

# Creationism in New Mexico

by Dave Thomas : [nmsrdaveATswcp.com](mailto:nmsrdaveATswcp.com) (Help fight SPAM! Please replace the AT with an @ )

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The history of creationism in New Mexico is typical of many rural states. It has long followed national teaching trends, with occasional punctuations like the "Evolution is just a theory" disclaimer pasted on school biology books by the State Board of Education in the 70's.

## To Users of This Book:

In adopting this biology book for use in the schools of New Mexico, the State Board of Education wishes to emphasize that its official position is that the theory of evolution should be presented as theory and not fact.

TAMMINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT # 3  
SAN JUAN COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

But things really heated up in the summer of 1996. In spring of that year, a committee of teachers and scientists had finished draft science standards for public schools, which included (of course!) evolution and the age of the earth. But these standards were unacceptable to a Governor appointed Board member, Roger X. Lenard, of Sandia Laboratories. He took on the task of opposing them, and was joined in his new quest by Board member Millie Pogna. In the version of the standards released to the public on the day before the acceptance vote, August 21, 1996, Lenard's and Pogna's work was finally revealed. Evolution and the age of the earth were completely omitted, replaced by the vague "*various theories of origin*." On August 22nd, 1996, dubbed "Black Thursday" by many New Mexican scientists, the State Board of Education, swayed by Lenard's persuasive anti-Darwinian rhetoric, passed the set of Content Standards with Benchmarks for Science. Several academic, science religious and other groups vigorously opposed these changes. Groups stating opposition to the gutting of science from the standards included New Mexicans for Science and Reason, the New Mexico Academy of Science, the National Center for Science Education, several University of New Mexico Departments (Faculty and Students: Physics, Biology, Earth and Planetary Science; Faculty: History, Anthropology, Psychology), individuals/faculty from New Mexico State University and from the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, individuals from the New Mexico Senate and House of Representatives, members and

the Rabbi of Temple Albert, The Albuquerque Journal, The Albuquerque Tribune, The Santa Fe New Mexican, The United Church of Santa Fe, Christ Unity Church, and many other groups.

For the creationist version of these events, see "Creation Wins Some More in New Mexico," by D. Russell Humphreys:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20010216092038/http://www.creationresearch.org/creation\\_matters/97/cm9705.html#Creation\\_Wins\\_Some\\_More#Creation\\_Wins\\_Some\\_More](https://web.archive.org/web/20010216092038/http://www.creationresearch.org/creation_matters/97/cm9705.html#Creation_Wins_Some_More#Creation_Wins_Some_More)

Even with these numerous protests, efforts to change the newly-adopted creationism-friendly standards were making little progress. So, State Senator Pauline Eisenstadt (D-Corralles) introduced Senate Bill 155 to the New Mexico state legislature on Jan. 28th 1997. The Bill said simply "In determining public school curriculum policy or prescribing courses of instruction for public schools, the state board shall adopt curriculum standards for life sciences and earth and space sciences that conform with the national academy of sciences' national science education standards for life sciences and earth and space sciences." Since the National Standards included evolution (of course! Chemistry was included too!), the bill would get evolution back into New Mexico standards, if only in an indirect way. The Bill narrowly passed the Senate Education committee by 4 to 3, and went to the full Senate on Feb. 17th. During a lengthy debate, Sen. Leonard Lee Rawson of Las Cruces waved a stuffed ape he called "Uncle Harry" as he denounced evolution. Ex-UNM Biology chair Jim Findley and I provided Sen. Eisenstadt with answers to questions during the hearing on the bill. I was honored to be the scientist standing on the floor of the State Senate that day to affirm that the best modern science really does show that the age of the Earth is four and a half billion years. The Senate passed the bill 24 to 17, in a strongly partisan vote (Democrats for, Republicans against).

