Throughout the United States, various individuals and groups have tried to subvert science education by removing evolution from state science education standards or by demanding that non-science topics such as creationism (e.g., “intelligent design”) be included in the standards. These individuals and groups have had varying degrees of success, as documented by Lerner’s (2000) study which concluded that only 10 states have evolution education standards that are “very good” to “excellent” (i.e., a grade of A), 14 states have standards that are “good” (i.e., a grade of B), seven states have standards that are “satisfactory” (i.e., a grade of C), six states have standards that are “unsatisfactory” (i.e., a grade of D), and 13 states have standards that are “reprehensible,” “disgraceful,” “an embarrassing display of ignorance,” and “useless for purposes of teaching evolution” (i.e., a grade of F or F-). Ten states (e.g., Illinois, Florida) do not include the word evolution in their guidelines, and another (i.e., Maine) mentions it only once. Weak standards are not restricted to the Bible Belt; for example, the evolution standards of North Carolina and South Carolina are excellent (i.e., earned a grade of A), whereas those of several northern states (e.g., New Hampshire, Maine) are “useless” (i.e., earned a grade of F). But do these standards matter? And how do these standards relate to students’ views of evolution and the teaching of evolution?

Minnesota provides an interesting and informative case study for investigating students’ views of evolution and the roles of state standards in evolution education. The Minnesota K-12 Framework for Science (2003), which includes evolution education standards that are “good” (Lerner, 2000), states that “The focus of instruction in life science for all students at the high school level is on developing an understanding of cell structure and function, the relationship of matter and energy in biological systems, heredity, biological evolution, the behavior and interdependence of organisms and apply their understandings in a variety of situations” (p. 3-192). The Framework also includes the National Science Education Standards (which discuss natural selection, similarities among organisms, common descent, and the 4.6-billion-year age of Earth; National Research Council, 1996) as well as a sample curriculum titled “Life Sciences on Location 9-12” that includes competition and natural selection (p. 3-193). Similarly, Minnesota’s “Graduation Standards—High School Level” specify that all high school graduates should “understand biological change over time,” including natural selection and biodiversity (p. 3-199). Minnesota’s evolution education standards are supported by the Minnesota Science Teachers Association, which supports the teaching of evolution and whose Board of Directors in 2003 endorsed the position statement of the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) stating that “teaching biology in an effective and scientifically honest manner requires classroom discussions and laboratory experiences on evolution” (National Association of Biology Teachers, 2002). Clearly, there is strong and consistent support for the teaching of evolution in science classes of Minnesota’s public schools. Creationism and intelligent design—both of which are explicitly rejected by the Minnesota Science...