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GAS President's Comments and Report from the Academy Council

In my previous set of comments, I addressed the issue of what we try to teach the children of the State of Georgia. At that time I was writing in connection with low SAT scores and changes in the Quality Core Curriculum for grades K through 12. The issue appears in a different form when we look at the actions of the Cobb County Board of Education regarding the teaching of evolution. To remind you, the Cobb County Board of Education has placed disclaimers in biology textbooks stating that evolution is "a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things" and recently voted to allow the teaching of alternatives to evolution. The actions taken by the Cobb County Board of Education should not be taken as an isolated incident. They are symptomatic of a widespread antagonism to Darwinian evolution, as evidenced by the number of letters of support received by the members of the Board, including letters from a group called the Georgia Scientists for Academic Freedom. In light of this controversy I think it is appropriate to reiterate the Academy's opposition to watering down the teaching of evolution and the introduction of religious views under the guise of science. Therefore, I have appended copies of two documents approved by the Academy over twenty years ago. I should point out that battlefield has changed somewhat in the past two decades. The creation science referred to in the documents has been repackaged and relabeled as intelligent design theory. According to the new theory, the complexity and diversity of life can only be explained by the actions of an extra-natural intelligent agent, with the nature of the extra-natural agent left vague. The new formulation is apparently more palatable than the old and is gaining some measure of support in the country. However, the Board of Directors of the American Association for the Advancement of Science has concluded that this theory, like its predecessor, is not based on science and its inclusion in the science curriculum would undermine the integrity of science education. They are urging policy-makers to keep intelligent design out of the classroom. We should do the same.

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Text of a resolution passed unanimously by plenary session of the Georgia Academy of Science on 19 April 1980

Whereas members of the Georgia Academy of Science are duly trained in their respective scientific disciplines by years of education and experience, and

Whereas members of the Georgia Academy of Science have considered creationism in light of their scientific experience and religious beliefs, and

Whereas members of the Georgia Academy of Science have the following concerns about creationism:

1. Philosophically, "scientific creationism" or "divine creationism" is not based upon objectively gathered data and testing of the model as required by science.

2. Legally, the required teaching of "creationism" might violate the separation of religion and state. It would definitely establish precedent for the legal inclusion of creation narratives of many religions into the science curriculum. The precedent would also be set for other groups to make demands for modifications in the curriculum of disciplines other than science.

3. Pedagogically, problems could result by requiring science teachers to teach as science a model of divine creationism in which they have not been trained. Moreover, various local groups might demand that divine creation be taught according to their own religious beliefs.

Be it, therefore, resolved that the members of the Georgia Academy of Science oppose the teaching of "creationism" in the science curriculum.

Passed unanimously by plenary session of the Georgia Academy of Science on 19 April 1980.

Synoptic Position Statement of the Georgia Academy of Science with Respect to the Forced Teaching of Creation-Science in Public School Science Education

The great majority of scientists and teachers of science in the primary schools, high schools, colleges, and universities of Georgia are both evolutionists and Christians, or Jews, or adherents to some other religious preference. A few may adhere to no religion. In a pluralistic society students represent a comparable religious spectrum.

Based upon overwhelming scientifically verifiable evidence to date, most scientists, regardless of religious preference, think that the earth and all forms of life evolved over a period of several billion years. Evolution can be viewed as a creative process continuing over long periods of time. The extensive evidence of evolution is not in opposition to the variety of religious concepts or creation by a supreme being. The causative beginning of primeval appearance of matter or life in our universe is not at issue. The evidence of evolution does not claim to reveal the primal source of energy, matter, or life. The latter is a question which is addressed by the various religions outside the walls of our publicly funded educational institutions.

On January 5, 1982, U.S. Circuit Court Judge William R. Overton ruled Arkansas' "Balanced Treatment for Creation Science and Evolution Science" Act to be a violation of the constitutional separation of church and state. The Act had the advancement of religion as its primary goal, in his opinion. A month later, the attorney general of Arkansas announced his decision not to appeal Overton's opinion because the state had little chance of winning in higher federal court. The plaintiffs in this landmark case included components of the Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, United Methodist, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic churches, in addition to the American Jewish Congress, and the Union of Hebrew

Congregations. Other plaintiffs included the Arkansas Education Association, the National Association of Biology Teachers, and the National Coalition for Public Education and Religious Liberty.

The Georgia Academy of Science concurs with the following resolution adopted in January of 1982 by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) pertaining to the Forced Teaching of Creationist Beliefs in public school science education: (see Science 215:1072 for the text of the AAAS resolution; the full text can also be found on the web at <http://www.aaas.org/spp/dser/evolution/perspectives/voices/science/aaas82.htm>)

The above statement, including the AAAS resolution, was adopted by the Georgia Academy of Science at its plenary session on 24 April 1982 and published in the Georgia Journal of Science 40:91-92, 1982.

Excerpts From a Letter by Bruce Alberts, President of the National Academy of Sciences, to members who live in Georgia.

A Request to Help Counter the Cobb County, Ga., School Board's Actions on the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools

September 18, 2002

Dear Colleagues:

You may be aware of the recent decision by the Cobb County School Board to place disclaimers about biological evolution in biology textbooks and the recent efforts of some members of that Board to approve a policy that states that "discussion of disputed views of academic subjects is a necessary element of providing a balanced education." Although we know that there are numerous controversies in science and technology, the policy includes the "origin of the species" as its only example.

These kinds of actions by members of the school board are classic approaches to introduce Intelligent Design theory into the biology curriculum. Intelligent Design is a recent permutation of "creation science" that is being touted as an alternative to the modern theory of evolution. It is argued that molecular biology has now revealed that cells are formed from such a complex network of proteins and protein-generating processes that they could not have evolved without the intervention of a special outside intelligence. Proponents of Intelligent Design claim that their approach does not involve religious tenets and therefore does not violate the separation of church and state principle on which the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled in a number of cases involving attempts to teach some form of "creation science" in public school science classes. School board members and the public are bombarded with arguments that including more than one approach to origins of life in science curricula promotes fairness, academic freedom, and intellectual openness.

A number of people in Georgia have brought these activities in Cobb County to our attention... Of course, our greatest resource is our membership of distinguished scientists, engineers, and health professionals. As a member of the National Academy of Sciences or the Institute of Medicine, and as a citizen of Georgia, your help could be particularly effective in reversing these actions.

I am writing to ask that you consider contributing to this effort through one or more of the following actions:

- Send e-mails or letters to members of the School Board that state your position.
- Write an op-ed piece for local and statewide newspapers spelling out your position on this issue. Such articles need to present the issues in ways that