



Threats to the Teaching of Evolution Science

The number of state and local policy threats to evolution education appears to be increasing. While supporters of strong science standards, curricula and textbooks have won high profile battles in Georgia, Minnesota, New Mexico and Texas, advocates for everything from young-Earth creationism to intelligent design creationism continue to launch attacks at local school boards, state boards of education, and state legislatures. As state and local school systems develop and implement new standards to comply with requirements set forth in the federal No Child Left Behind law, more political meddling with science curricula should be expected across the nation. Following are brief summaries of recent anti-evolution initiatives around the United States.

ALABAMA—On May 17, 2004 the Alabama legislature adjourned for this legislative session without voting on a number of controversial measures, including SB 336 "the Academic Freedom Act." The original version of this legislation would have allowed teachers to present "alternative theories" of "biological or physical origins."

CALIFORNIA—After a year of debate, in the spring of 2004 the Roseville, California school board defeated a proposal that would have allowed the introduction of non-scientific criticisms of evolution into public school curricula.

GEORGIA—In February 2004 a draft of new science standards was released that would have replaced "evolution" with "changes over time." Other significant problems with the standards existed. Following widespread public criticism, including a statement in support of evolution by former President Jimmy Carter, the State Superintendent of Education reversed her position. The adopted standards include many key science concepts supported by science and education organizations. However, in March 2004 the State Senate introduced SR 661 to "recommend the observance of an Academic Bill of Rights at public universities in Georgia." Higher education organizations are concerned with the resolution, noting that such efforts are often spearheaded by conservative organizations concerned with university course content.

KANSAS— Following widespread criticism of the State Board of Education's 1999 decision to adopt science standards that "de-emphasize" evolution, Kansans elected a new Board. The Board reversed the 1999 decision, but has since been deadlocked 5-5 on the issue of evolution. In 2004 evolution became a central issue in the Republican primary election for the Board. In two separate races, Republicans supporting strong

evolution standards were defeated by conservative Republican candidates that have endorsed the 1999 position and advocated for creationism. Because no Democrats or independents are on the ballot for these seats, the winners of the Republican primary are virtually assured election in fall 2004, giving those unfriendly to evolution a one-vote majority on the Board this fall.

LOUISIANA—A House Resolution was introduced in June 2003 encouraging schools to purchase textbooks that present students with differing scientific views on certain controversial issues.

MICHIGAN—Legislation was introduced in the state House in July 2003 that would modify state science standards to include the concept of "intelligent design by a creator." A second 'milder' bill was later introduced that would authorize teaching alternatives to evolution in science courses.

MINNESOTA—In 2004 the Minnesota state legislature adopted new science education standards. The standards do not include any of the changes proposed by those seeking to teach "evidence against" or "weaknesses" of evolution. Education advocates worked tirelessly through what often appeared to be a questionable process to ensure the state adopted the strongest standards possible. Early in 2004, then Education Commissioner, Cheri Pierson Yecke, modified draft science standards prepared by a writing committee comprised of scientists and educators. Yecke also publicly advocated that local school districts should have the freedom to teach creationism if they desire. Yecke's proposals would have weakened science education in Minnesota. Prior to adjourning for the legislative session, the Minnesota Senate voted 35-31 not to confirm Yecke as the Education Commissioner.

As of August 17, 2004

MISSISSIPPI— In March 2004, legislation that would have required textbooks discussing evolution have a disclaimer placed in the front cover describing evolution as a controversial theory and an unproven belief died in the Education Committee of the Mississippi House of Representatives.

MISSOURI—In 2004 the Missouri legislative session ended without action on two House Bills (HB 911 and 1722) that would have weakened science education. HB 911 would have mandated "the equal treatment of science instruction regarding evolution and intelligent design" in the public schools. The measure was less than favorably received by the House largely because it included provisions that "Willful neglect of any elementary or secondary school superintendent, principal, or teacher to observe and carry out the requirements of this section shall be cause for termination of his or her contract" and that "Each public school classroom in this state from grades eight through twelve in which science is taught exclusively shall post a copy of this section in a conspicuous manner." HB 1722 omitted these provisions but retained the "equal time" requirement. HB 1722 died in the House Education Committee.

MONTANA—A local minister led an effort in Darby to pressure the school board to adopt a policy that would support the teaching of non-scientific criticisms of evolution. The school board ultimately defeated the proposal by a vote of 3 to 2. School board members that supported the policy were defeated in school board elections.

NEW MEXICO—Science education advocates won a battle over the inclusion of non-scientific concepts in school curriculum. The State Board of Education voted in August 2003 to adopt science standards that do not include language designed to cast doubt on the role of evolutionary biology in science.

OHIO—In March 2004 the Ohio Board of Education approved a model lesson plan for "Critical Analysis of Evolution." The plan has been actively opposed by scientists and educators in Ohio who contend it is nothing more than a thinly disguised attempt to introduce intelligent design creationism into the science curriculum.

OKLAHOMA— Legislation passed by the State House of Representatives to include an "evolution disclaimer" in textbooks and provide state funding for local school systems to purchase textbooks not on the state adoption list died in the Education Committee of the State Senate in March 2004.

SOUTH CAROLINA—The General Assembly adjourned in June 2003, killing legislation that would establish a science standards committee that would address whether alternatives to evolution should be taught in the schools. The political committee likely would have included advocates for creationism and intelligent design. Supporters of the legislation vowed to revisit the issue in 2004.

TENNESSEE—In April 2003 a school district rejected three biology textbooks for not giving equal time to creationism.

TEXAS—In November 2003, following a heated battle covered by national media, the State Board of Education approved textbooks supported by scientists and educators for their appropriate treatment of evolution.

WEST VIRGINIA—In March 2003 the State Board of Education adopted science standards that include evolution education.

WYOMING—In September 2003 a local school board voted against changing the school district's policy on evolution education to require religious criticisms of evolution.

For more information ...

The AIBS Public Policy webpage (www.aibs.org/public-policy/) includes updates about current threats to evolution education and links to statements helpful to science education advocates. From this site you may access the AIBS/National Center for Science Education State Evolution List Serve Network.

Resources for science educators may be obtained from AIBS' award-winning education resource – ActionBioscience at www.actionbioscience.org.

The National Center for Science Education (<http://www.ncseweb.org>) is dedicated to defending evolution education and provides up-to-date information and resources for teachers and local citizen science organizations across the nation.