

THE PLAIN DEALER

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Voters must make education, not faith, the central issue

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Last week Kansas voters ensured that non-creationist moderates will once again have a majority on the new state school board. That vote also means that new intelligent design-inspired state science standards will not go into effect.

In last week's primary election, three of five moderates bested their creationist opponents, with incumbent Janet Waugh winning her primary and moderates Sally Cauble and Jana Shaver defeating creationist opponents.

This is a great victory for public school education, and it sends a useful message nationwide regarding the public's ability to see through efforts by groups such as the Discovery Institute to misrepresent science in schools.

For Ohioans, it signals the possibility that various creationist advocates on our state school board might be defeated by strong challengers this fall. Many of us are optimistic that Tom Sawyer, a former teacher and Akron mayor who served in Congress for 16 years, will announce his candidacy for the state school board in a race against Debra Owens-Fink.

Owens-Fink has systematically worked to dilute and distort the teaching of science in the state. A Sawyer candidacy undoubtedly would cause money to flow into the Owens-Fink campaign from various wealthy out-of-state donors who support the attack on evolution in the schools. But voters in Northeast Ohio nevertheless would have a great opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to education that prepares our students for the 21st century.

The possibility of having strong candidates should give us hope, but celebrations over the Kansas results should probably be muted.

Last week's election is not the first turnaround in recent Kansas history. In 2000, after a creationist board had removed evolution from the state science curriculum, a huge public outcry led to the wholesale removal of creationist board members up for re-election at that time. Subsequently, evolution was reinstated in the curriculum. However, in the following election, creationists once again won enough seats to gain the majority on the board - and the power to establish the current intelligent design-inspired curriculum. If the two creationist board members who won in the primary win in the general election, they will find themselves in the minority once again, but just barely.

These creationism-evolution see-saws in Kansas are troubling. But it's more worrisome that the officials determining the curriculum of our children in many states are largely scientifically illiterate. Kansas is a good case in point.

The chairman of the Kansas State Board, Steve Abrams, is not merely a strict creationist. He has stated openly that he believes that God created the universe 6,500 years ago, although he points out that his personal faith "doesn't have anything to do with science. I can separate them. My personal views of Scripture have no room in the science classroom."

The key concern should not be whether Abrams' religious views have a place in the classroom, but rather how someone whose religious views require a denial of essentially all modern scientific knowledge can be chairman of a state school board.

I have recently been criticized by some for objecting in print to what I believe are scientifically inappropriate attempts by some scientists to discredit the religious faith of others. However, the age of the Earth, and the universe, is no more a matter of religious faith than is the question of whether or not the Earth is flat. It is a matter of overwhelming scientific evidence. To maintain a belief in a 6,000-year-old Earth requires a denial of essentially all of the results of modern physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology and geology.

Not only can Abrams separate his personal faith from science, as he attests, he is required to. What he attests to believe in is inconsistent with the most fundamental facts that his school system teaches children.

As we work to improve the abysmal state of science education in our public schools, we will continue to do battle with those who feel that knowledge is a threat to religious faith. But when we win minor skirmishes, as we did in Kansas, we must remember that the issue is far deeper. We must hold our elected school board officials to certain basic standards of knowledge about the world. Here in Ohio as we approach the next election, we should remember that the battle is not against faith, but against ignorance.

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