

The Texas State Board of Education and Public School Content

Heather Zeiger

The Facts

The Texas State Board of Education is a group of fifteen individuals, representing various districts in Texas. One of their roles is to decide on standardized, statewide guidelines on public school contents for grades K-12. These guidelines are delineated in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), which dictate the content for every subject for every grade level that students must master in order to graduate from a Texas accredited public school. Importantly, these guidelines also dictate what textbooks are approved for classrooms and selection criteria for universities. While these guidelines are not enforceable in the private school setting, private schools that are college preparatory must consider these guidelines in determining student advancement and subsequent collegiate eligibility.

The old draft of the TEKS, which was approved in 1998, states that students are expected to “analyze, review, and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses using scientific evidence and information.”[{1}](#)

The new draft of the TEKS, set for final approval in March 2009, states in the parallel section that students are expected to “analyze and evaluate scientific explanations using empirical evidence, logical reasoning, and experimental and observational testing.”[{2}](#) This line is in the introduction to the Biology class content under “scientific processes.” The content portion of the biology class has various topics listed, and what students are required to master within each of

these topics. Topics include *Cells and Cellular Processes, Molecular Genetics and Heredity, Evolution and Populations, Classification and Taxonomy, Biochemistry, Systems and Homeostasis, Ecosystems, and Plants*. Under each of these topics are specific items that students need to know.

The Contentious Issues

Those are the facts of the issue as best as we can describe them. However, these changes have created more than a little uproar from various groups that have a vested interest in how evolution is taught. The lines divided as such: advocates of the unquestioned teaching of evolution in public schools who were in favor of the new wording, and advocates of questioning certain aspects of evolutionary theory who were in favor of keeping the wording “strengths and weaknesses” within the TEKS. Many people that were for the new wording said that there were no weaknesses to evolutionary theory, or accused the other side of using this language of “weaknesses” to somehow smuggle creationism into the classroom. Many people who wanted to keep the strengths and weakness language intact accused the other side of censorship and subversively teaching an ideology and abridging academic freedom.

The Texas State Board of Education hosted a public hearing on Wednesday, January 21 (2009), where they welcomed testimony from individuals. The hearing would close at 12:40 p.m., no matter how many testifiers were left on the schedule. With a list of nearly a hundred, the Board only got through thirty testifiers. Some provision was made for trading up and testifying earlier, and the Board members invited select individuals to testify at the public hearing. However the majority of people there to be heard, including me (spot thirty-nine), and my husband (a science teacher who has taught both in public high school and private middle school and was spot sixty-three) went unheard. While each testifier had a three-minute time limit, an obviously divided Board asked several questions, either for clarification or to be on public record for having asked.

Whatever one may read or hear in the media, most of the testimonies on both sides were articulate and intelligent, and the testifiers fielded their questions remarkably well. If you look at the audience, you might think it looked like a rally; the room was a bit of a zoo. But the testimonies were certainly at a higher level than some kind of emotionally-charged, rah-rah pep rally. Whether we agreed with them or not, we thought each testifier made good points.

Testimonies

While we do not necessarily agree with everything below, we have summarized the main points presented by each side.

For the Proposed Wording and Against “Strengths and Weaknesses” Wording

- *The old wording does not provide guidance to teachers, especially new teachers.*
- *Students are not necessarily capable of analyzing evolutionary theory, or are not necessarily capable of evaluating the current research.*
- *Academic freedom refers to the university level, and students do not have the same freedoms of speech as adults.*
- *The current draft has more specific wording.*
- *There is a possibility of litigation as has happened in other states.*
- *Students could fall behind if they are taught supposed weaknesses in evolutionary biology.*
- *“Strengths and Weaknesses” wording would block the publication and adoption of good textbooks. In fact, it could result in the adoption of subversive Creationist books designed to exploit this flaw in educational guidelines.*

