Global citizenship and the American high school curriculum

David Weatherly reflects on the impact of the marginalisation of Geography in the American curriculum. His research suggests that, despite isolated examples of good practice, the serious lack of international awareness among high school students that was highlighted by the events of September 11 2001 has not proved to be an impetus for the development of a more globally holistic social studies curriculum.

Introduction
Although global citizenship has been part of the National Curriculum in secondary schools in England since 2002 there is no statutory requirement for global citizenship for American high school students. However, in the United States citizenship education has long been woven into social studies programmes. This approach ‘which integrates history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology and law-related education’ (Kennedy Manzo 2003) emerged in the United States following the National Education Association curriculum revision in 1911 (Clark and Stoltman 2000).

A research visit to the United States as a Walter Hines Page scholar afforded me an opportunity to visit thirteen schools in four states, formally interview forty teachers and officers of district education boards and observe lessons with the objective of answering the following questions:

• What statutory entitlement to global citizenship education currently exists for students in the sample of American high schools (equivalent to Years 10 to 13 in England) observed?
• Is an international dimension to the curriculum in American middle schools (equivalent to Years 7 to 9) more or less pronounced than in high schools?
• What has been the impact on global citizenship education of the virtual disappearance of geography as a separate high school subject?
• Since the events of September 11 2001, has there been any discernible change in the status of global citizenship education?

Global citizenship and high school social studies programmes
State graduation requirements in the nine high schools visited ensured that students studied a prescribed number of social studies courses, requiring between 3 and 3.5 years of study, to obtain the appropriate number of credits at the end of Grade 12. In all cases these courses included a full year study of US History and Modern World History, often packaged as ‘World Civilisations’. In addition, all high schools required students to study at least a semester (half an academic year) of US Government, Political Science or Economics. Only four high schools prescribed courses with elements of global citizenship or any geographical understanding. Three of these were in Portland Public Schools District in Oregon and required students to complete a one year programme in ‘Global Studies’ with aims which included understanding the nature of interdependence and developing an awareness of the concept of global citizenship. A fourth school, in the state of Kansas, required students to complete a semester of world geography during their freshman year. The relatively high profile of global citizenship education in Portland, where there is no social science Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), appeared to be the result of a collaborative effort by social studies educators to combat the increasing marginalisation of their curriculum in the face of competition from subjects in which students sit SATs, especially mathematics and English. One outcome of their work, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, is an innovative set of skills standards in social studies (Portland Public Schools 2001). Because there is no statutorily prescribed body of knowledge to cover, these standards allow schools a good deal of autonomy to select the most relevant content. Further support has been offered to teachers through grant funded summer institutes and the development of learning and teaching materials. This contrasts with the situation of the Kansas school which introduced a semester of geography, including issues such as global interdependence and the work of international organisations, in order to cover the prescribed content of a state social studies SAT. Important parallels were found between Portland and Kansas. It was immediately apparent that in both locations imaginative curricular developments in global citizenship at school level were underpinned by a clear and innovative framework for curricular design, teaching and assessment at state or district level.

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recommendations of the US National Geography Standards (National Council for Geographic Education 1994). By the end of the Eleventh Grade (Year 12 in England), assessment indicators to be covered by students included the ‘analysis of world events’ and the ‘evaluation of the spatial aspects of economic systems such as the international debt crisis’ (p.35).

Amongst the elective courses offered to students to complete the requisite number of credits for graduation at the high schools in the study, were several which contained a clearly defined global dimension. For example, one school in Seattle (Washington State) offered ‘Contemporary World Problems’ as an option in the final year. However, as Li, Knox and Wright (2003) have emphasised in their study of high schools, the proportion of students opting for social studies electives is traditionally very low.

**Global citizenship and the middle school curriculum**

The extent to which a global dimension was included within the curriculum of the middle schools visited varied enormously across the four schools observed. Two schools in Indiana did not offer geography beyond the Fifth Grade although a history class a week in Grade 8 was given over to current affairs in one of the schools and the other offered a current events class in Grade 6. This compares with the situation in a middle school in Kansas (where children are required to sit a social studies SAT at the end of Grades 6 and 8) in which geography was being taught in all three grades. This school was drawing upon the comprehensive Kansas State Board of Education Curricular Standards (1999), the geography element of which is based on the National Geography Standards (1994), to design its curriculum. A frequent response from middle school teachers asked about this general lack of global dimension work, was to blame history dominated high school social studies programmes. They argued that since middle schools are preparing pupils to perform well at high school, it is difficult to justify precious curriculum time for geography and global citizenship work when neither are significant components of a student’s studies beyond Grade 8. A further reason cited for the marginalisation of geography was the increasing expectation on schools to perform well in the English and mathematics tests, the results of which form the basis of comparative school league tables.

