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One of NCSE's most important jobs is keeping an eye on statehouses across the country for the introduction of bills that would allow, encourage, or even require teachers to teach scientifically inaccurate information in their science classrooms. On average, between half a dozen and a dozen such bills are introduced each year. Often, the real intent of the bills is

disguised in lofty language about critical thinking or academic freedom. Take, for example, Oklahoma's 2017 Senate Bill 393:

Neither the State Board of Education, nor any school district board of education, school district superintendent or school principal shall prohibit any teacher in a public school district in this state from helping students understand, analyze, critique and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and weaknesses of existing scientific theories covered in the course being taught.

This sounds harmless, even salutary, on the face of it, right? But think about the science you learned in high school. Did your teacher cover a lot of cutting-edge ideas on which the scientific jury was still out? Did your class assess the current scientific literature on how to reconcile general relativity with quantum mechanics, perhaps, or the best way of producing C4 rice (which would photosynthesize more efficiently), or maybe the physiological basis of human consciousness? I didn't think so. I'm pretty sure what was covered in your textbooks and classrooms was science that was generally accepted in the scientific community based on extensive published research and evaluation in the peer-reviewed scientific literature. Much of this science had been well-established for decades, even centuries.

So, when the Oklahoma bill talks about "strengths and weaknesses of existing scientific theories," it's speaking in code. "[E]xisting scientific theories" means evolution and climate change—nobody thinks that the sponsors are concerned to ensure that students hear the latest on valence bond theory or the Chevallier-Polarski-Linder model of dark energy. And "strengths and weaknesses" really just means (supposed) weaknesses. The goal of the bill is to provide cover to teachers who would rather teach that evolution is a flawed theory or climate change is a hoax. In other words, not science, but falsehoods.

When bills like this turn up, NCSE works with local science advocates to ensure that the actual intent of such legislation—to pave the way for the teaching of scientifically unwarranted material in science classes—is made abundantly clear. Once the intent is clear, lawmakers often discover that their constituents do not favor the idea of giving carte blanche to teachers in the public schools—with science teacher organizations at the front of the line to complain.

The lofty language of such bills makes them appealing, and the Oklahoma bill, for example, passed the Senate and almost the House before it lost steam. It was a real threat, and NCSE and its allies spent a lot of time and effort combating it. This isn't always so. Every year, a few bills are introduced that are so patently unscientific or clearly unconstitutional that their chances of making it out of committee, much less becoming law, is vanishingly remote.

For example, from Alabama's House Bill 258 (2018):

This bill would enable public school teachers who teach kindergarten through 12th grade to include, as a portion of instruction regarding the scientific origins of man and the Earth, instruction regarding the Biblical theory of creation, so long as evolution is also taught. This bill would further allow any teacher who desires to instruct students regarding the Biblical theory of creation to read passages from the Bible in class which he or she deems necessary to propel the instruction forward.

This bill is unambiguously unconstitutional, flying in the face of over thirty years of case law—including and especially the Supreme Court’s decision in *Edwards v. Aguillard* in 1987.

Considering such bills invites two questions: Why are they introduced at all, when they clearly will never become law? And why does NCSE pay attention to them, given their apparent futility?

I can think of three plausible answers to each question:

Why are these non-starters even started? First, the lawmakers who introduce them may be unaware of the history of legislation on teaching creationism and almost certainly do not understand why “creation science” and “intelligent design” (much less “the Biblical theory of creation”) are not science. Second, if they do understand that the case law is against them, they no doubt disagree vehemently with those decisions, considering them, wrongheadedly, an infringement of their religious rights. Finally, legislators frequently introduce bills simply to send a signal to their voters, even if they know that the bills have no chance of passage, and that seems to be the case in Alabama.

And why does NCSE call attention to them? First, just in case a legislator considering voting for such a bill doesn’t know that its passage would lead only to expensive and counterproductive lawsuits that the state will lose—someone needs to point that out! Second, although we have every expectation that such bills will go nowhere, we can hardly leave that to chance. Finally, it’s important to let the public know that hostility to the teaching of evolution is not dead. You can bet that the states where legislators think it’s useful to signal their religious zeal to voters are the states where teachers are likely to be nervous or worse about teaching evolution.

And so, year after year, NCSE draws attention to bills that will probably amount to nothing. I look forward to a time when we will no longer have to do so, maybe when our efforts to help teachers cover evolution accurately and effectively—even where it’s difficult—have borne fruit.

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