

Religious Audiences and the topic of evolution: Lessons from the classroom – what do you say to parents who, because of their religious beliefs, won't cooperate with their kids learning about evolution?

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on April 30, 2017

Wes McCoy: 00:26 Well, obviously, there might be someone who never cooperates. I've never had that particular person to deal with. I've always been able to communicate to at least an agreement, sort of a treaty could be signed, you might say. For example, there was a woman who I call frequently. I call parents frequently. And she said, "I heard you're teaching evolution." I said, "Yes, yes we are." And she said, "Well, I don't really want my daughter to learn that." So I started explaining about how the state standards work and my responsibility to teach the state standards. "By the way, this is a really important topic that ties together everything in biology, so I can't very well leave it out. And I really want your daughter to have the best possible science education. It's very important for her to understand what scientists mean when they talk about various topics." (01:33) So I got her to the point of we're all going to understand evolution. Matter of fact, I believe that person, who I could name if you want me to, but that particular person I used the idea that, imagine if I was a social studies teacher and I was teaching communism. I wouldn't necessarily want you all to go home and start a communist state. I would want you to understand what we mean by a communist state. So she was quite happy with that idea, especially when I mentioned the idea that when your daughter gets to college, I want her to be really conversant with this idea so that she will understand what other students are saying, who come from other schools, what other professors are saying, who have [inaudible 00:02:28] perhaps in a different way than she has been. (02:31) It's really important to understand what other people are thinking, even if you're not a scientist. And by the way, science is so important, even if you're not a scientist. You need to know science so that you know what kinds of legislation might be passed. There might be someone who wants to cut the EPA for some reason I don't understand. You want to be able to

comment logically and thoughtfully on topics like that. So that's why we're studying evolution in our class.

- Briana Pobiner: 03:02 And this is why-
- Lee Meadows: 03:03 Oh, I'll throw one more thing. In coaching, young teachers, in Alabama, we're a ten-year state. So in the first three years, they can be dismissed without cause. I coach them to do exactly what Wes said, of that full disclosure. But then I tell them to go down the hall and talk to their principal, tell their principal what they're doing. So if Mama calls or Daddy calls and they're upset, they can go back to the principal and say, "Hey, this parent's upset." And that has solved a whole lot of issues, because principals will get involved, especially. It's the teaching of the standards. In Alabama, that's the law, which is a crazy thing to say. Now, as the law is, teachers are going to teach evolution.
- Briana Pobiner: 03:43 And I was going to say, this is exactly why Wes is on the advisory board for our new project in Alabama, really as an expert teacher, being able to navigate these waters.
- Wes McCoy: 03:52 Thanks. There are bad ways to handle that situation.

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