



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 19, 2017

## Bill to Promote Academic Freedom Opposed in Oklahoma

When Galileo proposed in the 1600s that the earth revolved around the sun, he was told that he was not to question the “settled science” of his day. Today in Oklahoma, a bill to allow public school science teachers to freely discuss scientific evidence that supports or throws into question “established” scientific ideas is provoking strong opposition — all in the name of “science.”



A statement by the Oklahoma Academy for Science in opposition to SB 393 — which has passed the Oklahoma Senate and is poised to be voted on early next week in the Oklahoma House of Representatives — is typical of the opposition: “Science teachers should not be required to teach, as science, ideas, models, and theories that are clearly extra-scientific.” Oddly, the National Center for Science Education also expressed opposition to the bill, arguing that if the measure were to pass, it would “encourage science teachers with idiosyncratic opinions to teach anything they pleased ... and prevent responsible educational authorities from intervening.”

So, some oppose the bill because (they say) it would *force* teachers to teach “extra-scientific” ideas, while other opponents are concerned that the legislation would let “science teachers with idiosyncratic opinions to teach anything they pleased.”

Which is it? What kind of legislative language could possibly deny and also permit teachers academic freedom at the same time?

The bill, sponsored by Senator Josh Breechen, is really quite simple. It states, “The State Board of Education, school district boards of education, school district superintendents and school principals shall endeavor to create an environment within public school districts that encourages students to explore scientific questions, learn about scientific evidence, develop critical thinking skills and respond appropriately and respectfully to differences of opinion about controversial issues.”

That hardly sounds as though it should be controversial. The legislation further provides, “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.”

Shouldn’t a science class “review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and weaknesses of existing scientific theories?” One would think so. As *Evolution News and Science Today* commented, “In teaching about controversial issues, many educators face pressure to withhold from students a rounded, objective, and accurate picture of the range of views held by mainstream scientists. This legislation would protect teachers who want to engage their classes in scientific inquiry and critical thinking on theories in the curriculum.”

Just because a particular theory is supported by a majority of scientists does not make it true. Over the past few centuries, many scientific theories have been discarded as more evidence has led them to be



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questioned. If a theory cannot withstand scrutiny today, should it not also be modified to fit the existing evidence?

What are they worried about? Apparently, the opponents of this bill to allow free academic discussion and analysis of science topics are saying two particular theories cannot be questioned: Darwinian evolution and human-caused climate change. Glenn Branch, deputy director of the National Center for Science Education, told E and E News, "The target[s] of these bills, explicitly or implicitly, are usually evolution and/or climate change."

The left-wing Sierra Club centered its opposition on those two issues. Its statement released April 13 claimed that the bill "would protect teachers wishing to counter established scientific facts with pseudoscientific theories regarding such issues as climate change and evolution from repercussions from school officials," and would keep education officials from "stopping classroom teachers from teaching non-evidence based science."

On the contrary, the bill seeks to allow science teachers to present evidence that promotes a better understanding of science. One must wonder: If a science teacher taught Darwinian evolution and the Al Gore view on climate change and was fired by the school board for doing so, what would the Sierra Club say then? Ironically, one of the groups lining up to oppose the legislation to allow academic freedom calls itself the National Council Against Censorship.

Paul Blair, a Baptist minister in Edmond, Oklahoma, commented, "This bill will not allow the teaching of creation, but it will allow a science teacher to point out the obvious flaws with Darwinian Evolution (and there are many). Scientific laws are the result of the repeated experimentation and testing of models and theories. The results are what they are and should be reported as such."

In the General Government Oversight and Accountability Committee, the House sponsor, Representative David Brumbaugh, told the committee, "Nothing is settled when it comes to science," and added that the opposition by environmentalists (who support the Al Gore climate change theory) was "specious at best."

While the opponents of the legislation have argued that science teachers are opposed to the bill — because they do not want students to hear all the relevant facts, apparently — Brumbaugh told the committee that he had been contacted by several teachers urging him to get the bill passed. "If science was settled, we'd still be thinking the earth was flat," Brumbaugh noted. Actually, some opponents of the legislation have used the "straw man argument" that the bill is intended to actually allow the teaching in the classroom that the world is flat — a view that has had almost no adherents for the past millennium.

On the contrary, Brumbaugh said this legislation is designed to "encourage and promote free discussion and critical thinking." He paraphrased Galileo, who argued for the liberty to question the establishment view: "How could anyone assert that we do not need to know?"

Finally, Brumbaugh quoted Albert Einstein, who said that we should never stop questioning.

Brumbaugh's reasoned arguments won the day in the committee and the bill will be voted on by the full House early next week. Unfortunately, Brumbaugh suffered a fatal heart attack just two days after his appearance before the committee, and fellow state representative John Paul Jordan has had to take over sponsorship of the bill.

To pass, the bill will have to overcome an avalanche of misinformation by its opponents, which is



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standard practice by the supporters of Darwinian evolution and the man-made global-warming theory. Oklahoma City's Channel 4 television (the NBC affiliate), in a clearly slanted report against the bill, chose to interview a student in the Oklahoma City public schools who opposes the bill. Ken Nguyen took the view that the bill is "a blank check for teachers to teach whatever they believe is relevant." According to Channel 4, Nguyen is most concerned that the law will let teachers present creationism "instead of evolution," or "teach climate change is a hoax."

The Oklahomans for Excellence in Science Education said the bill contains "standard creationist language to allow anti-science information into the classroom," and provided several "talking points" for its readers to use in contacting lawmakers, including a suggestion to refer to the bill as the "Alternative Facts Bill."

This is the language of a political cause, not a reasoned analysis of scientific evidence. If a scientific theory is grounded on a mountain of evidence, it will not be questioned. But when proponents of a particular viewpoint "doctor" evidence, such as has happened recently with advocates of the position that human activity is causing an increase in global temperature, how is that "science"?

The so-called Piltdown Man — presented in science textbooks for decades as a proven example of a missing link and a verified piece of evidence for Darwinian evolution — was actually a crudely constructed hoax. Do the opponents of this bill contend that that hoax should not have been revealed, since doing so might have cast doubt on the Darwinian view? When the so-called Nebraska Man, another supposed missing link between humans and ape-like "ancestors," turned out to be based on nothing more than one tooth — of a pig, not an ape-man — should that have been defended despite the clear evidence it too was false?

If anyone is pushing for "alternative facts," they are the opponents of this bill.



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