

# Intelligent design lacks scientific support

by Peter Dawson Buck

On a muggy June evening, the State College Area School District school board voted on appropriations for special education, on policies regarding classified employees, and on some science textbooks for middle school, chemistry and 10th-grade biology, an anti-hazing policy created by the Citizen's Advisory Committee and a life skills program taught in conjunction with the State College police. All votes for the evening passed with polite discussion and no contention.

Unlike the Dover School Board in York County, Pa., the State College Area School District has had few if any challenges to the teaching of the theory of evolution. Last school year in Dover, administrators read the following preamble to biology classes at the beginning of the evolution unit:

"Because Darwin's theory is a theory, it continues to be tested as new evidence is discovered. The theory is not a fact. Gaps in the theory exist for which there is no evidence."

The district now provides a supplemental textbook, *Of Pandas and People*, which promotes intelligent design (ID) as an explanation for the origins of life.

The decision has rancorously pitted community members against one another and rekindled Clarence Darrow's and William Jennings Bryant's courtroom fireworks from the Scopes' Trial of 1925. Debates once again pit Christian literalists against secular humanists in an invigorated front on America's culture war.

Dover resident Jean Eisenhart openly asserted her religious support for ID when she told the *New York Times*, "If they can teach there is no God, then they can teach there is a God."

Conversely, Dover resident Bryan Rehm, a plaintiff in the ACLU's lawsuit against the Dover School Board, stated, "As a parent and a person of faith, I want to share my

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**-Jeffrey Kurland**

religious beliefs with my own children. But as a teacher, it would be a great disservice to and fallacy to teach students that a perfectly valid faith constitutes scientific knowledge."

Dr. Ken Mawritz, supervisor of Secondary Education for State College, says SCASD is under no such pressure. He works with the school board, teachers, reading specialists and concerned or interested community members to select textbooks – including those the board voted on in June.

In State College, students get their first glimpse of evolution in middle school. They then delve into a more detailed unit in May at the end of their 10th-grade Biology class.

Every spring one or two parents call the district to object to the evolution unit of the curriculum, citing conflicts with religious beliefs that they teach at home. Mawritz stated that teachers invite students to "complete a project on their particular belief. We try to satisfy [parents'] particular concerns."

However, the State College board might feel a greater push if Rep. Tom Creighton (R-Lancaster) manages to push House Bill 1007 through the Legislature. The bill would modify the code to allow local school boards to mandate teaching intelligent design in classrooms as a direct challenge to evolution. The bill is co-sponsored by 11 other representatives, including Kerry Benninghoff (R-Centre and Mifflin counties). Reps. Creighton and Benninghoff did not respond to inquiries.

On Monday, June 21, the House Subcommittee on Basic Education heard

four hours of testimony from ID's most prominent advocate, Michael Behe, professor of biochemistry at Lehigh University, who testified that design "is a conclusion based on physical evidence." Randy Bennett, associate professor of biology at Juniata College, countered Behe's testimony, stating that "[ID] offers nothing but untestable assertions, not scientific assertions."

Penn State University Associate Professor of Anthropology Jeffrey Kurland agrees. "It's subterfuge. Not science." Kurland enumerated problems with ID, frequently referring to history and current research.

First, he noted that ID's arguments are newer versions of those William Paley first espoused in *Natural Theology* in the 19th century. The scientific community quickly abandoned Paley's views in the wake of Darwin's and others' work. Kurland is appalled that the basic arguments he believes were soundly rejected 150 years ago are not only still in circulation, but entering into legislation that affects science curricula.

"No one legislated Newton, Mendel or plate tectonics," he said. "This is a political tactic to set up a theocratic state. First, it's intelligent design. Then it's prayer in schools."

If ID proponents want their materials taught in science class, Kurland says they need to prove ID's merits to the scientific community "by making a unique set of predictions that could compete with evolution."

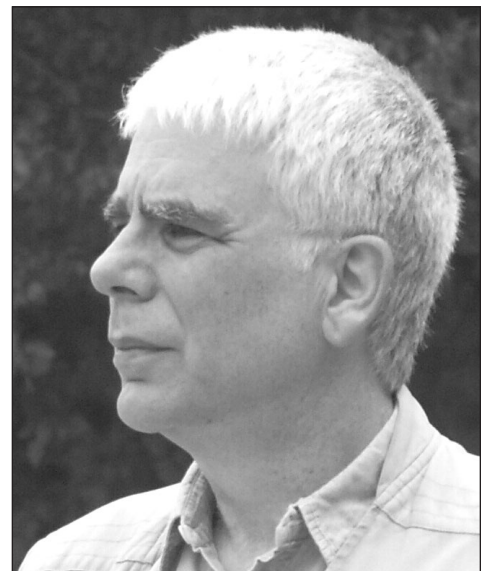


Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Kurland  
Penn State University Associate Professor of Anthropology Jeffrey Kurland.

"Darwin, by doing comparative anatomy, predicted that we would find human ancestors in Africa." ID, he says, makes no such predictions.

"They're not jeopardizing their position or offering an explanation. Without published falsifiable predictions, it can't be accepted as science."

Indeed, an examination of the literature finds that of thousands of articles published every year in peer-reviewed anthropology, biochemistry, biology or evolution journals, only one has used ID as its theoretical framework. Steven C. Meyer's review article, *The origin of biological information and the higher taxonomic categories*, appeared in *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* 117. Critics state that the article presents no research or experimental findings that promote ID's plausibility as positive and testable. An Aug. 24, 2004, review of *The Panda's Thumb* noted, "Although ID is discussed in

See ID, pg. 6

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