documents entitled **Geography for Life, National Geography Standards, 1994**. In leafing through its magazine type format, she finds beautiful photos that perk her interest, what looks like a well designed consistent format, sections divided into grade-level skills...Interesting, but there is so much!

All sorts of questions race through her mind. The Geography Standards, what are they? Where did they come from? Five Themes, six essential elements, eighteen standards - what does all this mean? If you have asked yourself similar questions about the many standards, this brief article will attempt to answer some of these wonderings.

The National Geography Standards are a Response to the **1994 Goals 2000: Educate America Act** which identifies geography as one of the core subjects for the schools of the United States. (Goal 3: "By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8 and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including...geography,...")

They are the result of a two year collaborative effort by The Association of American Geographers, The American Geographical Society, The National Council for Geographic Education, and the National Geographic Society to whom we can attribute the visual richness of the document. During the development process, over 2000 people were asked to review the standards, including parents

and other community members, business people, and major players in geography education. The document was also reviewed by an additional 750 geography teachers.

In the **Geography Assessment Framework**, it states: "The purpose of geography education is to foster the development of citizens who will actively seek and systematically apply the knowledge and skills of geography in life situations. Geography education must be responsive to the abilities and needs of students and to the societal and workplace requirements of the community, the nation, and the world."

In the **Geography for Life, Executive Summary**, Anthony R. De Souse writes, "Geography asks us to look at the world as a whole, to understand the connections between places, to recognize that the local affects the global and vice versa. The power and beauty of geography lie in seeing, understanding, and appreciating the web of relationships among people, places, and environments." (p.3)

The National Geography Standards are a set of flexible guidelines that help identify what students should know in order to be knowledgeable about their world in order to better participate as citizens of our world. These standards are not mandated and they do not contain a prescription for how teachers should teach. They are designed to help create geographically informed students who appreciate the interdependent world in which we live. The standards encourage students to see connections and ask questions of "where" and "why" from a variety of perspectives, such as where things are located, why they are located there and what difference their location makes.

As the world becomes more complex and interconnected, this knowledge becomes even more important. Our educational system must be designed to provide teachers and students with the skills and knowledge to make them more effective citizens and life long learners. In doing so we must also rethink the time allocated to geography in both quantitative and qualitative terms. (see **Geography For Life**, Appendix D, p. 254, "Time in the Classroom")

Teachers who are familiar with the Five Themes of Geography will find a strong link between those themes, the six essential elements and the eighteen geography standards. Although all of this might look lengthy and complicated, the geography standards become more user-friendly and more easily understood if put into two levels.



The first level consists of the six essential elements (see figure 2) that serve as a foundation for the eighteen standards (see figure 3) which expand or fit into the essential elements in extending ideas. These standards do not tell teachers how to teach, but rather what the designers of the standards believe students should know

### **The Five Fundamental Themes of Geography**

Place  
Location  
Region  
Movement/Diffusion  
Human/Environment Interaction

### **National Geographic Standards Six Essential Elements**

Seeing the world in spatial terms  
Places and regions  
Physical systems  
Human systems  
Environment and society  
Applying geography

*Figure 2*

“whole picture” look at geography, Chapters 1 and 2 provide excellent visuals and information.

I would encourage you to begin your journey into understanding the Geography Standards by first leafing through the document to get a feel for its excellent visuals and consistent format. Next, examine the table of contents. It is very helpful in providing the general layout of the standards, and in helping steer you to specific sections pertaining to grades K-4, 5-8, 9-12. For a clearer understanding of the format used, pp. 38-39 explain the step by step process used throughout the document to make the information valuable and user-friendly. Then take the standards in “bits

by the time they reach grade levels 4, 8, and 12, the grades tested by the National Assessment of Educational Programs. At each of these grade levels there is a section explaining the things that the student should know and be able to do. Also helpful are sets of learning activities that provide suggestions on what you and your students might do with these ideas in the classroom. For those who would like background material that provides a

and pieces," utilizing you own professional background to tailor its content to your own needs and the needs of your students.

When examining **Geography for Life**, you will find that each standard is identified by a number, then each standard is grouped within an essential element. Each standard title is actually a

### **Eighteen Geography Standards**

#### **Seeing the world in spatial terms**

1. maps, globes, other geographic representations, tools and technology
2. mental maps and spatial context
3. spatial organization of Earth

#### **Places and regions**

4. physical and human characteristic of places
5. regions interpret Earth's complexity
6. culture/experience change perception of places/regions

#### **Physical systems**

7. physical processes shape Earth's surface
8. characteristics and distribution of Earth's ecosystems

#### **Human systems**

9. characteristics, distribution, and migration of human population
10. character and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics
11. patterns and networks of economic interdependence
12. processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement
13. forces of conflict and cooperation shape division of Earth's surface

#### **Environment and society**

14. human actions modify the physical environment
15. physical systems affect human systems
16. meaning, distribution, and importance of resources

#### **Applying geography**

17. how to apply geography to interpret the past
18. how to apply geography to interpret present/plan for future

Figure 3



summary of student expectations. Each specific standard explains what the student should know and understand after completing a particular grade level and states what the student should be able to do on the basis of this knowledge. Several useful activities are suggested for use with students.

Beginning on Page 239, Chapter 8, with "What Does Your Fourth-Grader Know?" the document focuses on interpreting student achievement at K-4, 5-8, 9-12. Here you will find interesting breakdowns of the different levels of achievements for each grade category, plus a highlighted section, p. 239-241, that provides information for both parent and teacher as to what students can be expected to know at a particular grade level.

In returning to Ms. Graphia, it would be good to remind her that the standards are designed to be used as a guide in which she clearly remains in the driver's seat. She should feel free to add to, refine, or reorganize them as she helps her students develop a greater appreciation and understanding of their cultural landscape, and recognize that geography is vital to their basic education and life-long learning.

## References

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