The Children’s Crusade for Creationism

The nightmare of every biology teacher happened at our school. Creationists petitioned the school board to have creation science added to the biology curriculum. The outcome was mixed.

Why Us?

Why did it happen at Jefferson High School, Lafayette, Indiana, in the shadow of Purdue University? It seems reasonable to assume that if you are not teaching evolution, you greatly reduce your chances of a confrontation to nearly zero. As you increase the time spent on evolution and the effectiveness of your instruction, the risk of creationist intervention should logically increase. After an introductory unit on the nature of science, we teach one semester of ecology and one semester of evolution, with genetics and the cell included in evolution. John Moore’s deductions of evolutions are the skeleton upon which we build the second semester’s study (Moore 1993). In addition to teaching the big ideas in biology, we spend considerable time teaching life skills with goal setting, group learning, student choice, and oral testing. We use several tools that increase the chance that the 80% of the time spent in labs will result in critical thinking skills development. Because the class is team taught, student centered, and constructivist, students tend to enjoy it and they learn (Randak 2000). These factors work together to create an environment that stresses students with creationist beliefs. To relieve that stress we teach a comprehensive five-week introductory unit on the nature of science. It includes not only the scientific method but a consideration of how science is distinguished from nonscience and a condensed history of science. The commitment to developing a deep understanding of the nature of science comes, in part, from our involvement with an NSF-sponsored ENSI program (ENSI 2000). The ENSI philosophy assumes that if students develop an understanding of what science is and how you distinguish science from nonscience, they will have fewer problems when confronted with evolution (Nickels 1996). In the past it worked. This time it didn’t. Why?

Student Generated

The mystery further deepens when you consider that the entire initiative to add creationism to the curriculum was student driven. No adult took an obvious role. We know from talking with students that one of our chemistry teachers offers a great deal of support for the creationist view. It seems possible and even likely that the petition was his idea. In the past, he spent the first several weeks of school preaching the creationist dogma, but appeared to have stopped because of administrative pressure. He has recently started preaching in his classroom again. The guidance of this one adult may be the reason this creationist action happened or it may truly be a student response to effectively taught evolution. Our superintendent holds this latter opinion. He feels that creationist parents and students are upset because we teach evolution effectively.