

Situation Alert for Ohio Public Education

by Wesley R. Elsberry, 2004/02/20

Phillip Johnson's "Wedge" strategy for the "intelligent design" movement can be seen at work now in Ohio. Johnson's strategy is designed to attack evolutionary biology as the first step in making science safe for the sort of theism Johnson prefers. The bluntest expression of the "Wedge" strategy appeared in promotional material for the Discovery Institute's Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture. (See <http://www.antievolution.org/features/wedge.html> for the text of the "Wedge Document" and Barbara Forrest and Paul R. Gross's new book, "Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design" (Oxford, 2003), for a minutely detailed critique. The Discovery Institute attempts damage control in <http://www.discovery.org/csc/TopQuestions/wedgeresp.pdf>) As with magicians, one needs to get past the patter and watch for the action. It is in the actions and not the words that one can most clearly see that the dictates of the "Wedge" strategy are fully ascendant.

In 2002, the Ohio State Board of Education approved new science standards that mandated the teaching of evolution in science classes. At the urging of antievolutionists, the Ohio State Board of Education also included a statement calling for teaching how evolutionary theory was the subject of "critical analysis" by scientists.

23. Describe how scientists continue to investigate and critically analyze aspects of evolutionary theory. (The intent of this indicator does not mandate the teaching or testing of intelligent design.)

Source:

http://agpa.uakron.edu/k12/ohio_standards/life_science_benchmark_indicators_9-10.html or <http://tinyurl.com/2jqk9>

This sort of language was suggested by Stephen Meyer and Jonathan Wells (both Fellows of the Discovery Institute's Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture, since renamed as the Center for Science and Culture) in a presentation before the Ohio Board of Education on March 11, 2002. The apparently innocuous wording was deceptive, though, because rather than teach students about actual hot topics in evolutionary biology (e.g., allopatric versus sympatric speciation, punctuated equilibria in the fossil record, the evolution of sex, theories of eusociality, etc.), "Wedge" advocates took the wording as code for their own set of discredited objections to mainstream science. While Meyer and Wells had originally sought to push for the specific inclusion of "intelligent design" in science classes, they decided instead to ask for a "compromise." The "compromise" suggested by Meyer and Wells was to "teach the controversy." See <http://www.ohioroundtable.org/library/articles/ed/boardstudy.html> <http://www.creationists.org/20020311OSBEwells.html> and http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/2493_goodbye_columbus_4_4_2002.asp.

Although the adopted standards specifically stated that "intelligent design" was not to be part of the curricula (see quoted text above), the "Wedge" advocates got what they wanted

with the above language: a hole large enough to attempt to drive a big antievolutionary semi straight into science classrooms. See: <http://www.sciohio.org/sbe1015.htm>.

Over the past several months, the ID advocates on the Ohio Board of Education have loaded their truck. Model curricula comprised of lesson plans had to be generated to fulfill all the indicators of the science standards. These new lesson plans were kept out of the public's reach, preventing scientists from reviewing these materials until shortly before official consideration for adoption. (The embargo on access apparently did not extend to "Wedge" advocates; see <http://www.sciohio.org/orcweb.htm>.)

In particular, a lesson plan based upon indicator 23 of the science standards for Grade 10 (the "critical analysis" guideline quoted above) presented several items from Jonathan Wells's *Icons of Evolution*, included *Icons* in its bibliography, included a non-existent reference in its bibliography whose citation only existed on creationist web sites, and directed students to antievolutionary web sites (including <http://www.origins.org> and <http://www.arn.org>). This attempt to insert "trash science" (as it was called by cognitive scientist Richard Hoppe in a Board of Education meeting on January 13) or "junk science" (as it was called by Sam Fulwood in a column for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* on February 8) into science classrooms should be viewed as the expected outcome of the "compromise" language inserted into the standards. This was no compromise, but rather the "Wedge" Trojan Horse in action. Various cosmetic changes have been made to the lesson plan, but the blatantly deceptive content and many of the antievolution web resources remain. See http://www.cleveland.com/news/plaindealer/sam_fulwood/index.ssf?/base/opinion/107615855856191.xml or <http://tinyurl.com/22gvp> for Fulwood's column. See http://ecology.cwru.edu/ohioscience/L10-H23_Critical_Analysis.pdf for the lesson plan and http://ecology.cwru.edu/ohioscience/lesson_plan_critique.htm for a critique of it.

