WICHITA – Propelled by a polished strategy crafted by activists on America's political right, a battle is intensifying across the nation over how students are taught about the origins of life. Policymakers in 19 states are weighing proposals that question the science of evolution.

The proposals typically stop short of overturning evolution or introducing biblical accounts. Instead, they are calculated pleas to teach what advocates consider gaps in long-accepted Darwinian theory, with many relying on the idea of intelligent design, which posits the central role of a creator.

The growing trend has alarmed scientists and educators who consider it a masked effort to replace science with theology. But 80 years after the Scopes "monkey" trial -- in which a Tennessee man was prosecuted for violating state law by teaching evolution -- it is the anti-evolutionary scientists and Christian activists who say they are the ones being persecuted, by a liberal establishment.

They are acting now because they feel emboldened by the country's conservative currents and by President Bush, who angered many scientists and teachers by declaring that the jury is still out on evolution. Sharing strong convictions, deep pockets and impressive political credentials -- if not always the same goals -- the activists are building a sizable network.

In Seattle, the nonprofit Discovery Institute spends more than $1 million a year for research, polls and media pieces supporting intelligent design. In Fort Lauderdale, Christian evangelist James Kennedy established a Creation Studies Institute. In Virginia, Liberty University is sponsoring the Creation Mega Conference with a Kentucky group called Answers in Genesis, which raised $9 million in 2003.

At the state and local level, from South Carolina to California, these advocates are using lawsuits and school board debates to counter evolutionary theory. Alabama and Georgia legislators recently introduced bills to allow teachers to challenge evolutionary theory in the classroom. Ohio, Minnesota, New Mexico and Ohio have approved new rules allowing that. And a school board member in a Tennessee county wants stickers pasted on textbooks that say evolution remains unproven.

A prominent effort is underway in Kansas, where the state Board of Education intends to revise teaching standards. That would be progress, Southern Baptist minister Terry Fox said, because "most people in Kansas don't think we came from monkeys."

The movement is "steadily growing," said Eugenie C. Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education, which defends the teaching of evolution. "The energy level is new. The religious right has had an effect nationally. Now, by golly, they want to call in the chits."
Polls show that a large majority of Americans believe God alone created man or had a guiding hand. Advocates invoke the First Amendment and say the current campaigns are partly about respect for those beliefs.

"It's an academic freedom proposal. What we would like to foment is a civil discussion about science. That falls right down the middle of the fairway of American pluralism," said the Discovery Institute's Stephen C. Meyer, who believes evolution alone cannot explain life's unfurling. "We are interested in seeing that spread state by state across the country."

Some evolution opponents are trying to use Bush's No Child Left Behind law, saying it creates an opening for states to set new teaching standards. Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), a Christian who draws on Discovery Institute material, drafted language accompanying the law that said students should be exposed to "the full range of scientific views that exist."

"Anyone who expresses anything other than the dominant worldview is shunned and booted from the academy," Santorum said in an interview. "My reading of the science is there's a legitimate debate. My feeling is let the debate be had."

Although the new strategy speaks of "teaching the controversy" over evolution, opponents insist the controversy is not scientific, but political. They paint the approach as a disarming subterfuge designed to undermine solid evidence that all living things share a common ancestry.

"The movement is a veneer over a certain theological message. Every one of these groups is now actively engaged in trying to undercut sound science education by criticizing evolution," said Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "It is all based on their religious ideology. Even the people who don't specifically mention religion are hard-pressed with a straight face to say who the intelligent designer is if it's not God."

Although many backers of intelligent design oppose the biblical account that God created the world in six days, the Christian right is increasingly mobilized, Baylor University scholar Barry G. Hankins said. He noted the recent hiring by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary of Discovery Institute scholar and prominent intelligent design proponent William A. Dembski.

The seminary said the move, along with the creation of a Center for Science and Theology, was central to developing a "comprehensive Christian worldview."

"As the Christian right has success on a variety of issues, it emboldens them to expand their agenda," Hankins said. "When they have losses . . . it gives them fuel for their fire."

Deferring the Debate

The efforts are not limited to schools. From offices overlooking Puget Sound, Meyer is waging a careful campaign to change the way Americans think about the natural world. The Discovery Institute devotes about 85 percent of its budget to funding scientists, with other money going to public action campaigns.

