



## Zack Kopplin speaks for science and the nation takes notice— will Louisiana?

By: Mark Moseley – February 20, 2013

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Even by the standards of the young and the restless, science advocate Zack Kopplin has been a very busy troublemaker of late.

When Kopplin learned that the Orleans Parish School Board voted recently to ban creationist sham science texts from classrooms, he immediately sent word to the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology. That's the group that decided not to hold its convention in New Orleans as a protest against the 2008 Louisiana Science and Education Act. Why were the scientists so peeved about the LSEA, and how does the law relate to creationism? I think the Sensuous Curmudgeon blog offers a concise explanation:

Back in 2008 Louisiana disgraced itself by being the first state in the US to pass an anti-science, anti-evolution, pro-creationism “Academic Freedom” law modeled after the Academic Freedom Act promoted by the Discovery Institute. It encourages the use of unspecified “supplemental materials” – wink, wink – in science classes. The law was enacted notwithstanding a landmark decision from the US Supreme Court striking down Louisiana’s earlier creationism law (see: *Edwards v. Aguillard*).

A few weeks after the school board vote, Kopplin was pleased to write an editorial that announced the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology’s decision to lift its boycott of New Orleans. Now the Crescent City is back in the running as a future conference site to host nearly two thousand scientists for five days, an event with an estimated economic impact of \$2.7 million. Not too shabby for a 19-year old, especially at a time when city leaders bemoan tight budgets and extol every infusion of tourist cash.

Kopplin wasn’t following the school board’s lead; more like the reverse. For years he has spoken out against the LSEA, saying it was a creationist ploy to incorporate sham science into Louisiana school curricula. As a Baton Rouge high school student, Kopplin began the Repeal Creationism web site to overturn the law. He testified in front of the state board of education in favor of sound scientific textbooks and said science education was vital to the state’s future. Kopplin won a victory with the textbooks, but unfortunately his LSEA repeal efforts have failed two years in a row.

Alongside philosophy professor Barbara Forrest, Kopplin unmasked the LSEA as a Trojan horse that allows creationist “supplemental materials” into classrooms, with no oversight or accountability. Such materials—if they are anything like the views of their proponents—claim to

see scientific “controversies” where there is overwhelming academic consensus, as in the foundational principles of evolutionary biology, for example. Creationists do this more subtly these days. They don’t mention the biblically-based beliefs about “intelligent design.” Instead they act as if the issue is somehow about freedom of academic inquiry, or local school autonomy, or (my favorite) “a balanced curriculum” (where none exists). No, the real issue is public money being used to support sham science. It’s fine to doubt the evolutionary theories that explain the evidence upon which biological science is based—if you’re on your own time, or in religion class, perhaps. (Though I’ve got to say to the believers who doubt the fossils that give them doubts, where’s your faith?)

Kopplin is a troublemaker because he wants to safeguard science in a deeply religious state that would rather water it down. The irony is that along with our dependence on conventions that draw scientists, physicians and serious academics, the state is addicted to an oil industry that also relies on science. Don’t we want Louisianans to qualify for those in-state jobs? The bigger irony is that only sound science will solve the mega-problem of coastal erosion, which threatens South Louisiana’s way of life, religious or otherwise.

But the rest of the country likes Kopplin’s troublemaking. Kopplin’s science advocacy received national notice from the tech website io9 last month. Kopplin told io9 that scientific miseducation harms employment prospects:

Creationism confuses students about the nature of science. If students don’t understand the scientific method, and are taught that creationism is science, they will not be prepared to do work in genuine fields, especially not the biological sciences. We are hurting the chances of our students having jobs in science, and making discoveries that will change the world.

Kopplin has also been blessed with opponents who make fools of themselves. Lamar White at Cenlamar blog noted that two of the videos embedded in the io9 article have gone viral. As of this writing they have nearly 600,000 views. The first shows Kopplin’s testimony before the Legislature. State Senator Julie Quinn puts her foot in her mouth trying to establish her bona fides as a lawyer while also appearing to mock degreed scientists.

