South Carolina's war on science

Tucked away in the budget passed last month by the S.C. House was the following, rather peculiar amendment: "No funds shall be expended in the current fiscal year by the Department of Education, the Education Oversight Committee, or the State Board of Education to participate in, implement, adopt or promote the Next Generation Science Standards initiative." That amendment, proposed by Greenville GOP Rep. Eric Bedingfield, passed by a vote of 68-33.

Rob Dillon
Guest Columnist

What are the "Next Generation Science Standards"? And why might the state of South Carolina wish to shield the tender young minds in her classrooms from their taint? Perhaps a bit of historical background is in order.

The National Academy of Sciences is a private, nonprofit organization founded in 1863 to "investigate, examine, experiment and report upon any subject of science." It operates independently of governmental control, electing its members internally and setting its own agenda. And since 1996, the National Research Council (the advising body of the academy) has spearheaded an ongoing process to advance a rigorous, modern and coherent science curriculum across the nation's K-12 classrooms.

The S.C. Department of Education began developing statewide curriculum standards as a result of our state's 1998 Education Accountability Act. That law specified that every academic subject would be reviewed every five years, and outlined a rather detailed process by which this should be accomplished. Both the 2000 science standards and the 2005 standards (upon which our curriculum is currently based) were influenced strongly by the National Academy standards current at the time. As a consequence, both sets of standards were awarded grades of A from the Fordham Foundation. The state's 2005 science standards recently were judged among the top six in the nation, a point of which we can be proud.

As their name implies, the "Next Generation Science Standards" are the most recent iteration of the process initiated by the National Academy of Sciences 15 years ago. In addition to the academy, important contributions are being made by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Association of Science Teachers, as well as Achieve, a nonprofit founded by the nation's governors and business leaders. Although the Next Generation Standards themselves are still under development, their 400-page framework was published last month. They promise to make a marvelous contribution.

Meanwhile, South Carolina's 2005 science standards are overdue for review. Both the state Department of Education and the Education Oversight Committee have impaneled multiple committees of scientists, educators, parents and business and community leaders to attend this important duty. I was privileged to be called by the EOC to serve on a review panel of nationally recognized scientists. The process should yield a new set of standards late next year, for implementation in 2014-15.

But during a conference call on March 14, the panel of scientists upon which I serve was informed that any discussion of the Next Generation Science Standards by our committee in the current fiscal year already had been blocked by a budget proviso. Almost simultaneously, newspapers reported the Bedingfield amendment to next year's state budget.

Going far beyond a simple academic exercise, the clean, modern, rigorous Next Generation Science Standards will feature stronger emphasis on engineering, application and technology. In their rush to score political points for today, our elected representatives seem willing to jeopardize an entire state economy tomorrow.

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