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**STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
*NAEP 2010 Geography – Grades 4, 8, and 12***

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As Dave Gordon mentioned in the introductions, I am a fourth-grade teacher at Solano Avenue Elementary School in downtown Los Angeles. We are just a few blocks from Dodger Stadium and close to Chinatown.

Most of our students are Asian or Latino and they come from low-income homes. Many are English Language Learners. There are approximately 10 different languages spoken by the students at Solano, and their family histories cover a great deal of geography. Yet, many of these children have never travelled anywhere outside their own neighborhood.

This past spring, I took students on a field trip to the Manzanar National Historic Site, which was an internment camp for Japanese Americans and people of Japanese descent during World War II. It's 225 miles north of Los Angeles in the eastern Sierra Nevadas, about a four-hour bus ride from LA. Many of the students kept asking if we were still in California even though we had studied where the camp was on a map. They couldn't comprehend that we were still in California, that our state is so big and so varied.

Geography is the study of our planet earth—how its lands, seas, and people interact, and of the impact that its different peoples, economies, and societies have upon one another.

Geography—along with history, civics and economics—is part of the social studies. Each of these subjects is tested separately by NAEP in order to give a clear report on the subject-matter knowledge and skills that students have attained. Yet, obviously, these subjects are intertwined. Geography provides the context for all the others.

Students need to understand the relationships between the environment and the societies that develop within it. They need to study the relationships between various peoples and cultures, and make the connections between the location of natural resources and economic development.

All of these relationships provide context for understanding the social, political, and economic structures that exist in our world today.

The NAEP Geography assessment goes well beyond place-name geography, though students are expected to know the names and locations of many places. To reach the *Proficient* achievement level on the assessment, students must be able to apply what they know, to use important concepts, and to analyze and explain specific situations. It is in these application and analytical skills that too many of our students fall short.

As Commissioner Buckley has told you, the average score on the NAEP Geography assessment has increased over the past decade and a half at grade 4, stayed flat at grade 8, and declined at grade 12. All of the gains at grade 4 have taken place at the *Basic* achievement level or below—at the lower end of the achievement distribution. Since about the year 2000, there have been similar gains at the fourth-grade *Basic* level in NAEP Civics and U.S. History.

These improvements may all reflect another trend in NAEP, the gain in basic reading skills, as reported by the fourth-grade reading assessment over the past decade. The improvement in basic reading skills would certainly impact the lower-performing students since if they can read the questions easily they have a much better chance of answering them correctly. However, to reach *Proficient* requires more detailed knowledge of geography and critical thinking skills. Unfortunately, there have been no gains at the *Proficient* level.

The proportion of students with at least a *Basic*-level knowledge of geography is reasonably high—about 70 to 80 percent at grades 4, 8 and 12. But only about a quarter of the students reach the *Proficient* level, and that small proportion has not changed significantly or declined.

The situation at 12th grade is the most disappointing. There, the proportion of students reaching *Proficient* has dropped steeply—from 27 percent in 1994 to just 20 percent last year. To attain that standard, which was set by the Governing Board, students should be able to interpret maps, to discuss the physical and cultural features of major world regions, and to discuss the economic, political, and social factors that define various parts of the earth. Yes, the *Proficient* standard is challenging, but it is one that students need to reach in order to understand our complex world.

More 12th graders report that they study geography topics at least once a month, but very few seem to develop the analytical and conceptual framework they need—or much in-depth knowledge of the subject.

In elementary school, many teachers integrate geography into the other subjects they teach. It is not only part of social studies; it also can be referred to and developed in reading and science—and even in math. Children are always interested in other places and other people—no matter what their socio-economic background or how limited their own travel and experience. Incorporating examples and concepts from geography can make any subject come alive.

But in middle and high school, geography is often the unclaimed subject. In many districts and schools, the responsibility for teaching geography is unclear. The data seem to indicate that

students are not receiving sufficient, quality instruction in geography, and as an educator and citizen, this concerns me.

Besides the sample questions in the Geography Report Card, several dozen more test items have been released today. They are available to the public online through the NAEP Questions Tool. I would like to talk about a few of the questions, which offer some insight into what students know and how clearly they can think and reason.

At grade 4 there is a question that asks students to determine distance on a map. That's a basic skill. But because of the dependence on technology, the ability to read a map seems to be becoming a lost art. It shouldn't be lost because everyone needs to have some idea of the spatial relationships and distances between different places, and that can be best understood by reading a map. Sadly, on this question, only about a third of the students chose the correct answer, which is D—140 miles.

Here's another question where the percentage of correct responses shocked me. I couldn't believe that only 51 percent of fourth graders could put these places in descending order of size—North America, the U.S.A., California and Los Angeles. As a fourth-grade teacher, this is very troubling.

At 8th grade there are several questions which show the strengths and weaknesses of what students know and can do in geography. The first is a line graph, showing the changes in urban and rural population in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries. Most students could read the graph. When asked a factual question about it, 83 percent answered correctly. But when asked to give two reasons why the population changes occurred, performance fell off: 26 percent gave one acceptable reason; just 4 percent gave two reasons; and the remaining 70 percent of test papers were wrong, blank or off-task.

About half of the eighth-grade students answered correctly a multiple-choice question about why sod houses were built on the American Great Plains. But only 9 percent could write a full explanation of the population distribution in Egypt, which they were shown on a map.

At 12th grade about 80 percent correctly answered a multiple-choice question on the main reason why people move from one country to another—economics. But only 12 percent could give even a partial explanation, based on a diagram, of how changes in transportation have influenced urban growth.

It seems pretty clear from these examples that most students have some basic skills and some basic facts, but they fall well short of being able to marshal enough information and general concepts to give responsive answers to some straight-forward questions.

The basic skills are important. The improvements shown in basic reading and at the *Basic* level in fourth-grade geography are significant. But our schools must go beyond that to develop the insights and analytical abilities that our students need to understand the world.

As a teacher, I realize the power of geography. It provides the context for understanding many of the complex social, political and economic relationships that exist in our world. Geography is easily integrated into any subject, and it can provide the engaging, real world examples that make learning meaningful. I believe the social studies, including geography, are crucial for our students and for our schools. The NAEP test itself shows some of the richness of the field. Unfortunately, it also shows that too many students still fall far short of the knowledge and understanding they need.