

# South Dakota bill leaves evolution skepticism up to teachers

February 21 2017, by James Nord And Hannah Weikel

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South Dakota legislators are weighing whether to let teachers decide how much skepticism to work into lessons on contentious scientific topics such as evolution and climate change.

A House committee on Wednesday is set to consider the measure, which would give legal protection to teachers who want to discuss "in an objective scientific manner the strengths and weaknesses" of the subjects.

South Dakota is one of at least three states, along with Texas and Oklahoma, considering such a bill. Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee have enacted similar laws, according to Glenn Branch, deputy director of the California-based National Center for Science Education, which opposes the proposal.

Branch said there are concerns that such a bill would embolden some teachers to start presenting creationism in their classrooms.

Critics argue that the measure is bad for students and that allowing teachers to teach any [science](#) curriculum they choose could subject school districts to litigation. Federal courts have struck down attempts to present creationism in various forms at [public schools](#), Branch said.

South Dakota Sen. Jeff Monroe, the bill's prime sponsor, said that teachers should be able to talk about weaknesses in scientific theories, but he disputed that it would allow for creationism to seep into school

teachings. Rogue teaching of creationism instead of science wouldn't happen because it's not included in South Dakota's science content standards, he said.

The Republican has said that he has heard from concerned teachers, including one who was chastised for discussing how embryos develop and another who was frustrated that she was forced to teach [climate change](#) as a fact.

"That's how we got off the theory that man can't fly, that's how we got off the flat earth theory, by analyzing the theories, not by being stuck, told this is true and you're going to believe it and they're going to teach it as true," said Monroe, who added that it could help students learn.

The effort may face a hurdle in GOP Gov. Dennis Daugaard, who said in a recent letter to a group of Augustana University professors that he views the bill as unnecessary.

Deb Wolf, a high school science instructional coach who helps teachers in Sioux Falls schools write science curriculum said the bill is superfluous. She said she's concerned that it would protect educators who teach things that aren't "truly science."

Pam Wells, a Mobridge-Pollock High School science teacher, said some parents have asked her to teach intelligent design during her 35 years in public schools. Wells said she read the textbooks they gave her on the subject, but decided not to include it in her curriculum because the theories weren't based in science.

Wells said one high school senior told her that he wouldn't come to her class if she dropped evolutionary theory and picked up intelligent design. "He said, 'If I wanted to learn about that I'd go to church,'" said Wells, who plans to testify against the bill.

Shannon Schlomer is the father of five kids who have attended Mobridge-area schools. He has written letters to the editor of the local paper urging lawmakers to kill the bill, which he said aims to belittle established science and would end up hurting kids in South Dakota who want to go to college to become physicists, geologists or cosmologists.

Steve Matzner, an Augustana professor who signed a letter earlier this month urging House members to vote against the bill, teaches introductory biology classes every year. Some of the students come from small schools where evolutionary theory is breezed over, and they tend to struggle grasping evidence-based teaching, he said.

"The biggest effect of the [bill](#) would be that it could underprepare [high school](#) students if their [science education](#) is being watered down," he said.

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