

Charter School To Raise Topic Of Creationism

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A publicly financed charter school scheduled to open in Rochester next fall intends to teach students about creationism as a scientifically based theory competing with the theory of evolution.

The plan has drawn the attention of state regulators and attracted opposition from community and civil liberties groups, which contend that it is a thinly veiled attempt to teach religion in a public school classroom.

The Rochester Leadership Academy, which hopes to enroll 436 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, will teach the science of evolution, said John R. Walker, a Rochester business professor who sponsored the application for the school. But because "the theory of evolution is unproven," Mr. Walker said, the school "will present contrasting theories," including creationism.

Creationism holds that there is scientifically valid evidence that a divine being created the universe, humans and other species less than 10,000 years ago. Mr. Walker said he did not consider the presentation of creationism as an alternative scientific theory to be an unconstitutional promotion of religion.

Nevertheless, the approval of the Rochester Leadership Academy, which will be managed by National Heritage Academies, a Grand Rapids, Mich., company that operates 22 charter schools in Michigan and North Carolina, expands to New York a debate that has recently flared up in other states.

In August, the Kansas Board of Education voted to delete from the state's science curriculum virtually any mention of evolution, the theory that all life forms descended from simple organisms over billions of years. In October, New Mexico's education board voted to bar the teaching of creationism. The New York curriculum requires the teaching of evolution but does not mention alternative theories.

To opponents of creationism, the approval of the Rochester school raises questions about whether some companies applying to run charter schools see the explosive growth of such schools as a chance to skirt constitutional barriers between church and state. Charter schools are generally state-approved and publicly financed schools that are freed from many personnel and curricular regulations.

At the Rochester school, much will hinge on whether teachers spend significant time in class on the doctrine of creationism as science or simply note that it is an alternative belief. National Heritage contends that its teachers in Rochester will mention the existence of theories opposing evolution, as they do at the company's other schools, mainly to avoid offending parents who espouse those views at home.

"I understand the law, that you don't teach religion at school," said Mr. Walker, an assistant professor of business at Roberts Wesleyan College, a Christian college in Rochester, and the pastor of the Faith Christian Center, a small nondenominational church. "But basically, evolution is unproven. So we teach it as a theory, and we teach creationism as a theory. Like with all theories, we say, 'Examine the evidence and decide.' I don't consider that a religious preference."

National Heritage has been sued by the American Civil Liberties Union in Michigan over what the group says is the company's promotion of religious activities, including prayer sessions for parents, in a charter school there. National Heritage says it provides parents with a meeting room and some have prayed there, but not with the school's sanction. The suit is pending.

The Rochester academy received its charter last month from the State University of New York's trustees. State education officials say they will be closely watching the school and have received assurances that it will not offer any religious content. They say that merely presenting creationism as a theory does not violate state or federal law.

"We need to know how they intend to present it," said Roseanne DeFabio, assistant state education commissioner for curriculum. "If it is as a theory that is held by a number of people, rather than as a matter of faith and religious belief, then it is not inappropriate to present it alongside evolution."

That is how National Heritage says it intends to present the material. Mark DeHaan, senior vice president for National Heritage Academies, said creationism would occupy a "minute" portion of the time spent on evolution.

"The theory of creationism is appropriately mentioned when you talk of the theory of evolution," Mr. DeHaan said. "But 1 percent of the time is spent on that, and 99 on the theory of evolution."

"I think it's inappropriate to teach evolution as, 'This is reality,'" he added. "We have to teach evolution as a theory, and in doing so we say, 'By the way, there are other theories out there.' But we're not going to give the other theories the detail we're giving to evolution."

If a child asks about or wants to discuss creationism, Mr. DeHaan said, "the teacher will say, 'That's a great subject to talk with your parents about.'"

Mr. DeHaan pointed out that National Heritage did not mention creationism in the curriculum it presented to New York regulators. But that

same fact is cited by opponents of the school's plan as evidence that the company is trying to disguise its intentions.

"I think they have grown too savvy to put it in their curriculum," said Martha Laties, chairwoman of the Monroe Citizens for Public Education and Religious Liberty, based in Monroe County, where Rochester is located.

"Creationism is religion," Ms. Laties added. "I think this experience indicates it is very likely that charter schools that intend to promote religion will apply to the state and be approved."

The People for the American Way Foundation is also opposing the school's plans as unconstitutional, sending letters to SUNY trustees and the Board of Regents.

In New York, charter schools can be approved by either the SUNY trustees or the Board of Regents and are monitored jointly by SUNY's Charter School Institute and the State Education Department.

Robert J. Bellafiore, executive director of the Charter School Institute, said his staff members and SUNY trustees raised questions during the approval process about whether the Rochester school would include religious material in its curriculum, and received assurances that it would not.

"Everyone will be watching this very closely," said Mr. Bellafiore, a former press aide to Gov. George E. Pataki. "They understand the importance of the separation of church and state and we are confident they will abide by it."

National Heritage markets its schools as "offering a back-to-basics and moral focus approach," according to company materials, and in some communities in Michigan the company's schools have drawn students from private religious schools.

A significant part of National Heritage's curriculum focuses on character development, "based on the Greek cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, prudence and fortitude," according to company materials.

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