Debate Over Teaching of Evolution and Creationism

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Description

NBC's Matt Lauer moderates a discussion between scientist John Staver and Kansas Board of Education member Linda Holloway about the recent decision by Kansas to remove evolution from its state standards. Later, in February 2007, the Kansas Board would vote to reintroduce the teaching of evolution to the state's education standard.

Keywords


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Debate Over Teaching Evolution and Creationism

MATT LAUER, co-host:
While our attention was focused on Los Angeles this week, there was a seismic shift in Kansas. That state's Board of Education voted to delete virtually any mention of evolution from state science tests. It's by far one of the strongest efforts by creationists to challenge the teaching of evolution in schools. NBC's Robert Bazell has more.

ROBERT BAZELL reporting:
The vote by the Kansas Board of Education eliminates almost all mention of evolution from the state's science curriculum, allowing local boards to teach creationism--the idea that a divine being created all life on earth as it is. Linda Holloway chairs the board.

Ms. HOLLOWAY: It's called a theory, and I would sure like to see it be continued to be taught as a theory.

BAZELL: Many scientists and educators fear that the decision in Kansas could lead to similar actions in other states, harming many children's education.

Dr. MICHAEL NOVACEK (American Museum of Natural History): Evolution really is the foundation of modern biology, because it explains the continuity of life and the diversity of life.

Dr. ROBERT PARK: (American Physical Society): The world is getting ready to enter the next millennium, and Kansas has decided to go the other way.

BAZELL: In Kansas, proponents of the new curriculum, argue that it does not stop the teaching of evolution. Local boards could decide to keep it.

Ms. HOLLOWAY: I don't quite understand why the evolutionists are having such a frenzy about this.
They are really having an absolute, as my mother would say, a conniption fit. BAZELL: But many are upset because they fear that students in Kansas may get far less than the best science education. For TODAY, Robert Bazell, NBC News, New York. LAUER: Professor John Staver co-chaired the Committee of Science Education and opposed the new standards. And Linda Holloway chairs the Kansas State Board of Education. She voted for the new standards. Good morning to both of you. Professor JOHN STAVER (Committee of Science Education): Good morning. Ms. LINDA HOLLOWAY (Kansas State Board of Education): Good morning. I haven't talked to John since he and his committee put on quite a dramatic show Wednesday before the vote. LAUER: You're going to get a chance to do that in just a second, Miss Holloway. Professor Staver, let me start with you. This new measure does not outlaw the teaching of evolution. It doesn't require the teaching of creation. It does eliminate the mention of certain aspects of the evolution theory from the science test. So why is it such a big deal? Mr. STAVER: It eliminates most aspects of the evolutionary theory. And it's a big deal because it's very demeaning to teachers, and it cheats students. It's demeaning to teachers because only in education would a board of--an elected board of lay-people decline to take the advice of a committee of experts that the lay-board, in fact, asked to do the work for them. We would never see this happening in a field such as medicine and law. LAUER: But--but what is your fear in terms of a long-term impact of this decision? Mr. STAVER: It cheats students. It cheats students in two ways. First, the college-bound students are potentially going to be behind their peers here in Kansas as they compete for entrance into—into college admissions on college admissions tests and the advanced placement biology test. They're--Kansas students are also going to find themselves behind their peers when they walk in and take their seats in introductory biology and geology courses. But even worse than that, it cheats the students who will never go on to some form of higher education beyond the high school level. It cheats them out of understanding the--the aspects of the evolutionary theory and understanding the practical aspects, such as the development of antibiotics and why you're supposed to take all of your antibiotics... LAUER: All right. Mr. STAVER: ...instead of just part of it. LAUER: Miss Holloway, let's--let's answer that a little bit. You think this is much ado about nothing. You said that the opponents to this are having "a conniption fit." Explain that. Ms. HOLLOWAY: Oh, the sky is falling. The sky is falling. This has just been an amazing, amusing thing to me that has gone on since we passed these standards. What we have done as far as evolution has pretty much left it at status quo. It's what's going on in the state now. I have great faith in local communities and parents that they can decide what is best for their children. The--the extreme examples that have been given by the evolutionists have been amusing. And as far as experts, let's talk about this committee. The experts. How was--how was it, John, that on Wednesday the experts, as they were picking apart the modification, chose two statements to attack out of the modifications. `This is not true,' said the board
member that the committee had prepped. I understand by experts that this is not true.
LAUER: Miss Holloway, let me try and get back to...
Ms. HOLLOWAY: ...and come to find out--oh, no, I need to tell you because you've got to understand. The ref...
LAUER: I need to get to the basic issue, because people weren't part of that meeting.
Ms. HOLLOWAY: But you don't understand. These experts were attacking what turned out to be statements from their own document. They were in such a seething rage that they didn't realize they were attacking their own document.
LAUER: Let me get back to the bigger picture here for a second...
Ms. HOLLOWAY: So there are statements in their own document that they say are not true.
LAUER: Miss Holloway, let me ask you this question. If there are no longer questions about the big bang theory on statewide science tests, then why would a teacher waste time in a classroom to teach her students or his students about that theory?
Ms. HOLLOWAY: The local districts will determine that curriculum, and if that's in the curriculum...
LAUER: But I'm asking you about individual teachers.
Ms. HOLLOWAY: If that's in the district curriculum, then they will be expected to teach it.
LAUER: But don't you think you're sending a message to those teachers that if it's not on a test, they probably shouldn't waste time teaching it to their students?
Ms. HOLLOWAY: Well, there are many other tests besides the state assessment. And, again, I believe that local districts will make that decision. And as you have pointed out, this does not ban evolution. They can teach all the evolution they like. They can go along with their textbooks. They can teach as much as they want.
LAUER: Professor Staver, are you concerned that teachers will simply teach to the test and eliminate evolution from their curriculum?
Mr. STAVER: Yes, I'm very much concerned that--that teachers will teach to the test. I would also like to respond to Mrs. Holloway's comments about maintaining the status quo. We're in an era of change and—and progressiveness in scientification, a reform that involves trying to raise the level of science literacy of all students. Maintaining the status quo, as Mrs. Holloway wishes to do, means that Kansas will fall farther behind, and our students will be further cheated in the sense of the quality of education that they receive.