A new school year is starting, and if some state legislators have their way, evolution education will be marginalized in the curriculum. In spite of multiple court rulings prohibiting the teaching of creationism in public schools, some lawmakers continue to pursue legislative measures that would challenge the teaching of evolution and other “controversial” scientific subjects.

In statehouses around the country, the 2017 legislative session saw a flurry of attacks on science education. Eleven measures that would undermine evolution education were introduced in legislatures in eight states. This was “on the busy side of normal,” according to Glenn Branch, deputy director of the National Center for Science Education, in Oakland, California.

Although it is tempting to link this slight upswing to federal politics, Branch cautions against making a connection to the election of President Donald J. Trump. Most of the measures were reincarnations of previous failures. Much of the antievolution activity in 2017 can be traced to a handful of state lawmakers who have doggedly offered similar legislation year after year.

Even though most of these measures fail—as they did this year in Arkansas, Iowa, and Texas—some succeeded or came close.

A bill passed by the Florida legislature and signed into law by Governor Scott makes it easier to remove evolution education or any other “controversial” subject from a district’s curriculum. Any taxpayer who lives in the school district can file a complaint to the school board and will have the opportunity to argue why instructional materials are not “objective, balanced, noninflammatory, current,” or “free of pornography.”

Although Florida House Bill 989 did not specifically mention evolution, advocates cited the testimony of some supporters as evidence of the bill’s intentions. Some advocates for the measure wrote, “I have witnessed students being taught evolution as a fact of creation rather than a theory,” and “I have witnessed children being taught that global warming is a reality.”

In Oklahoma, Senate Bill 393 came closer to passing than ever before. The bill would allow educators to “help students understand, analyze, critique and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories.” Evolution is not specifically mentioned in the 2017 version of the bill.

Oklahoma State Senator Josh Brecheen has offered a version of the legislation every year since 2011, although it had not been approved by the Education Committee until this year. Brecheen openly stated in 2011 that his intention is to require “every publicly funded Oklahoma school to teach the debate of creation vs. evolution using the known science, even that which conflicts with Darwin’s religion.”

“Proponents of SB 393 brazenly claim the proposed law would allow for a free flow of ideas, with the implication that our current way of teaching the scientific method is stifling critical thinking,” wrote Oklahoma teacher Deborah Hill in The Journal Record in May 2017. Hill is past president of the Oklahoma Science Teachers Association. “Critical thinking and the testing of assumptions is central to the scientific method, but this legislation confuses scientific theory by promoting intelligent design as an equally or even a more valid scientific theory than the theory of evolution.”

The Oklahoma legislation was opposed by a broad coalition of scientific groups (including the American Institute of Biological Sciences, which publishes BioScience), education groups, the Oklahoma Chapter of the Sierra Club, and the Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce.

SB 393 passed the Oklahoma Senate and a House committee before stalling in the full House of Representatives. These “academic freedom” bills are the latest wave of attacks on evolution education, says Branch. First, opponents banned the teaching of evolution in the 1920s, but by 1968, courts had struck down those bans as unconstitutional. The second wave of attacks sought balance between the teaching of evolution and creationism, including the push to teach “intelligent design.” Courts ruled against that approach as well, which led to the current effort for teachers to have the ability to assess the strengths and weaknesses of evolution and other “controversial” subjects, such as climate change and human cloning. More than 70 such bills have been introduced nationwide since 2004.

Branch notes that the 2017 legislative session was a further weakening of that strategy, with academic freedom laws being rewritten as nonbinding resolutions that passed in Alabama and Indiana. “I would expect to see a lot more resolutions like that in states where sponsors have failed,” said Branch. “At least they got something across the finish line.”

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doi:10.1093/biosci/bix077

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