



TEXAS
FREEDOM
NETWORK

NETWORK NEWS

A MAINSTREAM VOICE TO COUNTER THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT · WWW.TFN.ORG · SUMMER 2007

What's the Matter with ~~Kansas~~ Texas?

The State Board of Education has been largely absent from the headlines over the past few months. But religious extremists are about to change that.

In last year's elections, the religious right captured two more seats on the state board, giving that faction a working majority on the 15-member panel. The news gets worse. Later this year, board members will begin revising public school curriculum standards for science – and the teaching of evolution is in the far right's crosshairs.

The situation in Texas is similar to what has happened in Kansas recently. Over the past decade, moderates have alternated with religious extremists in controlling the Kansas State Board of Education. When the religious right has controlled the board, the majority has voted to undermine the teaching of evolution and promote creationism in the state's public school science classes. Whenever moderates have retaken control of the board (as they did in November 2006), they have voted to reverse those policies.

Unfortunately, Kansas schools and their students have staggered from year to year without a firm commitment to a curriculum based on sound science rather than religious or political ideologies.

Now it looks like the religious right will again drag Texas schoolchildren into the same culture war battle.

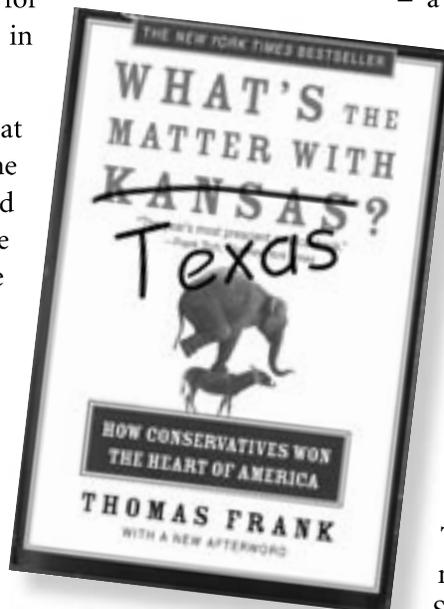
Most members of the far-right faction that now controls the Texas State Board of Education are already on record as opposing evolution. Some have explicitly called for schools to teach Bible-based creationism or "intelligent design" – a sham "scientific" concept that is really creationism dressed up in a lab coat.

The far right's assault on education isn't new. For years **Texas Freedom Network** activists have worked to blunt efforts by religious extremists to censor our schoolchildren's textbooks. We have opposed attacks on evolution in biology textbooks, irresponsible "abstinence-only" sex education policies in health classes, and the promotion of political ideology over facts in social studies textbooks.

TFN is already gearing up to defeat this new attack on science. The Stand Up for Science campaign is calling on parents, educators and public officials to insist that radicals on the state board promote science, not their own narrow religious and political agendas, in our public schools.

Over the coming year, TFN activists will have many opportunities to defend the teaching of evolution. **You can join this effort by signing up for TFN News Clips and alerts at tfn.org/subscribe/.** We will keep you informed about the far right's continuing efforts to water down our schoolchildren's education and how you can stop them.

Texas doesn't have to be like Kansas. Stand up for science and mainstream values before the far right damages our schoolchildren's education!



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A note from President Kathy Miller

This year's legislative session began with a strong challenge to Speaker Tom Craddick's leadership. It ended with his nearly tyrannical stranglehold over the rules of the Texas House of Representatives. Yet surrounding those events were clear signs that a shift in political power may be underway in Texas.

The Texas Freedom Network's issues – especially private school vouchers and religious freedom – were front and center in this power struggle. When Speaker Craddick forced a divisive vote over vouchers late in the 2005 legislative session, he demonstrated that he would go to extreme measures to please his far-right base. But early this session, the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly – 129-8 – for a measure by Rep. Joe Heflin, D-Crosbyton, to bar the use of public funds in this biennium for *any* private school voucher program. The vote demonstrated that House members strongly oppose undermining our neighborhood public schools by diverting taxpayer dollars to private and religious schools.

While the door was slammed shut on vouchers early in the session, the issue of religious freedom remained hot until the final days. TFN focused on two particular bills strongly backed by the religious right: Pampa Republican Rep. Warren Chisum's bill requiring every public high school to teach a course in the Bible and Sugar Land Republican Rep. Charlie Howard's bill that opens the door to school-sponsored prayer in our state's public schools.

