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"We were actually told in a meeting in September that if creationism is the party line, we have to abide by it," the former director of science curriculum for the Texas Education Agency [told](#) [4] the *Austin American-Statesman* (December 6, 2007). Chris Comer, who was forced to resign from her position with the TEA in November 2007, related that over the past year, the TEA began increasingly to scrutinize and constrain the activities of its employees in the curriculum department: "We couldn't go anywhere. We couldn't speak," she said. "They just started wanting everything to be channeled." According to the newspaper, Comer maintained "that her ouster was political and that she felt persecuted for having supported the teaching of evolution in Texas classrooms."

As NCSE [reported](#) [5] earlier, Comer was forced to resign after forwarding a brief e-mail announcing a talk on "intelligent design" by Barbara Forrest to several individuals and two e-mail discussion groups used by science educators. A spokesperson for the TEA was quoted by the *American-Statesman* as saying, "Obviously, there was a concern about the forwarding of that e-mail ... that she was supporting that particular speaker and [how] that could be construed ... as taking a position that could be misinterpreted by some people," and as contending that Comer evinced a lack of professionalism in other ways. Until her resignation, Comer served for nine years at the TEA, following a twenty-seven-year stint as a public school science teacher.

Comer is scheduled to appear during the first hour of NPR's "[Science Friday](#)" [6] show, hosted by Ira Flatow, on December 7, 2007. The description for the show [summarizes](#) [7], "The education official responsible for the science curriculum in the state of Texas resigned last month saying she was forced to step down after being reprimanded for informing colleagues of a talk on the conflict over the teaching of evolution. ... Comer's supervisor said the email was grounds for termination as the 'FYI' email 'implies endorsement of the speaker and implies that TEA endorses the speaker's position on a subject on which

the agency must remain neutral.' In this segment, Ira talks with Christine Castillo Comer about the case and about evolution, 'intelligent design,' and creationism in Texas."

The controversy comes shortly before Texas is about to embark on a revision of its state science standards. The new chair of the Texas state board of education, Don McLeroy, told the *American-Statesman* that although he is a creationist, "he doesn't necessarily think creationism should be taught in schools. Rather, he said, he supports current curriculum standards that say students should 'analyze, review and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses.'" Steve Schafersman of [Texas Citizens for Science](#) [8] retorted, "This 'teach the controversy' and 'weaknesses of evolution' is nothing more than an attempt to distort and disparage what really is one of the most highly corroborated explanations in science."

Editorial opinion, both within and outside Texas, continues to be critical of the TEA and worried about the implications of the case for the integrity of science education in Texas and across the country. As NCSE [reported](#) [9] earlier, the *Austin American-Statesman*, the Corpus Christi *Caller-Times*, a columnist for the *Waco Tribune*, and even *The New York Times* have weighed in, with the *Times* [writing](#) [10], "Is Texas about to become the next state to undermine the teaching of evolution? That is the scary implication of the abrupt ousting of Christine Comer, the state's top expert on science education. ... We can only hope that adherents of a sound science education can save Texas from a retreat into the darker ages."

Adding to the chorus, the *Houston Chronicle* (December 4, 2007) editorially [commented](#) [11], "Comer was simply alerting people to a relevant presentation by a reputable education writer. ... Since Texas policy supports the inclusion of evolution in science curriculum, it's hard to see how Comer was violating state policy by circulating an event notice sent out by a group that also endorses teaching evolution." Echoing Barbara Forrest's description of the TEA's stance as "just sad," the editorial added, "It will be more than sad if the Texas Education Agency is leaning toward taking an anti-evolutionary stance and allowing religious doctrine to be taught side by side with valid science in the state's classrooms."

