K-12 EDUCATION

Most Eighth Grade Students Are Not Proficient in Geography

What GAO Found

About three-quarters of eighth grade students—the only grade for which trend data are available—were not “proficient” in geography in 2014, according to GAO’s analysis of nationally representative data from the Department of Education (Education). Specifically, these students had not demonstrated solid competence in the subject, and the proficiency levels of eighth grade students have shown no improvement since 1994 (see figure). Geography is generally taught as part of social studies, but data show that more than half of eighth grade teachers reported spending a small portion (10 percent or less) of their social studies instruction time on geography. Further, according to a study by an academic organization, a majority of states do not require geography courses in middle school or high school.

A key challenge to providing geography education is the increased focus on other subjects, according to officials in selected states and K-12 teachers GAO interviewed. These officials and teachers said spending time and resources on geography education is difficult due to national and state focus on the tested subjects of reading, math, and science. GAO’s interviews and review of relevant reports identified a range of other challenges, as well, including:

- misconceptions about what geography education entails;
- lack of teacher preparation and professional development in geography;
- poor quality of geography instructional materials; and
- limited use of geographic technology in the classroom.

Education’s role with respect to geography education primarily involves assessing student performance in the subject, and providing data and the results of its analyses to the public. Education periodically assesses student achievement in geography, and other areas, but not with the same regularity as other subjects it is required by law to assess. Beyond assessments, Education officials said that absent funding specifically for geography-focused programs, the agency is hindered in its ability to support geography education.

Figure: Geography Proficiency Levels of Eighth Graders, 2014 and 1994

Source: GAO analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Geography Assessment data for 1994 and 2014. | GAO-16-7