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[Home](#) > Texas Textbook Showdown

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[1]

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[Attack on science education](#) [3], [Climate change education](#) [4], [Evolution denial](#) [5], [Evolution education](#) [6], [History](#) [7], [NCSE](#) [8], [Textbooks](#) [9], [Young-earth creationism](#) [10]

[Josh Rosenau](#) [1]

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## [Texas Textbook Showdown](#) [11]

It's a joy to be able to report on a sweeping victory for science education in Texas, and to be able to give an eyewitness report of the fight over the textbooks that will be used in that massive textbook market for years to come. The 2009 battle over Texas science standards made it quite possible that the textbooks adopted last week would be riddled with creationist claims, or would give creationist board members a foothold to demand that publishers rewrite their books or be left off of the state's approved list. In the end, the books available to students will be solid, accurate, and honest about evolution and climate change.



I took a red-eye out to Austin last Wednesday. That was the only way to make it to the Texas state board of education meeting in time for the scheduled start of public testimony on textbooks. [As I mentioned in posting my testimony](#) [12], the textbook discussion was supposed to start at 1 PM, but didn't actually start until 9:40, ending about an hour later, 13 hours after the three-day-long meeting opened.

Most of the day was taken up with testimony about a new law that changes graduation requirements for Texas public schools, and which left the board to decide whether Algebra II should be required for all students, or only for students on the college track. I spent most of the day at the [Texas Freedom Network](#) [13] offices, caffeinating, finalizing my statement and the list of societies who signed on to the statement to the board, and trying to figure out exactly where the textbooks stood.

A rumor circulated that some publishers may have caved to pressure from a creationist group. Behind-the-scenes inquiries revealed that the creationists were overstating their case, but it created some moments of excitement.

Meanwhile, we listened to a long train of witnesses argue about math requirements. It was nice to see the state board dedicating time to what sounded like serious and thoughtful discussion of how to structure graduation requirements to fit the needs of future Texans and current industry. Better this, than spending time on the culture war over evolution or rehashing doubts about evolution that have been scientifically discredited for decades. It was somewhat gratifying to see 89 people registered to testify on graduation requirements, and only 17 on biology textbooks (plus one on computer science and another on environmental systems).

Of the 17 speakers registered to speak on biology textbooks, only Franklin Mayo and former board chairman Don "someone has to stand up to experts" McLeroy were recognizable creationist names, and McLeroy left without testifying (though [his prepared testimony, including baby panda pix](#), [14] is on his blog).

The board chuckled when I pointed out that my statement was signed by the publishers of *Science* magazine and of *Ranger Rick*, but had no questions about the views of the many and august scientific societies that endorsed the statement. They did, however, give Franklin Mayo extra time to assert that epigenetics was missing from the textbooks and that this absence should disqualify them. Chairwoman Cargill even claimed that the board had told publishers to include it after the last meeting, which was false: epigenetics isn't part of the standards and publishers aren't required to cover it.

Otherwise, the board was perfectly happy to let the testimony move quickly. Or so it seemed, until the

last speaker of the night, who wanted to pick a fight over the lone book up for adoption in Environmental Systems. Becky Berger, a geologist who has worked for the oil and gas industry for years and is now a candidate for the state commission which regulates that industry, claimed not only that there was no science in the book, but that there shouldn't even be an Environmental Systems class in Texas high schools. Most of her testimony related to particulars of the book's handling of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) for oil and gas, and other issues beyond NCSE's particular focus, but I wasn't going to let anyone derail a textbook based on politics rather than science.

[As TFN observed](#) [15], Berger didn't turn in any written testimony or documentation to support her claims that the book had errors, no citations of where the errors could be found nor evidence refuting the book or justifying her other politically-charged attacks on it. This made it impossible to check her claims, of course. "Was she grandstanding in an attempt to gain support from anti-regulation tea party activists and oil and gas interests deciding whose campaigns to fund?" TFN's Dan Quinn asks, adding, "That seems a reasonable question for board members to ask."

I couldn't see why the board should give these unsubstantiated accusations any particular weight, since the book satisfied their appointed review panel, and was reviewed favorably by other testifiers, including [Texas Citizens for Science Steve Schafersman](#) [16], himself a geologist with experience in oilfields and experience teaching environmental science. But this is Texas, oil country, and a book tarred as anti-oil would be hard to vote for. We reached out to the board members when the session ended around 11 PM, and urged the publisher not to do anything rash, like letting an industry advocate rewrite their textbook.