Federal courts have ruled that public school Bible courses are constitutionally permissible if they are truly academic in nature and neither promote nor disparage religion. But Rep. Chisum refused to include safeguards in his bill that would ensure such courses are academically sound and not simply a vehicle for promoting the religious views of some over all others. Similarly, Rep. Howard refused to accept an amendment to his bill that would have prohibited students from promoting discrimination based on religion. Their resistance revealed the true purpose of the bills: using public schools to promote narrow religious agendas.

But true heroes stepped up to defend religious freedom. Rep. Scott Hochberg, D-Houston, and Rep. Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, worked tirelessly and successfully to ensure that safeguards for religious freedom were included in the Bible course bill. Rep. Yvonne Davis, D-Dallas, valiantly attempted to prevent the religious discrimination that will likely be the result of Rep. Howard's legislation. Her efforts ultimately fell short, but TFN was proud to stand with her, Reps. Hochberg and Eissler and many others who believe all of our state's diverse faith traditions deserve the respect of our elected leaders.

Many Texans are indeed deeply religious. But they oppose the misuse of faith as a political weapon and the promotion of one religious perspective over all others. This session, perhaps the far right and their pawns in the Texas Legislature began to understand those simple facts.



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TFN's Outreach/Field Interns

Texas Freedom Network's field/outreach team welcomed a host of great college students and recent college graduate interns this summer! Danielle Folsom is a senior at The University of Texas at Austin and will graduate next winter with a double major in communications and government. Sheel Bedi graduated from UT-Austin in May and plans to attend NYU law school in the fall. Holly Hanna also graduated this spring from UT-Austin with a triple major in Middle Eastern Studies, Government, and History. Jennifer Quereau graduated from Rice University with a degree in History and Hispanic Studies. And Shanae Becker, majoring in religion, will be a senior at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania.



L to R: Top Row: Danielle Folsom, Holly Hanna, Sheel Bedi; Bottom Row: Shanae Becker, Jennifer Quereau

A GIFT HAS BEEN GIVEN...

In Loving Memory of

Earl Lee Dachslager

by Drew and Dylan Lopenzina
Barbara Morrison and Amelia Morrison
Deborah and Martin Segal

Maxine Steel

by Diane Ireson

In Honor of

Jesse H. Jones II

by Cathryn Selman

Network News is the official newsletter of the
Texas Freedom Network.



Photos by Mark Graham

TFN Speaker Series Brings Jim Wallis to Dallas

More than 800 people packed into the beautiful sanctuary of Wilshire Baptist Church on the evening of July 24 to hear a message from the Rev. Jim Wallis. Considered by many to be the leading progressive commentator on religion and politics in the country today, Wallis was the featured speaker on the Dallas stop of TFN's 2007 Faith & Freedom Speaker Series. Expanding on themes from his bestselling book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, Wallis encouraged the captivated audience with his proclamation that the monologue of the religious right is over – even in Texas! The crowd was the largest yet at a TFN speaker series stop. All those gathered left with a renewed commitment to restoring the values of love, justice and community throughout our state.

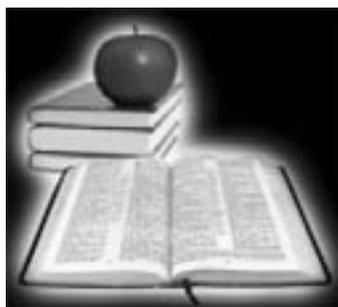
Next stop: Houston on August 23! (See details on page 8.)

The Odessa Files: Bible Course Challenged in Court

After two years of national media attention and local controversy, on May 16 a group of parents and citizens filed suit against the Ector County School Board in Odessa. They charge that the new elective Bible course in Odessa's public schools violates their religious liberty.

While the Texas Freedom Network is not a party to the lawsuit, we have been monitoring the situation since the Odessa school board first considered adding an elective Bible course in the spring of 2005. TFN alerted the press – and directly warned members of the school board – that the curriculum produced by the North Carolina-based National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS) was not appropriate for public school classrooms.

