

Fast Facts about...

Christian Teachers in Public School

What can Christian Teachers Say Regarding Creation & Evolution in Public School?

We compiled this “Fast Fact” by having conversations with law firms that specialize in Christian rights in public schools. Please know, however, that this document was not prepared by a law firm and we are not attorneys—these are simply our opinions and should not be considered legal advice. For answers to specific questions, we recommend contacting Liberty Counsel (<http://www.lc.org>) or the Pacific Justice Institute (<http://www.pacificjustice.org/>). Because laws and regulations on these topics vary by state and district, teachers are also encouraged to consult with their direct supervisors.

1. First, it’s important to understand that evolution is not really taught in a widespread fashion in U.S. public schools. A study reviewed in the New York Times¹ found that only 28% of public school biology teachers consistently follow the NRC recommendations to “describe straightforwardly the evidence for evolution and explain the ways in which it is a unifying theme in all of biology.” The study also found that “13% explicitly advocate creationism, and spend at least an hour of class time presenting it in a positive light” and 60% avoid the creation-evolution controversy by endorsing neither evolution nor creation.
2. In many classrooms, certain sections of the text may be skipped and other areas emphasized. We have seen teachers skip evolution entirely, and other teachers emphasize evolution by teaching it well beyond the required curriculum using extra-curricular exercises and videos.
3. The amount of leeway a Christian teacher has regarding creation-evolution topics varies by state and district. Basically, a teacher signs a contract to be an agent of the state (or county or district) and must teach what they are told to teach in most areas, especially where local control of schools has been replaced by state curricula. A Christian who has signed a contract to teach the prescribed curriculum should not do something dishonest or contrary to what they are hired to do, provided the instructions given to them otherwise comply with the Constitution.
4. In general, teachers can present a balanced treatment of the concept of origins in science class (or other classes, as appropriate to the subject matter or material to be covered). If discussion would take an inordinate amount of class time, or derail scheduled discussion, students that have questions regarding origins can be encouraged to research the matter for themselves, ask their parents, or discuss after class so that instruction can continue.
5. On an **individual basis** (i.e., teacher-student relationships) where teachers are not acting in their official capacity or during the school day, teachers are free to share their personal opinions, beliefs, and perspectives on a variety of topics, including God, evolution, and Biblical creation. This privilege is protected by First Amendment rights shared by teachers and students alike. Teachers can even lead after-school Bible clubs, for that matter, in the same schools in which they teach, during contracted hours.

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6. Teachers can generally emphasize that (macro) evolution is a **theory**. Teachers do not have to affirm macro-evolution (“molecules-to-man”) as a “fact,” but they are generally required to teach the subject as represented in the textbook. Teaching students only one side of the evidence does not promote critical thinking and scientific rigor. Students should be made aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of evolution theory—just as they should be with other theories. Much of the criticism around evolution comes from secular scientists (e.g., evolution-based articles by the late Steve Gould are critical of the traditional Darwinian interpretation of the fossil record). As such, teachers should supplement the molecules-to-man evolutionary theory, particularly if they use classroom-approved texts or resources.
7. Some schools have an academic freedom or critical thinking provision in a school policy or union contract. While a teacher may be able to present viewpoints of origins side-by-side, the teacher should not actively promote a religious Christian view while teaching creation; however, teachers are encouraged to overview creation within the science curriculum. A teacher can overview religion in whatever topic is taught, so long as it is relevant. In teaching about origins, one can overview different theories of creation.
8. One can discuss evolution and some of the counter arguments from a creation or abrupt appearance perspective. For example, while there might be evidence of minor change or adjustment over time (e.g., micro-evolution or “adaptation”), there is no evidence of major change (e.g., one “kind” evolving into another). Likewise, there is no evidence of flora (plant) and fauna (animal) transfer. One can overview the various theories and then say: “Now there are a lot of different theories about evolution and abrupt appearance. Whatever theory one holds, all theories have one thing in common, faith.” It takes a major leap in faith to assume that evolution demonstrates how animals and plants originated. The theory of abrupt appearance or creation also requires faith. While there is evidence to support creation, nobody was there at the beginning. Nobody was there for evolution and nobody was there for creation. Whichever theory of origins one ultimately accepts, neither can be considered a proven fact because they are not observable, testable, and repeatable today. Evolution is believed by faith, and creation is believed by faith. Students should be informed that evolution is one faith-based theory, just like creation is a faith-based theory. Rather than elevating evolution and tearing down creation, one can show that both are on the same level—i.e., both are theories or beliefs, not established fact. Indeed, if one discusses the evidence for and against evolution, it becomes obvious that one must have more faith to believe in evolution than in creation.

In summary, in the context of evolution, academic freedom provides enough leeway in which teachers may juxtapose facts about evolution, with other facts which may lead to an alternative viewpoint of origins. Teachers should always teach with the goal of broadening students' intellectual horizons, but should do so mindful of the sensitivities required by their position in light of current court understandings of the Establishment Clause, and if they do receive a direct order to cease or refrain from doing something touching the area of faith, contact Liberty Counsel (<http://www.lc.org>) or the Pacific Justice Institute (<http://www.pacificjustice.org/>) before proceeding further.

¹ Nicholas Bakalarfeb (February 7, 2011). On Evolution, Biology Teachers Stray from Lesson Plan. Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/08/science/08creationism.html?_r=0 (March 26, 2015).