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## [\*\*Concern mounting about Texas state science standards\*\*](#) [3]

"A battle looms in Texas over science textbooks that teach evolution," Laura Beil [reports](#) [4] in the June 4, 2008, issue of *The New York Times*, "and the wrestle for control seizes on three words. None of them are 'creationism' or 'intelligent design' or even 'creator.' The words are 'strengths and weaknesses.' Starting this summer, the state education board will determine the curriculum for the next decade and decide whether the 'strengths and weaknesses' of evolution should be taught. The benign-sounding phrase, some argue, is a reasonable effort at balance. But critics say it is a new strategy taking shape across the nation to undermine the teaching of evolution, a way for students to hear religious objections under the heading of scientific discourse."

The story mentions the recent spate of antievolution bills invoking "academic freedom" -- such bills have died in Florida, Alabama, and Missouri, but are still active in Louisiana, Michigan, and South Carolina -- but observes, "In Texas, evolution foes do not have to win over the entire Legislature, only a majority of the education board; they are one vote away." The chair of the Texas state board of education, Don McLeroy, describes the debate as between "two systems of science" -- "You've got a creationist system and a naturalist system," he told the *Times* -- but avowed, "My personal religious beliefs are going to make no difference in how well our students are going to learn science."

In 2003, "strengths and weaknesses" language in the Texas state science standards was selectively applied by members of the board attempting to dilute the treatment of evolution in the biology textbooks then under consideration. In the end, however, all of the textbooks were adopted without substantial change. Now the committee charged with the task of revising the standards plans to recommend the removal of the "strengths and weaknesses" language, Kevin Fisher, a member of the committee, told the *Times*, commenting that the "weaknesses" listed on a Texas creationist website were "decades old" and have "all been thoroughly refuted." But the board is free to reject or amend the committee's

recommendations.

Also quoted in the article were NCSE's deputy director Glenn Branch, who commented on the trend of "antievolution policies in sheep's clothing"; Kathy Miller of the [Texas Freedom Network](#) [5], who explained, "'Strengths and weaknesses' are regular words that have now been drafted into the rhetorical arsenal of creationists"; and Dan Foster, former chairman of the department of medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and past president of the Academy of Medicine, Engineering, and Science of Texas, who worried, "Serious students will not come to study in our universities if Texas is labeled scientifically backward."

The *Times* story follows on the heels of a story in the *San Antonio Express-News* (May 31, 2008), which similarly [predicted](#) [6] **[Link broken]**, "After feuding for months over how to teach school children to read, the State Board of Education soon will shift to a topic that could become much more controversial -- the science curriculum. Science, after all, involves biology. And biology is built on the theory of evolution, raising fears among some observers that social conservatives on the 15-member panel will try to shade textbooks with religion." One of those social conservatives, the board's vice chair David Bradley, explained, "Evolution is not fact. Evolution is a theory and, as such, cannot be proven. Students need to be able to jump to their own conclusions."

Steven Schafersman of [Texas Citizens for Science](#) [7] told NCSE, "What Bradley and his colleagues actually plan to do is damage evolution instruction by trying to get the new science standards to mention alleged but false 'weaknesses' of evolution, in order to weaken evolution content, confuse students and make them think science is less accurate and reliable than it really is about biological origins, and intimidate teachers to avoid or minimize the subject (as many of them do now in Texas)." With respect to Bradley's description of evolution as theory not fact, he added, "This banal canard is indulged in by every creationist who thinks he can get away with it. ... Evolution is a fact, if fact is defined as something for which so much reliable evidence exists that it would be irrational to deny it."

Likewise, David Hillis, a distinguished biology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, told the *Express-News* that the main purpose of the "strengths and weaknesses" language "is to introduce religious ideas and anti-science ideas into the science classroom," adding, "Evolution is an easily observable phenomenon, and has been documented beyond any reasonable doubt. The 'theory' part of evolutionary theory concerns the experiments, observations, and models that explain how populations evolve. At this level of introductory instruction, it is ludicrous to think about teaching what some people disingenuously call 'weaknesses.' ... We teach what is known and has been supported by a huge body of scientific research."

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