

NEWS AND COMMENTS

CALIFORNIA SCIENCE TEXTBOOKS

In September 1985 the California State Board of Education (CBE) rejected science textbooks proposed for adoption. Two CBE members believed the textbooks contained “too much evolution already” and urged the textbook panel to comply with a 1981 court order by removing dogmatic assertions in behalf of evolution. The other seven CBE members felt that the science textbooks had failed to follow the State Board’s model curriculum because they systematically omitted such controversial topics as evolution and human reproduction. All CBE members concluded unanimously that the proposed science textbooks for elementary and junior high schools must be revised before they can be approved for adoption.

This decision is important because California accounts for about 11% of the U.S. textbook market and approves textbooks for use over a multi-year cycle. Because publishers find it too costly to produce multiple editions of a given text, California’s selections are likely to become standard for the nation. Bill Honig, state Superintendent of Public Instruction, cited the rejection of science textbooks currently offered by publishers as the culmination of an 18-month effort to set higher standards for content. Acknowledging that the same demands for quality would be placed also on textbooks for other areas, he predicted, “The reality is that we are establishing a policy for the rest of the country as well.”

Although the CBE had never before rejected textbooks on the basis of inferior quality, their decision was not unexpected. In July a state education review panel comprising school officials and teachers reported that “no single textbook series was judged to be excellent in all respects” and recommended that some be rejected and that others be accepted with the proviso that they be revised to include thorough discussions of evolution, human reproduction, and environmental and ethical issues.

Not wanting to lose the lucrative California market, most publishers agreed to comply with the decision, despite the imminent deadline for revisions and the high costs of making changes. In the area of human origins, they will have to walk a tightrope in order to meet the demands of the CBE and still avoid violating the 1981 court order against dogmatic presentation of evolution.

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