

Bills Seek to Protect Academic Freedom

The legislation introduced in five states would allow educators to challenge Darwinism in science classes

In tandem with a provocative documentary claiming that scientists are not allowed to discuss evidence of design in the universe, lawmakers in several states introduced academic freedom bills that would allow educators to challenge flaws in Darwinian evolution with objective scientific data.

“There is a nationwide trend going on in which people are becoming aware of the fact that scientists have been persecuted because they questioned Darwinism and that there is a need for protections of teachers and scientists to challenge evolution,” said Casey Luskin, program officer for public policy and legal affairs at the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based intelligent-design think tank.

“The movie *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* is raising consciousness about this problem, and there is now a nationwide movement to protect teachers who challenge evolution.”

The film, which released April 18, follows actor and social commentator Ben Stein as he travels the globe interviewing educators and scientists who claim they were denied tenure and even fired for questioning Darwinism. The film released as more than 700 scientists from the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and universities that included Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rice and UCLA signed the Discovery Institute’s “Scientific Dissent from Darwinism” list.

By signing the document, the prominent scientists and professors acknowledged that they are skeptical of the ability

of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life and called for a careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory.

Patricia Reiff, a professor of physics and astronomy at Rice University and the director of the Rice Space Institute in Houston, said she agreed to have her name added to the list because there are certain events in the evolutionary process that are mathematically "quite improbable." She is convinced by the evidence for evolution and does not discuss religion in the classroom, but said "life from nonlife is very, very improbable."

"Astronomer Fred Hoyle once said, 'It's like having an explosion in a junk yard and ending up with a 747,'" she said. "I think there is an option for people of faith to say, 'Look, there are certain places in the evolutionary structure where the hand of God can be seen.' "

After Stein and the producers showed the film to Florida lawmakers, Sen. Ronda Storms and Rep. D. Alan Hays, both Republicans, introduced the Academic Freedom Act, which would allow public schoolteachers to present a "full range of views on biological and chemical origins." In March, an education committee approved the bill 4-1, but it must be passed by both houses and signed by the governor to become a law. In April, lawmakers in Louisiana, Alabama, Michigan and Missouri introduced similar bills.

"What these bills would do is give protections to teachers and students that they could not be reprimanded or terminated because they engaged in a robust discussion, not on creationism or intelligent design, but just on the scientific strengths and weaknesses of evolution," said John Stemberger, president and general counsel of the Florida Family Policy Council, which joined Stein at a March press conference to support the bill.

Stein and the producers of Expelled hope lawmakers in all 50 states will introduce similar legislation. "People don't like to be told what is obviously true is not true," Stein said. "People don't like to be told that the God who made them in a loving way helps them and is their shepherd every single moment of every day doesn't exist. We're sick and tired of being pushed around, and it stops now."

—Troy Anderson