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Review of Berkman and Plutzer's "Evolution, Creationism, and the Battle to Control America’s Classrooms"

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Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer view the continuing evolution controversy as both a worldview clash between conservative Christianity and modern secularism and as a political battle over who makes decisions about what will be taught in public schools. The battle of ideas provides context, but the political struggle over curricular decision-making, rooted in "the very meaning of democracy in America" (p. 3), provides the focus of *Evolution, Creationism, and the Battle to Control America's Classrooms*. The classroom teachers charged with helping students grasp evolution are at the heart of this investigation, and Berkman and Plutzer make a strong case that these teachers hold significant power and use it in surprising ways, often at odds with what policy makers intended.

The initial chapters provide a helpful framework. A history of the political questions related to school governance is detailed with the evolution controversy woven throughout. What follows is a description of the standards movement, which now dominates curriculum decisions. The public's views are also examined. Berkman and Plutzer assert that "support for teaching creationism is high and not an illusion" (p. 52) and that this support is not fueled by scientific ignorance. Rather, other beliefs—especially religious commitments—are powerful forces that operate alongside scientific understanding as Americans reason about evolution. The fault line in American culture over this issue is rooted in "social divisions that derive from religious affiliation, education, and geography" (p. 63).

The final background chapter describes curriculum standards as political documents. Standards development is technical work that is typically beyond the public's level of knowledge. It might be expected that the writing of science standards would be left to experts, but that has not been the history, and the implications are considered.

Berkman and Plutzer then turn to the nearly 1,000 high school biology teachers at the center of their study. About one-third of the participants also provided supplemental qualitative responses, adding many rich
reviews. The data offer a detailed peek behind closed classroom doors and into the thoughts of science teachers.

One key finding is a disconnect between teachers’ beliefs about how to approach the teaching of evolution and the views of the larger scientific community. For example, only 12% strongly support the three cornerstone positions of national science groups: evolution is a fact, it is essential for understanding all of biology, and it should be the “unifying theme of any class in general biology” (p. 123).

Berkman and Pultzer then explain how teachers use the range of freedom inherent in their practice to implement the standards on evolution in ways that fall far short of what the scientific guild advocates. Such practices include putting the evolution unit at the end of the year so it is likely to be cut or reduced, and downplaying the importance of evolution to students. “Teaching the controversy” is common, and it is estimated that 14% to 21% teach creationism (p. 146).

What is behind these practices? Berkman and Plutzer note some confusion regarding science standards. Poor communication from policy makers to practitioners is another factor. The capability of teachers to deliver instruction on evolution as demanded is also a concern. However, “attitudes toward evolution are part of teachers’ fundamental values and are not easily transformed” (p. 182). The teachers’ attitudes toward evolution are examined in detail. Three in four believe that evolution occurred, but almost half of them embrace theistic evolution, and 14% espouse young earth creationism (p. 183).

The implications are clear: “In ways that are sometimes subtle and sometimes conspicuous and bold, teachers’ personal beliefs play a major role—largely unconstrained by the state content standards and textbook selection procedures that provoke such heated political battles” (p. 193). Perhaps even more insightful is the chapter on the relationship with the local community. Berkman and Pultzer note that communities tend to hire and retain teachers who at least honor, but often agree with, local beliefs. In the shadows of this observation are the school administrators. The book would have been strengthened with more attention to their role in the controversy at the local level.

The enduring conflict over teaching evolution in America’s public schools features national voices and policy makers, but this investigation of high school biology teachers provides a unique and vital perspective.
Those who work at every level of the K–12 enterprise will find this book both useful and surprising.

Gary Sehorn