

Evolution key issue for Kan. voters

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(AP) -- Kansas Board of Education members who approved new classroom standards that call evolution into question faced a counterattack at the polls Tuesday from Darwin's defenders.

Five of the 10 seats on the board were up for election in the primary, the latest skirmish in a seesawing battle between faith and science that has opened Kansas up to international ridicule.

Last November, the Board of Education's 6-to-4 conservative Republican majority rewrote testing standards for public schools to incorporate language supported by advocates of intelligent design, which holds that life is so complex it must have been created by some kind of higher power. The new standards say that some aspects of evolution are contradicted by scientific evidence.

On Tuesday, three members of the majority faced GOP primary foes who support evolution. A fourth Republican conservative is retiring, and her seat was up for grabs.

The fifth seat was held by Janet Waugh, a Kansas City Democrat who opposed the new standards. She faced a more conservative Democrat who favored the anti-evolution language.

Eugenie Scott, director of the National Center for Science Education in Oakland, Calif., which supports the teaching of evolution, said conservative victories would generate attempts to adopt Kansas' standards elsewhere.

"There are people around the country who would like to see the Kansas standards in their own states," she said.

Also Tuesday, Kansas Republicans chose a nominee from among seven candidates to challenge Democratic Gov. Kathleen Sebelius.

The school board contest was part of a larger effort by the intelligent design movement to introduce its ideas in public schools.

A suburban Atlanta school district is locked in a legal dispute over its putting stickers in 35,000 biology textbooks declaring evolution "a theory, not a fact."

Last year, in Dover, Pa., voters ousted school board members who had required the biology curriculum to include mention of intelligent design. A federal judge struck down the policy, declaring intelligent design is religion in disguise.

A poll by six news organizations last year suggested about half of Kansans thought evolution should be taught alongside intelligent design.

"I feel like if you give two sides of something, most people are intelligent enough to make up their own minds," said Ryan Cole, a 26-year-old farmer and horse trainer from Smith County, along the Nebraska line.

Board member Connie Morris' race in western Kansas was the most closely watched. The retired teacher has described evolution as "an age-old fairy tale" and "a nice bedtime story" unsupported by science.

Control of the school board has slipped into, out of and back into conservative Republicans' hands since 1998, resulting in anti-evolution standards in 1999, evolution-friendly ones in 2001 and anti-evolution

ones again last year.

Late-night comedians have been making cracks about Kansas, portraying it as backward and ignorant. Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" broadcast a four-part series titled, "Evolution Schmevolution."

Proponents of Kansas' latest standards contend they encourage open discussion.

"Students need to have an accurate assessment of the state of the facts in regard to Darwin's theory," said John West, a vice president for the Center for Science and Culture at the Seattle-based, anti-evolution Discovery Institute.

The standards say that the evolutionary theory that all life had a common origin has been challenged by fossils and molecular biology. And they say there is controversy over whether changes over time in one species can lead to a new species.

On the Net:

Kansas science standards: www.ksde.org/outcomes/sciencstd.pdf

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