

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense."

-- James Randi

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Kansas Evolution Decision's Aftermath

Similarities in Illinois, Impacts in Presidential Race

by David Bloomberg

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Now don't get me wrong -- I certainly got no joy out of the backwards school board members who don't have a clue about what science is. The joy I got came from the media pointing out that the backwards school board members had no clue what science is! How often is an issue this important to us trumpeted across the top of the Chicago Tribune's front page? (8/12) Not to mention that they actually agreed with us!More

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How bad was it? Some members of the science panel who had worked for the Board issued a statement denouncing the standards; the curriculum committee didn't want their names associated with the standards; even the governor of Kansas was aghast and called the vote, "out of sync with reality."

The hoopla surrounding this vote also allowed the Tribune to talk to Molleen Matsamura, of the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), about the standards here in Illinois. She pointed out that our standards contain "sins of omission" -- you will not find the word "evolution" in our standards.

While the Illinois standards are not quite as bad as Kansas, this gives us a chance to bring up, once again, the fact that they are somewhat backwards in this day and age. The Kansas standards are worse because they removed everything related to evolution, other than some references to "microevolution." They removed references to the age of the Earth, the age of the universe, etc. They also inserted a few hidden creationist-related portions, such as suggesting schools teach things about which the Institute for Creation Research conveniently publishes materials.

So, Illinois isn't quite as bad. But it's bad enough that we need to get it changed. It's purposely vague, to the point that if a teacher was challenged on why s/he is teaching evolution, it would be hard to point to the standards and use them to

back up that teacher. Sure, there is some reference to fossils and adapting, but the fact is that it's just not good enough. Evolution is the foundation of biology; it is, as a guidebook from the National Academy of Sciences says, "a central organizing principle that biologists use to understand the world." It should not be relegated to the vague terms found in the Illinois standards.

The Tribune article was pretty good about pointing these things out, and also explaining the proper use of the term "theory," which many non-scientists improperly use to mean a "guess," noting that biologists say the theory of evolution is "overwhelmingly supported by fossil evidence and observed trends in living species."

The Chicago Sun-Times, in an interesting vein, had a column by film critic Roger Ebert giving the thumbs-down to the Kansas Board (8/16). He notes that no matter what your beliefs about God, it seems odd that He would provide evidence to lead science "down a blind alley just to disguise the majesty of his creation." He adds, "God is not a practical joker." Later, he says, "I believe it is our duty as intelligent beings to examine the evidence and draw the best conclusions we can. If we want to believe that God set evolution into motion, that is our privilege. But surely if there is a God, then it is a sin against his creation to ignore the evidence he left us and make up a theory of our own -- to make it against the law to admire the handiwork of the creator." This last quote is actually rather similar to one from Galileo, who once said, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."

The media attention focused on Kansas has given us a golden opportunity to shine some of that light on our own state standards. I have written letters pointing this out to the Chicago Tribune and the State Journal-Register. In addition, I have written to the new State Superintendent, Glenn McGee, and pointed out how his predecessor, Superintendent Spagnolo, had "evolution" removed from the standards without giving a good scientific or educational explanation. I further noted that it was fairly common knowledge that he did this because of his previous bad experiences with these types of issues in Virginia.

I explained how Ron Larkin and I spoke out against the vague standards at a Board meeting, and how we, and all those who had commented previously, were ignored.

I closed by pointing out that, according to the Board's website, they will consider updates to the standards every three years. Two years have gone by since the current standards were finalized, and I called on McGee and the Board to review our science standards and put evolution back as the foundation of biology, where it rightfully belongs. Depending on what his response is (if any), I think REALL will need to act to bring this issue to the attention of scientists, educators, and the media as we approach that three-year mark in July. (The full text of the letters I sent on this subject can be found at www.reall.org.)

Obviously, many other newspapers, TV news shows, etc. covered this story. For a number of different stories related to this, I would suggest you check out www.skepticnews.com, which has a bunch of links (and happens to be run by our own Editor Wally).

Presidential Campaign Addendum

Just as we were about to go to press, Reuters came out with stories about front-running presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore, dealing with this topic. In short, Bush was asked about the Kansas situation and responded, "I believe children ought to be exposed to different theories about how the world started." His spokeswoman said, "[Bush] believes both creationism and evolution ought to be taught. He believes it is a question for states and local school boards to decide but he believes both ought to be taught." Gore's spokesman, when asked about the situation, said, "The vice president favors the teaching of evolution in public schools. Obviously, that decision should and will be made at the local level and localities should be free to decide to teach creationism as well." Obviously? Apparently, neither candidate is aware of the list of court decisions specifically saying that creationism cannot be taught as science in public schools. Eugenie Scott, executive director of NCSE, was quoted as saying, in response to the Gore statement, "My God, that's appalling!"

She added, "I understand politicians like to compromise and that faced with one group who says two plus two equals four and another group that says two plus two equals six, will tend to arrive at a position that says two plus two equals

five. Unfortunately, sometimes the answer has to be four and this is one of those times."

Gore's spokesman did call Reuters back later to say that "the vice president supports the right of school boards to teach creationism within the context of religious courses and not science courses." This is certainly better, but does look a lot like the "two plus two equals five" compromise that Scott mentioned.