October 18, 2018

Arizona State Board of Education Members
1700 W. Washington Street
Executive Tower Suite 300
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Re: Comments on October 2018 Draft Science Standards

Dear Members of the Arizona State Board of Education:

On behalf of our Arizona chapter, members, and supporters, Americans United for Separation of Church and State submits comments on the October 2018 Draft Science Standards. We strongly urge you to ensure that the state science standards do not undermine the teaching of evolution. Arizona’s students deserve sound a science education.

According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, evolution “is the only tested, comprehensive scientific explanation for the nature of the biological world today that is supported by overwhelming evidence and widely accepted in the scientific community.”¹ That is why the committee of expert teachers tasked with developing the standards included its teaching.

The Arizona Department of Education, however, has amended the standards proposed by experts to undermine the teaching of evolution. Most instances of the word evolution have been deleted from the standards altogether. Those that remain imply that evolution is only one of several possible explanations for organism diversity. Other references to evolution add phrases such as “may” and “are believed to” to imply that there is scientific disagreement about evolution.

The proposed changes are designed to provide cover for those who wish to insert religion into the public-school science classrooms. This coincides with Superintendent of Public Instruction Diane Douglas’ support for the teaching of intelligent design. Douglas said, "Personally, I absolutely believe that intelligent design ... should be taught alongside evolution. But the courts have deemed that unconstitutional."²

The Superintendent is correct that the Constitution prohibits the teaching of creationism and intelligent design in public school classrooms. Federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have consistently and repeatedly held that state officials cannot promote religious alternatives to evolution, including creationism and all its variations.³ Moreover, in Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District, a federal court held that “intelligent design” is a form of creationism.⁴

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³ See Epperson v. Arkansas, 393 U.S. 97, 106 (1968) (striking down a state statute prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools, and explaining that "the First Amendment does not permit the State to require that teaching and learning
The Superintendent’s alternative plan, however, is also unconstitutional. She admitted, "the focus of the draft science standards is not to introduce intelligent design into the standards, but rather to clearly define the strengths and weaknesses of evolution theory." That too violates the constitution.

Kitzmiller held that highlighting the so-called weaknesses in the theory of evolution “distort and misrepresent scientific knowledge.” As a result, the court prohibited the Dover Area School District not only from requiring teachers to refer to “intelligent design” in science class, but also from “denigrating or disparaging the scientific theory of evolution.”

The current draft of the science standards, however, follow the strategy commonly used by creationists—to undermine students’ confidence in evolution. This, they believe, will naturally cause students to seek another explanation and spark discussions of religious beliefs like creationism.

Science is “limited to the search for natural causes to explain natural phenomena.” The goals of science are narrow: Science cannot provide “ultimate” explanations for the existence or characteristics of the natural world . . . [and it] does not consider issues of ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ in the world.” Many people seek these important answers in religion. But only families get to decide what religious beliefs they will teach to their children—not our politicians or our public schools.

Americans United is committed to protecting students’ and parents’ rights to have sound science, rather than religious belief, taught in public-school science classrooms. Thus, we urge you to approve state standards on evolution that rely on the best available scientific evidence and do not undermine student education.

Sincerely,

Nikolas Nartowicz
State Legislative Counsel

must be tailored to the principles or prohibitions of any [religion].”); see also Edwards v. Aguillard, 482 U.S. 578, 591 (1987) (invalidating a Louisiana statute requiring the “balanced treatment” of evolution and “creation science” in the public schools and declaring the law unconstitutional because its “preeminent purpose . . . was clearly to advance the religious viewpoint that a supernatural being created humankind.”); see also Freiler v. Tangipahoa Parish Bd. of Educ., 185 F.3d 337, 348 (5th Cir. 1999) (striking down an oral disclaimer casting doubt on evolution and referring to “biblical” alternatives); Peloza v. Capistrano Unified Sch. Dist., 37 F.3d 517, 522 (9th Cir. 1994) (holding that a science teacher was properly required by his school district to teach evolution and refrain from discussing his religious views); Daniel v. Waters, 515 F.2d 485, 491 (6th Cir. 1975) (striking down statute requiring schools teaching evolution to devote equal time to other theories, including Biblical account of creation).


5 Supra note 2.

6 Supra note 4 at 743.

7 Id. at 766.

8 Kitzmiller, 400 F. Supp. 2d at 735–36.

9 Id. at 735.