



Tennessee House Passes Bill: Teachers May Challenge Evolution

Late last week, the lower chamber of the Tennessee General Assembly passed a bill preventing public school administrators from obstructing the efforts of any teacher to help: ... students understand, analyze, critique, and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories covered in the course being taught, such as evolution and global warming.



The bill, [HB 386](#), alternatively styled the Tennessee Academic Freedom Bill and the Critical Thinking Bill, was passed by a significant majority of the Tennessee House in a vote of 70-23. The measure was sent to the State Senate on Thursday of last week, where it will be debated by the Senate Education Committee.

The bill's chief sponsor in the House, Representative [Bill Dunn](#) (R-Knoxville), said the purpose is to promote "critical thinking" in science classes. Predictably, opponents of the proposed law insist that it is merely "a backdoor means of teaching creationism...."

Dunn continued the defense of his proposal, explaining that, "Some of the best teachable moments are when you're discussing things, and when there's some give and take with the students."

The Volunteer State is particularly sensitive about the issue of how man's existence should be addressed in school, as it was home to the famous "[Scopes Monkey Trial](#)" of 1925, a case involving a Tennessee [law](#) that prohibited the teaching of evolution. John Scopes (pictured, above) was a high school teacher in the tiny town of Dayton.

Local business owners interested in drumming up publicity hired Scopes for the express purpose of teaching evolution in class and thus drawing the nation's attention to the town. The plan worked, as the trial attracted the biggest legal names in the nation — William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution and Clarence Darrow for the defense. The proceedings were broadcast on radio nationwide.

In that vein, House Speaker Emeritus Jimmy Naifeh (D-Covington) pejoratively referred to the measure as "the monkey bill." In response, Representative Dunn accused opponents of playing "monkey see, monkey do" by parroting unfounded descriptions of the bill as an attack on science and the promotion of religion in the classroom.

As is typical for such a controversial subject, debate on the floor of the House was impassioned. At one point, a block of Republican lawmakers in favor of the bill called opponents "intellectual bullies."

Despite the charges that the measure is simply a backdoor way of state-sponsored religious education,



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on April 11, 2011

the text of the bill specifically prohibits the use of the bill for the purpose of promoting religion.

According to the bill, it:

only protects the teaching of scientific information, and shall not be construed to promote any religious or non-religious doctrine, promote discrimination for or against a particular set of religious beliefs or non-beliefs, or promote discrimination for or against religion or non-religion.

While the bill itself expressly denounces the promotion of religion as a means or an end of the legislation, many supporters were not so secular in their praise.

As [cited](#) by the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, “Rep. Frank Niceley (R-Strawberry Plains) quoted Albert Einstein as saying: ‘A little knowledge would turn your head to atheism, while a broader knowledge would turn your head to Christianity.’”

And this from Representative Jeremy Faison (R-Cosby): “Our whole state will be better if we have children using critical thinking about how we got here and not just accepting a theory that has never been proven.”

One of those who voted against the measure, Representative Jeanne Richardson (D-Memphis), worried that lawmakers might be taking steps down a slippery slope that would lead to other laws mandating what theories teachers may or may not discuss in other subjects, such as math or science.

No such decline is permissible under the provisions of the proposal, say proponents. The bill is designed to protect the rights of teachers desirous of exposing popular and controversial scientific theories (specifically those regarding man’s evolution, global warming, and human cloning) to a rigorous debate, free from any de facto or de jure assumption of official sponsorship on the part of the state via the theory’s inclusion in the approved curriculum.

As one [supporter](#) explained it:

The Tennessee Academic Freedom Bill is worded such that it only intends to protect instruction regarding topics that are already part of the curriculum....The bill only protects topics that are already covered in the curriculum, and it does not protect teachers that introduce entirely new theories that aren’t already part of the course curriculum. But if a theory is already covered in the curriculum, as is the case with evolution, then teachers are protected if they choose to teach the both scientific strengths and weaknesses.

Still, there are those concerned that placing the concept of creation on an equal academic footing with the scientific theory of natural selection will have the concomitant effect of debasing the latter and promoting the former.

One such critic is Andy Kramer, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Said Kramer, “Scientific theories need to be testable and they have to have only natural causes. If we use a supernatural entity like God as an ultimate cause, that removes it from being science because we cannot test whether or not God exists.”

A less restrained critic of the bill, Alan I. Leshner, the chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, argued before the bill was passed out of committee:

There is virtually no scientific controversy among the overwhelming majority of researchers on the core facts of global warming and evolution. Asserting that there are significant scientific controversies about the overall nature of these concepts when there are none will only confuse



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students, not enlighten them.

Given the tone and content of Leshner's defense of global warming and evolution, perhaps there is something to the charge that critics of the bill are trying to intellectually bully those who disagree with their positions on these topics of scientific debate. Perhaps someone should send Leshner a subscription to [The New American](#) so he can bring himself up to speed on the existence of "scientific controversy" regarding the "core facts" of global warming."

The Senate version of the measure is [scheduled](#) to be taken up by the Senate Education Committee on Wednesday, April 13.

Photo: Teacher John T. Scopes



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