

18 October 2004

Dr. Joni Burgin
Superintendent
Grantsburg School District
Grantsburg, Wisconsin

Dear Dr. Burgin,

It has come to our attention that the Grantsburg School Board has just changed the District's science curriculum to require that the district's science teaching staff address "theories of origin" other than the theory of evolution in the district's science classes. As liberal arts and sciences deans throughout the State of Wisconsin, we urge you, on behalf of your students, to work diligently to overturn this misguided policy and not to permit the presentation of such non-scientific topics in the guise of science. To allow material of this sort into the science classroom would make it difficult for Grantsburg students to fully grasp the nature of science and to understand the explanatory and predictive power of science. This knowledge is critical for students to succeed in university courses and is essential if we are to develop a scientifically literate work force and electorate.

The call to present "theories of origin" other than the theory of evolution is often couched in terms of ensuring full debate and encouraging critical thinking skills in students. You should not be fooled by these tactics. Students do not learn critical thinking skills when they are presented with material completely at odds with the nature and thrust of a discipline. In the case of evolution, the "alternative theories" promoted are collections of spurious and misinformed attacks on evolution coupled with simplistic and misleading descriptions of evolution. When a political agenda of this sort is inserted into the science curriculum, students come to misunderstand the nature of the scientific process rather than learning how to think critically.

We hope you understand that our position is in no way at odds with and in no way intends to demean any religion. Rather we believe that science, and only science, should be taught in science classrooms and laboratories. And evolution is most certainly a critical scientific topic for students to understand at a time when genetic engineering, stem cell research, and emerging tropical viral diseases, to name just a few issues, are playing such an important role in our lives. Indeed, as the presidents of fifteen public universities in Ohio wrote to the Ohio Board of Education, "Evolution is the single unifying scientific theory of life and an essential element of scientific literacy." They went on to add, "Clearly, we must acknowledge and respect the faiths of students and other citizens. Parents and clerics play a crucial role in teaching matters of religious philosophy, and education plays a role in teaching about the history of these ideas. The role of diverse faiths likely belongs in our K-12 curricula in courses on comparative religions and the history of science." We agree fully and hope you can convince the members of the Board of Education of the wisdom in these thoughts.

The great biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky has said, "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution." If you take this theoretical framework away from your students, they will not be able to understand the living world and will be forced merely to memorize facts. Memorization is a far cry from understanding and by forcing your students into this position, you will make it unnecessarily difficult for them to succeed in much of what they might do later in life. Simply put, your students deserve a better education than they will get if non-scientific topics masquerading as science are permitted to enter the science curriculum.

Thank you for taking the time to read this note. We sincerely hope that you agree with our concerns and we stand ready to help you in any way we you might find productive.

Sincerely,

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