Discovery Institute raised money for "Unlocking the Mystery of Life," a DVD produced by Illustra Media and shown on PBS stations in major markets. The institute has sponsored opinion polls and underwrites research for books sold in secular and Christian bookstores. Its newest project is to establish a science laboratory.
Meyer said the institute accepts money from such wealthy conservatives as Howard Ahmanson Jr., who once said his goal is "the total integration of biblical law into our lives," and the Maclellan Foundation, which commits itself to "the infallibility of the Scripture."

"We'll take money from anyone who wants to give it to us," Meyer said. "Everyone has motives. Let's acknowledge that and get on with the interesting part."

Meyer said he and Discovery Institute President Bruce Chapman devised the compromise strategy in March 2002 when they realized a dispute over intelligent design was complicating efforts to challenge evolution in the classroom. They settled on the current approach that stresses open debate and evolution's ostensible weakness, but does not require students to study design.

The idea was to sow doubt about Darwin and buy time for the 40-plus scientists affiliated with the institute to perfect the theory, Meyer said. Also, by deferring a debate about whether God was the intelligent designer, the strategy avoids the defeats suffered by creationists who tried to oust evolution from the classroom and ran afoul of the Constitution.

"Our goal is to not remove evolution. Good lord, it's incredible how much this is misunderstood," said William Harris, a professor at the University of Missouri at Kansas City medical school. "Kids need to understand it, but they need to know the strengths and weaknesses of the data, how much of it is a guess, how much of it is extrapolation."

Harris does not favor teaching intelligent design, although he believes there is more to the story than evolution.

"To say God did not play a role is arrogant," Harris said. "It's far beyond the data."

Harris teamed up with John H. Calvert, a retired corporate lawyer who calls the debate over the origins of life "the most fundamental issue facing the culture." They formed Intelligent Design Network Inc., which draws interested legislators and activists to an annual Darwin, Design and Democracy conference.

The 2001 conference presented its Wedge of Truth award to members of the 1999 Kansas Board of Education that played down evolution and allowed local boards to decide what students would learn. A board elected in 2001 overturned that decision, but a fresh batch of conservatives won office in November, when Bush swamped his Democratic opponent, Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), here by 62 to 37 percent.

"The thing that excites me is we really are in a revolution of scientific thought," Calvert said. He described offering advice in such places as Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio and Cobb County, Ga., where a federal court recently halted an attempt to affix a sticker to science textbooks saying evolution is theory, not fact.

'Liberals Will Die'

Despite some disagreement, Calvert, Harris and the Discovery Institute collectively favor efforts to change state teaching standards. Bypassing the work of a 26-member science standards committee that rejected revisions, the Kansas board's conservative majority recently announced a series of "scientific hearings" to discuss evolution and its critics.

The board's chairman, Steve Abrams, said he is seeking space for students to "critically analyze" the evidence.

That approach appeals to Cindy Duckett, a Wichita mother who believes public school leaves many
religious children feeling shut out. Teaching doubts about evolution, she said, is "more inclusive. I think the more options, the better."

"If students only have one thing to consider, one option, that's really more brainwashing," said Duckett, who sent her children to Christian schools because of her frustration. Students should be exposed to the Big Bang, evolution, intelligent design "and, beyond that, any other belief that a kid in class has. It should all be okay."

Fox -- pastor of the largest Southern Baptist church in the Midwest, drawing 6,000 worshipers a week to his Wichita church -- said the compromise is an important tactic. "The strategy this time is not to go for the whole enchilada. We're trying to be a little more subtle," he said.

To fundamentalist Christians, Fox said, the fight to teach God's role in creation is becoming the essential front in America's culture war. The issue is on the agenda at every meeting of pastors he attends. If evolution's boosters can be forced to back down, he said, the Christian right's agenda will advance.

"If you believe God created that baby, it makes it a whole lot harder to get rid of that baby," Fox said. "If you can cause enough doubt on evolution, liberalism will die."

Like Meyer, Fox is glad to make common cause with people who do not entirely agree.

"Creationism's going to be our big battle. We're hoping that Kansas will be the model, and we're in it for the long haul," Fox said. He added that it does not matter "who gets the credit, as long as we win."

Special correspondent Kari Lydersen in Chicago contributed to this report.

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