

Rio Rancho School Board passes misguided and flawed science policy

On Monday, Aug. 22, the Rio Rancho school board adopted policy 401, "Regarding Science Education Pertaining to Biological and Cosmological Origins." This new policy, which is not part of the State Science Standards, was passed 3 to 2. The policy states, in part, that "discussions about issues that are of interest to both science and individual religious and philosophical beliefs will acknowledge that reasonable people may disagree about the meaning and interpretation of data."

The wording appears innocent enough. Why would anyone object? But in fact, the policy has been carefully crafted to permit, or even require, that Rio Rancho science teachers discuss the unscientific and even anti-scientific "notions" proposed by creationists and the "intelligent design" movement. How do we know that?

1. Discussions at the Board meeting on Aug. 22 demonstrated that the proponents of the policy believe that "evolution" is flawed, and that there are data that show its weaknesses.
2. Board advocates also said that there are scientists who believe there are problems with "origins science," a non-scientific phrase often used by creationists.
3. The Board discussion reflected many of the arguments currently being promoted by Intelligent Design and creationist advocates.
4. One of the very few speakers in favor of the policy is a member of the Intelligent Design Network of New Mexico. She claimed that the NM standards were of high quality, and had been praised by many national organizations. What she didn't say was that ALL of those national organizations vigorously oppose her views as unscientific, and would unanimously reject the policy.
5. On the day after the policy was passed, a student brought a Bible into a chemistry class, and wanted to discuss intelligent design.
6. On the same day, in a different class on Anatomy and Physiology, a student questioned the teacher who was discussing the way impulses generated in the brain are transmitted through neurons to cause muscles to move. The student said that this was so complex that it had to be intelligently designed. Another student argued that this system evolved. The two students continued to take up class time on the other topics that the teacher tried to present.
7. Later in the week, another student brought the Book of Mormon to class and wanted to discuss it.
8. So far, almost all the Rio Rancho science teachers, and every science and science education organization in the state has stated its opposition to the policy.
9. All the chairs of the UNM departments of biology, chemistry, earth and planetary sciences, physics and astronomy, anthropology, and mathematics and statistics, declared that this policy should be abolished.
10. Many scientists and educators in the state have expressed their opposition to the policy in letters to the school board and to the newspapers.
11. The strongest support for the policy has come from intelligent design advocates and creationists.
12. The policy and even its short-term consequences, reflect a nationwide, orchestrated strategy to inject supernatural explanations into public school science classes; similar efforts are occurring in

40 states across the country, with pending lawsuits in Georgia and Pennsylvania, curriculum distortion in Ohio, and a total redefinition of the meaning of science in Kansas.

Despite the careful legalistic crafting of the policy, it appears that it will, in fact, promote teaching the vacuous and unscientific notion of “Intelligent Design.” Subsequent actions speak louder than those words. If the Board feels that New Mexico’s science standards are very good, then they should avoid tinkering with them and allow their teachers to teach the best science available. The use of the phrase “reasonable people” opens the door to introducing non-scientific material, confusing our students, and demoralizing our teachers.

We think that this policy will also have a negative impact on other technology companies with high-paying jobs that might locate in Rio Rancho or anywhere else in the state.

Rio Rancho High School is one of the finest and most academically successful school districts in the country. It has close ties between its science students and the technology industry, especially Intel, which provided \$30 million for the building of the high school about ten years ago. This school board policy will actually have profoundly negative impacts on student learning in science and critical thinking; it has already significantly lowered teacher morale.

(In 1996, a national engineering society cancelled their convention in Albuquerque because the State Board of Education at that time had similarly passed seriously flawed science standards. The State Board later revised the science standards during and following the tenure of one of the authors of this letter.)

Discussions about intelligent design and other creation philosophies may be held in social studies classes on history, philosophy, or comparative religions; they are also appropriate in church or at home, but not in public school science classes.

In the 1980s, federal courts and the Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment prohibited the teaching of so-called “Creation Science.” Shortly thereafter, an “evolved” version of creationism appeared called “Intelligent Design.” Its center is the Discovery Institute in Seattle. The Institute refuses to describe the “designer,” say anything about methods or timing of the design process, show any empirical support, or propose any way the “notion” could be tested or falsified. It hired a well-known public relations firm, Creative Response Concepts [<http://www.crc4pr.com/firm/clients.asp>]. It influenced a large group of local, state and federal politicians. The Intelligent Design proponents in fact do everything a political advocacy group could do, except produce any new scientific knowledge. These are the so-called “data” that the school board believes should be taught.

The anti-evolution issue was first addressed in court 80 years ago in the Scopes Trial in Tennessee. We must learn from the past that scientific knowledge will continue to evolve and its discoveries have greatly enhanced the quality of our lives. It is up to each individual to determine his or her own belief system, but only mainstream science should be taught in science classrooms.

Sincerely,

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