- *These weaknesses are pseudoscience, or these weaknesses are from sources that engage in pseudoscience (no satisfactory definition of pseudoscience was given).*
- *The word “weaknesses” has changed in meaning due to the use of it for P.R. by certain Creationist groups, and therefore should not be included in the TEKS.*
- *Warning that people may doubt the integrity of Texas education if strengths and weaknesses are allowed.*
- *“Strengths and weaknesses” is inaccurate because there are no weaknesses. These supposed weaknesses are false and misleading information. Teaching weaknesses is likened to teaching that Grant surrendered to Lee.*
- *It’s better to get your information from the National Academy of Sciences than from “creationist” sources [quotes are mine].*
- *The peer review literature does not argue whether evolution happened, it is just researching how it happened. Whether it happened is not in question.*

Against Proposed Wording and For “Strengths and Weaknesses” Wording:

- *Even within the “strengths and weaknesses” wording, there has been silencing of students, and some teachers are intimidated to even broach the subject. Examples were cited by two of the testifiers.*
- *Cases of scientific hoaxes were cited by several people, including Piltdown Man and Haeckel’s Embryos. These are significant because many evolutionists will not admit these were hoaxes/errors. While they could be examples of how theories grow and change (something they agree is part of science and should apply to evolution), they instead go unaddressed and worry those who respect true scientific research and achievement.*

- *No one area of science has answers to everything, so there are always weaknesses in theories.*
- *There has been no litigation in the last twenty years with the wording “strengths and weaknesses” and to say that this encourages pseudoscience, brings up the question as to whether Texas has been engaging in pseudoscience for the last twenty years.*
- *Standards should promote academic diversity and critical thinking. Some of the great minds in science were non-conformists.*
- *Children begin thinking abstractly at young adolescence, and their abstract and cognitive abilities continue to develop through high school. This stresses the importance of including critical thinking skills in the TEKS. Teaching strengths and not weaknesses does not promote abstract thinking.*
- *Teaching strengths and weaknesses is more honest.*
- *Examples were cited of students who did learn strengths and weaknesses and it worked well.*
- *Real science deals with strengths and weaknesses of a theory; why should evolution be held to a different standard?*
- *We should not proclaim high school students too dumb to understand (my note: two of the testimonies were given by high school seniors).*
- *“Evolution” is a tricky term because when someone says “evolution” they may mean three different things, one of which is a fact and two of which are conjecture: 1) Microevolution (fact), 2) Common Descent (theory), 3) Natural Selection acting on mutations is how things evolve (theory). Student should distinguish this.*
- *Scientific consensus is only one part of science, the conclusion part. Students*

need to also know the scientific process.

- There is a difference between scientific law, theory and hypothesis.*
- All theories are refined in the scientific process. Evolution does not have testable postulates. (This testimony was cut off due to time, but he was going to distinguish between origins and operations science).*

Assessment

My husband David is a science teacher who has taught high school science in public school and now teaches middle school science in a private, college-preparatory school. I have two degrees in science and am a research associate at Probe Ministries. Here is our assessment of the TEKS:

The wording “strengths and weaknesses” seems very intentionally omitted from the proposed version, which is suspect, but neither one of us can say definitively that it was left out in order to promote a particular agenda of misleading students or indoctrinating them by evolutionist advocates. “Analyze and evaluate” does convey something different than “analyze, review, and critique” and it does seem to be a very subtle difference that allows for slightly less freedom of discussion within the classroom; however, with this language, by itself, there may still be opportunity to have a rigorous discussion of weaknesses, especially if it falls under the category of “evaluating.” Its omission from the TEKS however, as one Board member pointed out, does communicate something as well, so we are skeptical of the perceived freedom with this language.

Another, and what I think is a blatant problem with the evolution curriculum, is in the specific wording within the evolution content section. Within the TEKS Biology section, there are several topics that the students must cover. Within each of those topics are specific things that they must master. In the TEKS proposed draft, the evolution section of high school biology requires students to:

- A. Identify how evidence for common ancestry among groups is provided by the fossil record, biogeography, and homologies including anatomical, molecular, and developmental;*
- B. Recognize that natural selection produces change in populations, not individuals;*
- C. Describe the elements of natural selection including inherited variation, the potential of a population to produce more offspring that can survive, and a finite supply of environmental resources resulting in differential reproductive success;*
- D. Recognize the relationship of natural selection to adaptation, and to the development of diversity in and among species; and*
- E. Recognize the effects of other evolutionary mechanisms including genetic drift, gene flow, mutation, and recombination.*[{3}](#)

