



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 13, 2012

New Tenn. Law Allows Creation Theory to Be Discussed in Science Classes

Haslam had originally planned to sign the bill in spite of his misgivings, but following an aggressive petition drive against the legislation by a coalition of opponents, he opted neither to sign nor veto it, reported [Reuters News](#), allowing it to become law by default.



In a statement, the Governor said that he did not believe the new law “changes the scientific standards that are taught in our schools or the curriculum that is used by our teachers. However, I also don’t believe that it accomplishes anything that isn’t already acceptable in our schools.” He said that while the bill had received solid bipartisan support, passing in both the House and Senate by three-to-one margins, “good legislation should bring clarity and not confusion. My concern is that this bill has not met this objective. For that reason, I will not sign the bill, but will allow it to become law without my signature.”

Groups such as the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the state teacher’s union fought the measure, which requires that teachers permit discussion of alternative theories to evolution, as well as other controversial issues such as global warming. While instructors are not allowed to raise the issue of creationism or other alternative theories, they must allow for their discussion and debate if they are mentioned in class.

Critics complained that the measure allows the introduction of religious-based theories — namely the belief that the Earth was created by God or by “intelligent design” — thereby threatening to return the state to the days of Dayton, Tennessee’s [“Monkey Trial”](#) of 1925, when substitute teacher [John Scopes](#) was tried and convicted of violating the state’s prohibition on teaching evolution. “With all the emphasis now on science, math, and technology, this seems like a real step backwards,” Jerry Winters of the Tennessee Education Association told Reuters. “Tennessee was the focus of this debate in the 1920s and we don’t need to be turning the clock back now.” In 1967, more than 40 years after the fact, Scopes’ conviction was overturned by the state supreme court, and the ban on teaching evolution was repealed.

Rob Boston, a senior policy analyst with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, warned that the new law could lead to legal problems for schools. “A school district somewhere in the state is going to implement these reckless policies and get sued,” Boston wrote on the group’s website. “The courts have been clear on this. Public schools cannot teach creationism, which is a religious concept



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favored by some fundamentalist Christians, in science class.”

[Baptist Press News](#) reported that, according to the bill’s language, “legislators believe teachers may be ‘unsure’ what they are allowed to say on some issues, and it listed four examples, although it said the list isn’t exhaustive: ‘biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, global warming, and human cloning.’ The law further says that an important purpose of scientific education is ‘to help students develop critical thinking skills.’ To that end, the law says, state officials cannot prohibit teachers ‘from helping students understand, analyze, critique, and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories.’”

Language in the law stipulates that it exists to protect “the teaching of scientific information” and “shall not be construed to promote any religious or non-religious doctrine.”

State Representative Bill Dunn, who sponsored the bill in the House, said that “it seems like a lot of discussion and critical thinking is shut down in our schools because there are people who feel you can’t question anything that’s politically correct. If you only discuss one side, then you don’t get a very good product.”

John West of the [Center for Science and Culture](#) at the Discovery Institute, a faith-based scientific organization, said his group believes the law will help foster academic freedom for both students and teachers. “More than 85 years ago, Tennessee teacher John Scopes appealed for the right to teach students all of the scientific evidence,” West said. “This historic bill now secures that right. It’s ironic that many of today’s defenders of evolution have abandoned Scopes’ plea for free discussion and are pushing for censorship and intolerance in the classroom instead.”

He said the new measure “encourages teachers to teach the scientific evidence on both sides [of the issues]. There are a lot of protections in the bill. It makes clear this isn’t right for teachers to propagandize on either side.”



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