A red herring being used by "Wedge" advocates is to say that "intelligent design" is not present in the lesson plan being critiqued, therefore there is no problem. For example:

"I think it's going to be great for science. This lesson, in my opinion, has been misunderstood. I am very familiar with intelligent design and it just is not in there," said Robert Lattimer, an intelligent design proponent and a scientist who was on the standards writing team from two years ago.

Source:

<http://www.daytondailynews.com/localnews/content/localnews/daily/0211science.html>

Although the phrase "intelligent design" may indeed be absent from the lesson plan, the content is easily recognizable, despite Lattimer's disavowal. The content derives most notably from Jonathan Wells's *Icons of Evolution*, which was hailed as a "Wedge Book" of the year 2000, and even now heads the poster-style ad on "ID Books" at <http://www.discovery.org/csc/favoriteItems/IDBookAd.jpg>. "Intelligent design," having failed to develop any positive scientific research program of its own, consists entirely of often-rebutted negative argumentation against evolutionary biology, fully deserving the moniker of "trash science." The material in the "critical analysis" lesson plan

demonstrably is the content of "intelligent design" advocacy. Its role in the "Wedge" is clear (see <http://www.antievolution.org/features/wedge.html>, especially "Phase III: Cultural Confrontation and Renewal").

Scientists in Ohio and across the nation took notice. For an account of the recommendations of the Ohio Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences, see <http://www.fortwayne.com/mld/journalgazette/7965530.htm>. More detail can be seen in the Cleveland Plain Dealer article:

The nation's most prestigious science organization added its voice Monday to criticism of model science lesson plans that the state school board is expected to vote on today.

Scientists are "rightfully concerned about attempts to introduce tenets of intelligent design into your state's science curriculum and instruction," Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences, said in a letter Monday to Jennifer Sheets, president of the Ohio Board of Education.

Source:

<http://www.cleveland.com/news/plaindealer/index.ssf?/base/news/1076419820131720.xml> or <http://tinyurl.com/2kh7u>

The letter from NAS can be seen at

http://ecology.cwru.edu/ohioscience/NAS_Letter.html or http://www.antievolution.org/features/nas_ohio_20040209.pdf

Despite the strong recommendations from Ohio state and national scientific organizations to reject this and other "Wedge" lesson plans, the Ohio Board of Education voted an "intent to adopt" the lesson plans, including the one on "critical analysis," at its February 13 meeting. It was a date that proved unlucky for good science education.

An editorial appeared in the Dayton Daily News offering timely advice:

Citizens who are not in a position to read all the documentation -- or interpret all the buzz words that only the fully initiated understand -- might wonder where to turn.

Best to turn to the scientists. And not just individual scientists, but the organizations that are representative of scientists and that have people who have responsibility for looking into these matters fully.

Source

<http://www.daytondailynews.com/opinion/content/opinion/daily/0214evol.html>

The editorial calls for Ohio Governor Bob Taft to weigh in on this issue. So far, the governor has chosen to let the Board of Education move the discussion along -- and take the political heat.

The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* has also called upon Governor Taft to take responsibility and an active role in the process:

JEERS . . .

to Gov. Bob Taft for taking a walk on the debate over the state's proposed science education standards. He must figure enough people are arguing that they'll eventually drift to a solution. That's not leadership.

Source

<http://www.cleveland.com/search/index.ssf?/base/opinion/107666841292640.xml?oxedi>

Jeffrey McKee had an instructive opinion letter which appeared in the *Columbus Dispatch* on February 20:

Can scientists comprehend a simple lesson plan? According to State Board of Education member Deborah Owens-Fink, "Some of these scientists are so paranoid, they don't understand it."

The truth is that scientists understand it all too well: The proposed lesson plan on evolution is a thinly disguised attempt to promote creationism in Ohio's science classrooms. But the lesson is one of politics, not science. One need not be a scientist to connect the dots, as board members should know.