Meanwhile, a counter-offensive was launched in the House. House Bill 1321 said, among other things, that "no fossil or any other evidence exists for this common ancestor and noted evolutionists have described the extreme scarcity of transitional forms as the 'trade secret of paleontology.'"

On Tuesday, March 11th, 1997, the bill came before the House Business and Industry Committee. After much discussion, including passage of an amendment calling for "balanced treatment," the bill was tabled by a 10 to 2 vote. Three days later, Rep. Tim Macko tabled his creationism bill (HB 1321). SB 155 still had one last gasp of activity. On March 15th, the Business and Industry suddenly un-tabled the bill, and passed it without recommendation to the House Education Committee. The bill came up the morning of Friday, March 21st, the day before the end of the session. Sen. Eisenstadt presented four speakers, including Nobel laureate Murray Gell-Mann. After testimony from board and department of education members against legislating standards, a roll call vote to table the bill passed 6 to 5. And that was the end of Senate Bill 155.

In the meantime, members of several of the opposition groups banded together to form CESE, the Coalition for Excellence in Science Education. CESE drafted a set of suggested changes to the

standards, and the Department of Education appeared to be considering them seriously. A survey was carried out on the suggested changes. What happened after that was "rather disturbing," in the words of UNM science history professor Tim Moy. In a September 1997 radio interview, Moy said that the State Board spent tens of thousands of dollars of taxpayer money to do the survey, sending it to hundreds of scientists, and engineers, teachers, and parents. It listed the changes that the CESE had proposed on how to fix the standards. When the results were returned and tallied, the CESE recommendations passed by overwhelming margins - 60 to 70 percent for each of these recommendations. The State Board reviewed these results and announced that they were not going to make any of the changes.

With no results from efforts with the Legislature and with the State Department of Education, concerned citizens turned their attention to politics. Lenard's appointed position ended in the upcoming election cycle (1998), and creationist incumbent Millie Pogna was running for re-election. At first, the dubious task of defeating a 20-year incumbent in a primary election seemed difficult indeed. But CESE founder Marshall Berman accepted the challenge as a candidate in the Republican primary. Berman built up a tremendous grass-roots effort staffed by dozens of volunteers, including many of the scientists and teachers who had opposed the new standards. Near the end of the campaign, on May 27th, 1998, several noted community leaders took the unusual step of holding a press conference to endorse a candidate for the board of education. The dignitaries included Sen. Harrison "Jack" Schmitt, the last man to walk on the moon.



*Endorsers of Berman's candidacy, from left to right: former Sen. Harrison "Jack" Schmitt, the last man to walk on the moon; Dr. Richard Nygren, president of the NM Academy of Science; Dr. Al Narath, former president of Sandia Nat. Labs; Dr. Marshall Berman; Dr. Laura Crossey, Assoc. Dean, UNM Arts/Sciences; and Rev. Clyde Stanfield (First United Methodist Church). Not shown: Dr. Alan Hale, co-discoveror of comet Hale-Bopp; Col. Mike Mullane, space shuttle astronaut. (Photo by David A. Thomas)*

On Tuesday, June 2nd, District 2 handed Marshall Berman a two-to-one margin of victory. His primary opponent, Millie Pogna, lost her 20-year position on the board, getting just 33 percent of the vote. Berman faced no opposition in the general election in November. During the campaign, Pogna tried to

claim that she also opposed creationism in the science classroom. Perhaps voters remembered statements like one from the October 9th, 1996 Albuquerque Journal, where Pogna said "The only thing the standards do is it kind of opens the door to a discussion of creationism."

On August 11th, 1999, the Kansas State Board of Education voted 6-4 to remove evolution from school standards and testing requirements. As happened in New Mexico, a diverse group of teachers, parents and scientists worked hard to develop accurate and complete science standards, modeled on national standards developed by groups like the National Academy of Sciences or the American Association for the Advancement of Science. And, just as in New Mexico, a few members of the school board threw out the work of the committee, and introduced their own standards -- heavily biased against evolution.

