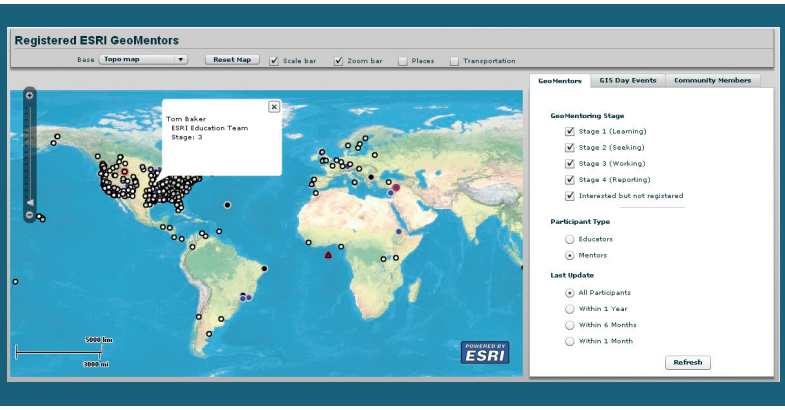
Can You Do It?

The challenge to improve geographic awareness



After registering at the GeoMentoring.org site, your location will be placed on the worldwide GeoMentoring map so nearby potential Mentees can contact you through the Web site.

What would it be like if every day was GIS Day?

In the 11 years since its inception, the popularity of this global event has grown and led to celebrations that span many more days than the official observance on Wednesday during Geography Awareness Week. The same impulse that inspired both GIS Day and Geography Awareness Week is behind a new initiative: the GeoMentoring program.

Although geospatial information continues to play a larger and more critical role in analyzing conditions and making decisions in many professions, the level of geographic knowledge and spatial thinking skills of students continues to fall. The GeoMentoring Program goes beyond an annual event that heightens awareness of the importance of geographic knowledge and establishes a resource for improving this type of knowledge all year long.

"The rate of geoliteracy in the United States—meaning the number of people who can synthesize geographic information from a variety of sources and draw a sound conclusion—is frighteningly low," said Daniel C. Edelson, vice president for education, National Geographic Society. "If it is allowed to continue, the inability of most Americans to do even basic analysis of geographic information will have a profound impact on our ability to compete economically, maintain our security, and sustain our environment in coming decades."

What Is the GeoMentoring Program?

The GeoMentoring program is a global answer to this growing need for geoliteracy. Part resource center and part matchmaking service, the GeoMentoring program helps people who know and use geography in their professional lives join forces with educators who want to incorporate activities that teach geography and geospatial technology into the daily curriculum of students from elementary through college levels.

A key part of the program is the GeoMentor Web site, which has tools for seeking a partner, finding activities, acquiring resources, and sharing stories.

The GeoMentoring program was announced by its cosponsors, the National Geographic Society (NGS) and ESRI, on July 13, 2009, at the Plenary Session of ESRI's 29th Annual International User Conference. During the conference, Charlie Fitzpatrick, who is leading the GeoMentoring program for ESRI, and Anne Haywood of the National Geographic Society made several presentations about the program that elicited a lively response from attendees. More than 900 people at the conference indicated their interest in the program by having their conference badges scanned so they could be sent additional information.

On stage at the 2009 ESRI International User Conference, the achievements of Joppatowne High School, Joppa, Maryland, were lauded (left to right: Jack Dangermond, Eric Cromwell, Matt Kelly, Joey Hightower, and Jacqueline Smith).

Who Can Be a GeoMentor?

People from any occupational field who use geography and recognize its importance are welcome to participate in the program. GeoMentors adopt a classroom or run an after-school program that helps both teachers and students see the world around them—at scales large and small—geographically. Activities GeoMentors might engage in range from exercises for younger students that involve paper maps and crayons to long-term GIS projects for older students that benefit the community.

What Does It Take to Be a GeoMentor?

There are four important qualities that a potential GeoMentor should possess: vision, commitment, willingness to learn and share, and a sense of excitement.

Vision

GeoMentors need to share the belief that youth are the future and that understanding geography will help them (our future leaders) make better decisions.

Commitment

While this program carries on and expands the spirit of GIS Day, GeoMentoring is a relationship, not an event. There is no minimum number of sessions or activities required, but the partnership between the GeoMentor and the educator needs time to develop.

Willingness to Learn and Share

GeoMentors listen to the educators they are working with to learn—specifically—what they need to support geographic learning in their classrooms.

Excitement

GeoMentors need to remember why they became interested in geography in the first place so they can convey this excitement to students and teachers.

What Do GeoMentors Do?

