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Scientists speak up for evolution

By Gary Scharrer - Express-News

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

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

The State Board of Education is expected to take a preliminary vote in January on new science curriculum standards that will dictate new science textbooks 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 is the requirement for teaching 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 theories such as those governing atomics, germs and 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.”

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.

“The eyes of the nation are on Texas right now, and we hope that ideology and politics do not influence the outcome of the science standards,” Eberle said.

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

Paul Kramer, a Carrollton-based engineer, gave board members names of more than 700 scientists from around the world attached to a statement expressing skepticism about claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection. The statement encouraged careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory.

“To arbitrarily and unnecessarily restrict debate of, in some cases, untested and unproven theories in our public schools seems out of place in a free society,” Kramer said. “It smacks of oppression and tyranny and reminds us of another darker time in Germany where brown-shirted, black-booted thought police burned books and crushed any free debate.”

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.

Some board members asked science teachers to name one example of how the teaching of evolutionary weakness complicated their teaching. The “weaknesses” concept has been a part of the science curriculum for nearly 20 years.

“I don't think I need one,” answered Max Brodsky, a 4th-grade teacher in Houston.

The “strengths and weaknesses” provision “is intended to require educators to instill religion in the science curriculum,” he said.

But “this is not a religion debate, even though they keep trying to introduce it,” board member David Bradley, R-Beaumont, emphasized during a break.

“It takes more faith to believe in evolution than it does in creation — for me,” Bradley added.

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