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Senate Bill 561, styled the "Louisiana Academic Freedom Act," was prefiled in the Louisiana Senate by state senator Ben Nevers (D-District 12) on March 21, 2008, and provisionally assigned to the Senate Education Committee, of which Nevers is the chair. In name, the bill is similar to the so-called academic freedom bills in Florida, House Bill 1483 and Senate Bill 2692, which are evidently based on a string of similar bills in Alabama as well as on a model bill that the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, the institutional home of "intelligent design" creationism, recently began to promote. But in its content, Louisiana's SB 561 seems to be modeled instead on a controversial policy adopted by a local school board in 2006.

Adopted in 2006 with the backing of the Louisiana Family Forum, a religious right group with a long history of promoting creationism and attacking evolution education in the state, the Ouachita Parish School Board's [policy](#) [4] permits teachers to help students to understand "the scientific strengths and weaknesses of existing scientific theories pertinent to the course being taught"; "biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, global warming and human cloning" are the only topics specifically mentioned. A local paper editorially described it as "a policy that is so clear that one School Board member voted affirmatively while adding, 'but I don't know what I'm voting on'" (*Monroe News-Star*, December 3, 2006).

The controversy over the policy was renewed in September 2007, when Senator David Vitter (R-Louisiana) sought to earmark \$100,000 of federal funds to the Louisiana Family Forum. The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* (September 22, 2007) [reported](#) [5] that the money was intended to "pay for a report suggesting 'improvements' in science education in Louisiana, the development and distribution of educational materials and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Ouachita Parish School Board's 2006 policy that opened the door to biblically inspired teachings in science classes." Thanks to pressure from NCSE and its allies, Vitter [withdrew](#) [6] his proposal in the following month.

Now [SB 561](#) [7] (PDF) echoes the central language of the Ouachita Parish School Board's policy. Contending that "the teaching of some scientific subjects, such as biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, global warming, and human cloning, can cause controversy, and that some teachers may be unsure of the expectations concerning how they should present information on such subjects," the bill extends permission to Louisiana's teachers to "help students understand, analyze, critique, and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories pertinent to the course being taught."

Unlike the policy, the bill contains directives aimed at state and local education administrators, who are instructed to "endeavor to create an environment within public elementary and secondary schools that encourages students to explore scientific questions, learn about scientific evidence, to help students develop critical thinking skills, and respond appropriately and respectfully to differences of opinion about controversial issues" and to "endeavor to assist teachers to find more effective ways to present the science curriculum where it addresses scientific controversies." Administrators are also instructed not to "censor or suppress in any way any writing, document, record, or other content of any material which references" the listed topics.

Attempting to immunize itself against a likely challenge to its constitutionality, the bill also claims to protect only "the teaching of scientific information," adding that it "shall not be construed to promote any religious doctrine, promote discrimination for or against a particular set of religious beliefs, or promote discrimination for or against religion or non-religion." The involvement of the Louisiana Family Forum -- which seeks to "persuasively present biblical principles in the centers of influence on issues affecting the family through research, communication and networking" -- is, however, no doubt going to provoke a careful scrutiny of the intent of the bill's backers. The upcoming legislative session begins on March 31, 2008.

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