

# Kansas Board of Education removes evolution from science curriculum

By Jerry White  
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The Kansas Board of Education voted Wednesday to delete virtually all references to evolution, natural selection and the origins of the universe from the state's science curriculum. The decision represents the most far-reaching success thus far for the Religious Right and its attempt to ban Darwinism from public school classrooms in the US.

Under the new guidelines for K-12 students, individual science teachers will not be barred from teaching evolution, but it will no longer be included in state tests, and therefore can be dropped from the curriculum of local school boards. Presented by the state board as a victory for local school "choice," the move is expected to encourage Christian conservatives to push for a complete ban on the teaching of evolution in local school districts and to force teachers to question the validity of evolution and teach creationism.

Kenneth Miller, a Brown University biology professor and staunch advocate of teaching evolution, told the WWS, "I think it's a dramatic step backward for science education in Kansas. What they have done is to cut the heart out of science, which is evolution. Of course this will embolden critics of evolution and serve to legitimize them. But in another way it may be productive, and serve as a wake-up call to the science community."

The campaign to change the Kansas guidelines was led by board member Steve Abrams, a former state Republican chairman. It began after a 27-member state committee of scientists drafted new standards which acknowledged that evolution was a "broad, unifying theoretical framework of biology." Abrams denounced the draft, saying, "it is not good science to teach evolution as fact." He was joined by Scott Hill, a farmer, who recently said, "There's a liberal agenda to build up and glorify evolution in our schools."

With the help of creationists, Abrams and Hill redrafted the guidelines, deleting two pages on evolution and inserting the sentence: "The design and complexity of the design of the cosmos requires an intelligent designer." The latter was removed after protests from scientists, but a compromise was then drafted, and after months of a 5-5 deadlock on the school board, it passed by a margin of 6-4 Wednesday.

The new standard includes a reference to so-called micro-evolution, a term coined by creationists, which refers to the genetic adaptation and natural process within a species. But it excludes any mention of "macro-evolution," the understanding that all life evolved from common ancestors. Also removed was any reference to the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe.

Instead, teachers are instructed to "suggest alternative explanations to scientific hypotheses or theories" and a reference is made to the 1980 eruption of Mt. St. Helens in Washington state, which creationists claim undermines scientific evolutionary theory because it showed geological changes can happen very quickly (i.e., within a Biblical time frame rather than over millions of years).

John Staver, co-chairman of the committee of scientists that drafted the standards, called it a "travesty to science education" and added, "Kansas just embarrassed itself on the national stage." More than half of the committee members are demanding their names be removed from the document. In addition, the presidents of the state's six public universities, including the University of Kansas, opposed the school board's plan, writing that it would, "set Kansas back a century and give hard-to-find science teachers no choice but to pursue other career fields or assignments outside of Kansas."

One board member who opposed the new standards said the decision would make Kansas science students "the laughing stock of the world." Anticipating that being branded backward and ignorant might hurt businesses in the state, even Republican Governor Bill Graves called the board's action, "a terrible, tragic, embarrassing solution to a problem that didn't exist."

Half of the members on the Kansas Board of Education are right-wing fundamentalists. It is chaired by Linda Holloway, an Evangelical Christian and former Kansas City school teacher, who shortly after being elected to the state school board led a campaign to require that parents give written permission before students took sex education and that the course teach abstinence only.

The passage of the new state guidelines does not express a groundswell of support for taking Kansas back to the Middle Ages. Nor is the attack on evolution the product of rural ignorance. The stronghold of the fundamentalists is not the farms, but the middle class suburbs around Kansas City. Kansas is in the Midwest, not the South, with traditions of free thought which go back nearly 150 years, to the state's origins in the struggle against slavery before the American Civil War. A century ago Kansas was a hotbed of radical thought and opposition to capitalism—Populism, the Socialist Party, the IWW—and was home to the *Appeal to Reason*, a socialist newspaper with a mass nationwide circulation.

