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Kennedy: Science is up for debate in Austin

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The battle for science begins today in Austin.

It might not end until 2010, when Gov. Rick Perry is either replaced or re-elected.

Perry has said bluntly that he wants so-called intelligent design — creation theology — taught in science classes.

Look, the way Perry runs our schools, teachers barely have enough time to teach *science*.

Can't somebody else teach religion?

To oversee the decision about whether science classes will stick to science, Perry has appointed somebody with the same high academic credentials as our governor: a former Aggie yell leader.

Perry put Bryan dentist Don McLeroy in charge of the State Board of Education.

McLeroy describes himself as a creationist who reads the Bible as literal. Asked how faith should affect science lessons, he told *The Eagle* of Bryan-College Station: "Science should be neutral."

Neutral?

Conservatives would raise a fuss if some math teacher wanted to remain neutral on whether 2 plus 2 equals 4 or if some English teacher tried to stay neutral on how to spell, say, *theocracy*.

When the Aggies are playing the Longhorns, I want classroom teachers to remain neutral.

Evolution is not a football game. There are not two sides.

There is no *neutral*.

Right now, there is one and only one scientific theory of evolution. No other theory is widely accepted yet by scientists.

So anyone who wants to "teach the controversy" — or stage a "great debate," as one of the exiting Episcopal churches in Fort Worth did recently — is inherently preaching.

The State Board of Education will hear a lot of preaching today at a public hearing on changing the science curriculum.

Board member Gail Lowe, a Lampasas Republican who also represents voters in Denton, Hood and Wise counties, has said she wants to keep the current policy to teach the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolution theory.

Only 94 of 464 Texas university science professors who responded to a survey would agree.

Most say that creation theology has no place in the classroom and that teaching "strengths and weaknesses" hinders Texas kids in college, according to a survey released this week by the Texas Freedom Network.

The entire evolution debate might also hinder Republicans' chances in 2010.

By all indications, Perry will go up against U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, with the winner facing Houston Mayor Bill White in a state that is now about 45 percent Democratic.

"There is a risk here for Republicans," said Texas Christian University political science professor Jim Riddlesperger. "The party needs to define itself as conservative but not narrow. If they let the social conservatives dominate, they risk losing votes."

The low-profile State Board of Education has been run for years by home-schoolers, pastors and zealots like Houston-area lawyer Cynthia Dunbar.

Southern Methodist University political science professor Cal Jillson sees short-term success and long-term failure if Perry forces creationism into schools.

"Short term, it rallies some Republicans around Perry in the primary," Jillson said. "Long term, the problem is that the Republican Party's voter base is already narrowing. The party can't afford to be identified as anti-science."

Tarrant County Republican Party Chairwoman Stephanie Klick said she's not worried.

"It's healthy to have a discussion," she said, adding that the big-bang theory should also be open to challenge.

"We should look at any theory and ask, 'Does this make sense?' " she said.

Does that include the theory that Perry and the board know what they're doing?