

Kansas and evolution

ROBERT W. RACINSKI

The essence of: education is the, teaching of facts and reasoning skills to our children, so that they learn how to think.

Yet for almost a century, our schools have been under assault by an approach to education that elevates feelings over facts. Under the influence of Progressive Education, "Socialization" – getting the student in touch with other children's feelings – is now more important than getting him in touch with the facts of history, mathematics or geography.

"Creative spelling" – in which students are encouraged to spell words in whatever way they feel is correct – is more important than the rules of language. Urging children to "feel good" about themselves is more important than ensuring that they acquire the knowledge necessary for living successfully.

This emotion-centered, anti-reason assault on education has found a new ally: those who believe the literal words of the Bible. The Kansas Board of Education has just excised the theory of evolution from the state's official science standards. Other states have enacted similar anti-evolution policies, thus elevating the feelings of religious fundamentalists over the accumulated evidence of the entire science, of biology.

These policies do not actually ban the teaching of evolution, nor do they mandate the teaching of "Creationism" – the biblical claim that the Earth and all life on it were created in six days. They

simply drop evolution from the required curriculum. The goal of the religious activists is to keep students ignorant of the theory of evolution, or to encourage the teaching of evolution and Creationism side-by-side, as two "competing" theories.

Consider what this latter would mean in the classroom. On the one side, teachers would present the theory of evolution, supported by countless observations, all integrated into a comprehensive explanation of virtually every fact in its field. On the other side, teachers would present – what? All that the Creationist view offers is the assertion that an ancient religious text reveals that 10,000 years ago God created the world in six days.

Some of these religious activists claim that they reject the teaching of evolution because it is "unproven," since it lacks "sufficient evidence."

Yet their arguments systematically reject the need for proof and evidence. Scientists can point to a billion-year-long fossil record of continuous changes across all species as they develop from more-primitive to present-day forms. They can point to the natural variations among members of a species, variations that change from one climate to another as species adapt. But the Creationist categorically dismisses the evidence – because it contradicts biblical dogma.

The central issue is not whether there is enough scientific evidence to validate a particular conclusion – but whether science as such, rather than faith, is the basis for arriving at conclusions. There can be no scientific debate between these two positions. There can be no rational argument between a view that

rests on observation and reason, and one that rests on blind faith – i.e., on its adherents' desire to believe something, irrespective of logic.

If the Creationist approach were taken seriously, what would remain of education? If evidence and reasoning are to be "balanced" by faith or feelings – what, then, would not belong in the curriculum? What is to stop teachers from presenting any other non-rational view of the origin of man? Why not give equal time to, say, the Nazi claim that the white race descended from the superior Aryans?

The most ominous implication of the Creationist position is its belief that, in judging the truth of an idea, one can simply ignore rational evidence – if it clashes with one's desire to believe otherwise. This is a disastrous methodology to inculcate in our children – and it is even more dangerous to back it up with the rulings of a government body.

The crucial role of education is to provide young people with the information and methods they need in order to learn how to think independently. Education has liberated mankind from the shackles of myth, superstition and unchallenged tradition. But the prevailing trend is to reverse this development, by enshrining feelings over facts and faith over reason.

If campaigns such as the one against teaching evolution succeed, the ultimate result will be the extinction of genuine education.

Robert Racinski is a senior writer for the Ayn Rand Institute.