

Kansas board of education restores teaching of evolution

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In a significant defeat for Christian fundamentalist groups, the state board of education in Kansas voted February 14 to restore evolution as a central theory in the state's science curriculum. In a 7-3 vote the board approved new standards to replace ones adopted in August 1999 that deleted virtually all references to evolution, natural selection and the origins of the universe. The 1999 guidelines did not explicitly bar the teaching of evolution, but prohibited the inclusion of questions on school tests about evolution or the big-bang theory of cosmology.

The August 1999 standards excluded any mention of "macro-evolution," the understanding that all life evolved from common ancestors, but included the term "micro-evolution," coined by the creationists to explain genetic adaptations and natural processes within a species. The anti-evolution standards elicited denunciations from scientists and science groups around the world, and considerable opposition within the state's population.

The first political response to the anti-evolution stance came in August 2000 when three of the pro-creationist school board members were defeated in a Republican Party primary. Steve Abrams, a former state Republican chairman, was the only anti-evolution board member up for election who was returned by the voters. He was one of the major figures responsible for the 1999 redraft and voted against the revision of the standards February 14.

The new standards require the teaching of evolution, but include language that was an apparent attempt to appease some of the less fanatical fundamentalist Christian elements. It reads in part: "While students may be required to understand some concepts [i.e., evolution, the big-bang theory] that researchers use to conduct research and solve practical problems, they

may accept or reject the scientific concepts presented. This applies particularly where students' and/or parents' beliefs may be at odds with the current scientific theories or concepts."

One of the board members, Janet Waugh, commented: "We are not atheists on this board. I believe the board members are all Christians, and we have no problem with Christianity or any other religion being taught, but it cannot be taught in a science class."

The new standards were drawn up by a 27-member committee of science teachers and other experts. It refers to evolution as "a broad, unifying theoretical framework in biology."

"I believe now that we have science standards that the rest of the world could look to," said board member Carol Rupe, who voted to approve the new standards. Another board member, Val DeFever, commented that most school districts ignored the 1999 rules: "It wasn't specifically stating that creationism can be taught. It was saying that any child could present any current theory and the teacher was not to dispute it in any way. That opens the door to so many other pseudo-sciences that it isn't even funny."

Two days prior to the board of education vote, with its result already a foregone conclusion, scientists and students at the University of Kansas in Lawrence organized a celebration to commemorate the 192nd anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth. Liz Craig, a member of Kansas Citizens for Science, organized the event to offset the bad national and international coverage Kansas received after the 1999 decision. "There was a lot of making fun of Kansas for being backward," Craig said. "Now that they're about to reverse that, there should be some hoopla so that the world knows the voters of Kansas have voted for good science education."

Following the February 14 vote by the state school board, Leonard Krishtalka, director of the university's Natural History Museum and Biodiversity Research Center and a leading opponent of the creationist standards, commented: "Bravo. Kansas will now return to educational excellence by adopting nationally accepted science standards. All of Lawrence and people across the state deserve credit for keeping this high on the radar screen during the elections."

Tom Willis, the president of the Creation Science Association of Mid-America, a Christian fundamentalist outfit, declared unhappily: "The Bible teaches us that we will turn aside from the truth. It doesn't surprise me at all."

Fourth-, seventh- and tenth-graders in Kansas will take tests that cover the theory of evolution as early as this March and April.

A study published last September in the journal *Nature* indicated that one-third of all students in US public schools were receiving inadequate instruction in regard to evolution. The evaluation was carried out by Lawrence Lerner, a professor of natural sciences and mathematics at California State University at Long Beach.

Based on Lerner's ratings, only 10 states received an A grade for being "superb models" in teaching evolution, 14 states received Bs, 7 got Cs, six got Ds and 12 failed. Kansas, after its anti-evolution standards were adopted, received an F-. Alabama, Texas and Nebraska teach evolution as one possible explanation for the development of life; in Alabama, science textbooks include a warning that evolution is theory and not fact.



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