Kansas school board passes anti-evolution science standards

Joseph Kay
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The Kansas Board of Education voted on November 8 to adopt science standards that seek to undermine the teaching of biological evolution in public schools. The move is the latest in a series of attempts to promote religious conceptions in the public classroom, a violation of the constitutional separation of church and state.

The board voted 6-4 for the new standards, which were written in coordination with advocates for "intelligent design," a conception that seeks to cloak creationism and Christian fundamentalism in pseudo-scientific rhetoric. In August, President Bush called for the teaching of intelligent design alongside evolution in public schools.

This is the second time in six years that the Kansas school board has attempted to revise the state's science standards to attack evolution. In 1999, the board eliminated all reference to evolution in the standards; however, the original standards were reinstated after a new board was elected in 2001.

In 2004, religious conservatives regained control of the school board. This time, in line with the strategy of intelligent design advocates, the Kansas board did not explicitly endorse the teaching of any specific alternative to evolution, nor did it remove all references to evolution. Instead, it said students should be told about the "controversial" aspects of the modern theory of evolution, its supposed inconsistencies and inadequacies. Intelligent design advocates intend the "teach the controversy" campaign to be a wedge that will open the way for more-explicit religious conceptions.

Four other states (New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Minnesota) have adopted standards that reflect the views of the intelligent design movement; however, the Kansas standards go beyond these states by explicitly outlining supposed limitations in the evolutionary framework.

Modifying the proposals of a separate committee established to write the standards, the education board inserted statements such as "in many cases the fossil record is not consistent with gradual, unbroken sequences postulated by biological evolution"; the fossil record "shows sudden bursts of increased complexity"; and "whether microevolution (change within a species) can be extrapolated to explain macroevolutionary changes (such as new complex organs or body plans and new biochemical systems which appear irreducibly complex) is controversial."

The idea that any of these statements pose fundamental problems for evolutionary theory is spurious and without any scientific foundation. There is, in fact, no scientific controversy over the validity of evolutionary theory, a unifying framework whose explanatory power is perhaps unequaled in any other field of science.

The plain purpose of these statements, which come directly from the writings of intelligent design advocates, is to open the way for the teaching of religion. Because there are some systems that appear "irreducibly complex," because there appear to be "sudden bursts" in the fossil record—neither of which pose serious problems for evolutionary theory—there must be a designer responsible for this complexity and these sudden bursts; there must be some supernatural explanation for them.

In addition to inserting these supposed problems with evolutionary theory, the board also modified the document's definition of science, removing a statement that limited science to the search for natural explanations of phenomenon. If science is not limited to natural explanations, it presumably may include religious explanations, and in particular the view that the origin of species is the handiwork of God. Once this is accepted, the foundation of any scientific and rational investigation of phenomenon is undermined.

Phillip Johnson, one of the founders of the intelligent design movement, explained the logic of the movement as follows: "The first thing you understand is that the Darwinian theory isn't true," he said at a 1999 conference entitled "Reclaiming American for Christ." "It's falsified by all of the evidence and the logic is terrible. When you realize that, the next question that occurs to you is, well, where might you get the truth?... I start with John 1:1. In the beginning was the word. In the beginning was intelligence,

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purpose, and wisdom. The Bible had that right. And the materialist scientists are deluding themselves."

This so-called "wedge" strategy to introduce biblical teachings into public schools is designed to circumvent Supreme Court rulings that have explicitly asserted that the teaching creationism in public schools is unconstitutional.

The agenda of Christian fundamentalism exerts a degree of control over the political establishment that far exceeds the level of support that it has within the population as a whole. The general popular hostility to these forces was evident last week in Dover, Pennsylvania, where voters elected to oust all eight members of the Dover School Board, who were responsible for that district's pro-intelligent design science standards.

The Dover elections came just days after testimony concluded in the case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, in which several parents in the district are challenging the constitutionality of the school board's decision to require biology teachers to read before their classrooms a statement challenging evolution and supporting intelligent design as an alternative theory. The judge in the case is set to issue his ruling by January.

The thinking dominant within the fascistic Christian fundamentalist movement was expressed by Pat Robertson, the multimillionaire host of "The 700 Club" television program and founder of the Christian Coalition. Responding to the vote, Robertson declared on his show that citizens of Dover should beware the wrath of God: "If there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God; you just rejected him from your city," he declared.

Later, he expanded on his remarks: "I was simply stating that our spiritual actions have consequences and it's high time we started recognizing it. God is tolerant and loving, but we can't keep sticking our finger in his eye forever. If they have problems in Dover, I recommend they call on Charles Darwin. Maybe he can help them." This can only be construed as a divinely conceived threat to exterminate the population of Dover.

These statements cannot be dismissed as the outpouring of a lunatic, for Robertson speaks for a significant and powerful section within the political establishment. Nor will the threat to science posed by the Christian fundamentalist movement be disposed of simply through the election of new school boards.

The intelligent design movement has a multimillion-dollar budget for promoting its activities, which reflects the support it has within a significant section of the American ruling class. The movement's principal organization, the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, has received much of its funding from individuals such as Howard Ahmanson, a multimillionaire heir to a fortune made in the savings and loan industry. According to an article published by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Ahmanson is a supporter of Christian Reconstructionism, a religious movement that advocates a theocratic state in the United States.

The Discovery Institute and individuals such as Ahmanson advocate an attack not simply on Darwinism, but also on the "cultural legacy" of materialism, in which they include welfare programs, the minimum wage and similar measures.

The proposed standards of the Kansas school board highlight the fundamental attack on decades of scientific progress and indeed on the very nature of scientific investigation itself. It is not accidental that this attack is bound up with a right-wing economic agenda. There is a conscious attempt within sections of the American ruling class, most closely aligned with the Bush administration, to promote and cultivate religious fundamentalism as a means of generating a social basis for far-reaching attacks on democratic rights and all constraints on the accumulation of profit.

The attack on science also aims to undermine any rational analysis of society and social inequality. From the point of view of the American ruling elite, science and rational thought in the hands of the population as a whole can be very dangerous. Indeed, in the promotional material of the Discovery Institute, Marx is linked with Darwin as one of the great proponents of scientific materialism.

As the crisis of American capitalism intensifies and the American ruling class turns increasingly to authoritarian means to implement its unpopular policies, the influence of these layers within the political establishment will grow. The defense of science is inseparable from the development of a political movement that attacks the social roots of the anti-scientific crusade.

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