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Author: GROPP, ROBERT E.

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FYI: Threats Remain for Evolution Education

ROBERT E. GROPP

Just over two years ago, intelligent design and creationism (IDC) proponents suffered a stunning legal defeat when a federal judge ruled that intelligent design is no different from religious belief in creationism and has no place in the science classroom. Longtime science education advocates applauded the significant victory in the *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* case (400 F. Supp. 2d 707 [M.D. Pa. 2005]).

Since the *Kitzmiller* decision, politicians from state capitols to the halls of Congress have seized on reports warning that the nation's schoolchildren continue to lag behind international peers in science and mathematics, and that the nation's global leadership in research and innovation are in jeopardy. Nationally, Congress and the executive branch have moved with alacrity to enact legislation intended to stimulate innovation and enhance science education through teacher training and improved instruction. Governors, working through the National Governors Association, have launched "Innovation America," a plan that recognizes the important role states play in training skilled and scientific workforces. Also since *Kitzmiller,* many elected officials who advocated—sometimes surreptitiously—teaching IDC have lost elections. In this context, some in the science community hoped for a respite from the evolution issue. But political interests seeking to serve the IDC community remain, particularly at the state and local levels, and in some circumstances, they retain power.

Thus, science education advocates are once again vigilant. In June 2007, Texas governor Rick Perry (R) signed into law legislation that changes the process by which the state adopts textbooks and supplemental instructional materials. In short, the law makes it easier for the state to introduce alternatives to accepted science into the curriculum. Also capturing the attention of scientists and educators is the new chairman of the Texas State Board of Education, Don McLeroy. Appointed by Governor Perry, McLeroy—a Republican who served on the board before his appointment as chairman—voted against the state's current biology textbook because it fails to discuss the weaknesses of evolution.

"Chairman McLeroy is an admitted young-earth creationist and supporter of intelligent design creationism," says Eugenie Scott, of the National Center for Science Education. "Although he seems to have received the memo from the Discovery Institute about not openly advocating for intelligent design to be taught in the schools, and instead to argue...'teach the controversy'...he is in a more powerful position now than in 2003, when he and his allies on the board almost succeeded in watering down the coverage of evolution," Scott said.

Education, science, and religious liberty advocates in Texas worry that political pressure from the governor's office or his political appointees will be brought to bear, particularly as the state considers its next textbooks and revisits Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Science, the state-mandated curriculum guidelines.

Concern escalated to outrage in December, when state officials called for the dismissal of Christine Castillo Comer. Then director of science at the Texas Education Agency, and a veteran classroom teacher, Comer was pressured to resign for forwarding an e-mail announcement she had received, stating that Barbara Forrest, a professor at Southeastern Louisiana University, was scheduled to speak in Austin. Comer had forwarded the message, which she had modified by adding "FYI," to a small number of friends and colleagues. Forrest—an expert witness in the *Kitzmiller* trial—has conducted scholarly research demonstrating the evolution of creationism into intelligent design.

"This is a deplorable politicization of science and science education," Scott said of the effort to oust Comer. Part of the justification for seeking to remove Comer from her post was that the Texas state agency responsible for science education must remain "neutral" on the issue of evolution.

Responding to the developments in Texas, 2007 AIBS president Douglas J. Futuyma said, "When it comes to science education, we absolutely cannot remain neutral on evolution. Evolution is the unifying principle of modern biology."

Science education advocates have taken the actions in Texas seriously. This is "a shot across the bow of TEA [Texas Education Agency] and of science educators statewide, warning them against the straightforward teaching of evolution," Scott said. She worries that the actions will "have a chilling effect," and are intended to intimidate teachers and TEA staff.

"It is the responsibility of science educators at all levels to stay well informed, and to inform their students on the major principles in every area of science. With biology, evolution is the leading principle," Futuyma asserted.

Robert E. Gropp (e-mail: rgropp@aibs.org) is director of the AIBS Public Policy Office.

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