

Group Promotes Global Studies in Curriculum

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While policymakers and business leaders have lamented American students' inadequate knowledge about the world, a growing number of schools around the United States are beginning to infuse a global perspective into the curriculum and classroom activities.

Some 300 educators committed to such an approach gathered here Feb. 17-20 at the International Studies Schools Association conference. They shared ideas and resources for teaching children about other regions and countries, including their geography, history, politics, and culture.

The 4-year-old ISSA, a network of K-12 schools housed at the University of Denver, has been working to expand the number of teachers and schools that incorporate international content into the curriculum, as well as the quantity and quality of materials to help them do so.

“We want to help bolster teachers' content knowledge ... and help them to become better conduits of international education in their classrooms,” said Mark Montgomery, an associate dean at the university's Center for Teaching International Relations and an organizer of the conference. “Many teachers [who take an international approach] are feeling alone and isolated,” he said. “Here they can connect with those teachers who are doing this.”

No Add-Ons

Much of the conference focused on the progress made by this academic approach. An increasing number of schools are adopting an international theme, experts here said, and at least 18 states have initiated policies that encourage or require greater attention to instruction in world history and culture, foreign languages, and the interactions between the United States and other countries.

But as academic standards and accountability gain greater influence over curricular decisions, and schools pay more attention to the core subjects that are tested under federal and state school improvement initiatives, such changes have proved difficult, said Michael H. Levine, the executive director of the National Campaign for

International Education in the Schools. The campaign is an arm of the New York City-based Asia Society.

“The curriculum in the ‘Leave No Child Behind’ world requires that global education not be a separate subject,” Mr. Levine told the attendees. The international content in the curriculum, he said, “has to be transformative, not additive.”

Educators who have helped their schools go through that transformation said the process has been complicated, but beneficial for both teachers and students.

“Having staff integrate global awareness within their mandated content—while making time for two hours of literacy a day and 90 minutes of math a day—is a challenge,” said Myrna Meehan, the principal of the Winding Springs Elementary Center for Leadership and Global Economics, a school in Charlotte, N.C.

The effort has paid off for Winding Springs, which was set to close because of low academic performance before it was restructured as a magnet school. It now draws some 650 students from around the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district and has moved off the state list of low-performing schools.

The challenges are exacerbated, though, by the tendency of schools in this country to focus exclusively on the U.S. perspective, as well as by high-stakes standardized testing in core subjects, a lack of instructional materials, and limited classroom time, said Catherine W. Scherer, an educator and the president of Simon and Barklee Inc., a Langley, Wash.-based publisher of books that have international themes related to content in core subjects.

“But the reality is that there are 6 billion people in the world, and 95 percent of them don't live here,” she pointed out to the more than 50 participants in a session on internationalizing the curriculum. “Our students have to have an awareness and acknowledgment of the world beyond the confines of [their own] city, state, and country.”

Beyond Food and Flags

In more than two dozen sessions, the conference offered practical advice for teachers to move beyond the tradition in many schools of simply highlighting the food, flags, and festivals of other regions and countries. Sessions on globalizing lessons in social studies, science, math, business education, physical education, language arts, and service learning were provided.

Ms. Scherer suggested that teachers “internationalize” their classrooms, using world maps, centers where students can research information about other countries, and daily routines, such as learning a foreign word each day, discussing current events around the world, or using metric measurements or currency conversions.

To do so, teachers themselves must gain greater knowledge and better understanding of the world, experts said.

“Know your subject matter,” urged Betsy Devlin-Foltz, the program director for the Longview Foundation. The Silver Spring, Md.-based organization, which was a sponsor of the conference, provides grants for teacher education and student workshops on international issues.

“Look for every opportunity,” she said, “to bring the global perspective to teaching.”

Deputy Managing Editor Karen Diegmüller contributed to this report.

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