The action verb at the beginning of each of these points is important because each verb is intentionally chosen, and from an educator's perspective has a technical meaning. According to Bloom's taxonomy of educational activities, verbs such as "describe," "define," or "identify" represent a low level of cognizance, while words such as "explain," "recognize," "illustrate" and "predict" are mid-level, and words such as "compare" "analyze," "interpret" are higher level of cognizance.[{4}](#) In *all* of the other science concepts taught in biology, students are asked to "compare," "investigate," "predict," "analyze," and "interpret." However, evolution is kept at a purely definitional level, meaning that even though the proposed TEKS include "analyze and evaluate" within the general scientific process section, there is no opportunity to do this when the students get to the evolution section; they are only required to essentially memorize definitions or memorize what fossils lead to common descent. Many testifiers claimed that students were free and in fact encouraged to discuss evolutionary theory. They

said the “strengths and weaknesses” language was being replaced by the better, more specific “analyze and evaluate.” This is intentionally misleading. The general standards do read that way, but the evolution section itself is exempt from this rigid treatment in the new TEKS.

I was particularly unimpressed with Terrence Stutz’s article from the *Dallas Morning News*, in which he labeled the board members who wanted to include “weaknesses” as being aligned with “social conservative groups that in past have worked to cast doubt on science-based theories on the origins of life,” {5} when really, most of the testifiers and Board members that wanted “weaknesses” left in the TEKS, including my husband and myself, are arguing for academic freedom and free inquiry. The way evolution is handled in the proposal does nothing to promote even an analysis and evaluation, let alone an atmosphere of inquiry on a theory that is supposed to be the cornerstone of biology. {6}

The Vote and Results:

The Texas State Board of Education had a preliminary vote Thursday, and it was tied 7-7, which means that, so far, “strengths and weaknesses” language will not be in the next version of the TEKS (it requires a majority). However, the board has until March to make its final decision, and make a final vote.

While “strengths and weaknesses” is not in the current draft of the TEKS, the board did vote on some amendments that ask students to “analyze and evaluate” specific aspects of evolutionary theory, bringing the evolution science concepts up a notch (or two) on Bloom’s scale.

According to *Evolution News and Views*, {7} the wording change is as follows:

(7) Science concepts. The student knows evolutionary theory is a scientific explanation for the unity and diversity of life. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze and evaluate how evidence of common ancestry among groups is

provided by the fossil record, biogeography, and homologies including anatomical, molecular, and developmental;

(B) analyze and evaluate how natural selection produces change in populations, not individuals;

(C) analyze and evaluate how the elements of natural selection including inherited variation, the potential of a population to produce more offspring than can survive, and a finite supply of environmental resources result in differential reproductive success;

(D) analyze and evaluate the relationship of natural selection to adaptation, and to the development of diversity in and among species; and

(E) analyze and evaluate the effects of other evolutionary mechanisms including genetic drift, gene flow, mutation, and recombination.

Furthermore, the Board passed an amendment that asks students to “Analyze and evaluate the sufficiency or insufficiency of common ancestry to explain the sudden appearance, stasis, and sequential nature of groups in the fossil record.” [\[8\]](#) Unfortunately, media coverage on these particular amendments are scarce. We would consider these amendments a success, especially since they address the issue of low-level cognizance in the evolution requirements. Now they are at a level that seems much more appropriate for high school biology, and we feel will promote good critical thinking and intellectual inquiry. We also believe that these amendments will better serve to prepare our students for the intellectual rigor and higher level thinking skills that they will need at the collegiate level.

Public Testimony
Heather Zeiger, M.S.
Research Associate, Probe Ministries

I went to Texas public schools for junior high and high school. I knew then that I was going to pursue a career in science, and ended up choosing chemistry my senior year. I graduated in 1999, and at the time, I had received some education in evolutionary biology. That education mostly consisted of memorizing facts and definitions, but gave no indication that there was anything more to be discussed. By way of example, one of the things we learned in biology was the Miller Urey experiment. We learned that this was the prevailing theory on how life began, and this is how it worked. There was no further discussion on chemical origins, and as far as I knew from what I was taught in the public high school, scientists agreed that this was how it happened. Except . . . it turns out that there were and still are many questions about chemical origins. In fact, as I later learned, there is an entire field of study in which chemists deal with the very fundamental questions of how life began. There is more than a little contention among those who believe that life came from an RNA-based world and others who believe that it was originally metabolic. There are still others who think that life beginning from purely chemical processes may not even be possible under our current theories.