Did she really think that we would not notice the highly misleading statements on the fossil record of evolution, fraudulent claims about today's evolution of bacteria and direct references to creationist literature?

The proposed lesson plan must be replaced by an honest and serious portrayal of contemporary biology.

Owens-Fink's cavalier attitude is characteristic of certain board members who would rather play political games than ensure a quality science education for Ohio's young scholars. Along with board member Michael Cochran, the other main perpetrator of this fraud, Owens-Fink is pushing a desperation agenda instead of fostering understanding.

The "standards committee" of the State Board of Education needs a new chairperson with higher standards. Owens-Fink and Cochran should resign.

JEFFREY K. McKEE
Professor
Ohio State University

Source

<http://www.dispatch.com/editorials-story.php?story=dispatch/2004/02/20/20040220-A10-05.html>

The next meeting of the Board of Education and final vote on the lesson plans is scheduled for March 8-9, which does not leave much time for feedback. The leadership in Ohio needs to hear from you. When contacting them, brevity and courtesy are virtues to keep in mind. Also, if you have scientific training or credentials, please do mention those. Please also consider putting a copy of your comments in a public forum, where they may be referred to as a resource and inform the commentary of others. A thread suitable for this purpose is located at <http://tinyurl.com/3a2sy>

Those who wish to make their views known to Governor Taft -- especially if you live in Ohio or know someone there -- can contact him at the following address:

Governor Bob Taft
30th Floor
77 South High Street
Columbus, OH 43215-6117

Phone 614-466-3555 or 614-644-HELP

<http://governor.ohio.gov/contactinfopage.asp>

Members of the State Board of Education of Ohio

Members are grouped by how they voted on the intent to adopt the model curriculum. A "for" vote does not necessarily mean that the member is sympathetic to the "Wedge" advocates; several members are likely to have voted "for" simply to move the process forward, knowing that another vote would be taken in March.

Voted AGAINST intent to adopt on February 13:

Robin C. Hovis, Millersburg (330) 674-5000
Robin.Hovis@ode.state.oh.us
<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-5/default.asp>

Cy B. Richardson, Jr., Bethel (513) 734-6700
Cyrus.Richards@ode.state.oh.us
<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-10/>

G. R. (Sam) Schloemer, Cincinnati (513) 821-4145
Sam.Schloemer@ode.state.oh.us
<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-4/>

Jennifer H. Stewart, Zanesville (740) 452-4558
Jennifer.Stewart@ode.state.oh.us
<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-9/>

ABSENT during vote on February 13:

Martha W. Wise, Avon (440) 934-4935

Martha.Wise@ode.state.oh.us

<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-2/>

Virginia E. Jacobs, Lima (419) 999-4219

Virginia.Jacobs@ode.state.oh.us

<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-1/>

Voted FOR intent to adopt on February 13:

Jennifer L. Sheets, Pomeroy, President (740) 992-2151

jennifer.Sheets@ode.state.oh.us

<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/sheets/default.asp>

Richard E. Baker, Hollansburg, Vice President (937) 997-2101

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Virgil E. Brown, Jr., Shaker Heights (216) 851-3304

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<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-11/>

Michael Cochran, Blacklick (614) 863-0045

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Jim Craig, Canton (330) 492-5533

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<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/members/district-8/>

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Stephen M. Millett, Columbus (614) 424-5335

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Deborah Owens Fink, Richfield (330) 972-8079

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Emerson J. Ross, Jr., Toledo (419) 537-1562
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Jo Ann Thatcher, McDermott (740) 858-3300
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James L. Turner, Cincinnati (513) 287-3232
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Ex Officio Members

Senator Robert Gardner, Madison (614) 644-7718
Representative Arlene Setzer, Vandalia (614) 644-8051

For further information regarding upcoming Board meetings or general information about the State Board of Education, contact

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The Ohio State Board of Education page is at
<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/board/default.asp>

Please copy whatever you send to Ohio representatives to the thread here:
<http://tinyurl.com/3a2sy>

This will make it easy for those in Ohio to reference your opinions.