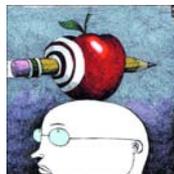


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Intelligent standards or religious design?

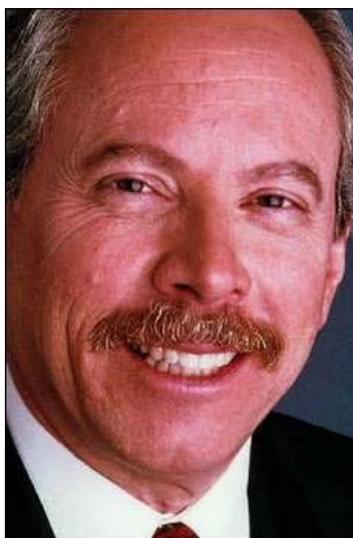
Keep religion out of science classrooms

March 8, 2006

BY GILBERT S. OMENN AND ALAN I. LESHNER

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As many Michigan teens continue to leave high school unprepared and the state struggles to diversify and strengthen its economy, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature are supporting legislation to mandate high school graduation requirements. One specific provision of House Bill 5606, awaiting action in the Senate, is particularly troublesome.



 zoom
Alan Leshner

There is a worm in this basket of apples -- a single line of text that could damage science education, economic progress and even religious freedom, if it isn't removed. Nationwide, at least a dozen similar legislative bills would undermine science education by emphasizing "flaws" in the theory of evolution, generally by calling for more critical thinking, though only when it comes to the teaching of evolution.

The graduation requirements bill borrows a line from HB 5251, one of several previous attempts to wedge religion into science classrooms. The language calls on students to "use relevant scientific data to assess the validity of those theories and to formulate arguments for and against those theories."

Such code words misrepresent the scientific process and are likely to confuse students about the nature of science and its differences from religion. All aspects of scientific knowledge are, of course, subjected to rigorous and

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critical analysis. Much like gravity, evolution is a well-tested scientific theory, supported by virtually all scientists, that explains today's diverse life forms, as well as the fossil record. It describes a natural mechanism for how life on Earth evolved from the simplest, single-celled organisms some 3.5 billion years ago.

The scientific evidence for evolution does not, in fact, conflict in any way with the religious views of the vast majority of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu followers.

A subset of U.S. citizens believes that the universe and all its inhabitants were created, literally in their current form, within the past 10,000 years, not billions of years ago. This small group of people, some of whom have sought in years past to introduce "creationism" and, more recently, "intelligent design" into science classrooms, is entitled to its views.

However, Americans have long valued religious freedom, and Michigan's public schools serve children from families representing many religious traditions. If teachers must cover one religion in school, they would have to cover all beliefs. In no case should such content be forced into the science classroom. If students are confused about the difference between scientific knowledge and faith, science education would be sorely compromised.

Also, if children don't understand what is and isn't science, they later may be hard-pressed to compete for jobs in an increasingly technology-based economy. As Michigan works to overcome its high unemployment rate of 6.7% -- well above the national rate of 4.9% in December 2005 -- we owe every child the best possible science education.

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