On the second day of the meeting, textbook adoption again waited until almost 10 PM. That gave us all day to talk with publishers, and to get a read on likely board votes. When the hearing turned to textbooks, discussion started with the fact that a creationist reviewer had submitted a list of supposed errors in Ken Miller and Joe Levine's *Biology*, published by Pearson, and the publisher had refused to make changes (since the passages weren't in error). A book can be denied statewide adoption based on the presence of any "factual errors," and such claims are the most common way that books are challenged. Board members took a while, at that late hour, to realize that these were not acknowledged errors that the publisher refused to fix. Rather, the publisher didn't agree that their book was in error at all. Once the board realized that, they had no existing procedure for addressing the dispute, especially given that the board members aren't experts, and hadn't had time to read and evaluate the back and forth or consult with outside experts.

For once, I agreed with board member, and arch-creationist, David Bradley. He made a motion to adopt all of the books and just move on, which would have been a fine outcome. I think he knew that the books would get adopted either way, and didn't want the theatrics, though there was a lot of head-scratching about his motives. Pat Hardy, a conservative member who tends to vote in support of scientifically honest textbooks and standards, proposed adopting the Miller and Levine textbook contingent on further review of the disputed passages. In the end, her proposal succeeded, requiring three board members to appoint three Texas scientists to review the dispute, but the book remains on the list of approved textbooks.

After that, the board turned to the Environmental Studies book. Berger had turned in a written account of her objections during the day, and the publisher had prepared a response: they agreed to add a more recent image of the ozone hole, and to mention the cost of disposing of hybrid batteries, but dismissed the other objections as vague, wrong, or not statements of a factual error.

A board member had also solicited comments from the state geologist, but the publisher hadn't yet had a chance to review and respond to those comments. That night, the board voted to adopt the textbook, conditioned on the publisher making the changes they agreed to. They postponed any consideration of the state geologist's comments until the next and final day of the meeting. By then, it was well past midnight, and 16 hours since the board had convened that morning.

Things moved faster on the last day of the meeting. They moved so fast, in fact, that the textbooks were taken up, voted on, and the meeting adjourned in the time it took us to get from the TFN offices to the boardroom, a ten-minute drive. The publisher agreed to make reasonable changes in response to the state geologist's review of the Environmental Systems book, and that review only turned up minor technical issues to be updated, so the kerfuffle didn't do any harm.

The board also refined the review process for Miller and Levine's textbook, clarifying that the reviewers must all have PhDs in a relevant field, that the review committee's decision can be reached by simple majority vote, rather than by consensus, and that each of the three board members would nominate one expert (not that they'd have to agree on a group of three). Each of those moves makes the process more rigorous and thus more likely to dismiss the creationist complaints.

In short, this was a victory, and an unqualified victory. While I might have preferred to have an outright rejection of the bogus complaints against Miller and Levine's book, the board set an important precedent by creating this review process. Before this change, any appeal by publishers was resolved either by the Texas Education Agency's legal team, or by a vote of the board. Now they've established a system for a second round of expert review when the first review generates dispute. I'll be shocked if that precedent doesn't make next year's social studies textbook adoption less contentious and less politicized.

There are still a few board members fighting to preserve the old ways. I overheard David Bradley whispering to new board member Donna Bahorich that she should vote against the Environmental Systems textbook regardless of whether the reasons offered constituted "factual errors" (as required by statute). "You don't have to have any reason to reject a book," he told her. As long as eight of fifteen board members want to call something a factual error, he seemed to be saying, it's a factual error.

But he was in a clear minority. I was pleased this month and at the September meeting to see how important it is to so many board members, especially newer members, to fix the broken process for textbook and standards adoption in Texas. They are looking for ways to make it less political and to bring expertise to bear, rather than ideology. The victory in Texas can be attributed to a lot of hard work by advocates like NCSE, Texas Freedom Network, and Texas Citizens for Science, and all of our members and allies, but in the end, it's a result of choices that voters made in the last two rounds of board elections. Thank you and congratulations to all who made this happen.

[+ read](#) [11]

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#### Links

[1] <https://ncse.com/users/josh>

[2] <https://ncse.com/printpdf/15203>

[3] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/attack-science-education>

[4] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/climate-change-education>

- [5] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/evolution-denial>
- [6] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/evolution-education>
- [7] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/history>
- [8] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/ncse>
- [9] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/textbooks>
- [10] <https://ncse.com/blog-tags/young-earth-creationism>
- [11] <https://ncse.com/blog/2013/11/texas-textbook-showdown-0015203>
- [12] <http://ncse.com/blog/2013/11/my-testimony-before-texas-board-education-0015198>
- [13] <http://tfn.org>
- [14] <http://donmcleroy.wordpress.com/2013/11/19/prepared-testimony-before-the-texas-state-board-of-education-november-20-2013/>
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