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01.28.2015

## [Inside the West Virginia Board of Education Hearing](#) [8]

*Herman Mays is a member of NCSE and a biology professor at Marshall University. He testified at the West Virginia Board of Education meeting last week, speaking against climate change-denying revisions to the state's science standards. Thanks to outcry from concerned scientists and parents like Mays, the board voted to remove the climate change denial. We asked him to describe what happened at the hearing, and what motivated him to speak out. A longer account of his visit with the state board will appear in a future issue of Reports of the NCSE. (Your [NCSE membership](#) [9] includes a subscription.) Concerned West Virginians should [submit comments urging the adoption of the standards](#) [10] through the state department of education.*

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By 10:00AM on January 14, the Capitol Room in building 7 of the capitol complex in Charleston, WV, was crowded with media, teachers, parents, and other concerned groups. Approximately the first half of the public hearing was devoted to failing public school infrastructure, highlighting the challenges of

education in West Virginia where many communities struggle not just to provide sound instructional content, but also structurally sound classrooms. Immediately following came the science standards testimony.

I'm an evolutionary biologist from an evangelical Christian background, grew up in Kentucky, but come from a long line of West Virginians. In August, 2014, I came to West Virginia's Marshall University after serving as the curator of zoology at Cincinnati Museum Center, only a couple miles from Ken Ham's Creation Museum. Given this background, my family and I have seen first hand the pervasive influence of ideologically driven individuals on the public's view of science, scientists, scholarship and intellectualism in general. I had to speak out.

I chose to speak to the board both as a scientist and as a West Virginia parent, but I didn't come alone. I brought two colleagues from the Department of Biological Sciences at Marshall University. I also came with a petition signed by over 3,500 parents, mostly West Virginians, concerned with the erosion of educational standards with regard to climate change, having agreed to deliver the petition on behalf of Climate Parents. In addition, I delivered a letter signed by more than 80 faculty at West Virginia University supporting the original consensus language on climate change and opposing revisions that falsely called climate science into question. That letter said the modifications to the standards represent a "deceptive interpretation" of the scientific consensus on climate change. I encouraged similar letters of support to be sent by faculty in my department here at Marshall University and many did lend their voices in support of an evidence-driven educational policy built on the consensus of scientists and science educators.

Faculty and staff from other universities spoke, as did representatives of the [West Virginia Citizen Action Group](#) [11], [Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Impacts Initiative](#) [12] and [the Citizens' Climate Lobby](#) [13]. Educators and others who helped review the standards decried these revisions taking place after they had given feedback. The scientists and educators who spoke out criticized the revised standard's factual errors, the flawed sources used to justify these revisions, and the way that the changes perpetuated the belief of West Virginia as a "backwards and uneducated state".

The climate change denial position was in a minority at this public hearing but not absent. Marc Morano (formerly the spokesman for Oklahoma's Senator James Inhofe) and Craig Rucker, both representing the [Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow \(CFACT\)](#) [14], testified in support of the changes to the language on climate change. Neither are scientists. Neither are professional educators. Neither are parents of West Virginia students. Both Mr. Rucker and Mr. Morano represent a well-funded, ideologically driven political group well known in climate denial circles. Mr. Morano touted the number of climate conferences he has been to over the years and both Mr. Morano and Mr. Rucker claimed there were hundreds of scientists that support their position. Mr. Rucker claimed "categorically" that there is "absolutely no scientific consensus on the issue of climate change."

Savvy lobbyists that they are, they realized their out-of-state status could be a liability, so they gathered a group of college students from my home institution to provide their views with some appearance of local bona fides. [West Virginia Public Broadcasting](#) [16] described the students as non-science majors who were being “mentored” by staff at CFACT. Mr. Rucker was observed frequently consulting with these students and apparently coaching them on their remarks (as, I suppose, any good “mentor” would). Prior to the public comments these four students occupied the back of the Capitol Room holding up poster board signs with climate denial slogans like “Don’t silence the debate”, “Yes to balance” and, my personal favorite, “Keep calm, climate changes.” If only the trilobites and gorgonopsids had seen this last slogan at the end of the Permian.



xtinct trilobites photographed by Wyoming\_jackrabbit, [posted on Flickr](#) [15] under a CC-BY-NC 2.0 license. Protest signs added by Josh Rosenau based on those used by actual modern climate change deniers in West Virginia.

Mr. Morano, Mr. Rucker and at least three of the students mentored by CFACT testified before the board. Apparently there were more CFACT-mentored students on the slate to testify, but when their names were called one of the students replied, “They slept in!” One theme that permeated the testimony of both Mr. Morano and Mr. Rucker, as well as the testimony of the students they mentored, was that of balance and fairness. As a veteran observer and often participant in the evolution-creationism debates this language sounded all too familiar. All emphasized that their position was that the proposed changes promoted critical thinking and allowed students to make decisions for themselves free of dogma. Unfortunately for their position, adhering to empirical reality is hardly equivalent to an ideological dogma. One of the students, Matt Jarvis, even equated the exclusion of climate change denial in the classroom to the censoring of Galileo thereby playing to the popular mythos of the suppression of ideas by an entrenched elite.