The only thing a GeoMentor must do is get to know the needs of the educator-partner. The list of activities a GeoMentor can do is long, varied, and constantly growing. The needs of the educational partner will largely determine which activities an individual GeoMentor undertakes. These activities will evolve with the relationship. These suggestions are just a few examples:

- ❑ Lead a very local field trip (around the room, building, or neighborhood) highlighting examples of mappable phenomena.
- ❑ Provide maps to hang in the classroom.
- ❑ Do a presentation about geography for a classroom or youth group.
- ❑ Provide subscriptions to publications like *National Geographic* magazine.
- ❑ Bring the class or youth group on a field trip to your work site.
- ❑ Help a class/group learn to make maps with GIS.
- ❑ Lead an activity using the Geography Action! materials from the National Geographic Web site (www.nationalgeographic.com/geography-action).
- ❑ Provide prepackaged lessons that use GIS (www.esri.com/ourworldgiseducation).
- ❑ Host a GeoCareers event for a high school class about careers that engage geography.
- ❑ Help an educator get to a professional development event—online class, local workshop, regional user group meeting, or ESRI Education User Conference.
- ❑ Be a judge at a school or youth group geo event.

More suggested activities are listed on the GeoMentoring.org (edcommunity.esri.com/geomentor) Web site under Activities. Many more ideas can be found on the Web sites linked to the GeoMentoring site.

How Do I Get Involved?

The first step in becoming a GeoMentor is visiting the GeoMentoring.org Web site (edcommunity.esri.com/geomentor) and registering so you can be contacted by potential Mentees. This process requires nothing more than an ESRI Global ID and lets you indicate how you wish to be contacted. Once completed, your location will be placed on the site's map so educational partners near you can contact you through the GeoMentoring.org site.

Making an Impact

Enthusiasm and dedication change students' lives

Sharing geographic knowledge through mentoring can start a chain reaction that enriches the lives of many people. Just ask Eric Cromwell.

During the Plenary Session of the 2009 ESRI International User Conference, Cromwell explained how a chance encounter 13 years ago with a local engineer, who was also a GIS user, ignited his interest in teaching GIS. Now, not only does Cromwell use GIS in his environmental science classes, but he has also had a tremendous impact as a GeoMentor for Joppatowne High School in Joppa, Maryland.

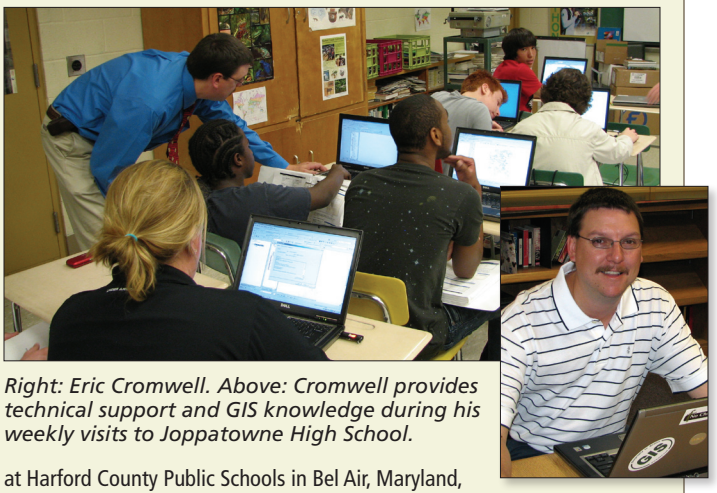
Jacqueline Smith, the science department chair at Joppatowne High School, was inspired by Cromwell and enamoured with GIS despite having no previous experience with the technology. Smith, who already had a busy schedule teaching five classes and coaching three sports, mastered the GIS course content and added it to the school's career path program.

Clearly, Smith feels the results made this effort worthwhile. "The coolest part about this course is the amount of time and energy students are willing to invest on their projects," said Smith. "On many occasions, they would get passes out of their scheduled classes to come to my room to do work—not because they were behind, but because they wanted to do more—they wanted to get ahead."

Using the STARS Curriculum from Digital Quest and ArcGIS software, the 16 students in the Joppatowne High School program have acquired a range of geospatial skills.

Two students from Smith's program class, Joey Hightower and Matt Kelly, joined Cromwell and Smith on stage at the 2009 ESRI International User Conference. They described the projects they have worked on during the past year. By year's end, they will have earned their spatial technology and remote-sensing certifications and hope to intern with local government agencies using these new skills to solve local problems.

Cromwell, who is now the coordinator of Accelerated Learning Programs at Harford County Public Schools in Bel Air, Maryland, visits Joppatowne High School on a weekly basis to supply technical support and GIS knowledge. He continues to wrestle with a temperamental network and an assortment of other less-than-ideal conditions.



Right: Eric Cromwell. Above: Cromwell provides technical support and GIS knowledge during his weekly visits to Joppatowne High School.

In his closing remarks at the Plenary Session, Cromwell challenged the audience to support the GeoMentoring program. "That chance encounter led to what you see here on stage. Imagine what we could do if we were intentional about this. My charge to you is this: first, believe in the kids. Believe that they can use these tools. Second, find teachers willing to say 'I don't know' in front of the kids. That's frightening. Find teachers willing to go beyond what is written on the test. Ladies and gentlemen, let us make every day GIS Day."