



GUEST COMMENTARY

Jaclyn Reeves-Pepin

Everything Old is New Again

When eighteen biologists met in New York City on July 1, 1938, they probably never imagined what would result from their conversations. Sitting in a hot, muggy conference room at the Hotel New Yorker, they enthusiastically engaged in discussions that would establish the National Association of Biology Teachers, thus changing the life of thousands of biology teachers and millions of students. This group of eighteen set forth with two missions, to establish a national organization devoted to the teaching of biology and develop a magazine for biology teachers.

Here we are, 80 years later.

When NABT was first established in 1938, it was specifically to address the depressing trend in biology classrooms to omit “organic evolution” from the secondary school curriculum. Thirteen years after the infamous Scopes Trial, alarms about the state of biology education had been raised by a number of prominent scientists, and a study conducted by the Committee on Biological Science Teaching of the Union of American Biological Societies found that fewer than 50 percent of high schools included evolution in their biology teaching. Evolution was not the only topic receiving limited attention in the curriculum. Only 11 percent of the respondents indicated an emphasis on conservation and only 13 of 1,086 replies claimed that attention was given to photosynthesis.

Biology and life science teachers needed an organization like NABT then, just as they need NABT now. This point was not lost on me when, as executive director of NABT I wrote a letter on behalf of our members in Arizona to oppose the “special consideration” given to evolution and climate change in the state science standards. This letter was strikingly similar to those sent by NABT leaders (myself and others) to New Mexico and South Dakota in 2017. NABT’s review and support of appropriate life science curriculum standards have been ongoing for decades. We have formally voiced concern to numerous state legislatures and courts and coordinated with local members in states such as Louisiana, Texas, Florida, Tennessee, Indiana, Kansas, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.

It is sometimes daunting to fight the same battles year after year, decade after decade. The false controversies of evolution and climate change are not new to NABT, nor are the parties behind the fairly boilerplate legislation that is constantly introduced to undermine the teaching and learning of science. While our commitment to advocating on behalf of biology teachers has not changed, the technology has definitely “evolved” (pun completely intended). NABT now employs a service that utilizes algorithms for keyword searches to tag legislation. This has allowed us to efficiently identify problematic language proposed in legislation at all levels of government. We know what’s coming, who is sponsoring it, and when it’s in committee or up for vote. We are only getting started with this capability, but to think what was required by my predecessors to mobilize members is what is really daunting.

NABT regularly joins other groups to promote scientific integrity through policy, and we specifically champion the professionalism

and expertise of science teachers. When the Heartland Institute sent over 200,000 booklets to teachers to persuade them that there is no consensus about climate changes, NABT was one of many to deride this use of fake news and alternative facts. The booklet may have been flashy, but the tactics were stale. Articles in *The American Biology Teacher* have been supporting environmental education since the 1960s.

The NABT archive has countless letters, articles, and records of correspondence related to the “controversial issues” that arise with the teaching of the subject of biology. But in the last few years, there have been other professional tensions surfacing. Discourse on topics such as access to resources, equity and diversity, civic engagement, teacher compensation, and on-campus violence have all challenged us to think about how NABT can best support our members as citizens and not just as biology teachers. Changing technology and shifting demographics within our association have led to healthy introspection.

Once again, our members are meeting the “controversial” issues head on. We are having thoughtful discussions on how we teach about race in our courses. We are being mindful about the use of pronouns and recognizing that students move in and out of our classrooms with fluidity. We are marching for science and promoting science in our communities beyond the classroom. Together we are making NABT a professional home for ourselves and our colleagues, one that serves our needs now, and one that can adapt and change to serve us in the future.

As I think back on my own meetings with our members, supporters, allies, and friends, I continue to be impressed that the enthusiasm for NABT has never waned. Whether the group size is 18 or 80, the discussions are always lively, engaging, respectful, and important to those involved. These conversations help us prepare to take on the controversies that impact us as biology teachers. They are also an opportunity to share our victories, both personal and professional.

As the seventh executive director of the National Association of Biology Teachers, I am proud to provide and protect this space for us, knowing that the definition of “us” will continue to change even as our central mission to empower educators remains unwavering. As both the National Association of Biology Teachers and *The American Biology Teacher* celebrate our 80th year, let us reflect fondly on the audacity of those 18 original NABT members for what they did, and applaud the audacity of those who are proudly following them.

Jaclyn Reeves-Pepin, M.B.S.

Executive Director

National Association of Biology Teachers

jreevespepin@nabt.org

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