A report from the TFN Education Fund, published in August 2005, revealed serious problems with the National Council's curriculum. TFN delivered a copy of that report to each school board member and to district officials in Odessa prior to the board's decision in December 2005 to adopt the National



Council's curriculum. In addition, local parents and educators urged the school board to choose an unbiased and more appropriate curriculum for the course.

"This is a case study in what happens when public officials put their own religious and political agendas ahead of the interests of students and taxpayers," TFN President Kathy Miller said. "Instead of model courses that respect both the Bible and religious

freedom, school board members created a model for promoting their own religious views over everybody else's."

The eyes of the nation will be on Odessa in the coming months. The decision in this case could have wide ramifications for all such Bible classes in public schools, which have proliferated around the country in recent years. TFN will continue to serve as the state's watchdog, making sure school districts that choose to offer these courses do so in a way that respects the faith of all students and families.

LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

The 80th Texas Legislature Sees Key Victories for Mainstream Values

The 80th Regular Session of the Texas Legislature brought evidence that the **Texas Freedom Network's** fight against the religious right is gaining momentum. Today, much of the far right's legislative agenda lies in pieces, after major defeats in its efforts to undermine public education, religious freedom, medical research and civil rights.

Calls and e-mails from TFN Rapid Response Team members flooded Capitol offices throughout the session. In addition, TFN activists converged on the Capitol for a special lobby day in March. Together we put lawmakers on notice that Texans will no longer tolerate radical efforts to sabotage public education, attack the civil liberties of gay and lesbian Texans or promote the religious views of extremists over all other Texans.

Far-right pressure groups did claim a handful of victories. Many of those victories, however, were superficial. At the same time, those groups revealed their contempt for religious freedom and the rights of all Texans to practice their own faith without interference – especially interference from the government.

Following is a summary of the session's legislative history.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Vouchers

In March, supporters of private school vouchers suffered their biggest defeat ever in the Texas Legislature. During debate on the state appropriations bill, House members voted 129-8 to bar public funding for private school vouchers. TFN Rapid Response Team members called and e-mailed their representatives in support of the measure while TFN's lobby team worked one-on-one with lawmakers. A House-Senate conference committee later dropped the provision, but the message was clear: voucher schemes stood no chance in the House this session.

Contact from TFN activists also helped bury two major voucher bills in the Senate. One voucher scheme would have shifted hundreds of millions of dollars from public school special education budgets to private schools. TFN worked with leaders like Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, and Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, to craft an alternative package of bills that would provide real help to students with disabilities. Another bill would have created a massive pilot voucher program in the state's largest urban counties. Neither bill made it to the Senate floor in the face of TFN's efforts on behalf of all public school students, including students with autism and other disabilities.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



TFN President Kathy Miller and far-right Free Market Foundation's Kelly Shackelford debate a bill promoting religious expression in Texas public schools on MSNBC.

Prayer in Schools

The far right chalked up one victory in the last weekend of the session, barely passing a bill promoting organized prayer and other religious activities in public schools. TFN and other groups that support religious freedom warned that House Bill 3678 by state Rep. Charlie Howard, R-Sugar Land, would permit organized efforts to promote the religious views of some over all others in our state's public schools. Supporters of the so-called "freedom of religious expression" bill even stripped out a provision (proposed by state Rep. Yvonne Davis, D-Dallas) prohibiting schools and students from using such expression to discriminate against those who don't share the same religious beliefs. But in stripping out that anti-discrimination provision, far-right pressure groups and their legislative supporters revealed their own intolerance of any religious beliefs but their own.

Public School Bible Classes

On the other hand, TFN scored a major victory on other legislation important to religious freedom. Bipartisan efforts led by TFN thwarted an attempt by state Rep. Warren Chisum, R-Pampa, to require that all of the state's public high schools teach classes about the Bible. In-depth research by the TFN Education Fund into the severe problems that already exist in public school Bible classes made us a vital resource for lawmakers on this issue. TFN worked with House Public Education Committee Chairman Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, and state Rep. Scott Hochberg, D-Houston, to add key safeguards to the bill. Those safeguards include stronger protection for the religious freedom of all students, training for teachers, and sound curriculum and textbook standards. In addition, the bill no longer requires schools to offer classes about the Bible. The nearly unanimous votes for the revised bill in both chambers were stunning defeats for far-right groups that sought to turn our state's public schools into Sunday schools. TFN will now join with families across the state to monitor these classes and ensure that public schools adhere to the bill's safeguards.

