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With evolution sure to be a hotly debated topic at the next meeting of the Texas state board of education, with a bill just introduced in the Texas legislature aimed at restoring the contentious "strengths and weaknesses" language to the standards, and with a different bill aimed at exempting the Institute for Creation Research's graduate school from the regulations governing degree-granting institutions in Texas, there's no shortage of news from the Lone Star state. NCSE, of course, continues not only to report on the antics of creationism in Texas but also to help concerned Texans to combat them: Texans wishing to express their concerns about the standards to the Texas state board of education, which is expected to have its final vote on the standards at its meeting in Austin on March 25-27, 2009, will find contact information and talking points in the [Taking Action](#) [4] section of NCSE's website and on the Texas Freedom Network's [website](#) [5].

With Texans still reeling from the detailed profiles of the chair of the Texas state board of education, avowed creationist Don McLeroy, published in the [Austin American-Statesman](#) [6] (March 8, 2009) and the [Texas Observer](#) [7] (February 20, 2009), Texas Citizens for Science (March 14, 2009) recently [disclosed](#) [8] that McLeroy endorsed a bizarre creationist screed entitled *Sowing Atheism: The National Academy of Sciences' Sinister Scheme to Teach Our Children They're Descended from Reptiles* — aimed, of course, at [Evolution, Creationism, and Science](#) [9], issued by the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine in February 2008 to general [acclaim](#) [10]. McLeroy, however, praises *Sowing Atheism* for showing "how the NAS attempts to seduce the unwitting reader by providing scanty empirical evidence but presented with great intellectual bullying — both secular and religious."

On its blog (March 18, 2009), the Texas Freedom Network [summarized](#) [11] the themes of the book — "Scientists are 'atheists.' Parents who want to teach their children about evolution are 'monsters.' Pastors who support sound science are 'morons'" — and pointedly asked, "Is that the sort of message Chairman Don McLeroy and his cohorts on the State Board of Education have in mind for Texas science classrooms if they succeed in their campaign to shoehorn 'weaknesses' of evolution back into the science curriculum standards?" Mavis Knight, a member of the Texas state board of education who supports the integrity of science education, wryly [commented](#) [12] to the *Dallas Observer* (March 18, 2009), "So much for neutrality in the chairman's position." Looking forward to the board's impending vote on the standards, she added, "I am confident several of us will hold firm, but it's the swing votes you have to concern yourself with — and I don't know how much pressure is being put on the swing voters. ... It definitely won't be boring."

Fox News (March 18, 2009) [offered](#) [13] a detailed story about [House Bill 2800](#) [14], which would, if enacted, exempt institutions such as the Institute for Creation Research's graduate school from Texas's regulations governing degree-granting institutions. Although the ICR is not named, "[the bill's sponsor Leo] Berman says ICR was the inspiration for the bill because he feels creationism is as scientific as evolution and should be granted equal weight in the educational community." Berman was also quoted as saying, "I don't believe I came from a salamander that crawled out of a swamp millions of years ago." NCSE's executive director Eugenie C. Scott responded, "Their science education degrees are greatly inferior to those at, say, the University of Texas or Baylor University or even a good community college, frankly," adding, "Teaching that the Earth is only 10,000 years old is a little irregular in modern science."

Concern about HB 2800 was not confined to worries about the ICR's graduate school. A spokesperson for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, which denied state certification to the ICR's graduate school in 2007, argued that "HB 2800 appears to open the doors of Texas to predatory institutions ... Were the bill to become law, it could have the effect of leaving students defenseless against exploitation by diploma mills and other substandard institutions." Similarly, Steven Schafersman of Texas Citizens for Science warned, "This would open the door to other fly-by-night organizations that come in and want to award degrees in our state, because the bill is highly generalized," and NCSE's Scott added, "It would certainly open the door to all kinds of chicanery ... I mean, all you have to do, it looks to me from the bill, is start a non-profit organization, don't take any federal or state money, and then offer degrees in any fool subject you want."

Discussing [House Bill 4224](#) [15], which would, if enacted, require the Texas state board of education to restore the "strengths and weaknesses" language to the Texas state science standards, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (March 19, 2009), [reported](#) [16], "The bill does not address evolution specifically, but that seems to be its target. ... [The bill's sponsor Wayne] Christian said he filed the bill to allow teachers to continue to teach the strengths and weaknesses of the theory of evolution." Steven Schafersman of Texas Citizens for Science told the newspaper that the language was removed from the proposed new standards because it is not scientifically based, and warned that HB 4224 was likely to encourage teachers to teach creationism in violation of the constitutional strictures against doing so. He also said that for Texas to compete nationally and globally, the education standards must be based on "good science and not get bogged down with these religious interventions into our secular schools."

A further concern about HB 4224 discussed in the *Star-Telegram's* article was the bill's provision that "Students may be evaluated based upon their understanding of course materials, but no student in any public school or institution shall be penalized in any way because he or she subscribes to a particular position on scientific theories or hypotheses." (The article reports, incorrectly, that the bill would afford

the same protection to teachers; it is in fact silent about the beliefs of teachers, although it explicitly allows them to present "strengths and weaknesses" — a creationist catchphrase — to their students.) Schafersman commented, "Students could claim they believe anything they wanted in anything in science and if that's what they say, the teacher would be forced to give that student an A," but Christian countered that students would still be responsible for learning the material presented in the curriculum: "They can be lazy if they want to ... but teachers are still in charge of the grading system," he contended.

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[9] <http://www.nap.edu/sec>

[10] <https://ncse.com/news/2008/01/kudos-science-evolution-creationism-002137>

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