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As the Florida state board of education prepared to consider a final draft of a new set of state science standards, Floridians offered their opinions at a last-minute meeting held in Orlando on February 11, 2008. Over eighty speakers addressed the state commissioner of education, Eric Smith, and, via webcast, the board. A video of the entire meeting is [available](#) [4] on the department's website. As the *Orlando Sentinel* (February 12, 2008) [reported](#) [5], "They came from one end of Florida to the other, and with views on evolution as far apart as the 800 miles that separate the Keys from the Panhandle." Observers estimated that there were about twice as many speakers opposing the treatment of evolution in the new standards as there were speakers who applauded it.

The previous set of standards, adopted in 1999, received a grade of F in a 2005 report from the Fordham Foundation, which [observed](#) [6], "The superficiality of the treatment of evolutionary biology alone justifies the grade 'F'." Lawrence S. Lerner, a coauthor of the report, [evaluated](#) [7] a previous draft of the new standards, grading it as a high B, and commenting, "With a little bit of extra effort, Florida could bring that up to an A." The [final draft](#) [8], released on February 1, 2008, incorporated many of the suggestions offered by Lerner and other experts who reviewed the draft. The standards have also received the editorial approval of newspapers around the state, including, most recently, the [Vero Beach Press-Journal](#) [9] (January 23, 2008).

But not everyone was enthusiastic about the proposed improvement. As NCSE [reported](#) [10] earlier, nearly a dozen county school boards in northern Florida have adopted resolutions objecting to the characterization of evolution as anything but a "theory" and calling for the teaching of "alternative" theories. Supporters of the resolutions were candid about their religious beliefs: Ken Hall, a school board member in Madison County, [told](#) [11] the *St. Petersburg Times* (January 24, 2008), for example, "We're not asking that evolution not be taught, just that it be taught as a theory, one of several. I'm a Christian. And I believe I was created by God, and that I didn't come from an amoeba or a monkey."

The same motivations were on view at the Orlando meeting, along with bizarre claims about science – the *St. Petersburg Times* (February 12, 2008) [reported](#) [12] that a speaker "held up an orange and said that because of evolution, he now had irrefutable evidence that an orange was 'the first cousin to somebody's pet cat' and 'related to human beings'" – and about the supposed moral consequences of teaching evolution, with Darwin compared with Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung. The *Orlando Sentinel* summarized, "Some speakers said they wanted creationism or intelligent design taught, while others said they just wanted what they called weaknesses in the theory of evolution talked about, too."

Responding to the creationist complaints were a number of scientists, educators, and citizens from around the state. Joe Wolf, president of the grassroots group [Florida Citizens for Science](#) [13] ([blog](#) [14]), presented a petition signed by over 1500 supporters of the standards, describing evolution as "the central organizing concept that allows us to understand all biological sciences from medicine to forestry to entomology, and its principles are the theoretical basis that underlies major advances in all biological fields" and calling on the board to accept the final draft. (The petition is still [accepting](#) [15] signatories.) The Lakeland *Ledger* (February 12, 2008) [reported](#) [16] that Wolf warned the board, "It will be a sad day if Florida becomes the next Kansas."

A majority of the writing committee itself urged the board to adopt the new set of standards, in a [statement](#) [17] (PDF) read by Gerry Meisels, professor of chemistry at the University of South Florida and a member of the science standards writing committee. Meisels was [quoted](#) [18] by the Associated Press (February 11, 2008) as saying, "We are frustrated by the disproportionate publicity and the political pressure that has been brought to bear on decision makers. Yielding to these pressures would be a real disservice to Florida because it would not only seriously impede the education of our children but also create the image of a backward state."

Debra Walker, an archaeologist who serves on the Monroe County School Board and served on the writing committee, also urged the board to accept the new set of standards without tinkering. According to the *Orlando Sentinel*, Walker "said the current 'political meltdown over Darwinian theory' was proof that too many people had received a poor-quality science education. She noted that the school districts with some of the lowest science scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test were the ones complaining loudest about the new standards. 'Do we want these boards setting science policy in Florida? I think not.'"

The board of education is scheduled to vote on the new standards on February 19, and it is expected that creationists will continue to lobby the board to compromise the treatment of evolution. John Stemberger, president and general counsel for Florida Family Policy Council, told the Lakeland *Ledger* that critics of the standards are angry at not having a further chance to speak to the board directly: "We will lobby the commissioner and governor until we get our 15 minutes each before the board." According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, "The groups promised to bombard Gov. Charlie Crist and other state officials with thousands of requests until the board says okay."

In the meantime, it is also expected that individuals and organizations supporting the integrity of science education will continue to urge the board to adopt the new set of standards. In addition to the [petition](#) [15] organized by Florida Citizens for Science, Americans United for Separation of Church and State sent a [letter](#) [19] (PDF) encouraging the board to resist efforts to undermine the treatment of evolution in the standards. And the American Institute for Biological Sciences followed suit, [telling](#) [20] the board, "The biologists and science educators represented by AIBS, and the scientific community as a whole, agree that there is no research supporting either creationism or 'intelligent design' or challenging the

importance of evolution for explaining the history and diversity of life."

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