Balance certainly has a place where no consensus exists among knowledgeable scholars, but this is no more the case for evolution or climate change, than for heliocentrism or the germ-theory of disease. There are certainly scientific issues within climate science where there is considerable debate. However, these debates primarily concern specific consequences of a warming planet rather than any significant debate over whether or not the planet is indeed undergoing a long-term warming trend or over the primary cause of that trend. The very real scientific uncertainty about the consequences of climate change as opposed to being a reason to ignore the available evidence is itself a reason for concern and action. That is why the opposing view to the scientific consensus on climate change has rightfully earned the title of ‘denial’ as it is primarily about the promotion of ignorance of the evidence and not the promotion of any meaningful debate about the environment. Climate denial, like creationism, no more deserves equal merit in the science classroom than a conspiracy around a faked moon landing deserves equal merit in a history class. Both are attempts by individuals who either through ideological delusion or blatant self-interest seek to obfuscate empirical reality and erode the public trust in science.

Affable fellow that I am, after the session I introduced myself to Mr. Rucker and Mr. Morano. Mr. Rucker said exactly 10 words to me. First, “Who are you?” and following my introduction, “Oh, you are one of the speakers.” No polite small talk with Mr. Rucker was to follow. I chatted with Mr. Morano very briefly. He was going on about climate studies that support the consensus being funded by Exxon setting the stage for some anticipated response of horror on my part I suppose. I explained to Mr. Morano that if there is sound data, especially if that data is simultaneously in line with a broad consensus on climate change and contrary to any obvious financial interest of the funders, and the study clearly discloses its funding sources then I fail to see why I should be opposed to it. Like many who enter a debate from a rigid ideological starting point Mr. Morano paints the world in black-and-white where your adversaries are one-dimensional stereotypes. He seems to be under some irrational belief that there is some systemic, philosophical opposition to business on the part of scientists. Mr. Morano then alluded to my “belief” in climate change and I had to interrupt to clarify. I explained that I don’t have a “belief” in climate change, rather I’m convinced its real by the weight of the available evidence.” This conversation seemed foreign territory to Mr. Morano whose position, like those of creationists, seems mired in a priori ideological beliefs rather than the malleable positions based on reason and evidence.

This slavish adherence to ideology is my issue with the climate denial industry. It’s one more arena in which the erosion of public intellectualism has created roadblocks in the fostering of a thinking, rational public. Climate denial and creationism have contributed to creating a fetish for ignorance in the public where the lack of education is bizarrely seen as a virtue and people engaging in careers dedicated to a rational, evidence-driven discourse about ideas are looked upon with suspicion. We may never have a proper discussion based on our values about what to do, if anything, about climate change if we first fail to recognize the reality of climate change based on reason.

Following the public comments, board president Gayle Manchin called for a vote on reverting to the earlier language. Prior to the vote several board members commented on the issue. Mrs. Manchin said that she viewed the hearing as a learning experience and the Department of Education’s Chief Academic Officer Clayton Burch said that there was time to “get this right” before the standards went into effect. Mr. Linger, who sponsored the flawed revisions, and fellow board member Tom Campbell expressed some incredulity in the situation arguing that the changes only amounted little more than 29 words and thus were inconsequential (though apparently they were consequential enough to make in the first place). Bill White emphasized that his prior experience as a professional chemist taught him the value of the peer review process in science and said that while the changes were small, “It doesn’t take a lot to make a major change.” Board member Lloyd Jackson said, “Climate change is real” voicing his position to return back to the original language in the standards. Mr. Campbell said that this was more of an issue about how the state decides standards than about climate change per se and parroted the language of the climate denial side regarding the fostering of student debate. Mr. Linger complained that the original authors of the science standards under consideration were all from out of state and none were climate scientists but rather educators. Mr. Linger then said his goal is to have the board to not be a “rubber stamp” and to enact policies that teach students, “how to think and not what to think.” The discussion among the board members was relatively brief and one got the impression that barring any overwhelming public outcry to keep the changes, reverting back to the original language was the plan prior to the hearing. Only Mr. Campbell and Mr. Linger voted to not return back to the original standards.

Now the standards revert back to their original form, without the modifications introduced by Mr. Linger, to a 30-day public comment period before the final vote. Supporters of sound educational standards in West Virginia are encouraged to submit their [comments](#) [10] to the West Virginia Board of Education.

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[12] <http://www.alleghenyclimate.org/>

[13] <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/>

[14] [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Committee\\_for\\_a\\_Constructive\\_Tomorrow](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Committee_for_a_Constructive_Tomorrow)

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[16] <http://wvpublic.org/post/west-virginia-board-education-hears-debate-science-standards-teaching-climate-change>