A Michigan Science Teachers Association Position Statement

July 2008
“The Academic Freedom Law”
Michigan House of Representatives Bill #6027 & Senate Bill #1361

Identical bills from the Michigan House of Representatives (#6027) & the Senate (#1361) would require an amendment to “The Revised School Code” (1976 PA 451 (MCL 380.1-380.1852) to include section 1292 which states “…that the teaching of some scientific theories, such as biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, human impact of climate change & human cloning, can cause controversy & that some teachers may be unsure of the expectations concerning how they should present information on such subjects”. The proposed amendment would “…allow teachers to help pupils understand, analyze, critique, & review in an objective manner the scientific strengths & scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories” as well as to “…help students develop critical thinking skills…”.

While the stated objectives of these bills appear meritorious, the Michigan Department of Education’s (MDE) “K-12 Science Content Expectations (SCE)” already require that students “develop an understanding that claims & evidence for their scientific merit should be analyzed” (K-7 Science Standard S.RS) & that students “evaluate the strengths & weaknesses of claims, arguments, & data” (SCE C.RS.07.11) & that students be able to “evaluate scientific explanations based on current evidence & scientific principles” (SCE C.RS.07.14), & to “use empirical evidence to explain & critique the reasoning used to draw a scientific conclusion or explanation” (HSSCE B1.1g).

As the goals of the proposed legislation are clearly included in the 2006-7 High School Science Content Expectations and the 2007-08 K-7 Science Content Expectations, the Michigan Science Teachers Association (MSTA) can identify no legitimate reason for legislative intervention that would modify the existing Content Expectations. The K-12 Science Content Expectations were developed & adopted by the MDE working in collaboration with Michigan’s academic & professional science education communities. Additionally, these documents were available for public, legislative & national review & subsequently approved by the MDE.

Furthermore, there is no reason for teachers to be “…unsure of the expectations concerning how they should present information” as the Science Content Expectations describe, in great detail, the “what” of the curriculum that is to be
taught for all grade levels. The SCE “Companion Documents” have been developed to provide strategies for “how” the curriculum can be presented to students.

Whereas evolution, climate change and cloning are the only “controversial topics” cited in these bills while “controversial topics” in non-scientific fields are noticeably omitted and whereas the Curriculum Expectations already address the pedagogical & educational goals of these bills, the legislative intent of these bills is called into question. It is also important to note that while evolution theory and global warming/climate change may be controversial from a socio-political perspective, they are not controversial from a scientific perspective.

HB 6027 & SB 1361 are very similar to “academic freedom” legislation introduced into other states. This type of legislation may enable the introduction of non-scientific ideologies, such as “intelligent design (ID) creationism”, into the public science classroom. HB 6027 & SB 1361 also include language that may facilitate such events in Michigan science classrooms. In 2005, a Federal court ruled in the Dover School Board (PA) case that “…the goal of the ID movement is not to encourage critical thought, but to foment a revolution that would supplant evolutionary theory with ID”.

In recognition of the aforementioned, it is the position of the Michigan Science Teachers Association that HB 6027 & SB 1361 be removed from any further consideration by the Michigan House & Senate.

**HB 6027 Sponsors:** John Moolenaar (Primary Sponsor), Stahl, Sheen, Walker, Agema, Emmons, Pearce, Casperson, Sheltrown

**SB 1361 Sponsors:** Bill Hardiman (Primary Sponsor), Garcia, Jansen, Cropsey, Kuipers

Approved: MSTA Board, July 14, 2008