

Board of Education challenged over evolution

Scientists, teachers implore panel not to water down science curriculum

By GARY SCHARRER
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Nov. 19, 2008, 10:08PM

AUSTIN — Texas risks becoming a national joke if state educators insist on clouding the teaching of evolution, scores of scientists, science teachers and concerned residents Texans told the State Board of Education on Wednesday.

They pleaded with the 15-member board not to confuse public schoolchildren with a watered-down teaching of evolution by requiring teachers to teach the weaknesses or limitations of evolution.

The board is expected to take a preliminary vote in January on new science curriculum standards that will dictate new science books for the state's 4.5 million students.

"Once again, Texas is in the national spotlight, and scientists, science teachers, and education news writers all over the United States are waiting to see what new foolishness is going to happen in Austin this time," Steven Schafersman, president of Texas Citizens for Science, told the board. "Once again our state is going to experience the embarrassment of having anti-

scientific, anti-evolutionists on the state board try to game the process and force the new science standards to contain anti-scientific language."

The issue for most critics focuses on the provision requiring both the strengths and weaknesses of evolution.

"Scientists want to get rid of this weaknesses wording. It's just bad science," Schafersman said. "Scientific theories don't have weaknesses."

Some science hypotheses have weaknesses, he said. But he and other experts emphasized that such theories governing atomic, germ or plate tectonics don't have weaknesses.

For board member Ken Mercer, R-San Antonio, the issue involves academic freedom and allowing students to ask questions.

"I'm a big fan of academic freedom," Mercer said. "We're not putting religion in books."

Evolution as an explanation for the nature and history of life on Earth is a major unifying concept in science, Francis Eberle, head of the 60,000-member National Science Teachers Association, told the board.

"Only one model — the theory of evolution — is widely accepted, and any other model should not be used in the science classroom," Eberle said. "Students are easily impressed and are not often able to comprehend the complexity of adult arguments."

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Texas students would be disadvantaged in the world's work force if exposed to pseudoscience concepts and if evolution is not reinforced as a major scientific concept, he said.

Nearly 90 people signed up to testify before the board. By early evening, only one person embraced the weaknesses provision.

Not all of the complaints involved evolution. Several teachers criticized the state's proposed science curriculum standards as being overly broad and not deep enough.

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