If in 1999 it is the appeal to unreason which has taken the initiative, it reflects more the well-financed efforts of the religious

right, which enjoys widespread publicity, if not support, in the news media, as well as the lack of any significant opposition from what might be described as the liberal intelligentsia. In the midst of this campaign, the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, in Kansas editorialized that "creationism is a good a hypothesis as any for how the universe began."

Moreover, these right-wing elements have increasingly taken over the Republican Party. After the school shooting in Littleton, Colo., earlier this year, House Minority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Texas) blamed the incident in part on the teaching of evolution rather than creationism in public schools.

"Our school systems teach the children that they are nothing but glorified apes who are evolutionized out of some primordial soup of mud," DeLay said in an speech on the floor of the House of Representatives. In June, the House passed a measure allowing the Ten Commandments to be posted in schools and other government buildings and the bill is now going to the Senate.

One creationist "scholar," Sam Blumenfeld, said that America's founders were Calvinists who believed that man is, by nature, a depraved creature who needs fear of a higher power to do the right thing. Public schools at one time were based on this philosophy, Blumenfeld said, but in recent decades the schools have been shaped by "secular humanism" which holds that humans control their destinies.

It is difficult to overstate the concentrated ignorance in this comment. The Christian fundamentalists have forgotten Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, and Benjamin Franklin! Those who led the American Revolution were men of the Enlightenment, that great and liberating period in which the bourgeoisie, during its revolutionary rise, shook off the shackles of religious dogma. The Founding Fathers were for the most part Deists and materialists, and many of them scientists and inventors.

The apparent success of the fundamentalists, then, is not based either on the strength of their ideas or any broad popular support, but on the rightward shift of the political establishment. For the most part, the masses of people remain confused and passive, unaware of the dangers posed by the escalating attack on public education and democratic rights as a whole.

The Christian conservatives have mobilized their followers to vote for school board members and legislators, and general low voter turnout in many elections has ensured their success. Along with their denunciations of the "immorality" of public schools, they have advocated publicly financed charter schools, homeschooling and aid, in the form of vouchers or tax credits, for parents who send their children to private and parochial schools.

Public education has been particularly targeted because it remains identified with the rational, egalitarian and democratic ideals of those reformers who fought for universal public schools in the 19th and 20th century. These ideas are correctly seen as an obstacle to the deeply reactionary agenda which the right-wing is pursuing. In a speech at last fall's Christian Coalition national convention, Pat Robertson denounced educational reformer John Dewey for training teachers to spread "poison" into the schools.

More than a decade ago, the US Supreme Court, in the case of *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987), ruled that Louisiana's so-called balanced treatment of creationism and evolution in the public

schools violated the constitutional separation of church and state. Since this ruling, that effectively barred the teaching of creationism in public schools, religious fundamentalists have tried a new tactic, i.e., efforts to limit the teaching of evolution and challenging its merits on pseudo-scientific grounds.

In recent years Alabama, New Mexico and Nebraska have made changes that to varying degrees challenge the prominence of evolution in science classes, generally presenting it as merely one possible explanation of natural development. Other states such as Texas, Ohio, Washington, New Hampshire and Tennessee, have considered, but ultimately defeated, similar bills, including some that would have required those who teach evolution to present so-called evidence to disprove it. In addition, many local school boards have moved in this direction.

In Alabama, for example, biology textbooks carry a sticker calling evolution, "a controversial theory some scientists present as a scientific explanation for the origin of living things." The disclaimer adds: "No one was present when life first appeared on earth. Therefore, any statement about life's origins should be considered as theory, not fact." This has gone hand in hand with attempts to intimidate science teachers, school administrators and textbook publishers.

In opposition there is an increasing concern, particularly among teachers, that scientific thought is under attack as it was 75 years ago during the famous Scopes Monkey trial in Tennessee. In a recent statement, the National Association of Biology Teachers wrote: "Whether called 'creation science,' 'scientific creationism,' 'intelligent-design theory,' 'young-earth theory' or some other synonym, creation beliefs have no place in the science classroom. Explanations employing nonnaturalistic or supernatural events, whether or not explicit reference is made to a supernatural being, are outside of the realm of science and not part of a valid science curriculum."

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