

Opting Out – Not!

Dear NCSE: I teach 9th grade biology and the principal informed me that in response to the request of a parent, a student in my class has been given permission to opt out of the evolution section.

Unfortunately, teachers may find themselves faced with the issue of students wishing to opt out of the evolution section of their biology course. Scott and Branch (2008) address why opting out is a big mistake. If, as a teacher, you are confronted with this issue, find out whether your state has a policy that allows for the accommodation of a student's religious beliefs with regard to academic activities.

Consider drafting a departmental or district policy that clearly outlines why opting out is not an appropriate course of action. Science relies on "evidence to construct testable explanations and predictions of natural phenomena" (National Academy of Science, Evolution and Creationism) [link to NAS website resource]. Science is not determined by popular vote, public opinion, or religious beliefs. Opting-out of learning specific scientific theories such as evolution is not an appropriate accommodation of a student's religious beliefs.

Furthermore, a student choosing to leave class whenever a topic such as evolution is mentioned will suffer academically. Evolution is a unifying theme in biology, and as such, integrated throughout the biology curriculum. To allow opting out of evolution would require a student to be absent from extensive portions of the course, ultimately limiting the student's potential to do well in future science courses, and leading to poor performance on district, state, and nation-wide tests. It is also unethical for a school district to certify that a student has taken a district/state approved biology course and met the objectives if they have missed such a large portion of the course.

Scott, E.C. and G. Branch. 2008. Overcoming obstacles to evolution education: The OOPSIE compromise-a big mistake. *Evo. Edu. Outreach* 1:147-149.

EVOLUTION

*Text provided from Scott & Branch, 2008 and the
National Center for Science Education*