

An Open Letter to the Texas Education Agency regarding science education and the termination of Chris Comer

As representatives of various scientific societies, we write to express our deep concern about the recent termination of Chris Comer from her job as Director of Science Curriculum for the Texas Education Agency (TEA). According to press reports, Ms. Comer was forced to resign for political reasons, directly after she forwarded an email announcement about a lecture critical of Intelligent Design (ID). These reports are deeply troubling. Not only has Ms. Comer suffered an apparently grave injustice, but it appears that members of the TEA administration are willing to sacrifice standards of science education in the state of Texas to partisan political ideology. This is just the kind of purging employed by Trofim Lysenko and other ideologues within the Soviet Union during the Stalin era, when rejection of well-established principles of Mendelian genetics set Soviet biology back by 50 years. We fear that the stage is now being set for a similar erosion of science education for a current generation of Texas students.

The Austin America-Statesman (Nov. 20, 2007) reported that the call to fire Ms. Comer came from TEA's senior adviser on statewide initiatives, Lizzette Reynolds. We are shocked by Ms. Reynold's statement that the email in question is "highly inappropriate" in assuming that evolution "is a subject that the agency supports." We are further shocked by the purported rationale for termination in the published memorandum from Monica Martinez: that Ms. Comer's email "implies endorsement of the speaker and implies that TEA endorses the speaker's position on a subject on which the agency *must remain neutral*," and that this "creat[es] the perception that TEA has a *biased* position." And we are dumbfounded by TEA spokeswoman Debbie Ratcliffe's implication, reported in the New York Times (Dec. 2, 2007), that evolutionary science is a matter of "personal opinions and beliefs."

Such statements betray an astonishing lack of understanding about not only about basic biology, for which evolution is fundamental, but also about the nature of science generally. It is not a matter of "personal opinions and belief" to include well-established scientific findings, such as Mendelian genetics or evolution, in science classes. It is not "biased" to exclude unfounded pseudo-scientific ideology such as Lysenkoism or "Intelligent Design" from science curricula. Indeed, for a science educator or agency to "remain neutral" about such critical matters—which go to the very heart of science education—would be the height of professional irresponsibility.

In 1987 the Supreme Court ruled that teaching creationism in science classes violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Since that 1987 ruling, the creationist movement has "evolved" into "Intelligent Design" in a thinly veiled attempt to avoid the issue of separation of church and state. Intelligent Design has been exhaustively discussed in the academy and its claims to scientific status have been carefully examined and thoroughly dismissed. Its specious arguments against evolution have been considered and soundly refuted. The recent *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School Board* Federal Court case only confirmed what scientists and philosophers of science had long

before concluded—"Intelligent Design" is not a scientific theory but a narrow religious view that aims to establish itself above other, mainstream, religious faiths. It has no place in the science classroom, neither explicitly nor disguised under the false pretence of teaching "controversy" in science. Any responsible educational agency should exercise careful oversight to ensure that such religious ideology is *not* included in the science curriculum.

Indeed, scientists and science educators should be even more pro-active. As part of its 6 November 2002 Board Resolution on Intelligent Design, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) expressed the general conclusion of the scientific community that "Intelligent Design" creationism was not science. Moreover, it explicitly called upon its over 260 affiliated scientific societies "to assist those engaged in overseeing science education policy to understand the nature of science, the content of contemporary evolutionary theory and the *inappropriateness of 'intelligent design theory'* as subject matter for science education."

SSE concurs with the AAAS Board's conclusions and its recommendation. Professional ethics demands that one not "remain neutral" when science is deliberately misrepresented by creationists. Chris Comer thus acted responsibly and professionally in forwarding the announcement about an educational lecture regarding "Intelligent Design" creationism.

In contrast, the administrators who called for her termination and who forced her resignation acted irresponsibly and in direct opposition to the professional standards expected of those who oversee science education. Their comments, quoted above, make it clear that they have sacrificed not only a dedicated public servant but also the facts and the very nature of science to partisan political ideology. It is a sad day for Texas when TEA administrators resort to Stalinist-style purging to suppress the truth about the bankruptcy of "Intelligent Design" arguments.

The TEA loses considerable stature and credibility in making Ms. Comer a martyr to political interference in the teaching of science. We urge the TEA to instead immediately reinstate Ms. Comer in her position as TEA's Director of Science Curriculum. We also applaud Ms. Comer for her distinguished career in science education and her dedication to defending sound education for the children of Texas.

Robert T. Pennock, Chair, Education Committee

Johanna Schmitt, president-Elect

Donald Waller, President

All, Society for the Study of Evolution

Rick Amasino, Past-President, American Society of Plant Biologists