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Sun March 19, 2006



Science education: Protecting science, religion

By Alan I. Leshner

A remarkable consensus has formed recently among business leaders, elected officials and scholars that we must strengthen U.S. science and engineering education if we hope to strengthen our work force and maintain our innovative edge in an increasingly competitive world economy. And so it is particularly troubling to see that the Oklahoma Legislature is advancing a plan that would undermine science education and put the state's students at risk, all to promote one controversial religious doctrine in public school classrooms.

The threat is concealed in House Bill 2107, a measure that has passed the state House and now awaits action in the Senate. It would establish that teachers have the academic freedom to teach the "full range of scientific views on the biological or chemical origins of life" and that students cannot be graded on their beliefs.

The sponsor of the measure says it would encourage critical thinking by exposing students to all sides of the scientific debate about evolution. That sounds reasonable, at first. But this is the sort of code language that supporters of intelligent design doctrine have tried to inject into science education standards in other communities and states nationwide -- not to promote science, but to promote a narrow religious agenda.

In fact, there is no scientific debate about evolution. The evidence accumulated during the past 150 years -- from dinosaur fossils to the latest discoveries about our own genetic coding -- proves that evolution is the only plausible explanation for how life has unfolded over millions of years. The only major scientific organization in the world accepts that explanation. Those groups represent millions of scientists and educators -- from Nobel laureates and medical researchers to our community museum directors and biology teachers.

The group of scientists who back teaching intelligent design is quite small, and most are in fields unrelated to evolution. They intentionally seek to sow confusion about science, to advance the same limited religious agenda.

But there's nothing to be gained -- and much to be lost -- by pitting science and religion against each other. Evolution doesn't conflict with most mainstream Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu or other beliefs, and the effort to impose one religious view on science standards is disrespectful of these other faiths. More than 10,000 U.S. religious leaders from a range of faiths and denominations -- including a significant group from Oklahoma -- have signed onto the Clergy Letter Project supporting the harmonious coexistence of religion and evolution.

In a time that calls for unity and common purpose, the Oklahoma measure divides and distracts us. America is facing unprecedented challenges -- protecting national security, developing new energy sources, improving our economy and defending against diseases such as Avian flu.

Science classrooms are where we cultivate the mind-set of discovery that benefits billions of people worldwide. We can meet those challenges not by bringing religion into those classrooms, but by teaching science better than ever, with new imagination and increased energy.

Leshner is chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and executive publisher of the journal Science.

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