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Senate Bill 561 -- originally called the "Louisiana Academic Freedom Act"; now renamed the "Louisiana Science Education Act" -- passed the Louisiana Senate Education Committee on April 17, 2008. As introduced, the bill contended 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," and extended 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."

The Baton Rouge *Advocate* (April 18, 2008) [reported](#) [4], "Senate Education Committee Chairman Ben Nevers, sponsor of the bill, denied that his proposal was a bid to promote creationism," and quoted Nevers as saying, "This bill does not promote religion or ask to introduce religion in any classroom." Earlier, however, Nevers [acknowledged](#) [5] to the *Advocate* (April 1, 2008) that he introduced the bill at the behest of the Louisiana Family Forum, a religious right group that [recommends](#) [6] (PDF) a variety of young-earth and "intelligent design" creationist organizations, including the Institute for Creation Research, the Foundation for Thought and Ethics, and Kent Hovind's Creation Science Evangelism.

Before the hearing, the Shreveport *Times* (April 14, 2008) took a firm editorial stand against the bill, [writing](#) [7], **[Link broken]** "Even though it is presented with an attractive title and couched in the newest terms, Senate Bill 561 is not in the best interest of students, educators or religious leaders. It would open the door for high school science class curricula and discussions concerning matters best left to individual faith, families and religious institutions. The bill proposes bad law that has been tried before and has been struck down repeatedly by the courts," and concluding, "Religious doctrine and the science classroom must remain separate, and SB 561 should be ditched in committee."

But it was not to be, despite the testimony of what the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* (April 18, 2008) [described](#) [8] as "a bank of witnesses" who "blasted the proposed Louisiana Science Education Act as a back-door attempt to inject the biblical story of creation into the classroom." The *Advocate* (April 18, 2008) [reported](#) [4] that William Hansel, a scientist at Louisiana State University's Pennington Biomedical Research Center, told the committee, "nearly all scientists oppose passage of this bill," adding that if enacted, the bill "will be seized upon as one more piece of evidence that Louisiana is a backward state by those who have popularized this image of our state."

Before its passage, the bill was renumbered (SB 733), renamed, and revised, with the removal of the "strengths and weaknesses" language and the list of specific scientific topics. Even the sanitized version of the bill is likely to continue to spark controversy, owing to its creationist antecedents, from which its supporters may be unable to disentangle themselves. Discussing his support for the bill, David Tate, who serves on the Livingston Parish School Board, told the *Times-Picayune*, "I believe that both sides -- the creationism side and the evolution side -- should be presented and let students decide what they believe," adding that the bill is needed because "teachers are scared to talk about" creation.

The *Advocate* (April 19, 2008) editorially agreed that the antecedents of the bill were problematic, [writing](#) [9], "it seems clear that the supporters of this legislation are seeking a way to get creationism -- the story of creation as told in the biblical book of Genesis -- into science classrooms." Acknowledging the revisions of the bill, the editorial commented, "At this point, the wording of the bill seems more symbol than substance. But its implication -- that real science is somehow being stifled in Louisiana's classrooms -- doesn't seem grounded in actual fact. This kind of rhetorical grandstanding is a needless distraction from the real problems the Legislature should be addressing."

Speaking to the *Advocate* (April 20, 2008), the executive director of the Louisiana Family Forum expressed disappointment at the revisions to the bill, describing his support of it as now only lukewarm, even though its sponsor, Ben Nevers, [told](#) [10] the newspaper, "It didn't change the intent of the bill." However, Barbara Forrest, the co-author of *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design* and a member of NCSE's board of directors, commented, "The bill itself is still a very problematic bill, a stealth creationism bill," explaining, "The strategy now is to sanitize the terminology, which is what they did with the original bill and which they are doing now."

*Updated on April 24, 2008*

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