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Evolution proponents descend on state education panel

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AUSTIN — Texas became the latest stage for the debate about evolution and creationism Wednesday, as more than 80 witnesses trooped before the State Board of Education to weigh in on proposed changes in the public school science curriculum.

With few exceptions, the speakers — scientists, teachers, clergy and grassroots activists — took the side of evolution, saying they feared that the proposed changes will open the door to the teaching of creationism or intelligent design.

Board Chairman Don McLeroy said the lopsided turnout was part of an orchestrated campaign and flatly dismissed the notion that the board is intent on sabotaging the teaching of evolution in public schools, which would defy the U.S. Supreme Court.

"This is all being ginned up by the evolution side," McLeroy, of College Station, said in an interview during a break. "I'm a creationist, but I'm not going to put creationism in the schools."

Origins of the issue

Charles Darwin introduced the theory of evolution — that species, including humans, evolved over millions of years — in 1859. Creationists hold that God created all things, citing physical evidence that they say supports the biblical account of creation. Those who espouse intelligent design say certain features of the natural world are so complex that they are likely products of an intelligent cause rather than random mutation and natural selection.

Court rulings

The Supreme Court and a host of lower courts have upheld the teaching of evolution, ruling that teaching creationism or intelligent design would violate the constitutional principle of separation of church and state.

What now?

A committee of the State Board of Education has recommended a change that permits analysis of "strengths and limitations" of evolution in the study of biology and other high school science courses. The committee's draft, released Nov. 12, changed language that had been more acceptable to evolution proponents. Although the problem of those three words might seem subtle, advocacy groups fear that the change would weaken science instruction in the schools.

What they said

Testimony stretched into the evening Wednesday.

"Scientists overwhelmingly consider evolution to be established, mainstream science, and scientists have been crystal-clear in explaining that phony arguments against evolution are based on ideology, not science," said Kathy Miller, president of the Texas Freedom Network.

Wendee Holtcamp, a freelance writer, drew a sharp reprimand from McLeroy when she accused the board of lying. "Are you willing to play dice with our children's education as our nation's science lead deteriorates?" Holtcamp asserted.

One of the few voices from the other side came from Paul Kramer, a Carrollton engineer, who said that more than 700 eminent scientists welcome the teaching of pros and cons about evolution. Not allowing debate over untested and unproven theories "seems out of place in a free society" and is reminiscent of book-burning in Nazi Germany, he said.

What's next?

The board is not expected to vote on the issue until next year, possibly in January.