

Truth Sheet #01-06

Secular Purposes for Teaching About Intelligent Design

Under American constitutional law, all government actions “must have a secular legislative purpose.”¹ In the landmark case *Edwards v. Aguillard*, the U.S. Supreme Court sanctioned the teaching of alternatives to neo-Darwinism if done for legitimate secular purposes. As the Court stated, “teaching a variety of scientific theories about the origins of humankind to schoolchildren might be validly done with the clear secular intent of enhancing the effectiveness of science instruction.”²

Intelligent design is an empirically-based scientific theory for the origin of various aspects of nature. There are many secular purposes for teaching about intelligent design that would enhance the effectiveness of science instruction. For example, students could be introduced to the scientific debate between Professor Michael Behe and Professor Kenneth Miller about the origin of “irreducibly complex” molecular machines in order to enhance their critical thinking skills and interest them in the world of cell biology.³

Here are seven secular purposes which justify teaching about intelligent design in a science classroom:

- 1) **Promoting scientific literacy and following the Report language in the No Child Left Behind Act by including “the full range of scientific views” about biological evolution in the science curriculum.**⁴
- 2) **Informing students about competing scientific theories of biological origins as they exist within the scientific community.**^{4,5}
- 3) **Helping students to better understand neo-Darwinism by understanding a scientific theory with which it competes.**⁵
- 4) **Enhancing critical thinking skills by exposing students to alternative scientific explanations for the origin of life.**⁶
- 5) **Helping students to understand the value of dissenting scientific viewpoints in the advancement of scientific knowledge.**^{5,6}
- 6) **Increasing student interest in science by exposing them to current debates within the scientific community.**^{5,6}
- 7) **Advancing cultural literacy by helping students understand a current controversy about science and science education policy.**^{5,6}

¹ This is from the first “prong” of the “Lemon test.” *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 612-13 (1971).

² *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 593-94 (1987).

³ See Chapters 5 and 19 in *DEBATING DESIGN: FROM DARWIN TO DNA*, (W. A. Dembski & M. Ruse, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴ “Where topics are taught that may generate controversy (such as biological evolution), the curriculum should help students to understand the full range of scientific views that exist ...” Conference report to the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress; House Committee of Conference, *Report to Accompany H.R. 1*, 107th Cong. 1st sess., 78 (2001) H. Rept. 334, 78.

⁵ John Angus Campbell, *Intelligent Design, Darwinism, and Public Education Philosophy*, in *DARWIN, DESIGN, AND PUBLIC EDUCATION* (Michigan State University Press, 2003).

⁶ Students should engage in “identification of assumptions, use of critical and logical thinking, and consideration of alternative explanations.” National Research Council, *National Science Education Standards* (National Academy Press, 1996), at 23.