

ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN K-12 SCIENCE EDUCATION

by Robert Lattimer, Ph.D., Eagle Forum Science Issues Chairman.

K-12 science standards in all states contain performance expectations on biological evolution (macroevolution, or descent from a common ancestry). All state standards (including the Next Generation Science Standards) present unguided evolution as the *only* explanation for the development of life starting from single-cell ancestors.

One approach to making K-12 science education more objective is “academic freedom” legislation. In 2008, the Louisiana Science Education Act (Senate Bill 733) became the first academic freedom law for K-12 education. In 2012, Tennessee passed a similar law (House Bill 368). Neither law has been challenged in court, so their legality seems well established. Since 2008 at least eighteen other state legislatures have considered similar bills, but none of them has yet passed into law.

Almost all of the academic freedom bills contain similar provisions, which include:

1. Encouragement for students to explore scientific questions and develop critical thinking skills regarding controversial issues in science.

2. A statement that some subjects (most often cited are biological evolution, chemical origin of life, global warming, and human cloning) can cause controversy.

3. Permission and protection for teachers to objectively cover scientific strengths and weaknesses of existing scientific theories — that is, to “teach the controversy.”

4. An admonition that the teacher not promote any particular religious

or non-religious doctrine.

These statements are rather innocuous, but whenever these bills have been introduced they have caused the science and education establishment to rise up in furious opposition. Why? Because the intent of such laws is to challenge theories that the establishment regards as unassailable. Is there overwhelming evidence that the theory of biological evolution is true? In actuality, the “unguided common descent” is quite weak in several regards, and it is deceptive and dishonest to shield students from the contradictory evidence.

The reigning viewpoint on climate change is that modern global warming is anthropogenic (human-caused). Since the extent and long-term effects of global warming are unknown, it is uncertain whether human actions have significantly contributed to warming, and it is doubtful that human intervention can have much effect on future climate change.

The most common tactic used by mainline scientists/educators to thwart academic freedom bills aimed at evolution is to accuse the proponents of religious motives — with such labels as pseudoscience, creationism, or intelligent design. Unfortunately name-calling often works, partly because most people do not understand the scientific arguments and assume that the “experts” know best. Also, the science/education establishment is intimidating. Good science should be based on the *evidence*, but political correctness often gets in the way of the search for truth.

Academic freedom laws have

been promoted extensively by the Discovery Institute, a Seattle think-tank. The Institute says the intent of academic freedom laws is to “protect the right of teachers to teach about controversial scientific subjects in an objective manner without having to fear for their jobs.” While this goal is noble, one can list several concerns about the effectiveness of such legislation:

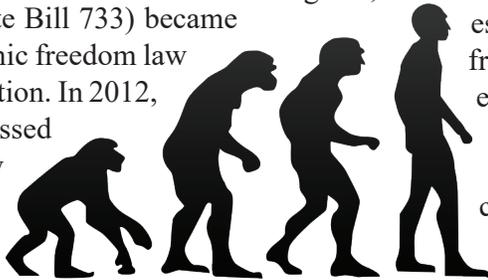
1. Since the academic freedom laws do not *require* anything, they have little legal effect. They only *permit* and *encourage* objective teaching. Most teachers will simply adhere to the established curriculum. Some teachers will downplay or avoid controversial topics because they want to avoid the conflict.

2. The laws will protect not only objectively minded teachers, but also teachers who give unbending support to certain controversial theories. Thus while such laws may cause a few teachers to broaden their coverage, other teachers may feel empowered to teach even more dogmatically.

3. The laws assume an incorrect definition of religion — that is, that religion encompasses only *theistic* beliefs. U.S. courts in recent years have embraced an *inclusive* definition of religion that includes not only theistic, but also pantheistic and atheistic belief systems. Unguided biological evolution is a *materialistic* (naturalistic) theory; and it assumes that life can be explained solely by natural laws and chance. Evolution intentionally excludes teleology (purposeful design) in nature, and thus it promotes a nontheistic *religious* worldview.

4. The laws still allow biological evolution to be taught as the *only* explanation for origins. This exclusiveness is arguably a violation of

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the First Amendment requirement for government neutrality with respect to religion, since evolution is the basis of nontheistic religions such as secular humanism.

5. The laws do not consider *age-appropriateness*. Most science curricula start dealing with controversial issues in middle school. Students need maturity and a good background in basic science before debating such issues. Thus, coverage of scientific controversies should be delayed until high school.

6. The laws do not list any *weak-*

nesses of evolution (or other theories). Mainline scientists/educators claim that evolution is so well established that there are no weaknesses. In fact, there is abundant evidence that suggests biological evolution cannot stand on its own. For example: (a) the chemical origin of life remains an unsolved mystery; (b) intelligence was needed to form the genetic code; (c) biological information and complexity cannot be explained by material causes; (d) the fossil record is inconsistent with macroevolution;

(e) random mutations, a key factor in neo-Darwinian theory, are almost always harmful to the organism; and (f) material causes cannot explain non-material entities (*e.g.*, the mind, consciousness, thoughts and memories). Science should follow the evidence.

Academic freedom laws for K-12 schools may be helpful in some circumstances to insert more objectivity in the teaching of controversial issues in science. These laws are not a long-term solution to the problem of embedded materialism in science education. 

DEFUND THE DEPARTMENT THAT DOES NOT EDUCATE

by Congressman Thomas Massie, representing Kentucky's 4th District.

On February 7, 2017 Representative Thomas Massie (R-KY) introduced H.R. 899, a bill to abolish the federal Department of Education. The bill, which is one sentence long, states, “The Department of Education shall terminate on December 31, 2018.”

On the day of Betsy DeVos’ scheduled Senate confirmation for Secretary of Education, Massie said, “Neither Congress nor the President, through his appointees, has the constitutional authority to dictate how and what our children must learn.”

Massie added, “Unelected bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. should not be in charge of our children’s intellectual and moral development. States and local communities are best positioned to shape curricula that meet the needs of their students. Schools should be accountable. Parents have the right to choose the most appropriate educational opportunity for their children, including home school, public school, or private school.”

“For years, I have advocated returning education policy to where it belongs — the state and local level,” said Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC), an original co-sponsor. “D.C. bureaucrats cannot begin to understand the needs of schools and its students on an indi-

vidual basis. It is time that we get the Feds out of the classroom, and terminate the Department of Education.”

“I’ve always been a proponent of empowering parents, teachers and local school boards who best know our children and their needs,” said Rep. Raul Labrador (R-ID), another original co-sponsor. “Eliminating the U.S. Department of Education is the most important step we in Congress can take in returning decision making to the local level.”

“Education of our students should lie primarily with parents, teachers, and state and local officials who know how to meet their individual needs best,” said Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ). “Since its inception, the Department of Education has grown into an unrecognizable federal beast, and its policies have helped foster Common Core across the country. It is time the one-size-fits-all approach by the federal government is ended and authority is returned to the local level.”

The Department of Education began operating in 1980. On September 24, 1981 in his Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery, President Ronald Reagan said, “As a third step, we propose to dismantle two Cabinet Departments, Energy and Education. Both Secretaries are wholly

in accord with this. Some of the activities in both of these departments will, of course, be continued either independently or in other areas of government. There’s

only one way to shrink the size and cost of big government, and that is by eliminating agencies that are not needed and are getting in the way of a solution. . . . Education is the principal responsibility of local school systems, teachers, parents, citizen boards, and State governments. By eliminating the Department of Education less than 2 years after it was created, we cannot only reduce the budget but ensure that local needs and preferences, rather than the wishes of Washington, determine the education of our children.” 

