



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

[Home](#) > The Comer controversy continues

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

[Steve Newton](#) [2]

12.14.2007

[The Comer controversy continues](#) [3]

Over two weeks after it was first reported that Christine Comer was forced to resign from her post at the Texas Education Agency, apparently because she forwarded a brief e-mail announcing a lecture on "intelligent design" by Barbara Forrest, the state's newspapers continue to provide a steady stream of news and commentary. And groups with a stake in the integrity of science education in Texas continue to voice their concern. As the *Austin American-Statesman* (December 14, 2007) [observed](#) [4] in its latest story, "The controversy over Comer's departure put the agency's scientific credibility at risk at a time when Texas is trying to attract star researchers and scientists for a growing biomedical and biotech industry, and just before the State Board of Education begins developing new science standards next month."

Comer herself [appeared](#) [5] on NPR's "Science Friday" on December 7, 2007, relating her story to the show's host, Ira Flatow. After receiving the e-mail announcing Forrest's talk, she said, "you know, I had a half minute and I said, gee, this is really interesting. And then, I looked up the credential on my computer, I Googled Barbara Forrest and I said, oh my goodness, this is quite a credential[ed] speaker. And then I thought to myself -- you know, I'm telling my biology teachers almost on a weekly basis, teach the curriculum, teach the evolution curriculum because it's part of the state-mandated curriculum. And now, I should be -- you know, I should be walking the talk here, and I -- there's nothing wrong with this e-mail, of course." Less than two hours later, a colleague was calling for her termination, and in the following week, she was effectively forced to resign.

Comer told Flatow that there were previous indications that the TEA was discouraging its employees from taking a stand on evolution. At a meeting during which employees were told that they must be careful about what they say and do, Comer recounted, she mentioned the topic of creationism: "And she said, I'm so glad you brought that up ... because it's important for us to realize that if the company line is that

we endorse creationism, then that's what we have to say. I was shocked. I said, my goodness, even the president's ... own science adviser, was not held to that standard. And she said, well, I'm just telling you." Comer was referring to John H. Marburger III, Director of the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy, who [told](#) [6] *The New York Times* (August 3, 2005), "Evolution is the cornerstone of modern biology" and "intelligent design is not a scientific concept."

Over the weekend, the *Austin American-Statesman* (December 8, 2007) again expressed its concern about both Comer's ouster and about what it signifies about the TEA's attitude toward evolution education. Acknowledging that the TEA cited a number of Comer's supposed misdeeds in the memorandum recommending her termination, the editorial [concluded](#) [7], "But there is no doubt that the e-mail incident riled an influential boss at TEA and played a role in Comer's resignation." As for the TEA's policy of "neutrality" about evolution, the editorial urged the TEA to heed the scientific community, quoting the biologist David Hillis of the University of Texas, Austin -- just two blocks away from the TEA -- as saying, "There is absolutely no scientific basis or evidence for 'intelligent design.' It is simply a religious assertion, and it has no place in a science course."

The TEA's commissioner Robert Scott was [interviewed](#) [8] by the *Dallas Morning News* (December 9, 2007). He denied that Comer was forced to resign just for forwarding the e-mail announcing Forrest's talk, alluding to "other factors" that he was not able to discuss. Asked, "Was her advocacy of evolution over creationism an element in her dismissal?" he replied, "She wasn't advocating for evolution. But she may have given the impression that ... we were taking a position as an agency -- not as an individual but as an agency -- on a matter." Asked, "Why shouldn't the agency advocate the science of evolution? Texas students are required to study it," he replied, "you can be in favor of a science without bashing people's faith, too. I don't know all the facts, but I think that may be the real issue here." He did not explain how Comer's behavior was supposed to constitute faith-bashing.

While on "Science Friday," Comer thanked her supporters, saying, "Science educators and rational minds have really gone to bat and have written letters, made e-mails, and sent phone messages. It's really been an incredible response." As NCSE previously reported, Texas Citizens for Science, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the American Institute for Biological Sciences have all issued statements critical of the TEA, focusing especially on the claim, expressed in the [memorandum](#) [9] (PDF) recommending Comer's termination, that "the TEA requires, as agency policy, neutrality when talking about evolution and creationism." In a [statement](#) [10] released through NCSE, and a subsequent [post](#) [11] at Oxford University Press's blog, Barbara Forrest herself deplored the situation, writing (in the latter), "I find it difficult to avoid concluding that Ms. Comer has become a casualty of the pro-ID political agenda."

The Society for the Study of Evolution released a [statement](#) [12] (PDF) reading, in part, "Professional ethics demands that one not 'remain neutral' when science is deliberately misrepresented by creationists. Chris Comer thus acted responsibly and professionally in forwarding the announcement about an educational lecture regarding 'Intelligent Design' creationism. In contrast, the administrators who called for her termination and who forced her resignation acted irresponsibly and in direct opposition to the professional standards expected of those who oversee science education. Their comments, quoted above, make it clear that they have sacrificed not only a dedicated public servant but also the facts and the very nature of science to partisan political ideology. It is a sad day for Texas when TEA administrators resort to Stalinist-style purging to suppress the truth about the bankruptcy of 'Intelligent Design' arguments."

