

Texas science standards earn a C

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The State Board of Education members created a lot of controversy in 2009 when they tussled over how evolutionary theory should be handled in Texas textbooks and classrooms.

It turns out that they might also have created some pretty good high school science standards, according to a new analysis from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington-based education reform think tank.

"The high school biology course is exemplary in its choice and presentation of topics, including its thorough consideration of biological evolution," according to the report being released today .

But the evaluation also found that evolution is largely absent from middle school and elementary grades, which means that "students are not prepared to learn what they need to learn at the high school level," said Kathleen Porter-Magee, senior director of the High Quality Standards Project at the Fordham Institute.

Last year, Texas officials bristled over Fordham's widely consulted assessment of the state's new social studies curriculum standards, which were also mired in controversy. So a positive review from the conservative think tank was not a given.

In 2005, Texas received a failing grade for its science standards. This year, it earned a grade of C, which was about average compared with other states and the District of Columbia; only 13 got a better grade.

Porter-Magee said that Texas gets some credit for at least addressing evolution, because most states ignore the subject to avoid stirring up controversy.

Texas, on the other hand, courted controversy in 2009 when the State Board of Education rewrote the science standards.

Then-Chairman Don McLeroy declared that "somebody's got to stand up to experts" on the subject of evolution, and the board's conservatives pushed for language that some construed as opening the door to the teaching of creationism or intelligent design.

But when the board considered new science materials last summer, the disputed subject matter was not included in any of the adopted submissions.

McLeroy's stand on the science standards ended up costing him the chairmanship when the Texas Senate refused to confirm his nomination in 2009. The next year, he was defeated in the Republican primary.

State Board of Education Chairwoman Barbara Cargill , R-The Woodlands, said she was pleased to see that Texas received good marks for content and rigor. The state took a hit for its standards being "sometimes confusing and frustratingly vague."

"We look forward to continuing to work with Texas teachers to bring the best instruction to the classroom with our excellent science standards," Cargill said.

Steven Schafersman, president of Texas Citizens for Science and a longtime critic of the board's conservatives, said the Fordham analysis overlooked some glaring problems with Texas' standards.

He pointed to a separate examination from the National Center for Science Education that found Texas' standards contain "creationist jargon" and "reflect political and religious agendas, rather than good pedagogy and strong science."

"Without the State Board-mandated political, anti-scientific changes, Texas would have received an A or perhaps B grade from the Fordham reviewers," said Schafersman, who is running as a Democrat for an open West Texas seat on the board.

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