

January 12, 2009

Dear ladies and gentlemen of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and especially the Student/School Performance Support Committee:

In my letter to you of January 6, 2009, I encouraged you to heed the excellent recommendations of the Louisiana Science Education Act Advisory Committee regarding the implementation of Act 473, the Louisiana Science Education Act. The December 2, 2008, guidelines for amending Section 2304 of Bulletin 741, the *Louisiana Handbook for School Administrators*, as required by Act 473, reflected these recommendations. Unfortunately, the revised §2304 guidelines that will be proposed to the Student/School Performance Support Committee on January 13, 2009, have been altered in ways that are detrimental to the education of Louisiana students.

I strongly encourage you to restore the wording of the original §2304, which was considered but deferred at the December 2, 2008 S/SPS Committee meeting. Changes introduced since that first proposal was made create problems for the implementation of Act 473 and make it more likely that teachers and administrators will not receive the clear guidance that they need in order to avoid infringing their students' religious freedoms. These changes will also make it more likely that science will not be taught accurately.

First, I encourage you to restore a sentence deleted from Part C of the Dec. 2 guidelines: "Religious beliefs shall not be advanced under the guise of encouraging critical thinking." This sentence reiterates a statement from Superintendent Pastorek's letter of August 27, 2008: "Religious theories shall not be advanced under the guise of encouraging critical thinking." Restoring this sentence to Part C of the January 13 version of the guidelines will provide unambiguous guidance to teachers and school administrators as to their legal responsibilities regarding supplementary materials. It is an important statement that will help teachers and administrators avoid costly legal challenges. In addition to the financial cost, such challenges would also divert time and attention away from the essential responsibility of educating children and would aggravate the harm that Act 473 has already done to Louisiana's image in the eyes of our fellow Americans.

Second, I direct your attention to the last sentence of Part D. 4. d.: "Evaluations of supplementary materials shall be made without regard to the religious or nonreligious beliefs and affiliations of the authors of supplementary materials." This sentence contains confusing and inaccurate directives regarding the evaluation of supplementary materials. Students must understand that the source of information *is* important, and teachers must instruct them that the source is related to the credibility and reliability of information. To determine quality, acceptability, and bias, scientists and teachers customarily and quite appropriately examine the source of instructional material. There is a difference between a document that derives from a respected scientific organization such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science and an article found on a website promoting the idea, for example, that the moon landing was a hoax. Knowing whether an article is published in a respected publication such as *Scientific American* or whether it comes from an advocacy organization does indeed matter.

The last sentence of Part D. 4. d. also contradicts Section 113 of the *Louisiana Content Standards, Benchmarks, and Grade Level Expectations for Science*, which requires in sections 3 and 4 that

Students examine the resources for readability, **currency, usefulness, and bias**.... [S]tudents must examine and evaluate the data in order to utilize the information retrieved. Students must interact with the information by categorizing, analyzing, evaluating, and **comparing for bias, inadequacies, omissions, errors, and value judgments**.... (emphasis added)
(<http://www.doa.louisiana.gov/osr/lac/28v123/28v123.pdf>.)

Knowing the beliefs and affiliations of the authors of supplementary instructional materials is critical to making such an assessment as required by the *Louisiana Content Standards*. The last sentence in Part D. 4. d of the January 13, 2009, guidelines would prohibit evaluating these materials on the basis of this essential information.

Third and finally, I encourage you to delete Parts D. 2 and D. 3, which present an unclear, ill-conceived, and onerous procedure by which the Department of Education will consider citizen challenges to supplementary instructional materials. The instructions are vague and confusing, and they unnecessarily complicate what should be a straightforward decision based on the professional expertise of LDoE staff. In considering citizen input concerning supplementary materials, the process should not involve a “meeting” which requires citizens to travel and incur expenses—unlike the current procedure for citizen input on textbooks. Furthermore, in the absence of any clear time-line, it is entirely likely that inappropriate materials would remain in classrooms indefinitely. A better procedure would be for LDoE to identify inappropriate supplemental materials to BESE, which would then circulate such a list to administrators and teachers. Citizens could then challenge the materials prohibited by BESE, but such materials would not first have to be purchased, introduced into classrooms to instruct children, and then removed after taxpayer dollars and time have been wasted.

Nothing is more vital to both the short-term and long-term quality of life in Louisiana than the education of the state’s children. I have told my own children many times that education is life, because without it, no decent life is possible for anyone. Educating *other* people’s children is a sacred trust which, as an educator myself, I do my best every day to honor. I am asking you to do the same by restoring the integrity of the guidelines under which the Louisiana Science Education Act will be administered.

If Louisiana children must be educated under this misguided law, then all of us have a moral responsibility to prevent their being injured by it.

Sincerely yours,

Barbara Forrest, Ph.D.

[For identification purposes only:]

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