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## State education panel hears evolution debate

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By **TERRENCE STUTZ** / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution grabbed center stage Wednesday as State Board of Education members heard from dozens of Texans trying to influence the panel on how evolution should be covered in science classes of the future.

College professors, science teachers and pro-evolution groups urged the board to drop a rule that requires the strengths and weaknesses of Darwin's theory to be taught in science courses, while conservative groups aligned with a sizable bloc of board members said the rule has worked well and hasn't forced religion into those classes as critics charge.

Andrew Ellington, a biochemistry professor at the University of Texas at Austin, was one of those warning that the state could become a "laughingstock" in the science community if it insists on watering down the treatment of evolution in science classes.

"At a time when Gov. [Rick] Perry has shepherded a landmark plan for cancer research and treatment, we cannot afford for the retrograde elements of the state board to foster teaching the equivalent of astrology to our students," Dr. Ellington said.

Nearly 90 people registered to testify on the proposed curriculum standards, which will dictate what is taught in science classes in elementary and secondary schools and provide the material for state tests and textbooks. The standards will remain in place for a decade after their approval by the state board.

Rabbi Nancy Kasten of Dallas, a board member for the National Council of Jewish Women, said a state rule mandating that weaknesses of evolution be covered makes science education in Texas "vulnerable to a wide range of speculative and subversive interpretation" – including non-scientific explanations such as creationism.

"As a member of a religious minority, I rely on the Constitution to ensure that our government and its institutions, including our public schools, serve Americans of all faiths and no faith," she said.

On the other side, Carrollton engineer Paul Kramer called on the board to retain the strengths-and-weaknesses rule for all scientific theories, insisting that its elimination would unfairly restrict debate among students on "untested and unproven" theories.



HARRY CABLUCK/The Associated Press

**A dinosaur suit** helped make one side's point Wednesday by posing a question to Don McLeroy, chairman of the State Board of Education.

"One can only wonder if we crush free speech and debate in our public classrooms now, where will it end?" he asked, citing a parallel with Nazi Germany. He also presented the board with a document, "A Scientific Dissent From Darwinism," signed by 700 scientists and institutions around the world skeptical of some of Darwin's principles.

Mark Ramsey of Texans for Better Science Education accused "Darwinist activists" of trying to censor what Texas students learn about evolution.

"The State Board of Education needs to stand up for academic freedom and make sure that scientific inquiry is not expelled from our classrooms," he said.

Board members are scheduled to take their first vote on the curriculum standards in January.

Revisions recommended by a panel of experts this week call for changing the "strengths-and-weaknesses" standard to "strengths and limitations." Another recommendation calls for middle school students to "discuss possible alternative explanations" for scientific concepts.

The latter change brought sharp criticism from the progressive Texas Freedom Network.

"The new draft contains loaded buzzwords that evolution deniers have used repeatedly to launch phony attacks on evolution," said network president Kathy Miller.