

Using science in classroom on behalf of a cause predates 'intelligent design'

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by Mark Reutter, Business & Law Editor

The effort to teach "intelligent design" in public schools is not the first time that "science" has been enlisted for a cause in the classroom, according to a University of Illinois legal scholar.

In the 1870s, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union launched a campaign for laws that required classroom instruction about the evils of alcohol. "It was not sufficient that moral suasion or economic and sociological argumentation be applied," Matthew W. Finkin, a professor at the Illinois College of Law, said. The WCTU instead demanded that the proven findings of science be enlisted for what was called "scientific temperance instruction."

Teachers were required to instruct students on the nature and properties of alcoholic intoxicants, including that alcohol was a "poison," which damaged virtually every human organ and could lead to an uncontrollable appetite for more.

By 1901, every state had some form of scientific temperance instruction, and about half of the nation's school districts had adopted textbooks approved by anti-alcohol crusaders.

The Illinois law, passed in 1896, was typical. All public schools were required to teach a minimum of 40 anti-alcohol lessons a year in the higher grades and 30 lessons a year in the lower grades. If teachers failed

to teach the required courses, they could be fined. Local school districts also had to certify to the state that temperance instruction had been conducted.

The difficulty, according to Finkin, was that the proven findings of science did not support the claims that alcohol foes insisted to be made. “A 1903 report by a distinguished body of American scientists pointed out that much of the substance of the instruction was unscientific. The claim that alcohol was a poison, not a food, was contradicted by evidence that alcohol had food value, and other research showed that a glass of wine did not lead to uncontrollable desires or physical breakdown.”

With the scientific basis for temperance discredited, the movement turned away from alcohol’s damage to the individual to its harm on society. This shifted the focus away from the classroom to the political arena and ended in the 1919 ratification of the 18th Amendment, which prohibited the sale of intoxicating liquors. Prohibition was repealed by the 21st Amendment in 1933.

Intelligent design asserts that certain features of the universe and living things exhibit characteristics that could only result from an intelligent cause or agent, not an unguided process such as Darwin’s natural evolution. Although the claims of ID cannot be tested by experiment and have been called “junk science” by scientific organizations, the theory has been put forward as an alternative to natural evolution.

A federal trial now under way may determine whether public schools can mention the theory. Eight families have sued the Dover (Pa.) Area School District for requiring teachers to read a statement about ID to ninth-grade biology students. The plaintiffs say the policy supports biblical creationism and therefore violates the constitutional separation of church and state.

According to Finkin, the policy also violates a fundamental precept of teaching, which is not to lie to your students.

“What is a conscientious science teacher to do when given an order by her employer to treat as science something that isn’t science? Should she say to her class, ‘The school board has directed me to teach you about the scientific theory of intelligent design, but I have to tell you that what I am about to say has no support in the scientific community.’ What she said is certainly true, but it may be cause for dismissal.”

Forcing teachers “to read from scripts requiring them to say things that they know are not true” is bad educational policy, according to the Illinois scholar, who is the editor of the Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal and has written extensively on higher education and employment law.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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