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Author: HEATH, ERIN

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Evolution after Dover

ERIN HEATH

The scene: a press conference featuring scientists and religious leaders. The date: 21 December 2005, the day after US District Court Judge John E. Jones III struck down the Dover, Pennsylvania, Area School District's inclusion of intelligent design in the district's science curriculum. The mood: cautious elation.

"Cautious elation" may appear to be a contradiction in terms, but that's exactly what many scientists felt about what was, by most accounts, a major victory for science education in Dover. Repeatedly, distinguished scientists such as Kenneth R. Miller, Francisco J. Ayala, and Joel Cracraft (a former president of AIBS) indicated that while they were gratified that the Dover judge recognized the importance of science education, the intelligent design movement, though weakened, is not dead. Indeed, new legislation seeking to at least downplay evolution's importance has already cropped up in state legislatures nationwide.

In Utah, Republican State Senator Chris Buttars has been trying to steer science classes away from evolution. Last year, he advocated for the addition of "divine design" to the state science curriculum. He then crafted a bill that did not mention evolution or intelligent design specifically, but mandated a state curriculum that would "stress that not all scientists agree on which theory regarding the origins of life, or the origins or present state of the human race, is correct." Critics decried the bill, which passed the State Senate in January 2006; the *Salt Lake Tribune* called the new legislation "an embarrassment." The tide turned only after opponents succeeded in defeating the bill in the House. State Representative Steve Urquhart (R), a lawyer with a bachelor's degree in biology, led the fight against the legislation.

Post-Dover antievolution legislation has arisen in other states as well, such as Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, Alabama, Mississippi, and Maryland. But not all evolution activity has been in the statehouses: In California, a handful of evolution-related lawsuits have made headlines. In one case, a school district in Lebec offered a winter elective called "Philosophy of Design," which drew almost exclusively from intelligent design/creationist sources. Parents objected. The course ended a week before its scheduled completion date, after the school district, fearing a costly court battle, settled the legal complaint against it.

Dover observers may this year train their eyes on Georgia. In 2002, the Cobb County school board ordered disclaimer stickers to be placed in its newly adopted science textbooks; those stickers called evolution "a theory, not a fact." Concerned parents sued and won in a US District Court in 2005, with Judge Clarence Cooper ordering the school district to remove the stickers. But now an appeal is under way, and at least one of three appellate judges seems to favor the school district: In December, Judge Ed Carnes stated that the disclaimer stickers were "technically accurate," adding that, according to the *Los Angeles Times,* "from non-life to life is the greatest gap in scientific theory. There is less evidence supporting it than there is for other theories. It sounds to me like evolution is more vulnerable and deserves more critical thinking."

What are the prospects for these bills and lawsuits? In many cases, says Glenn Branch, deputy director of the National Center for Science Education, the legislation serves mainly to bring attention to the sponsor and is unlikely to become law. Some of the sponsors of this year's antievolution legislation have been down this path before—like Utah's Buttars—and so weren't necessarily responding to the defeat at Dover. Nevertheless, Dover has had an impact, Branch says: Legislators who may have sought to introduce intelligent design into science curricula "instead have gone for the perennial creationist background strategy: impugning evolution."

The backlash against intelligent design may extend beyond Utah. A Wisconsin state representative has proposed a bill seeking to prevent the teaching of supernatural ideas in science classes, and Branch says there may be more such moves. The Ohio State Board of Education removed from its state standards a model lesson that singles out evolution for "critical analysis"; in February 2006, after Ohio Governor Bob Taft (R) questioned the legality of the standard in the wake of the Dover verdict, the board voted 11–4 to get rid of the lesson.

Results like this show scientists that their vigilance in supporting science education can pay off.

Erin Heath (e-mail: eheath@aibs.org) is with the AIBS Public Policy Office.

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