March 23, 2012

To: Governor Bill Haslam

Dear Honorable Governor Haslam,

We are Ph.D. scientists (and one M.D.) from around the United States who are concerned about the current climate of fear and censorship in science classrooms that prevents many teachers and students from being able to openly discuss dissenting views on controversial scientific issues. It has recently come to our attention that an academic freedom bill before you (HB 368) would protect teachers who choose to objectively inform students about the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of controversial scientific topics such as biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, global warming, and human cloning. We are aware that some national groups are pressuring you to oppose this bill, but we are writing you as scientists from around the country to express our support for this bill.

We understand that many critics of the bill are urging you to veto it. These vocal critics do not speak for the entire scientific community, nor are they telling you the truth about the bill. The truth is that they are misrepresenting HB 368 in order to intimidate those who would protect academic freedom.

For example, the bill could not bring religion into the science classroom because it states:

This section only protects the teaching of scientific information, and shall not be construed to promote any religious or non-religious doctrine, promote discrimination for or against a particular set of religious beliefs or non-beliefs, or promote discrimination for or against religion or non-religion.

It would be impossible for this bill to protect the teaching of religion—the bill states precisely the opposite.

Rather, the effect of the bill would be that teachers shall be permitted to help “students understand, analyze, critique, and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories covered in the course being taught within the curriculum framework developed by the state board of education.”

If Charles Darwin were alive today, he would urge us to teach his theory in this manner. In *Origin of Species*, Darwin explained that “a fair result can be obtained only by fully stating and balancing the facts and arguments on both sides of each question.” Likewise, leading science education theorists agree that students learn science best when taught “to discriminate between evidence that supports … or does not support”1 a given concept. HB 368 would implement such an objective approach when teaching controversial topics like evolution.

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Unfortunately, many modern defenders of Darwin’s ideas reject his advice when teaching evolution, and some elite scientists want to teach Darwinian evolution like religious dogma rather than science. Their approach is dangerous to science education because they refuse to allow students to ask hard questions, and would force them to treat evolution in an unscientific fashion. It is precisely this dogmatic mindset HB 368 seeks to remedy.

Moreover, there is much credible scientific dissent from neo-Darwinian evolution. In addition to the 15 scientists who have signed this letter, over 800 Ph.D. scientists have signed a statement declaring that they “are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged” (see www.dissentfromdarwin.com). Scientific critiques of modern Darwinian theory have a legitimate scientific basis in peer-reviewed scientific studies and teaching students about these scientific arguments against Darwinian evolution in no way injects religion into the classroom. None of this means that therefore Darwinian evolution is wrong. What it means is that there is credible scientific dissent from Darwinian evolution that should neither be ignored nor censored from students.

Some critics are calling this a “monkey bill” in reference to the Scopes trial of the 1920s. This bill is nothing like the efforts of that era to criminalize the teaching of evolution. In fact, the situation is the reverse of what it was in the 1920s, and this bill is in the spirit of John Scopes himself, who said:

If you limit a teacher to only one side of anything, the whole country will eventually have only one thought. ... I believe in teaching every aspect of every problem or theory.

This would be the precise effect of this bill—allowing teachers to fully teach students about scientific controversies in the classroom. In fact, the effect of this bill would be to bring more, not less, instruction on evolution into the classroom.

Some are now claiming that this bill is not necessary because teachers already have a right to present scientific criticisms of existing scientific theories in the classroom. In reality, teachers around the country have faced intimidation or discharge for trying to present different scientific views in the classroom. School administrators, meanwhile, are often unwilling to allow teachers more freedom to cover different views because they themselves fear retaliation from state educational authorities or outside pressure groups. This is why HB 368 is so sorely needed.

Genuine science education requires that we protect the right of teachers and students to discuss all sides of scientific controversies in an atmosphere that is free from fear. We therefore urge you to sign HB 368.

Signed:

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