

Science for the 21st Century

If the past is any indicator, Midland has always been a proud supporter of education and has a special interest in assuring excellent science instruction. Having a petroleum based economy gives us a local view of the need for well prepared youth to fill science positions. Most citizens would also agree that many of the questions facing our community, as well as our state and country, require training in science basics and empirical thinking if we are to make enlightened decisions. Unfortunately, there exists a threat today which has not been strongly reported locally. A large portion of the State Board of Education's work is in choosing textbooks. Four or five books for each subject at each grade level are selected from which local districts may choose. Next year will see a review of science curriculum standards for Texas schools. Once the SBOE adopts the final standards, publishers will design new textbooks based on these criteria. Since Texas has some 4.6 million students, the choices made for our state are used for many other smaller states.

It has become clear that Creationism and Intelligent Design advocates have decided to use Texas as a testing ground to insert their beliefs into science classrooms under the guise of "teaching both sides of the argument". As reported by a San Antonio Express-News editorial "This has the potential to harm students by inappropriately preparing them for higher education and sending them into a world in which they are scientifically outclassed." Surprisingly, the inclusion of this non-science material has become a serious controversy because several State Board members are strong advocates of undermining instruction on evolution, a unifying concept critical to the understanding of all biological sciences and, one might argue, to Geology. Board President Don McLeroy is an avid Young Earth Creationist and believes the world is less than 10,000 years old. Outspoken Board member Cynthia Dunbar, also a creationism advocate, has written a book which states that public education is a "subtly deceptive tool of perversion" and is unconstitutional" and "tyrannical". It is worth noting that this individual, who is to make major educational decisions for all of our children, home schools her own children.

In late fall 2007 and early spring of 2008, the Texas Freedom Network sent a lengthy survey to biology and biological anthropology faculty members from all 35 public universities plus the 15 largest private institutions in Texas assuming that they were uniquely positioned to fairly assess how such changes to the science curriculum standards would affect prospects for their students. 92% agreed that the SBOE should not allow Intelligent Design to be presented in public school science classrooms as scientifically credible. Probably because there is no way Intelligent Design can be tested as it is not a scientific theory, screened by peer-reviewed publications, tested or researched. Many people of faith believe in God and accept the science of evolution. The major denominations of Christianity accept evolutionary biology. This has been succinctly explained in the saying "science tells you how and religion tells you why". Supernatural explanations have no place in the science classroom. These issues should be left to our families and congregations where we best make our own individual faith decisions.

Final science standards will be set on March 2009 but you can submit comments to the State Board now. Join me insisting on a 21st-century education for our children. Letters can be directed to the State Board of Education, TX Education Agency, 1701 N. Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78701 or email to www.tea.state.tx.us for the home page where "contact us" is listed. These are OUR schools and OUR children.

Jan R. Artley

Former Director of K-12 Science & Health

Midland Independent School District

The author has taught chemistry, physics, earth science and biology in public schools, was a Junior High School administrator, and retired after eleven years as Director of Science for all Midland schools. She currently

Chairs the Sibley Nature Center Board, is Environmental Chair for the League of Women Voters and works with the Marian Blakemore Planetarium.