Marshall Berman advanced quickly in the State Board, and was soon leading a number of innovative efforts. But the board consensus at that time was that it was too soon to re-visit the science standards. Once Kansas was in the spotlight, however, and with New Mexico receiving renewed attention for its own anti-evolution standards, the Board decided to revisit the science standards quickly. And so they did. At 1:06 PM Mountain Standard Time on October 8th, 1999, the New Mexico State Board of Education voted 13-to-1 in favor of a proposal to revise state science teaching standards to include evolution and related concepts, such as the age of the earth. And so the fuzzy language in New Mexico's standards, which encouraged creationists and anti-evolutionists for three years, officially became history. Both major newspapers in the state strongly endorsed the action. The Albuquerque Tribune wrote on Oct. 14th *"How odd that public officials should draw praise for doing perfectly sensible things. But given the state of teaching standards for science classes across the nation these days, the New Mexico Board of Education has earned its accolades."* The state's largest paper, the [Albuquerque Journal](#), said on Oct. 17th that *"The religious beliefs of students and their parents must be respected -- but the beliefs of some must not be allowed to curtail the science education of all."* Even Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of the Diocese of Santa Fe weighed in, saying in two state newspapers that *"I don't believe there is any real contradiction between the theory of evolution and the creation of the world by God. The church has no problem accepting the theory of evolution, provided that it is understood that God infuses a human soul at a certain point in the evolutionary process and that, in fact, God is the force behind the evolution process."* (Albuquerque Journal, Santa Fe New Mexican, Oct. 15th 1999).

The board member who sponsored the new proposal, Sandia physicist /CESE founder/NMSR member Marshall Berman, was interviewed in the Oct. 22nd '99 Science (page 659), as was CESE member Kim Johnson. Berman's efforts were also discussed in "Speaking up for Science" in the November '99 issue of Scientific American.

The creationists, and their new incarnation ("Intelligent Design") continue their efforts to remove evolution from New Mexico schools. On February 15, 2000, the Senate Education Committee gave

Sen. Rod Adair's "Creation Theory" Bill a "DO PASS" recommendation, by a vote of 9-0. The bill, Senate Joint Memorial 47, was titled "Requesting The State Board Of Education To Allow The Use Of Materials In The Classroom For The Study Of Creation Theory." It never got to the full Senate. Adair is now the Republican candidate for Lieutenant Governor.

Signs are looming that New Mexico is the next target of anti-evolutionists, who have been most active recently in Kansas and Ohio. There has been an ongoing Intelligent Design Blitz at New Mexico universities (UNM, NM Tech) and state science labs (Sandia, Los Alamos). Several of the most prominent ID theorists have recently visited New Mexico. Phillip Johnson stumped the state in February of 2001, William Dembski in November of 2001, and Michael Behe in March of 2002 . A Christian activist group, the New Mexico Family Council (NMFC), claimed credit for sending out hundreds of copies of Michael Behe's book on Intelligent Design to science teachers around the state, but the name on the cover letter only stated the author's affiliation with the University of New Mexico . The formation of a New Mexico chapter of the Intelligent Design Network (IDNet) was announced on July 23rd, 2002.

Members of NMSR (<http://www.nmsr.org>) and CESE (<http://www.cese.org/>) have long participated in the never-ending struggle to keep real science in science classrooms. We were there in Santa Fe in 1996 as the science standards were being gutted, and we were on the Senate floor as teaching evolution was being debated. We were there in 1999 when the State Board overturned the anti-science standards. We were there on the editorial pages, and in the university halls giving pro-science talks to balance ID rhetoric. And we are there on the Internet, defending and explaining science, and debating creationists from New Mexico to Minnesota.

Seeing the clouds on the horizon, we in New Mexico know it's only a matter of time before creationism rears its ugly head once again. But next time won't be like 1996.

Next time, we'll be *ready*.