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# 'Academic freedom' poses a threat to state economy

Louisiana, like many states, is looking to information-based industries as engines of 21st century economic growth, but signs point to trouble ahead: statewide, employment in the information sector is at its lowest level since 1998.

Employers are having trouble finding top-flight computer programming staff. And recent national test scores show more than half of the state's eighth-graders — 53 percent — lack basic competence in science.

Given such serious challenges, it is alarming that the Louisiana Senate and a key House committee have passed a bill that would undermine science instruction in public schools, despite strong opposition from scientists, teachers and others. Sponsored by Sen. Ben Nevers, the "academic freedom" bill would give educators license to question, on nonscientific grounds, core scientific facts like evolution.

But the bill isn't truly about academic freedom. It is designed to introduce a religious idea called intelligent design into science classrooms. If it becomes law, the bill would unleash an assault against scientific integrity, leaving students confused about the fundamental nature of science and unprepared to excel in a work force that increasingly requires science-related skills.

That creates risk for all of Louisiana — not just educational risk, but economic and legal risk, too. And the bills pit religion against science when, as many religious and scientific leaders agree, they can comfortably co-exist.

Louisiana has been here before. In the 1980s, lawmakers required equal time for creationism in science classes where evolution was taught. That was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court, after considerable legal costs and damage to Louisiana's global reputation.

More recently, creationists and the intelligent design campaign have invested heavily in manufacturing a scientific debate over evolution, but there really is no controversy. Every major science and medical society in the world embraces evolution as a powerful explanation for how life has developed on Earth. It is supported by extensive evidence, ranging from dinosaur fossils to the coding of human genes.

Those who back the Louisiana bill insist their motives are not religious, but the evidence suggests otherwise. The measures have been promoted by intelligent design

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leaders, and support comes almost exclusively from one segment of the religious community. Their aim is clear: Erode students' understanding and trust of science by sowing confusion and doubt, and count on religious ideas to fill the void.

The Louisiana Science Teachers Association has reinforced that concern, saying critical-thinking objectives already are built into state educational standards.

We all, of course, have a right to interpret the origins of life based on Christian faith or other beliefs. But it is counterproductive to create a religion-vs.-science conflict where none exists.

Among millions of scientific researchers in the United States, many are religious. And more than 11,000 religious leaders from a range of denominations have joined

the Clergy Letter Project, which shares that belief.

Intelligent design may be appropriate for humanities or philosophy classes, but it does not belong in science class. U.S. District Court Judge John E. Jones III made that point forcefully in 2005. At the end of an exhaustive trial that rejected school board policy in Dover, Penn., he cited "overwhelming evidence" that intelligent design "is a religious view...not a scientific theory."

If the Louisiana bill becomes law, we are confident it would be overturned in court. But the fight would be an expensive, divisive distraction.

While national test scores show the state's students are making progress in science and math, there's a long way to go. In

just a few years, today's eighth-graders will need to have been educated well enough to improve agricultural practices, conduct medical research and develop powerful new computer technology. They'll be needed to protect their state's environment and rebuild its infrastructure.

At a time when Louisiana and the United States face serious economic challenges — and incredible opportunities — we must ensure the best possible science education for the next generation of problem-solvers.

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