



Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA) on the teaching of science, evolution and creationism in schools

What's happening?

Evolution

Evolution is one of the most important ideas underlying biological science. It is a key concept that children should be introduced to at an early stage so as to ensure a firmer scientific understanding when they study it in more detail later on.

There is no requirement for primary schools to teach evolution and natural selection at all, since this was dropped from legislation in the final days of the last parliament and the new government has signalled its intention not to proceed with it. This means that children may only first encounter the theory of evolution when they are teenagers, when it is first mandatorily included in the secondary science curriculum. At the same time, many young people will have been exposed to religious or pseudo-scientific "theories" approaches to understanding the world around us, including creationism, from an early age without the scientific skills and knowledge to approach them critically.

Science is not only key to understanding the world around us, but it is also vital for democratic citizenship. Without an understanding of key concepts people cannot properly engage with public debates around the scientific and technological topics which will directly affect their lives. The teaching of science in schools also opens up the wonder of the natural world to inquiring minds, and at the same time equips young people with the tools for explaining natural phenomena and an understanding and practical application of the scientific method.

We want all children and young people to have the benefit of excellent science teaching in school, and for the primary and secondary science curriculums explicitly to include evolution.

With the forthcoming reforms to the schools system and school curriculum, ensuring that all schools teach science and evolution is even more urgent.

Creationism

The BHA has been at the forefront of challenging and bringing to public attention the growing threat to education from creationism, not least in Academies since 2002. Government guidance published in 2007, 'Guidance on the place of creationism and intelligent design in science lessons', makes clear that creationism and intelligent design are not scientific theories, and so cannot be taught in science lessons, as they have "no underlying scientific principles, or explanations, and are not accepted by the scientific community as a whole".

We want assurances from the Government that this guidance will apply to its new Academies and "free schools".

What are we doing?

The BHA organised a joint letter by twenty-six of the UK's top scientists and science educators including three Nobel laureates; Richard Dawkins, former professor for the public understanding of science at the University of Oxford; and science education experts James Williams and Revd Professor Michael Reiss, which called on the government to protect and promote science in the school curriculum, with the specific inclusion of evolution in the primary curriculum.

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Science, Evolution and Schools

June 2010

The letter was organised after key reforms to the primary curriculum, which included evolution for the first time, were dropped just before the election. That inclusion of biology's "big idea" had come about following a similar letter organised last year by the BHA, urging the teaching of science and evolution in all schools.

The government has announced its intention to respond.

You can read the BHA's press release and the joint letter to Rt Hon Michael Gove MP at www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/571.

What can you do?

Early Day Motions

You can support Dr Julian Huppert MP's EDMs 243 and 185 on 'Science Education in Schools' and the 'Ulster Museum Exhibition' respectively.

EDM 243: 'That this House notes the value and importance of science in the schools' curriculum; further notes the importance of the specific inclusion of evolution and natural selection in the schools' curriculum; regrets that evolution has been dropped from reforms to the primary school curriculum, along with other reforms proposed; further regrets the inclusion of creationist and other pseudo-scientific theories in the teaching of science in some schools; and urges the Government to ensure that all schools teach and promote science and the scientific method and to include the theory of evolution in the science curriculum at both primary and secondary levels.'

EDM 185: 'That this House congratulates the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the re-opening of the Ulster Museum; regrets that there is pressure to include creationism in the proposed exhibition of evolution and diversity; and believes that the teaching or promotion of religious beliefs should be separate from the teaching or promotion of science.'

Legislation

You can table and support amendments to the Academies Bill and the forthcoming Education and Children's Bill which seek to include the teaching of evolution and natural selection in the school curriculum for all state-funded schools, including Academies and "free schools".

Write to Department for Education

You can write to Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education, asking for clarification of the position of science in the school curriculum, including Academies and "free schools", urging for the inclusion of evolution and natural selection in the school curriculum for all state-funded schools, and for assurance that the guidance against teaching creationism in science lessons applies to all state-funded schools.

About us

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing and supporting the non-religious and campaigning for an end to religious privilege and discrimination based on religion or belief. Committed to human rights, democracy, equality and mutual respect, the BHA works for an open and inclusive society with freedom of belief and speech.

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