But that’s nothing compared to the clip of State Sen. Mike Walsworth, who apparently thinks that evolution means bacteria can evolve directly into a human being. No wonder he’s skeptical about evolution, and no wonder his howling ignorance went viral.

White has two podcast interviews that I would recommend. Pay special attention to part one, where White and Kopplin discuss the implications of California’s decision to deny science course credits to applicants from Christian high schools that taint their curricula with creationism. That could have obvious political ramifications for students in Louisiana parochial schools, some of which accept vouchers—i.e. taxpayer money.

Speaking of vouchers, there was a recent Times-Picayune piece on a list compiled by Kopplin of 20 Louisiana schools that accept vouchers and also teach creationist “science.” But other than that, precious little from local media outlets in recent days. Nationally, however, Kopplin has received massive exposure.

For example, he partnered with Tulane professor Melissa Harris-Perry’s MSNBC show for a report on voucher schools, and wrote a guest post on PBS’s Independent Lens blog about the same topic.

He also wrote a Huffington Post article calling for a “Second Great Leap” in national funding of science research and education. The Chronicle of Higher Education profiled his efforts, as did Current TV and Public Radio International. A Houston TV station took note as did The Houston Chronicle.

His efforts have been honored with more than media attention. Kopplin has been awarded the first annual Troublemaker Award, which challenges teenagers to “channel their creative energy, passion, and unconventional ideas into making the kind of trouble that is the catalyst of all great movements.” Kopplin’s been selected as the Truthdigger of the week, and he even won the Hugh Hefner First Amendment Award earlier in 2012.

His opponents have taken notice, too. Kopplin’s been called a brainwasher by creationists and challenged to a debate. The Cato Institute critiqued his effort, saying his anti-creationism undermines religion and may have unintended consequences for the school choice “market.”

I don’t want to overstate the young man’s successes. The LSEA still is the law. State Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, who has joined Kopplin’s fight, will likely file a repeal bill that will no doubt have trouble getting out of the State Senate’s Education Committee for a real vote in the Legislature.

Simply put, the pro-science issue doesn’t play well in Louisiana, even though it has national relevance.

But note this dynamic, because it has potentially large national implications: As we know Governor Bobby Jindal has an eye on the White House, which obliges him to surf political crosscurrents as head of a conservative state with ambitions to lead a more liberal nation. And the tension will only be exacerbated nationally, if not here at home, as more Millennials reach voting age ahead of the 2016 presidential race. I spotted this dynamic two years ago at The Lens (even earlier elsewhere).

In short, Jindal’s pandering to the religious right in Louisiana will come back to haunt him. His support for creationism will be a millstone for his 2016 campaign to bear; national pundits and cartoonists will be unable to resist snide remarks about the governor who wants his party to smarten up, but who doubts evolution. It’s simply too easy for them to mock the Ivy League science major who talks up the Louisiana miracle in education, while voucher students learn about the Loch Ness monster and valedictorians are being turned away from California universities.

Even conservative organizations say the LSEA has to go. The Thomas Fordham Institute calls the law a “devastating flaw” in Louisiana’s science standards for public education. Pundits of all stripes will take notice, especially if more viral moments occur in Louisiana Legislature or classrooms.

The blowback is already happening. Joanna Weiss of The Boston Globe, expressed second thoughts about Jindal’s intelligence after Kopplin wrote to her about Jindal’s views. I suspect there will be a metric ton of those columns at some point.

Zack Kopplin understands he can’t do it alone. Creationism degrades the public perception of Louisiana. That makes it an economic threat to a state dependent on tourism and conventions. State business promoters need to speak up—just as they did back in 1991 when David Duke’s run for governor was a clear and present danger to tourism and the convention business. And oil

companies need to weigh in. They need to state clearly that Louisiana's future depends on sound science education. And incur the governor's wrath? Not to worry: Jindal is not about to stop pandering to Big Oil.

I've always admired Kopplin's clarity on the issue. He has not gotten sidetracked. He has always carefully declined to discuss his religious views, because they are immaterial. This is about science education. It's not a religious issue. Further, I'm pleased to see that Kopplin has leveraged his newfound publicity and called for a national emphasis on science education, to confront challenges such as climate change and resource depletion.