

Why should physicists care about Dover?

There is once again a controversy brewing in the United States over the teaching of evolution in schools. Scientists, both in the US and abroad, might be tempted to dismiss this as short-term hysteria, instigated by far-right religious zealots. Physicists in particular might feel happily insulated from the argument: an amusing article in satirical web magazine *The Onion* poked fun by suggesting that a theory of 'intelligent falling' should be introduced in physics classes as a competing theory with Newton's law of gravity.

Thankfully, there is little chance that physics teachers will be required to discuss religion-based alternatives to newtonian gravity in high-school classes. Nevertheless, there are dangerous implications for all of science arising from

a court case in process in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Eleven families have sued the board of the Dover Area School District over its ruling that 14-year-old biology students be read a statement by their teachers saying that evolution is a controversial theory, that intelligent design is a competing theory, and that the latter is discussed in a textbook (written by a lobbying group) available in the public library.

In the many places in which the teaching of evolution has come under attack, other curricular changes have also been proposed, such as removing discussions of the Big Bang. The issue is not so much the teaching of evolution, or even the separation of church and state, but that the notion of



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what constitutes a viable scientific theory in public education can be determined by popular demand and media campaigns.

Even if the intelligent-design bullet is dodged this time, similar attacks on science are likely in the future. Physicists have as much at stake in reaching out to the public as biologists do in the current battle. Hosting public lectures at universities and museums is not enough. We need to recognize that, in the public arena, the rules are different from those of scientific journals. Simply having empirical evidence on your side seems not enough to win the public-relations campaign against those who would replace science with ideology.

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