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NOTHING NEUTRAL ABOUT EVOLUTION

Scientists in Texas, elsewhere urged to remain on guard for threats to evolution education

WASHINGTON, DC – Despite state high-school biology standards that require that “the student knows the theory of biological evolution,” the latest actions by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) suggest that Texas will become the next battleground for evolution education.

Christine Castillo Comer, the director of science curriculum at TEA with nearly three decades of experience as a science teacher, was recently pressured to resign from her post after forwarding an e-mail about an upcoming talk in Austin by Barbara Forrest, a professor of philosophy at Southeastern Louisiana University, and coauthor of *Creationism’s Trojan Horse*, a scholarly work that chronicles how creationist politics are behind the movement to insert intelligent design/creationism into the public-school science curriculum. Forrest was an expert witness in the landmark 2005 *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* case that ruled against the teaching of intelligent design in the local Dover, Pennsylvania, public schools. The e-mail, originating from the National Center for Science Education, was titled “FYI” by Comer and distributed to a few people and members of a local online community.

According to a memo from TEA officials calling for Comer’s dismissal that was obtained by *The Austin American-Statesman* through the Texas Public Information Act, “Ms. Comer’s e-mail implies endorsement of the speaker and implies that TEA endorses the speaker’s position on a subject on which the agency must remain neutral.”

Biologists and evolution education advocates across the United States are outraged that the TEA requires, as agency policy, neutrality when talking about evolution and creationism.

“When it comes to science education, we absolutely cannot remain neutral on evolution. Evolution is the unifying principle of modern biology,” asserts Douglas J. Futuyma, president of the American Institute of Biological Sciences and distinguished professor of ecology and evolution at Stony Brook University. “Within biological science, the reality of evolution is not controversial. Creationism and its thinly veiled relative, ‘intelligent design,’ continue to pose a real threat to science education and the public understanding of science throughout the United States. It is the responsibility of science educators at all levels to stay well-informed, and to inform their students on the major principles in every area of science. With biology, evolution is the leading principle. We must remain vigilant.”

Shortly, the Texas State Board of Education will undertake its 10-year review of the science portion of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, the curriculum that determines what will be taught statewide in classrooms. The chairman of the State Board, Don McLeroy, has spoken favorably about intelligent design in the past and voted against the state’s current high school biology textbook because it did not include discussions of the weaknesses of evolution. Proponents for real science education are concerned that this most recent controversy foreshadows what will likely become a highly politicized and contentious review of the state science standards.

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