Dr. Obery Hendricks of the New York Theological Seminary speaks at the Texas Faith Network's Legislative Prayer Breakfast in March near the Texas Capitol.



SCIENCE AND MEDICAL RESERACH

Science Education

Early in the session, TFN alerted news media to a Georgia lawmaker's anti-Semitic memo circulated by Rep. Chisum to Texas legislators. The memo attacked the theory of evolution and even promoted the idea that the sun and rest of the universe revolve around the earth. But legislative efforts to undermine the teaching of evolution in the state's public schools failed to materialize.

Stem Cell Research

TFN worked closely with coalition partners to promote and protect promising medical research into embryonic and adult stem cells. House State Affairs Committee Chairman David Swinford, R-Dumas, rammed through his committee a draconian bill barring funding for embryonic stem cell research. Rep. Swinford did so in a snap vote during the middle of debate on a completely unrelated bill. Even worse, the chairman had forced patients suffering from Parkinson's disease and juvenile

diabetes to wait until the wee hours of the previous morning to testify against the bill.

Even so, strategically timed press events and grassroots action organized by TFN prevented any bill barring embryonic stem cell research from ever reaching the House or Senate floors. Moreover, TFN activists helped set the stage for passing legislation in two years that will promote this research and give hope to families with medical conditions such as juvenile diabetes, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injuries.

Sex Education

Efforts by Rep. Chisum and other far-right lawmakers to further restrict access by students to critical information on sex education also failed to pass. Rep. Chisum's H.B. 311 would have placed even more obstacles in the way of students seeking information about responsible pregnancy and disease prevention. But TFN worked hard – successfully – to bottle up this irresponsible legislation in committee.

CIVIL/EQUAL RIGHTS

Gay/Lesbian Foster Care

Far-right groups have long attacked the rights of gay and lesbian Texans, seeking to divide our state for political gain. This session, TFN joined with Equality Texas and other partners to prevent efforts to bar or restrict gay and lesbian families from caring for foster children. In the face of continuous communications from TFN, Equality Texas and other activists, lawmakers never considered one such bill or amendment. TFN will continue to oppose mean-spirited, divisive attacks on gay and lesbian families.

Join TFN on October 6 in Austin to Let Freedom Sing!

Texas Freedom Network's 12th Anniversary Gala features performances by Skyrocket! and the phenomenal Ruthie Foster, an award ceremony, delicious food, and one of the best silent auctions in Austin.

The event features an exciting live auction with premium packages including a golf excursion to St. Andrew's, Scotland, a wine-tasting from the exclusive *Wine Spectator's* Top 100, South by Southwest badges and much, much more.

Saturday, October 6, 2007
7:30 p.m. Silent Auction
8:30-11:00 p.m. Concert & Live Auction
La Zona Rosa • 612 W. 4th Street

For more information about the 12th Anniversary Gala, to sponsor the event or to donate an item to the silent or live auction, visit www.tfn.org or call Laura Schroeder at 512-322-0545.

Ruthie Foster



Skyrocket!



TFN Celebrates in Houston!

Long-standing supporters and new members joined Texas Freedom Network staff and board members in early May at the home of Kathryn and David Berg to toast TFN's many accomplishments. One of the highlights of the evening was celebrating breaking news of an important legislative victory on the House floor! Best of all, like-minded Texans were able to gather and celebrate true Texas values. A special thanks to Kathryn and David Berg for generously hosting the event. And "thank you" to all our sponsors!



TFN Faith Network Director Ryan Valentine with Joe and Nina Brown.

Retirement Law Allows Tax-Free Gift to Texas Freedom Network Education Fund

The Pension Protection Act of 2006 allows taxpayers aged 70½ or older to direct tax-free distributions from their IRA to qualified public charities like the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund – but only through December 31, 2007. The maximum amount any taxpayer may contribute in this way is \$100,000 for the 2007 tax year.

