

'Intelligent design' theory enters public schools

By Charles C. Haynes
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Is Darwin winning the battle, but losing the war?

As soon as one challenge to the teaching of evolution is beaten in the courts, another emerges to take its place.

The current contender is "intelligent design," a theory that, according to advocates at the Discovery Institute, "makes no religious claims, but says that the best natural evidence for life's origins points to design rather than a process of random mutation and natural selection."

Having failed twice to persuade the U.S. Supreme Court that "creationism" is a legitimate scientific theory, anti-evolutionists have seized on intelligent design as the next great hope for getting an alternative to Darwinism into the science classroom.

This year alone, challenges to evolution have been mounted in 13 states. For example, a Wisconsin school board mandated teaching "various scientific models or theories of origin." And a school district in Georgia has been taken

to court for putting a label on biology textbooks stating that evolution is "a theory, not a fact."

But last month the Dover, Pa., school board took the boldest step of all by voting to include the teaching of intelligent design in science instruction.

Nearly 80 years after Clarence Darrow debated William Jennings Bryan during the "Monkey trial" of 1925, millions of Americans still don't buy evolution. According to a Gallup Poll conducted in November, only 35 percent of us believe that Darwin's theory is supported by evidence. Another 35 percent say evolution isn't supported by evidence and 29 percent don't know enough to say.

Scientists take note. Despite winning court battles and dominating textbooks for decades, evolutionists continue to lose the war of public opinion. The science establishment blames this on "religious fundamentalists." But that same Gallup Poll reveals that 45 percent of Americans believe that "God created man in present form," while 38 percent believe "man developed with God

guiding." Only 13 percent say "man developed with no help from God." Resistance to evolutionary theory can be found across the religious spectrum.

Theist evolutionists (including the current pope) attempt to reconcile evolution and faith. But the prevailing view in science holds that accounts of the origin and development of life are explained only by non-purposive, undirected natural processes. Hence the appeal of intelligent design to many people of faith. The design argument challenges natural selection — leaving the door open for traditional views of a Creator God.

Critics of evolution understand what's at stake. Of course, religious alternatives to evolution could be discussed in public schools (in social studies, perhaps). But intelligent design advocates aren't content to be relegated to the "nonscientific" arena, especially in view of the exalted place "scientific truth" holds in our society. They seek to challenge evolution on scientific grounds.

But is it science? I'm not qual-

ified to say, but a great many scientists say no. The National Center for Science Education and other organizations representing scientists are leading the charge in school districts across the nation, dismissing intelligent design as a creationist wolf in designer clothing.

School board members in Dover and other places aren't buying that argument. Because it's legal to teach "a variety of scientific theories about the origins of humankind to schoolchildren" (as the Supreme Court put it in *Edwards v. Aguillard*), they're anxious to find a theory that might pass constitutional muster.

Enter intelligent design. Do school boards in Dover and elsewhere actually know whether or not intelligent design is good science? Probably not. In fact, few high school science teachers (who are being asked to teach it) are prepared to answer that question.

It may sound reasonable and fair to vote for including "competing theories" in the curriculum. But without first understanding what is and isn't good science,

such votes only lead to court battles — and bad education.

If school board resolutions aren't the answer, who decides what, if any, critiques of evolution get into the curriculum?

The short answer is — or should be — scientists decide. But many in the science establishment worry that teaching the controversy — even conflicts among scientists about some aspects of evolutionary theory — would open the door to creationist or other religious views. That's why so many scientists and science educators oppose any attempt to expose kids to debate over intelligent design or any other challenge to evolution.

But here's the rub. The strategy of exclusion may win court cases (at least thus far), but it shuts down the debate. And shutting down debate isn't good for academic freedom or critical thinking. Moreover, it doesn't work. Without understanding this controversy (and some of the historical and philosophical reasons for it), many students will continue to resist or distrust the claims of science.

Yet wouldn't "teaching the controversy" simply confuse students and undermine the prevailing theory? Not necessarily. Consider the April 2002 issue of *Natural History* with brief position statements for three proponents of intelligent design — and three responses from evolutionists. Surely there's room in the public school curriculum for exposing students to this debate and helping them to engage the issues.

If the aim of science education is scientific literacy, then students must learn the prevailing theories in science. But if we expect them to believe what they hear, they must also learn something about the conflicts and controversies surrounding those theories.

For anyone who cares about good science education, winning court battles isn't enough. Winning the hearts and minds of students is what really counts.

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