What was presented as a boring little tidbit in our biology books, actually is an entire field of inquiry. Chemical origins is just one area of evolutionary theory; and as we all know there are evolutionary biologists still researching these issues, which means that there are still challenges or unexplained parts of the theory to be investigated. The students that go into science, the ones I've worked with, are fascinated by the unexplained parts of a theory, by the mysteries. I think it is a disservice to our children and to the scientific community to gloss over the places where a theory needs more work. We should encourage students to go on and become the next scientist to answer these questions in evolutionary theory. While the proposed draft does discuss strengths and limitations, in science, in general, it does not leave the evolution section open to this, but keeps it at a definitional

level. I therefore contend that the Biology TEKS, science concept seven (evolution) should be phrased in such a way that would go beyond the less interesting part of science, identification and description of terms. And hopefully, this will open classroom instruction to analysis and discussion of current strengths and weakness within this important theory.

Texas State Board of Education

Public Testimony

David Zeiger

Texas SBEC Certified Science Composite Teacher for Grade 9-12

My name is David Zeiger and I am a certified composite science teacher for grades nine through twelve. I taught Chemistry and Physics for two years in Garland ISD, and now I teach seventh grade Life Science at Trinity Christian Academy, a private college preparatory school in Addison. In my relatively brief tenure as a science teacher, I have had to come to terms with a simple discouraging fact: most of my students will not love science as much as I do, let alone become researchers, engineers, doctors, nurses, or even science teachers. In fact the National Science Foundation found that in 2000 only one third of college students earn bachelor degrees in science and engineering.[{9}](#)

Therefore, when I read the TEKS as the guiding structure for my curriculum, I have to ask what my job as a science teacher truly is. Am I wasting my time with two-thirds of my students? Memorizing the parts of a plant, reeling off the periodic table, or calculating using laws of motion; are these things that students are going to use again? Do I even want them to memorize a chart with the strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory? No. The things that every student can take with them are how to gain information from their environment, whether that environment is a job training manual, a relationship with their spouse, or a new technique for hammering a nail; how to test that new information against their previous experience and training; and most importantly, how to be flexible enough to change their ideas when it turns out they were

wrong.

Those important methods of learning are included in the TEKS for non-biology science classes and in the non-evolution biology standards. When teaching science other than the evolutionary theory, students are asked to “compare,” “predict,” “investigate,” “explore,” “explain,” “analyze,” “interpret,” and “model,” activities from the whole range of cognizance. But, the proposed recommendations on evolution use language that refer to and limit the students to the simplest level of cognitive learning: memorization.

If we don't teach the simple fact that every theory has weaknesses, we don't teach young people true science. If we don't teach them to find and evaluate those weaknesses, we don't teach them to be humble in their search for truth. And if we don't teach them how to keep or reject those theories, we leave them as prey to whoever has a stronger opinion than they do.

Please keep teaching students to analyze and evaluate scientific theories. Critical reasoning is one of the few things I know all my students will need and use every day of their lives.

Notes

1. 1998 TEKS, Section 112.43, (c), (3), (A).
2. Section 112.43 (c), (3), (A) of proposed TEKS
3. Proposed 2009 TEKS Section 112.43, (7)
4. www.teachervision.com
5. Terence Stutz, “Texas Board of Education votes against teaching evolution weaknesses,” *Dallas Morning News*, January 24, 2009. tinyurl.com/bncw55
6. Theodosius Dobzhansky, “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution,” *American Biology Teacher* 1973, volume 35, pp. 125-129.
7. www.evolutionnews.org/2009/01/recap_texas_board_of_education.html
8. Ibid.
9. www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind04/c2/c2s3.htm