

Voucher schools include some teaching creationism

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Updated 03:41 p.m., Monday, July 30, 2012

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Taxpayer dollars in Louisiana's new voucher program will be paying to send children to schools that teach creationism and reject evolution, promoting a religious doctrine that challenges the lessons central to public school science classrooms.



Several religious schools that will be educating taxpayer-subsidized students tout their creationist views. Some schools question whether the universe is more than a few thousand years old, openly defying reams of scientific evidence to the contrary.

Critics say it's inappropriate to spend public money on such religious teaching, arguing such programs undercut a strong science education and threaten the adequate preparation of students for college science courses.

"What they're going to be getting financed with public money is phony science. They're going to be getting religion instead of science," said Barbara Forrest, a founder of the Louisiana Coalition for Science and a philosophy professor who has written about the clashes between religion and science.

Superintendent of Education John White says annual science tests required of all voucher students in the third through 11th grades will determine if children are getting the appropriate science education in the private school classrooms.

"If students are failing the test, we're going to intervene, and the test measures evolution," White said.

Refusal to teach evolution or challenging it as refutable won't get a school booted from the voucher program, which was pushed by Gov. Bobby Jindal as a way to improve educational opportunities for students in schools ranked with a C, D or F in the public school grading system.

For example, a handbook for Ascension Christian High School, posted online, declares among the goals of "Household of Faith Schools" that "the learner will be expected to

defend creationism through evidence presented by the Bible versus traditional scientific theory."

Ten voucher students have been assigned to Ascension Christian, along with another 41 voucher students for another Household of Faith school, Faith Academy. The schools, located in Ascension Parish, are set to receive more than \$250,000 from the state.

A biology teacher at Northlake Christian High School, a St. Tammany Parish school slated to teach 18 voucher students this school year, outlines his curriculum on a website that talks of giving students the opportunity to challenge evolution against "a creation worldview of life origins."

The website contradicts fossil evidence of millions of years of life on the planet, calling it incompatible with the Bible. Meanwhile, the school's doctrinal statement says Northlake Christian — which will get \$375,000 in state-funded tuition payments for its high school and elementary school — promotes "the creation of man by the direct act of God."

College student Zack Kopplin, an outspoken critic of teaching creationism in science classrooms, found at least 19 of the 119 mostly religious schools in the voucher program either promote creationism or teach with curricula from Christian textbook publishers that are known to challenge Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

The schools cited by Kopplin's research have been approved to take in more than 750 voucher students and receive more than \$4 million in taxpayer funding, in the first round of announced voucher assignments for the 2012-13 school year that begins next month.

Several of the schools use A Beka Book for their instructional materials. A description for a fifth-grade science textbook from the Florida-based publisher describes the world as "presented as the creation of God and glorifies Him as its Sustainer and Upholder."

"This teachable, readable and memorable book presents the universe as the direct creation of God and refutes the man-made idea of evolution," says the description of a sixth-grade science book, posted on A Beka's website. An eighth-grade textbook is described as rejecting "the unproven hypothesis of evolution, recognizing special creation as the only reasonable explanation for the origin of the universe."

Before the voucher program, Louisiana's had a series of controversies about science teaching.

A law mandating that "creationism" be given equal time in public school classrooms with evolution was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1987 as an effort to promote religion.

The state now has a law that allows public school science teachers to use supplemental materials in their classrooms in addition to state-approved textbooks. Guidelines adopted by the state education board ban the promotion of a religious doctrine in the supplemental materials, but without a specific ban on the teaching of creationism.

Jindal, who holds a college degree in biology, has supported the teaching of creationism, saying the theory of evolution has "flaws and gaps."

The rules governing Louisiana's voucher program give the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education oversight over the curricula used by participating private and parochial schools. White said BESE will make sure the standards are of an equitably quality to public schools.

"In the event that there is basic academic incompetence, the state (education) department can intervene," he said. "The most effective way of testing all of this is to literally see what do the students know and what do they achieve, and we're doing that through the state test."

Forrest and Kopplin said since the schools are receiving public money, their textbooks and teaching material should be available for public review, a proposal that hasn't been adopted by BESE.

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