

Dumb and Dumber

EACH YEAR, FEWER PEOPLE SUBSCRIBE TO AND READ THE Florida Times-Union. You might think that we here at Folio Weekly would be delighted. In fact, we're chagrined.

Whatever complaints we've had over the years about the quality of their product, we understand that reading the daily newspaper is a measure of civic involvement — a sign that citizens are "checking in." People who don't read the paper are less likely to vote, less likely to get involved in community and civic groups, and less likely to understand challenges facing the community. The T-U's declining circulation figures, then, pave a steep and treacherous path toward apathy and ignorance.

In a perfect world, we might look to the school system to reverse such a decline. But recent actions by the region's School Boards show them compounding ignorance with idiocy. Several local school districts have already or plan to formally oppose new state science standards that require schools to teach evolution. Current standards don't use the word "evolution" to describe what has happened over the past millennia, something most science teachers and virtually all scientists find preposterous. But the new standards, drafted by the Florida Department of Education in October, have drawn fire from conservative religious groups, like the Colorado Springs-based Focus on the Family and the Jacksonville-based newspaper Florida Baptist Witness, which have rallied massive opposition campaigns. In response to the pressure, school boards in St. Johns, Clay and Baker counties passed resolutions objecting to the new standards. Nassau is expected to follow suit. The Duval County School Board may be the least likely to go along with such foolishness, but pressure to fall in line will be powerful.

The argument — if you can call it that — that sustains evolution opponents goes something like this: Evolution is just a *theory*, which means you can't prove it. If you can't prove it, it shouldn't be taught as fact.

The recent School Board resolutions parrot this reasoning. The St. Johns version argues that evolution ought not be presented as "dogmatic fact." Clay County officials ask that it be taught "only" as a theory, not as a fact.

The problem with these resolutions is that they willfully misinterpret what a scientific theory is. Unlike theories that you or I may entertain — a theory about the personality characteristics of Hummer drivers, for instance, or about who ate our sandwich out of the refrigerator at work — scientific theory isn't merely an educated guess. (That would be a hypothesis.) A scientific theory is a set of observations based on proven hypotheses. More importantly, it is something that is accepted as true by the scientific community as a whole.

For those in the religious community who prefer to believe that life on earth is 6,000 years old rather than the 3.7 billion years generally accepted by the scientific community, the nuanced difference between a theory and a hypothesis may not be particularly compelling. But it is the obligation of education officials to hold the line against the anti-science brigades. Coddling ignorant skeptics only leads to weak minds and bad policy. Witness global warming. Witness policies that attempt to prevent unwanted pregnancies and STDs by *not* teaching contraception.

The problems that can and will continue to plague Northeast Florida — crime, pollution, sprawl, road rage, divorce, poverty, racism — will not get better through educational policies that cater to the ignorant masses. Polls are often cited in the evolution "debate" — a debate only

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engaged in by non-scientists — with much made of the fact that roughly half of Americans don't believe in evolution. That's nothing. 79 percent of Americans believe in angels. 40 percent believe plastic biodegrades over time. 85 percent can't find Afghanistan, Sudan or (thank you, Miss South Carolina) The Iraq on a map.

Evidence of our intellectual infirmity is well established — so well established, in fact, that one could formulate a theory that this nation's educational system is lacking. That's one theory, at least, to which most Americans would subscribe.

Author and Seattle-based advice columnist Dan Savage once said, "Anyone who doesn't believe in evolution shouldn't enjoy the benefits of evolution. No eyes, no walking upright, no opposable thumbs."

We can't think of a more apt description of the "educators" who are fighting the new state standards: Spineless, visionless bumbler. ☹

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