



Published on NCSE (<https://ncse.com>)

[Home](#) > The e-word arrives in Florida

SHARE TWEET EMAIL [PRINT](#) [1]

[Carrie Sager](#) [2]

02.18.2008

[The e-word arrives in Florida](#) [3]

The Florida state board of education voted 4-3 at its February 19, 2008, meeting to adopt a new set of state science standards in which evolution is presented as a "fundamental concept underlying all of biology." The adopted standards differ from those developed by the writing committee in adding the phrase "the scientific theory of" before mentions of plate tectonics, cell theory, atomic theory, electromagnetism, and evolution. According to the standards, "a scientific theory represents the most powerful explanation scientists have to offer."

The previous set of state science standards, adopted in 1999, received a failing grade in a national assessment by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in 2005, which [observed](#) [4], "The superficiality of the treatment of evolutionary biology alone justifies the grade 'F'." The word "evolution" itself was absent from the standards. In contrast, evolution is now featured as a "big idea" around which the standards are organized.

As the time neared for the board to consider the standards, creationists were assiduously lobbying against the treatment of evolution. At a last-minute meeting in Orlando on February 11, 2008, there were about twice as many speakers opposing the treatment of evolution in the new standards as there were speakers who applauded it. The *Orlando Sentinel* [reported](#) [5] (February 12, 2008), "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."

Supporters of the integrity of evolution education were not silent in Orlando. In addition to [statements](#) [6] offered by Florida Citizens for Science, the American Institute for Biological Sciences, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the Florida Academy of Sciences submitted a [statement](#) [7] (PDF) endorsing the treatment of "origins and biological evolution" in the new set of standards, describing evolution as "the central unifying concept in biology."

After the Orlando meeting, the Florida department of education developed a [new version](#) [8] of the standards, seeking to label scientific theories (including evolution) as such. The *Orlando Sentinel* (February 16, 2008) [suggested](#) [9], "By adding the word theory, which many opponents of the standards had argued for, the new version may appease those who do not view evolution as a scientific fact or those whose religious beliefs are in conflict with evolution."

A spokesperson for the department told the *Sentinel* (February 16, 2008) that the new version was vetted by the writing committee, but a later report in the *Sentinel* (February 17, 2008) [suggested](#) [10] that a majority of the committee opposed the changes, quoting Debra Walker (who also serves on the Monroe County School Board) as saying, "There is no scientifically sound reason to make these changes" and Gerry Meisels (a professor of chemistry at the University of South Florida) as describing them as "clumsy."

Over the weekend, the novelist and columnist Carl Hiasen provided comic relief, [writing](#) [11] in the *Miami Herald* (February 17, 2008), "By accepting evolution as a proven science, our top educators would be sending a loud message to the rest of the nation: Stop making fun of us. Is that what we really want?" and concluding, "there's no sin in being a slightly backward state with extremely modest expectations for its young people. ... We've worked hard to keep ourselves so far behind in education, and we must stay the course."

Before approving the modified standards on February 19, the board first heard from twenty speakers, each given 3 minutes, alternating between supporters and opponents of the standards. Among the supporters were Jonathan Smith of [Florida Citizens for Science](#) [12] ([blog](#) [13]), Debra Walker and Gerry Meisels from the writing committee, Joseph Travis (the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Florida State University), and Nobel laureate Sir Harold Kroto, who also [expressed](#) [14] his views in his op-ed for the *Ft. Myers News-Press* (February 16, 2008).

During a lively debate lasting about sixty minutes, board member Donna Callaway proposed a so-called "academic freedom" amendment to the standards to counter what she described as the "dogmatic" tone of the standards with respect to evolution. The *Miami Herald* (February 19, 2008) [reported](#) [15], "The amendment would have given teachers the explicit permission 'to engage students in a critical analysis of that evidence.'" She was unable to obtain a second to her motion, however.

Ultimately, a motion to adopt the new version of the standards, with "scientific theory" inserted, was adopted by a 4-3 vote. Joining Callaway in voting against the standards were Akshay Desai and Roberto Martinez, although for very different reasons. Martinez in particular fiercely defended the standards as drafted, brandishing a [letter](#) [16] (PDF) from the National Academy of Sciences endorsing the writing committee's version, and asking pointed questions about the development of the new version.

Martinez was [quoted](#) [17] by the Associated Press (February 19, 2008) as lamenting, "What we have here is an effort by people to water down our standards." To judge from the reaction of creationists, however, even the new version of the standards was too much. The Associated Press also reported that the Florida Family Policy Council, disappointed in the board's vote, plans to seek legislation to ensure "academic freedom" with respect to evolution.

Asked for comment about the board's vote by *Education Week* (February 19, 2008), Florida Citizens for Science's Brandon Haught [answered](#) [18], "The standards, as approved, are a huge step forward for our Florida schools ... They're light years ahead of what's been used in the state." And NCSE's Josh Rosenau agreed, saying, "the basic content of the standards is still good," and adding, "This is a win for science

overall."

[Anti-Evolution](#) [19]

[2008](#) [20]

[Florida](#) [21]

[+ read](#) [3]

Source URL: <https://ncse.com/news/the-e-word-arrives-in-florida#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://ncse.com/printpdf/12473>

[2] <https://ncse.com/users/carrie>

[3] <https://ncse.com/news/the-e-word-arrives-in-florida>

[4] <http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=352&pubsubid=1137#1137>

[5] <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/politics/orl-locevolution12021208feb12,0,3717277.story>

[6] http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2008/FL/731_evolution_under_siege_in_flori_2_12_2008.asp

[7] http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/fas_resolution.pdf

[8] <http://www.fldoestem.org/page231.aspx>

[9] <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/education/orl-evolution1608feb16,0,5061461.story>

[10] <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-evolution1708feb17,0,5605323.story>

[11] <http://www.miamiherald.com/540/story/421075.html>

[12] <http://www.flascience.org>

[13] <http://www.flascience.org/wp>

[14] <http://www.news-press.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080216/OPINION/802160414/1015>

[15] http://www.miamiherald.com/news/breaking_dade/story/424693.html

[16] http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/NAS_letter_to_FL.pdf

[17] <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/florida/sfl-219evolution,0,362365.story>

[18] <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/02/27/25evolution.h27.html>

[19] <https://ncse.com/news/anti-evolution>

[20] <https://ncse.com/news/2008>

[21] <https://ncse.com/news/florida>