**The impact of the decline of geography on global citizenship**

Geography as a separate subject had almost disappeared from the curriculum of American high schools by the beginning of the 1980s (Clark and Stoltman 2000). With the demise of geography went the curriculum context for most global citizenship related high school teaching. Unsurprisingly it was found that even in states where a SAT in social studies existed, it was based on the statutory history and civics standards, so there was little justification for programming a class to deliver the less significant global elements of the test. If these elements were handled at all, they tended to be delivered through history and world civilisation classes by teachers who had little or no academic background in geography or knowledge of global issues. Because of this, many teachers interviewed felt that the global aspect of the social studies curriculum had already entered a spiral of decline. They argued that a diminishing number of high school graduates with experience of geography or global studies would lead inevitably to a fall in recruitment to geography courses at college level, which would further reduce the number of teachers with a qualification in geography or a related field. This very pessimistic outlook existed despite a national campaign to reinstate geography within the school curriculum during the past twenty years (Clark and Stoltman 2000). The campaign began in 1984 when the US National Geographic Society initiated a Geography Education Programme and followed up a year later with a scheme to support the training of teachers in geography through ‘state alliances’. In the state of Kansas for example, this involved training groups of teachers for six weeks to a level where they in turn could become the trainers of colleagues attending two week summer camps. In 1994 the National Council for Geographic Education published *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards*, as voluntary geography curriculum guidance for Grades 1 through 12. Information from the thirteen schools studied indicated that the level to which these standards have been adopted varies dramatically. Beyond Grade 9 it is exceptional for a student’s curriculum to include a compulsory geographical or global dimension whilst at middle school, geography is rarely a component of the curriculum in all three grades. Since no state in America requires high school students to sit a SAT in geography, and the subject is not part of the American College Testing programme (Li, Knox and Wright 2003), it was no surprise to discover that geography did not merit curriculum time after the freshman year, even in high schools that purported in their mission statements to foster a sense of global citizenship. This reflects the findings of Clark and Stoltman (2000 p.251) that although on a national level the profile of geography as an academic subject has been raised within the public and political arena, ‘on an individual school level, however, geography remains the underdog of subjects despite the large scale projects and the vigorous policy making of the national campaign’.

**The status of global citizenship post September 11 2001**

Staff interviewed felt that after September 11 2001 the views of many of their students had polarised, ranging from unquestioning backing of the government to active participation in anti-war marches. They found something of an irony in the perception of global studies held by some members of school senior management after the terrorist attacks, expressing dismay that, after years of being devalued, they were now expected to provide a ‘rapid response curriculum’ for bewildered, angry and depressed
young people with huge gaps in their basic geographic knowledge and understanding of global issues. In a minority of schools, a broader and more inclusive curriculum was considered and some social studies teachers had already introduced more critical thinking and evaluation of current affairs into their lessons. However, others expressed concern and a sense of vulnerability and isolation when tackling issues in this way and were fearful of a potential backlash from both management and parents when they encouraged vigorous debate and the consideration of alternative views in the classroom. With a national campaign to reinstate the status of geography and at least some evidence of an acceptance, post September 11, that the social studies curriculum needs to be more responsive to global issues, an impartial observer could be forgiven for being optimistic about the status of global citizenship in the future. However, the wave of patriotism that swept the nation after September 11 also generated a campaign for more emphasis on the teaching of American history (Kennedy Manzo 2003). History is therefore set to attain even greater dominance if the National Council for History succeeds in its aim of establishing a predominantly American history-centred social studies curriculum, focusing on content rather than process. This would certainly reduce, if not actively undermine, the impact of those who are seeking, post September 11, to create a more globally holistic perspective to the high school curriculum.

Conclusion
Only four of the nine high schools surveyed required students to study courses with a global dimension in order to graduate. All but one of these were located in the Portland district where innovative development work had been undertaken by an active group of social studies educators, who had been co-ordinated imaginatively and funded by an external charitable body. Although in the context of Portland it might be argued that the lack of a state SAT provided a curricular freedom which social studies teachers in other states did not enjoy, this was certainly not the case in Kansas. Here, the school prescribing a compulsory ‘global credit’ did so partly in order to cover the geographic and economic assessment indicators which would appear in the compulsory state SAT. Although no middle schools were visited in Portland it is significant that the only one found to be teaching geography at all three grades was in Kansas where well structured state wide geography standards exist for the subject and the impact of teacher training ‘state alliances’ has been significant. Teachers interviewed about the impact of the disappearance of geography as a high school subject, felt that the natural context for most global citizenship work in the high school had now been lost and saw little likelihood of it ever being reinstated. Ironically, the events of September 11 2001 and more recently, the war in Iraq, were found to have generated amongst many high school students a desire to understand more about the global issues which the established social studies curriculum is ill equipped to satisfy.

No federal statutory right to a high school curriculum including global citizenship exists for young people in America. This does not mean however that innovative and intellectually challenging international dimension work was absent in the high schools visited. In educational contexts where one or more teachers were inspired by the visionary work of a colleague, a professional development experience, an enlightened curriculum, or the pressing needs of their school’s community; then global citizenship was evident. It was, however, piecemeal in its occurrence, dependent often on the professional commitment of individual teachers to developing open, enquiring and self-critical minds amongst their students. The absence of geography as a high school subject for the past twenty years was felt to have denied global citizenship a natural home and contributed to the lack of international awareness of American young people so exposed by the events of September 11 2001. Although this event was clearly a catalyst for considering the development of a more holistic curriculum in some institutions, generally no discernible change was found to have occurred during the past two years to the statutory national high school social studies programme which remains dominated by American history.

References
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This article was first published by the Geographical Association in Teaching Geography, April 2004.