Evolving State Policy on Creationism

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Like many other school systems across the country, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has faced its share of controversial issues. Each year such topics as sectarian instruction, creationism, or religious studies would be aired in quasi-legal hearings. For the most part, these hearings helped avoid legal actions against the schools, but did little to resolve the fundamental issues. Nevertheless, they provided an opportunity to educate the Wisconsin school community not only about important specific problems, but also about controversial issues in general and their role in a state that prides itself on local autonomy.

Early in this decade, Wisconsin schools began to feel the effects of the more conservative attitudes being expressed in national, political, and religious movements. Increasingly, we were asked to teach this content or not to teach that content, to use these materials and not those. In the case of creation science, local boards of education were being challenged as to their compliance with the law and many were buffeting from one rationale to another depending on the political clout of the antagonist.

In order to clear the air and give local administrators the reference point they needed to evaluate activities within their schools, I asked our state supervisors of science and social studies to develop a position paper that would succinctly state the legal and educational limits of this issue. I also suggested that they might offer more detailed curriculum guides for the proper study of religion in the public schools.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction defused a potentially explosive situation by focusing on the distinction between science and religion.

The Written Policy

Involving members of the education community was the most important aspect in dealing with this issue. Statewide committees were established to obtain the best possible input. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction provided a means for individuals and groups to meet and study the history, politics, and educational components of the problem. This process provided for consensus within the law and produced two useful documents that could help prevent similar problems in the future.

The first document, a position paper entitled Evolution, Creation, and the Science Curriculum, set forth two criteria that local schools could use to judge and build educational programs. Those criteria were (1) the contextual limitations of the law, and (2) the assumption that science and religion are two separate disciplines with different ways of addressing and answering questions.

With regard to the first criterion, the inclusion of creationism in the science curriculum raises serious issues in light of the constitutional doctrine requiring separation of church and state. The Wisconsin Statutes requires the state superintendent to exclude all sectarian instruction and materials from the public schools. The only federal court case considering the question, McLean vs. Arkansas Board of Education, has ruled that creationism is inherently religious and cannot constitutionally be presented in the public schools as a scientific explanation of origins.

While this criterion was clear and to the point, it did not say what schools could do about their curriculum. Thus, we invoked the second criterion, arguing that the strength of science is in its systematic process for developing the most logical and plausible

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Excluding religious explanations from the science class does not amount to telling students that they should not maintain those beliefs—only that those beliefs are not acceptable as science. Science, then, can only answer certain kinds of questions. If questions are posed outside the scientific domain, then other disciplines must be employed. Science is not superior in explanatory power to religion—only different. We could not allow science instructors to deal with ideas beyond the domain and processes of their discipline.

Principles of the Documents
This rationale is reflected in four principles included in the 1982 position paper:

1. Alternative scientific theories may be compared in the science classroom, but only those that best explain evidence which has been validated by repeated scientific testing should be accepted, and then only tentatively.

2. Years of intensive geological, biological, and other scientific study have provided the most acceptable explanations of the origin and development of earth and life on earth. The theory of evolution has the general consensus of the scientific community because it integrates and clarifies many otherwise isolated scientific facts, principles, and concepts in a manner consistent with known evidence and observed phenomena.

3. Like any scientific theory, evolution remains subject to modification and revision as new evidence is discovered. Therefore, evolution should never be presented to students as fact. Good teaching dictates that students be reminded of the tentative nature of conclusions resulting from scientific inquiry.

4. Religious beliefs and writings, including accounts of creation, comprise a body of human knowledge that may be properly addressed, in their own right, in other areas of the public school curriculum. There is no legal provision against the nonsectarian academic study of such matter where appropriate to locally establish curricular goals in such disciplines as literature, philosophy, history, or religious studies.

The position paper concludes with the following:

In Wisconsin, the decision regarding the goals of the science curriculum and its more specific teaching objectives as well as the goals for religious studies in the curriculum are legally and properly the responsibility of local boards of education. However, local districts dealing with these decisions may wish to consult the Department of Public Instruction for technical assistance relative to both legal and curricular problems and issues.

Because science and religion have such different epistemological bases... they serve different functions."
The legal basis and requirement of public education religious studies in Wisconsin.
- General goals for religious studies in public schools.
- Natural inclusion of religious studies in the curriculum.
- Special units and courses of religious studies.
- Standards for teachers in Wisconsin public schools and universities offering approved programs in religious studies.

The guide was prepared to deal with public schools and religion as completely as possible. While it was necessary to understand creation science in a legal context, we also had to address the full curricular implications of the issue, making sure that religious studies were not overlooked and that religious studies were not confused with science.

The Wisconsin creationism issue provided a framework that underscored our responsibility as public school leaders to help citizens develop skills for productive and meaningful participation in a pluralistic society. While it laid down the law, it afforded us the opportunity to better understand each other and the social systems in which we function. And by invoking the democratic process, it helped us clarify, promote, and enhance our public school programs.

References