

"Intelligent Design" Not Accepted by Most Scientists

by Eugenie C. Scott and Glenn Branch

This spring, a subcommittee of the Ohio Board of Education charged with supervising the preparation of the state's science education standards was petitioned by a citizens' group to include "intelligent design" (ID) along with evolution. As ID becomes better known, other state and local school boards might face similar requests.

What is ID, and does it have a legitimate place in the high school science curriculum?

ID parallels but is not identical to creation science, the view that there is scientific evidence to support the Genesis account of the creation of the earth and of life.

ID and creation science share the belief that the mainstream scientific discipline of evolution is largely incorrect. Both involve an intervening deity, but ID is more vague about what happened and when.

Indeed, ID proponents are tactically silent on an alternative to common descent. Teachers exhorted to teach ID, then, are left with little to teach other than "evolution didn't happen."

An ID high school textbook, *Of Pandas and People*, mentions "creationism" only once, but this text is recognized by teachers and scientists as being very similar in content to creation science. Since *Pandas* was published in 1986, the two major innovations in ID have been Michael Behe's concept of "irreducible complexity," presented in *Darwin's Black Box* in 1996, and William Dembski's "design inference," presented in *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* in 1999.

Dembski contends that he has developed an algorithm --an "explanatory filter" -- that can distinguish the products of "intelligent design" from the workings of natural law and chance. Behe proposes that there are certain biochemical structures that, being "irreducibly complex," cannot have arisen through unguided natural processes.

Neither Dembski's design inference nor Behe's irreducible complexity has fared well in the scholarly world, however.

A search of scientific databases, such as PubMed or SciSearch, reveals that scholars have not applied the concept of irreducible complexity or the design inference in researching scientific problems.

ID has been called an "argument from ignorance," as it relies upon a lack of knowledge for its conclusion: Lacking a natural explanation, we assume intelligent cause.

Most scientists would reply that unexplained is not unexplainable, and that "we don't know yet" is a more appropriate response than invoking a cause outside of science.

A third important book of the ID movement is Jonathan Wells' *Icons of Evolution*, published in

2000, which claims that biology textbooks promote fraudulent and inaccurate science. Although the reviews of Wells' book by scientists have unanimously regarded it as dishonest and devoid of scientific or educational value, it is being widely circulated among creationists and cited at school board meetings around the country.

ID also includes a "cultural renewal" component, which focuses on ideological and religious rather than scholarly goals.

The Seattle-based Discovery Institute's Center for Renewal of Science and Culture (CRSC) serves as an institutional home for virtually all of the prominent ID proponents, including Dembski, Behe, and Wells. The goals of the CRSC, as stated by the Discovery Institute's director Bruce Chapman, are explicitly religious: to promote Christian theism and to defeat philosophical materialism.

The sectarian orientation of the ID movement cannot be ignored in decisions about whether to include ID in the curriculum.

Courts repeatedly have held that the public school classroom must be religiously neutral and that schools must not advocate religious views. In 1987 the Supreme Court ruled that teaching creationism in the public schools is unconstitutional.

ID proponents may argue that a neutral-sounding "intelligence" is responsible for design, but it is clear from the "cultural renewal" aspect of ID that a deity — in particular, God as He is conceived of by certain conservative Christians — is envisioned as the agent of design. While schools can take no position on this view as religion, it cannot be regarded as science.

Thus, school board members and administrators would be ill-advised to include ID in the public school science curriculum. If the scholarly aspect of ID becomes established — if ID truly becomes incorporated into the scientific mainstream — then, and only then, should school boards consider whether to add it to the curriculum.

Until that day, proposals to introduce ID into curricula should be met with polite but firm explanations that there is as yet no scientific evidence in favor of ID, that ID supporters are wrong to allege that evolution is intrinsically antireligious, and that the sectarian orientation of ID renders it unsuitable for constitutional reasons.

And school board members should be aware that introducing ID into the curriculum is likely to lead to strong opposition — up to and including lawsuits — from those, including parents, teachers, scientists, and clergy, who do not want science education to be compromised.

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