

Why is creationism still being taught in public high schools?

A new survey reveals that when it comes to evolution, not all biology teachers favor science over religion

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The bible vs. biology: A recent survey finds that 13 percent of teachers openly advocate creationism. Photo: Corbis

It has been 86 years since the Scopes Monkey Trial, the landmark case that marked the widespread public acceptance of teaching evolutionary theory in America's public schools. But a new survey shows that teachers remain sharply divided over whether to teach the scientific or religious account of the origins of man — or both. According to a survey conducted by Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer, two researchers at Penn State, only a minority of biology teachers teach evolution "unabashedly," while many endorse creationism, and most don't make a strong case either way — leaving many students with a muddled picture of mankind's beginnings. Here, an instant guide to the findings:

What did the survey find?

Only 28 percent of the 926 teachers surveyed took an adamantly pro-evolution stance, following the National Research Council and National Academy of Sciences recommendations to cite scientific evidence that evolution occurred, according to LiveScience. Thirteen percent of those polled in the National Survey of High School Biology openly advocated creationism — the belief that God created Earth and humans, as told in the Bible's Book of Genesis — or intelligent design, the theory that a higher power, not natural selection, guided evolving species. The majority of teachers, meanwhile, didn't take any clear stand on evolution. The study's authors dub this group the "cautious 60 percent."

So how does the "cautious" majority of teachers treat the subject?

For the most part, educators walk on eggshells when it comes to evolution, avoiding a decisive viewpoint. The study identified three major ways biology teachers accomplish this, says Lisa Grossman at Wired. Some teachers "focus on evolution at the molecular level," thus "ignoring the idea that whole species of animals can evolve." Other teachers "hide behind rigid state science tests," teaching the theory but not actually advocating for it. A third group presents arguments for evolution and creationism, leaving students to decide which is the better approach. "This strategy," says Grossman, "respects high schoolers' critical reasoning skills, but undervalues the scientific method."

Why is evolution being taught this way?

The study's authors believe that many high-school teachers do not have a deep enough scientific education to properly teach their subject. "You can take very little science and get a degree and be teaching in high school," says Steven Newton, the Programs and Policy Director at the National Center for Science Education, as quoted by LiveScience. And "the quality of what [students learn] is so dependent on the teacher you get" that it's

a crapshoot as to whether students learn what they should." Another factor may be that teachers don't count on support from school administrators, and don't want to wade into a teaching controversy by themselves. Thus, Newton says, "it would be beneficial for there to be more support from the administration, so [teachers] don't feel out there all alone."

How can schools put the focus on science?

Berkman and Plutzer recommend training teachers before they step into a classroom. But Randy Moore, an evolution expert at the University of Minnesota, says the extra training won't help — many teachers will "simply reject" the scientific consensus. In the meantime, says Chris Dawson at ZDNet, we should stop talking about Creationism as an equal argument to evolution. You can "believe what you want," but "teaching Creationism in our public schools not only violates the U.S. Constitution, but infringes on a student's right to learn objective, research-based, state-of-the-art science." Maybe the answer is to stop using the schools to force people to believe something they don't, says Neal McCluskey at Cato-at-Liberty. Let schools teach the values of the communities they serve. "You simply cannot compel belief," and when you do, you sacrifice liberty on the altar of science.