

American interaction with Asia could start in nation's classrooms

MICHIANA POINT OF VIEW

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American students know far too little about the rest of the world. Witness the intensity with which teachers sought appropriate materials to help their students understand the politics, religions and cultures of the Middle East and the central Asian region after Sept. 11.

In 2001, the National Commission on Asia in the Schools, created by the Asia Society, released a report that said young Americans are "dangerously uninformed about international matters" and "this knowledge deficit is particularly glaring in the case of Asia," home to more than 60 percent of the world's population.

Our students ought to be able to pinpoint Tokyo, Afghanistan or Malaysia on a map. Yet the commission found that even among high school students who are bound for college, 25 percent could not name the ocean separating the United States from Asia. Eighty percent of all high school students surveyed were unaware that India is the world's largest democracy.

As the standards movement in American education has made important strides in the past dozen years, we have seen a refreshing and long-overdue focus on what our students should know and be able to do at various points in their education. Yet somehow this consensus for meaningful and rigorous standards has not made international education a high priority. Surely we cannot have a world-class education system if our children have only a superficial acquaintance with the rest of the world.

While cultivation in our school-age children of a broad understanding of the economic, cultural, religious, political, military, health and environmental dynamics around the globe affecting our nation's interests has always been vital, recent international events underscore its urgency.

Positive American interaction with all regions of Asia presents opportunities with significant long-term benefits.

United States trade with Asia has reached almost \$900 billion a year, more than double our trade with Europe. Given Asia's relatively well-educated population and economic growth, Asia is likely to provide a disproportionate share of world market growth in the 21st century.

School curricula rarely reflect this reality. To cite one example, while 1 million students in the United States study French, a language spoken by 70 million people, fewer than 50,000 students are learning Chinese, a language spoken by more than 1 billion people. That is hardly a promising formula for preparing our students to succeed.

As U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige has said, "Complex global interactions, once reserved for the diplomatic corps, are today the stuff of everyday business deals and cultural exchanges. If we expect

students to navigate international waters, we need to give them an international education that meets the highest standards."

What steps can decision-makers take to improve and expand teaching about Asia and other world regions and cultures in our schools?

- Governors can play a leading role by speaking out on the link between international commerce and jobs in their states. They can conduct reviews of the adequacy of current educational efforts and identify state resources and best practices to further education and business understanding of Asia.
- State departments and agencies of Education can take concrete actions to ensure that knowledge of other world cultures and global issues is integrated into standards and assessments for students and certification requirements for teachers.
- The federal government, through the Departments of Defense, State, Commerce and Education, and the CIA, should address the critical shortages in foreign languages that threaten our national security. We need to stimulate opportunities for more students from elementary school through college to learn major world languages.
- School districts and schools can make sure that high-quality professional development opportunities about Asia and other world regions are made available to teachers.
- Universities should make their strong area studies expertise available more systematically to K-12 schools. Schools of education should ensure that all new teachers have the opportunity to learn about another world culture or region.
- Parents ought to insist that international studies are treated not as a frill, but as a vital part of education for every citizen of the 21st century.

Everything from averting the spread of nuclear and biological weapons to opening new markets and business opportunities, from solving global environmental and health concerns to managing international conflicts will require our citizens to have greater knowledge of Asia and other world regions.

Studying other countries and cultures will help empower our young people to succeed in the marketplace and fulfill the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. It is time we applied this lesson in the classroom.

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