

OTHER VIEWS

Free Florida's students from lagging behind

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SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Some 422,000 Floridians remained out of work in February, the housing market continued its downward spiral, and less than two-fifths — just 37 percent — of all 11th-graders across Florida had mastered science-learning goals as of May 2007. Though K-12 students are improving statewide and locally, too, fewer than four in 10 Orange County 11th-graders, or 36 percent, were hitting their science-learning marks last year.

Yet, despite such serious educational and economic challenges, state lawmakers recently spent time reviewing a veiled proposal to wedge one religious viewpoint into science classrooms, which would weaken science education. By allowing teachers with a religious agenda to recast well-documented scientific facts as questionable, the deceptively named Academic Freedom Act could leave Florida's K-12 students confused about the nature of science, and hamstringing them when it comes to competing for future jobs.

The proposal — already approved 4-1 by the Senate's pre-K-through-12 education committee and potentially moving to the House and Senate — also flies in the face of newly minted statewide science standards.

Those standards require Florida's public schoolteachers to accurately instruct students on evolution. A cornerstone of modern biology, evolution describes how our solar system formed 4.55 billion years ago, followed by the

gradual emergence of Earth's earliest life forms, beginning with one-celled organisms around 3.5 billion years ago.

This view of the origins of human life, based on such indisputable physical evidence as radiometric measurements of the ages of Earth's rocks, as well as meteorites and moon rocks, could be called into question under House and Senate versions of the legislation, set forth by Sen. Ronda Storms of Valrico and Rep. D. Alan Hays of Umatilla.

The Storms-Hays proposal

Allowing teachers to introduce non-scientific concepts into science classrooms is sure to confuse students about the nature of science vs. religion.

would open the door to "the full range of views" on evolution in science classes. This may sound noble, but the bill is a smokescreen for efforts to insert a single religious concept into science classes. Advocates of intelligent design, the notion that a supernatural designer controls key developments in the emergence of life, have campaigned for bills urging students to "think critically" — but only about evolution — and to entertain the possibility of an intelligent designer. In recent years, those efforts have been rejected in Pennsylvania, Kansas, Ohio, and most recently in Florida, too, where educators wisely embraced new science education standards.

We all, of course, have a constitutional right as individuals to interpret the origins of life based on Christian or any other doctrine, and discussions about religion may be appropriate in theology or philosophy classes. But allowing teachers to introduce non-



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In February, Tony Zhang, 13, and Chandler Rich, 12, (right) study magnetism in their science class at Howard Middle School.

scientific concepts into science classrooms is sure to confuse students about the nature of science vs. religion.

Science education is especially critical as the United States faces a perfect economic storm. Today's stu-

FSU President T.K. Wetherell said, in announcing the project, that "the United States must continue to generate intellectual capital that can drive the research and development activities that fuel our economic engine" — the next generation of scientists and technical workers.

Pitting science against religion creates an unnecessary conflict. The scientific acceptance of evolution is compatible with the views of many Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu followers. But faith-based questions about the meaning of life, or the existence of a deity, cannot be tested using existing scientific methods, and therefore have no place in science classrooms.

The Storms-Hays proposal likely would be overturned, even if approved, given the response to intelligent design elsewhere. Still, the fight would be expensive and distracting. Florida's children would be better served by efforts to upgrade science education, based on the newly approved state standards, to fully prepare them for the economic challenges ahead.

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Future can be only as healthy as our children

On the whole, Florida's children possess average health. Worrisome patterns, however, churn beneath the seemingly benign average, calling for an active review by broad communities and partnerships to make sure the health of our kids doesn't plunge below average.

Child Health and Healthcare Quality, A Chartbook — a recent study of broad measures for child health and health-care quality in Florida — reveals that while many kids receive adequate care, too many lack access to service.

These often are low-income and publicly insured kids 17 years old or younger, more than half a million of them children with special needs deprived of specialty care.

Chartbook points out that slightly more than half of Florida's children rely on Medicaid for hospitalization, underscoring the need for careful evaluation of reforms that may negatively impact health-care services.

More than 550,000 children are overweight or at risk of being overweight, the study shows. Among Florida high-school students, three in 10 report daily symptoms of depression for two weeks or more. Another four of every 25 say they seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months.

If this is average, imagine what a school system, neighborhood or day care would be like if our children's health were worse than that.

Better yet, imagine what our state would be like — not only today, but tomorrow — if measures of child health care showed Florida soaring above average. Collaborating and coordinating with several pro-

grams in Florida that already rate as an A-plus will help us become better than average.

Addressing the state of our kids' health is an imperative for all. Our future can be only as healthy as our kids. Quality health care provides them the best chances to become the robust adults who will lead in years to come.

Chartbook culminates two years of study by the Florida Initiative for Children's Healthcare Quality, an initiative of the University of South Florida, sponsored by Nemours, All Children's Hospital and the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration.

The *Chartbook* findings, and its companion Web site, (www.flchartbook.childhealthdata.org), represent a starting point for collaboration on improving the children's health-care system in Florida.

We are all conscious of the difficult fiscal realities facing Florida at this time and the many important funding needs. However, continued investment in kids' health today beats the mortgage we'll need to take out to fix problems tomorrow. The challenge in the *Chartbook* findings is this: It is only a snapshot of where we've been. By its very nature, this research is a look backward. The next time this research presents itself, we may find that the worrisome patterns have become much more significant, problematic and costly to address.

All of this suggests that it's time to plot where we're headed now — and to have some serious discussion as to how we'll get there.

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