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Evolution opponents lose Kansas school board majority

Shift is latest high-profile blow for proponents of intelligent design.

By Monica Davey, Ralph Blumenthal
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TOPEKA, Kan. — Less than a year after the Kansas Board of Education adopted science standards that were the most wide-reaching in the nation in challenging Darwin's theory of evolution, voters Tuesday ousted the conservative majority on the board that favored those guidelines.

Several of the winners in the primary election, whose victories are virtually certain to shift the conservative majority to at least a 6-4 moderate majority after November's general election, pledged Wednesday to work swiftly to restore a science curriculum that does not subject evolution to critical attack.

They also said they will try to eliminate restrictions on sex education passed by the current board and to review the status of the education commissioner, who they said was hired with little schools background.

In a state where the fierce fight over how much students should learn about criticism of evolution has gone back and forth since 1999, the election results were seen as a significant defeat for the growing movement of intelligent design, which holds that nature by itself cannot account for life's complexity.

Defenders of evolution pointed to the results in Kansas as a third major recent defeat for the intelligent design movement across the country and as a sign, perhaps, that the public was beginning to pay attention to the movement's flaws.

"I think more citizens are learning what intelligent design really is and realizing that they don't really want that taught in their public schools," said Eugenie Scott, director of the National Center for Science Education.

In February, Ohio's board of education dropped a mandate that 10th-grade biology classes include critical analysis of evolution. Last year, a federal judge ruled that teaching intelligent design in the schools of Dover, Pa., was unconstitutional. But Scott said opponents of evolution were hardly finished.

"They've had a series of setbacks," she said, "but I don't think for one moment that this means the intelligent design people will fold their tents and go away."

Supporters of intelligent design and others who had favored Kansas' standards for science said that they were disappointed in Tuesday's outcome but that they had also won a series of little-noticed victories in other states such as South Carolina.

It is not clear that the Kansas vote necessarily reflected a widespread change in thinking across the state. The overall turnout in Tuesday's election was only 18 percent, the lowest in 14 years, a fact some political experts attributed to relatively low-key races statewide.

Several groups that favor the teaching of evolution had worked hard to stimulate the turnout among moderate voters, including the Kansas Alliance for Education, which raised more than \$100,000 to battle the current majority and its science guidelines, and Kansas Citizens for Science.

If school board elections bring out a different group of motivated voters in future years, the results could shift again.

Five seats were at stake in Tuesday's vote, four of them held by the board's conservative Republican majority. Two conservatives lost to moderates in the Republican primary, ensuring a shift in control on the ten-member state board.

Both face Democratic opponents in November, but the Democrats are both considered moderates as well, so the board that takes office in January is nearly certain to have at least six moderates.

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