

Some opponents of evolution are incensed that public schools can teach concepts to students that are contrary to what students are taught at home. However, this dilemma extends to a far wider range of concepts. And there is adequate recourse for students to both stay in the class or avoid it.

Blood transfusion is one example of a concept that is a regular part of biology lessons on the circulatory system. Yet the procedure squarely contradicts the beliefs of one denomination. What is a science teacher to do? What is a school to do?

Removing all concepts that contradict some religious group is neither wise nor possible. First, there are the larger number of students who are not members of that religion who need the knowledge on blood types and compatibility to handle future health decisions. And there are denominations that believe "inheritance travels on the male blood line" (thus eliminating all genetics) or that the world is indeed flat. Considering the growing number of students with international backgrounds, a science teacher would be hard pressed to find any science to teach that did not contradict some religious teaching somewhere.

The Kansas Legislature has long since settled this issue. Kansas is one of many states that have a religious opt-out law.

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K.S.A. 72-1111 (e) No child attending public school in this state shall be required to participate in any activity which is contrary to the religious teaching of the child if a written statement signed by one of the parents or a person acting as parent of the child is filed with the proper authorities of the school attended requesting that the child not be required to participate in such activities and stating the reason for the request.

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The full burden rests upon the parent or guardian to request the opt-out, since the teacher will likely have no knowledge of their religious objections. For the most part, merely stating that the request is based on religious beliefs satisfies the "reason." In contrast to the Kansas sex-education opt-out that is due to expire July 1, 2005 when the new high school graduation requirements begin for Kansas freshmen, a Kansas teacher does not have to alert parents ahead of time about course content that might contradict religious teachings.

Very few parents use the religious opt-out. In part, this is because Kansas teachers are not dictatorial in the classroom. The current Kansas science standards define this position clearly.

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"Understand" does not mandate "belief." While students may be required to understand some concepts that researchers use to conduct research and solve practical problems, they may accept or reject the scientific concepts presented.

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When I supervise student teachers, I meet many of the science teachers across Kansas. I do not know of any that force students to say they believe in evolution or other concepts. Not one. They ask for understanding, just as teachers ask students to understand a wide range of political and economic systems.

But just as students who do not accept “atomic theory” will be ineffective chemists, students who do not recognize the centrality of evolution to biology will be ineffective biologists. The above statutes and standards serve as a safety valve to drain off the pressure, and currently the opt-outs are barely a trickle. If Kansas science teachers can continue to teach for understanding, Kansas will continue to have a future in the BioSciences.