



Climate Debate Will Burn Public Schools

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With the recent revelations of a prominent scientist using dirty tricks against global-warming skeptics, the overheated climate debate has taken another ugly turn. Worse, the scandal reveals that our children's minds may be the newest battleground in the unending global warming war.

The scandal revolves around the unauthorized publication of internal documents from the Heartland Institute, an organization in the forefront of global-warming skepticism. Among the items exposed was a plan to create a K-12 curriculum casting doubt on the "consensus" that global warming is real, man-made, and dangerous. Indeed, the most damning document – which Heartland maintains is fake while confirming the authenticity of the others – says the lessons are aimed at "dissuading teachers from teaching science."

The scandal doesn't end with publication of the documents, or the possibility that one is a forged fraud, however. It is how Peter Gleick – hydroclimatologist, president of the Pacific Institute, and admitted deceiver – obtained some of them: by assuming the identity of a Heartland board member.

"In a serious lapse of...judgment and ethics," Gleick stated on his [Huffington Post blog](#), "I solicited and received additional materials directly from the Heartland Institute under someone else's name."

This is hardly the only behavior in the climate debate jarringly inconsistent with the image of scientists as even-handed truth-seekers who simply analyze facts and report objective conclusions.

A couple of years ago a similar act of legerdemain – publication of a purloined trove of emails from climate-change believers – produced considerable evidence that the discussants had tried to strong-arm scientific journals into blackballing anyone who cast doubts on their views. “Climategate” was like getting a rancid pizza from a guy with the flu – both the delivery method, and what was delivered, made you sick.

All this illustrates why everyone – no matter where they fall on climate change – should be greatly concerned about mixing global warming with public schools. It reveals both how contentious the issue is, and how subject scientists – like all people – are to uncertainty and selfishness.

The sheer contentiousness of the issue is a mammoth problem because public schools – institutions that diverse people are all forced to support – can’t handle it. Trying to teach hot-button issues usually creates, first, highly divisive conflict, and then barren curricula.

The battle over evolution is illustrative. The debate over the teaching human origins kicked off at least as far back as the famous Scopes “Monkey” trial of 1925, and it still tears communities apart today.

And what’s kept what peace we have? Avoiding the topic, as a recent survey of high school biology teachers found. Roughly 60 percent of teachers reported that they gloss over or skip evolution – even if state standards require it – because of the conflict they fear would result.

But what if one view could be imposed on all kids, without rancor or watering down?

That’s even more troubling. The main purpose of science is to tackle matters we do not fully understand. To teach that there is only one right view on such matters, then, is inimical to this purpose. It is also extremely dangerous, taking everyone down darkened paths, eliminating alternate routes, and leaving no options for escape if what’s “right” turns out to be wrong.

Finally, we see in these scandals that scientists will sometimes stoop to trickery and bullying rather than rely on the power of their evidence. It’s because they are human. If you invest huge amounts of your time and reputation into an idea you will fight to defend it, both because you think you are right, and for your advancement.

What is the best defense against basic, human self-interest? Not handing anyone all the levers of power.

In the case of education, that means moving away from a system of schooling controlled by government, and towards parental choice and educator freedom. It means enabling all to access a curriculum that’s coherent because it’s not a compromise. It means making ideas compete, and giving no one special access to children’s minds.

People on all sides of the global-warming debate will take issue with this, insisting that it would be wrong not to make all children learn their, often biased, “truth.” But climate change isn’t scientifically settled, and even if it were, most public schools still wouldn’t touch it. Only school choice overcomes these myriad, treacherous problems.