In a similar manner, the *Waco Tribune's* editorial (December 6, 2007) [suggested](#) [12] that "Texas parents, teachers and lawmakers should be extremely upset over the recent dismissal of the Texas Education Agency's director of science curriculum," and warned, "Because the State Board of Education will review the state science curriculum next year and set standards for classroom instruction and textbook selection, Comer's abrupt removal could signal an opening for the insertion of creationism or intelligent design into science classrooms in Texas. Texas parents, teachers and lawmakers should be on guard that the state avoids the mistakes that led to the 2005 Dover, Pa., lawsuit."

And in its editorial, the *Dallas Morning News* (December 7, 2007) [commented](#) [13], "We hope this isn't the beginning of a worrisome trend within the new leadership of the TEA and State Board of Education," adding, "If Ms. Comer was incompetent, it's certainly not reflected by her 27-year career as a teacher and nine years of service as director of science. The impression we get is that her bosses were gunning for her, and the forwarded e-mail was the most expedient excuse they could find. This action could not have sent a worse message to our state's educators, when we should be doing everything possible to encourage people to choose teaching as a career, not frightening or bullying them into leaving."

Writing in the *Wisconsin State Journal* (December 4, 2007), columnist Bill Wineke [commented](#) [14], "If proponents of this scientific quackery can terrorize a state education agency and force the resignation of a veteran science teacher, they will establish a precedent that will cripple serious science education not only in Texas but around the country." The Eugene, Oregon, *Register-Guard's* editorial (December 6,

2007) [commented](#) [15], **[Link broken]** "So if, as it appears, the director of science curriculum for the Texas Education Agency was forced to resign for forwarding an e-mail message about a presentation by an author critical of the intelligent design approach to science education, then it's appropriate to be both afraid and ashamed."

Those concerned for the integrity of science education have also been voicing their concern. As NCSE [reported](#) [16] earlier, Texas Citizens for Science released a detailed [statement](#) [17] on November 29, 2007. Moreover, Americans United for Separation of Church and State issued a [press release](#) [18] dated November 28, 2007, calling on the TEA to rehire Comer. AU's executive director the Reverend Barry W. Lynn remarked, "It's a sad day when a science expert can lose her job merely for recommending that people hear a speaker defend sound science ... Officials in Texas seem intent on elevating fundamentalist dogma over academic excellence and common sense."

Barbara Forrest herself released a [statement](#) [19] through NCSE on December 5, 2007, deploring the situation. "In forcing Chris Comer to resign as Texas Director of Science, the Texas Education Agency has confirmed in a most public, unfortunate way the central point of my Austin presentation, 'Inside Creationism's Trojan Horse,' the mere announcement of which TEA used as an excuse to terminate her: the intelligent design (ID) creationist movement is about politics, religion, and power," she wrote. "If anyone had any doubts about how mean-spirited ID politics is, this episode should erase them. ... For the last nine years at the TEA, after twenty-seven years as a science teacher, Ms. Comer was doing her part, and she got fired for doing it."

And the American Institute for Biological Sciences issued a [press release](#) [20] on December 6, 2007, expressing outrage at the fact, expressed in the [memorandum](#) [21] (PDF) recommending Comer's termination, that "the TEA requires, as agency policy, neutrality when talking about evolution and creationism." "When it comes to science education, we absolutely cannot remain neutral on evolution. Evolution is the unifying principle of modern biology," asserted Douglas J. Futuyma, president of the American Institute of Biological Sciences and distinguished professor of ecology and evolution at Stony Brook University. "Within biological science, the reality of evolution is not controversial."

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http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/editorials/stories/DN-comer_07edi.ART.State.Edition1.36b74e2.html

[14] <http://www.madison.com/wsj/home/column/index.php?ntid=260370&ntpid=1>

[15] <http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/dt.cms.support.viewStory.cls?cid=32284&sid=5&fid=1>

[16] http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2007/TX/950_texas_education_official_force_11_29_2007.asp

[17] <http://www.texscience.org/reviews/tea-science-director-resigns.htm>

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

[20] http://www.aibs.org/position-statements/20071206_aibs_president_1.html

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

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