Under prior law, if you wanted to use proceeds from your IRA to benefit a charity, you would have to take a distribution from the IRA and then make a gift to the charity. This process would have raised your taxable income, possibly causing you to shift into a higher marginal tax bracket or making otherwise untaxed Social Security benefits subject to tax. The ability to offset the charitable income tax deduction for your contribution would have depended on your personal tax situation.

Under the new law, you may direct your IRA trustee to distribute funds directly from the account to charities like the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund and pay no income tax on that distribution. However, since you will not owe any income tax on this charitable gift, you will not be able to claim the distribution as a charitable contribution on your tax return. These distributions to charity do satisfy your minimum distribution requirements from the IRA, however, potentially saving the income taxes otherwise due on that amount.

Administrators of IRAs are currently implementing their own rules for handling these kinds of distributions. Check with your specific account trustee to see if there are any other limits.

Please contact Rachel Glast, TFN's development director, at (512) 322-0545 or e-mail at Rachel@tfn.org with questions or to pledge a planned gift.

STAND UP FOR SCIENCE

Stem Cell Research Town Hall Meetings

In our continuing campaign against the religious right's war on science, the **Texas Freedom Network** hosted two well-attended and successful town hall meetings on stem cell research this spring. The first gathering took place in College Station and the second in Clear Lake near Houston. Panel experts and advocates spoke about the science behind this hopeful medical research and the religious right's efforts to outlaw research involving embryonic stem cells. Community discussions followed the panel presentations. Many thanks to patient advocates Joe and Nina Brown and Dr. Joan Nichols for their work in making these town hall meetings such a success.



Town hall meeting in Clear Lake

Thank you, TFN volunteers!

To all of our outstanding TFN volunteers and supporters, thank you for making this past legislative session a success. Rapid Response Team members, Lobby Day participants, Postcard Captains, Legislative Academy interns – you were with us every step of the way! Volunteers made phone calls, stuffed envelopes, collected thousands of postcard signatures, and made in-person legislative visits throughout the session. TFN's many victories this spring would not have been possible without all of our incredible volunteers.

Thank you, Postcard Captains!

To build support for responsible medical research in Texas, this spring TFN sent out a call for volunteers to distribute Stand Up for Science postcards promoting stem cell research. The response from TFN activists was fantastic! Volunteer Postcard Captains have helped us show state lawmakers that support for research involving both adult and embryonic stem cells is deep and broad-based. In fact, within weeks of launching the campaign, TFN President Kathy Miller presented more than 2,000 postcards to the House State Affairs Committee at the Capitol in Austin. And the number of signatures in support of stem cell research continues to climb! **You can volunteer as a Postcard Captain and sign the postcard petition at www.tfn.org/standupforscience.**

We would like to recognize the following individuals and groups for their hard work in gathering postcards as a TFN Postcard Captain.

Hall of Fame

Picce Glast – Odessa
 Judie Niskala - Austin
 Rebecca Robinson – Fort Worth
 Temple Beth-El – San Antonio

Most Valuable Player

Elizabeth Berigan – Bryan
 National Council of Jewish Women – Dallas

All – Star

Sylvia Ashby – Lubbock
 Carol Brady – Austin
 Mary Haraden – Amarillo
 Bettie John – Houston
 Nancy Latner – Dallas
 Sue Laurent – Austin
 Nancy Lewis – Austin
 Susan and Van Miles – Houston
 Paula Mixson, Gray Panthers – Austin
 Rey Pruneda – Austin
 Laura Schroeder – Austin
 Vic Vines – Dallas



Hello, Emily!

Emily Sentilles started this May as a Texas Freedom Network research and communications intern. Emily is currently pursuing her master's degree in public affairs at the LBJ School of Public Affairs in Austin, with a focus on social and economic policy.



Goodbye and Thanks, Judie!

Judie Niskala has been interning with Texas Freedom Network for the past year. During that time she has had the opportunity to participate in Lobby Day, contribute research to a variety of reports, compile legislative histories and perform other invaluable work for the TFN Education Fund. Judie will be receiving her master's degree in Women and Gender Studies from the University of Texas at Austin this summer and plans to continue work in the nonprofit arena in Austin.



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6:00 - 8:00 p.m.

**For sponsorship and event information,
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