

THE ANTI-EVOL

A man unsuccessfully searching for a word in a document on his laptop computer is a scene unlikely to captivate the average audience. Yet such a scene played before a spellbound audience of thousands on March 11, 2002. The place was Veterans Memorial Auditorium in Columbus, Ohio. The man was Kenneth R. Miller, Professor of Biology at Brown University. And the word for which he was searching was *evolution*. As the search of the 670-page document ended, without any results, the audience was abuzz.

Miller's *coup de théâtre* occurred during a debate before the Ohio Board of Education between two scientists — Miller and Lawrence Krauss, Professor of Physics at Case Western Reserve University — and two proponents of “intelligent design” — Jonathan Wells and Stephen C. Meyer, both Senior Fellows of the Discovery Institute's Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture (since renamed the Center for Science and Culture). The topic of the debate was the place of evolution in the new Ohio state science standards, then undergoing public review and comment.

In response to a question from the audience about the so-called Santorum Amendment to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Meyer asserted that it required the teaching of “alternatives” to evolution and urged Ohio to follow the law. What

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there was still a chance for the scientific and educational communities to influence the outcome. The officers of almost 100 scientific and educational societies, together representing over 100,000 scientists, petitioned the chairs of the conference committee to drop the Santorum Amendment.

In December 2001, the conference committee finished its work. The compromise bill was submitted to Congress, which passed it (renaming it the No Child Left Behind Act in the process) and sent it to President Bush for his signature, which it duly received on January 8, 2002. The fact that a version of the Santorum Amendment is present in the Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of Conference (in Title I, Part A, as item 78) proved to be inspirational to the ideological opponents of evolution education.

In Minnesota, a creationist group is attempting to convince Independent School District 196 in Rosemount that the NCLB requires the teaching of “intelligent design”; in Washington, a creationist group is making the same claim to the school board of the Burlington-Edison School District. In Carson City, Nevada, it is a member of the school board who is citing item 78 in the service of promoting young-earth creationism. Similarly, in Nebraska, several members of the State Board of Education unsuccessfully attempted to ensure that the newly drafted state science standards reflected the provisions of item 78. In the Georgia state legislature, House Bill 1563, introduced on February 26, 2002, was closely modeled on item 78; the legislative session ended without the bill’s leaving the Education Committee. And it was item 78 that Meyer was claiming to be law in the debate in Columbus, Ohio.

But educators ought not to panic. The good news is twofold. First, the Santorum Amendment

was substantially weakened during its stay in committee. In its final version, item 78 reads:

The conferees recognize that a quality science education should prepare students to distinguish the data and testable theories of science from religious or philosophical claims that are made in the name of science. Where topics are taught that may generate controversy (such as biological evolution), the curriculum should help students to understand the full range of scientific views that exist, why such topics may generate controversy, and how scientific discoveries can profoundly affect society.

Note that evolution is no longer singled out as uniquely controversial: it is merely used (perhaps injudiciously) as one example of a host of potentially controversial topics. The conference committee’s wish to keep “religious and philosophical claims that are made in the name of science” out of the science classroom is, of course, perfectly reasonable. “Creation science” and “intelligent design” consist largely of religious and philosophical claims that are disguised as science, and that is why they are inappropriate for the science classrooms of our nation’s public schools. Note also that the Santorum Amendment’s original desire for students “to be informed participants in public discussions” was replaced with the conference committee’s desire for students “to understand the full range of scientific views” – although creationism might be regarded as a matter of public discussion, it is certainly not a scientific view.

The second piece of good news is that the Joint Explanatory Statement is not part of the bill itself. It is simply an explanation of how the conference committee reconciled the various provisions of

the House and Senate versions of the bill. The law itself neither mentions evolution (as Miller memorably demonstrated) nor includes any sentiments reflecting the Santorum Amendment. “The Santorum language is not law – it is legislative history,” Dennis Hirsch, a law professor at Capital University in Columbus, told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. “It is always possible for special-interest groups to insert language into the legislative history. It is much harder to get it into the legislation.” In a letter to the National Center for Science Education, Representative George Miller (D-CA), a member of the conference committee, explained that “the report language should not be construed to promote specific topics within subject areas,” adding that Congress recognizes that decisions about the specific details of the science curriculum “are best left to the scientific community, rather than legislators.”

Thus the No Child Left Behind Act in no way requires teachers to teach evolution any differently. And teachers ought not to be intimidated by claims to the contrary.

And what was the upshot of the furor over the Santorum Amendment in Ohio? “Intelligent design” is mentioned in the final version of the state science standards – as something that is specifically *not* part of the continuing investigation and analysis of evolution. As for evolution itself, it is, appropriately, a primary and unifying theme throughout the academic content standards for life science – confirming the immortal words of Theodosius Dobzhansky, writing in *The American Biology Teacher* thirty years ago: “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.”

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