Similarly, as the *Austin American-Statesman* (December 11, 2007) [reported](#) [13], "More than 100 biology

faculty members from universities across Texas signed a letter sent Monday to state Education Commissioner Robert Scott saying Texas Education Agency employees should not have to remain neutral on evolution." Daniel Bolnick of the University of Texas, Austin, told the newspaper, "I'm an evolutionary biologist, and I and many others simply feel that good evolution education is key to understanding biology as a whole," and his colleague David Hillis added that the Comer controversy represented "an enormous black eye in terms of our competitiveness and ability to attract researchers and technologies." The [letter](#) [14] (PDF) was signed by biologists from across Texas, at both public and private universities.

And Alan I. Leshner, the chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, drove the message home, [writing](#) [15] in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (December 11, 2007): "As Texas prepares to reconsider what youngsters statewide should know about science, the forced ouster of science curriculum director Chris Comer of the Texas Education Agency, apparently for standing up for the integrity of science education, stands as both shocking and sad. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the official explanation for it. ... Should anyone in charge of science curriculum be expected to remain neutral regarding efforts to insert religious viewpoints into science classrooms? The answer is 'no.' ... If today's students are to thrive, education leaders cannot pick and choose which scientific facts they want to accept."

A common theme in the coverage of the Comer controversy is that it foreshadows a clash over the place of evolution in the science portion of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state science standards that determine both what is taught in Texas's public school science classrooms and the content of the biology textbooks approved for use in the state. The *Dallas Morning News* (December 13, 2007) [summarized](#) [16], "The resignation of the state's science curriculum director last month has signaled the beginning of what is shaping up to be a contentious and politically charged revision of the science curriculum, set to begin in earnest in January. ... in disciplinary paperwork [officials at the TEA] stressed that she needed to remain neutral in what was becoming a tense period leading up to the first review of the science curriculum in a decade."

Although creationists in Texas, including the chair of the Texas state board of education, Don McLeroy, have disavowed any intention of trying to include creationism in the TEKS, there are clear signs that they will press to include language attempting to instill scientifically unwarranted doubts about evolution. Mark Ramsey, representing a group styling itself Texans for Better Science Education, was characterized, for example, as wanting "weaknesses in evolution" to be taught. (Ramsey is also associated with the Greater Houston Creation Association, as Texas Citizens for Science [reports](#) [17].) NCSE's executive director Eugenie C. Scott told the *Morning News*, "It all boils down to the idea that to counter evolution you teach students that evolution is crummy science in the hopes that students will reject it ... It's a way of getting creationism in without the 'C' word."

For her part, Comer told the *Morning News*, "Any science teacher worth their salt that has any background in biology will tell you there is no controversy" over the scientific status of evolution. That, she said, was her approach during her tenure at the TEA, where she frequently responded to questions about evolution education in Texas: "We have teachers afraid to teach it, parents who don't want it taught and parents who do want it taught. It comes from all different angles." She added, "For all the years I was there, I would always say the teaching of evolution is part of our science curriculum. It's not just a good idea; it's the law." But now she is not optimistic about the future of science education in Texas, lamenting, "The way things are being done these days I don't think rational minds have a chance."

[Anti-Evolution](#) [18]

[2007](#) [19]

[Texas](#) [20]

[+ read](#) [3]

Source URL: <https://ncse.com/news/2007/12/comer-controversy-continues-001150#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://ncse.com/printpdf/13103>

[2] <https://ncse.com/users/steve-newton>

[3] <https://ncse.com/news/2007/12/comer-controversy-continues-001150>

[4] http://www.statesman.com/blogs/content/shared-gen/blogs/austin/editorial/entries/2007/12/14/official_i_was_looking_out_for.html

[5] <http://www.sciencefriday.com/program/archives/200712071>

[6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/03/politics/03bush.html>

[7] http://www.statesman.com/blogs/content/shared-gen/blogs/austin/editorial/entries/2007/12/08/experts_dont_mix_science_relig.html

[8] http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/points/stories/DN-pocscott_09edi.ART.State.Edition1.370eba7.html

[9] http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/Comer_firing_memo.pdf

[10] http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2007/TX/270_barbara_forrest_on_chris_comer_12_5_2007.asp

[11] <http://blog.oup.com/2007/12/creationism/>

[12] http://www.evolutionsociety.org/download/ComerLtr_RP_JS_DW.pdf

[13] <http://www.statesman.com/news/content/region/legislature/stories/12/11/1211science.html>

[14] http://alt.coxnewsweb.com/statesman/news/12/121107science_ltr_to_TEA_dir.pdf

[15] http://www.aaas.org/programs/centers/pe/media/20071211leshner_star_telegram.pdf

[16] <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/education/stories/121307dnmetevolution.2af0951.html>

[17] <http://texscience.org/files/tbse.htm>

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

[19] <https://ncse.com/news/2007>

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