

# A TOWN AT WAR

Teachers rebel, lawyers sue and feelings run high in Dover, Pa., as parents square off over the teaching of evolution in the schools



HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR

**“All they’re saying is there’s another theory and keep an open mind. To me, it’s not a big thing”**

JOSH ROWAND, 17  
(in Dover last month)

FORMER SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS  
**“From the viewpoint of intelligent design supporters, I’m allied with the devil”**

JEFF BROWN (with wife CASEY at home in September)



Standing before the ninth grade biology class at Dover Area High School in Pennsylvania this past January, school superintendent Richard Nilsen read a nine-sentence statement from a piece of paper. “Darwin’s theory [of evolution] is a theory ... not a fact,” he intoned. Nilsen stated that some people have embraced other explanations for the origins of life. He directed students “to keep an open mind.” Then, without any further discussion, he walked out. And in classic teenage fashion, the students reacted

with a collective *Whatever, dude*. “It was kind of sad,” says Tim Mummert, 15. “Nobody really paid attention. It was like, ‘That’s it? This is what everyone’s fussing over?’”

The fuss, at its root, is about science versus religion, and religion’s place in American classrooms. It pits mainstream biology—rooted in Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution—against intelligent design, which argues that nature is too complex to not have been guided by some higher being. Now the battle has moved to federal court in

Harrisburg, Pa., where 11 Dover parents have sued to stop the reading of the statement. The potentially landmark case could have repercussions across the country, where some two dozen states have wrestled with the issue of whether to offer an alternative to Darwin, for decades the standard teaching in biology class.

The controversy has roiled feelings in Dover, a largely white, rural and conservative area of 22,000 people in south central Pennsylvania that boasts plenty of rolling farmland and at least 16



Cynthia Sneath (left), Tammy Kitzmiller, Aralene Callahan and Fred Callahan were among those bringing suit.

#### THE PLAINTIFFS

**“Our science teachers have been heroes, to stand up for what they know to be science”**

ARALENE CALLAHAN (in Harrisburg last month)

churches. “Everybody was content living here,” says Larry Snook, 69, a retired salesman and former school board member. “Everyone got along very well.” Now, though, residents are being asked to choose sides. “People do have strong opinions about it, because it’s something that’s personal,” says Rev. David Sproull, pastor at the Dover Assembly of God, who supports the teaching of ID in the schools. Bill Parkinson, editorial page editor of *The York Dispatch*, says his paper gets a half dozen letters a week on the controversy, with more than a few of them taking a nasty tone. “We don’t allow personal attacks,” says Parkinson, whose paper has declared ID gobble-dygook. “But it can get hostile.”

The controversy over ID took most town residents by surprise. During what started as a routine school board meeting in June 2004, longtime board member William Buckingham, 59, voiced criticism of the biology textbook used by ninth graders, saying it was “laced with Darwinism.” Buckingham urged that the district include

*Of Pandas and People*, one of the key texts of the intelligent design movement, to supplement the course.

After that there were four months of sometimes heated discussion over the issue at board meetings, culminating in a debate-and-vote one evening in October that stretched on for three hours. “It got increasingly less polite as the evening wore on,” says Jeff Brown, one of the then board members opposed to ID. Though Buckingham’s proposal had been narrowly defeated at an earlier meeting, this time the board voted 6 to 3 to have a brief statement read to each biology class making mention of the intelligent design book. Jeff Brown’s wife, Casey, also a board member, then read a denunciation of the decision, in a voice by turns angry and tearful, and tendered her resignation. Jeff then resigned too. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life,” says Casey, 58, a freelance writer.

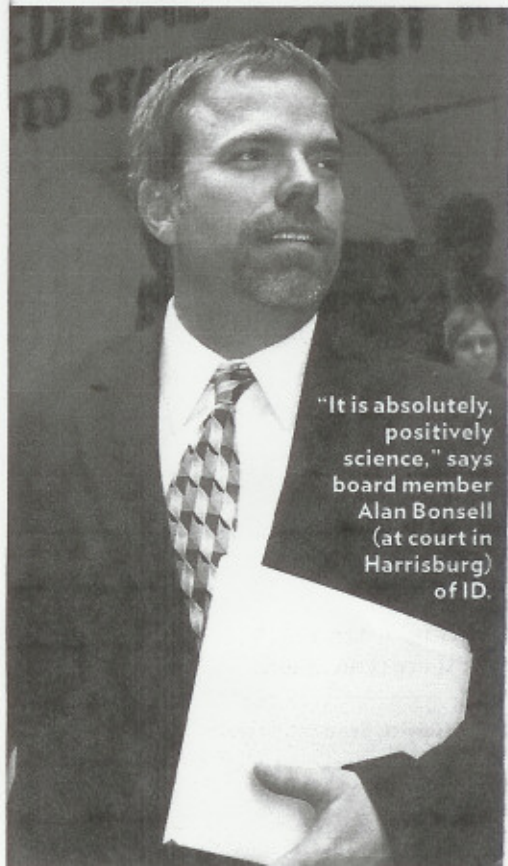
Behind the proposed statement the Browns saw the glimmerings of

## Controversy

creationism—the biblical version of the birth of the world—which had been banished from the classroom by a 1987 Supreme Court ruling. “We’re there to represent the viewpoints of all the students, whether they’re Buddhist, Muslim, atheist, agnostic, mainstream Christian or fringe,” says Casey. “You’ve got to put aside your personal beliefs.” Two months after the vote, like-minded parents enlisted the ACLU to file a lawsuit against the district. The district, meanwhile, is being represented by the Thomas More Law Center, which offers assistance to religious groups. “I never, ever thought I would be involved in a lawsuit against my old school district,” says one of the plaintiffs in the case, Aralene Callahan, 55, whose daughter Katie, 16, is a junior at Dover High. “It’s a painful experience,” she says, adding that it has cost her “a lot of sleepless nights.”

Some of the anti-ID folks now get the cold shoulder from some pro-ID neighbors, and vice versa. “It’s very uncomfortable,” says Brown, 55, an electrician who also teaches Sunday

MICHAEL FERNANDEZ



“It is absolutely, positively science,” says board member Alan Bonsell (at court in Harrisburg) of ID.

## Controversy

school, as he sits in a booth at the Route 74 Restaurant in town. "When I came in, there was a guy sitting at the counter who used to be very friendly. Now he won't even speak to me." Casey says it has sometimes gotten worse than that. "People who do speak to us call us atheistic quitters," she says. Still, the Browns, who are not plaintiffs in the suit, have maintained cordial relations with some ID advocates in town, including current board member Jim Cashman. "He's opinionated, which is fine," says Cashman of Jeff Brown. "But he'll talk with you, laugh about the issue, things like that."

For their part, the board members contend that all they ever wanted was a little fairness and balance. "Please tell me," says board member Alan Bonnell, "where in that one-minute statement is the religion? Where is it?" By the same token, though, backers of the statement make no secret that their religious beliefs and support for ID go hand in hand. Wendy Bowers, who helped start a petition in town supporting ID, says that she was raised in a Christian household where she was taught that God had created humans in his own image—which has always made

**"I think this has done more to destroy the unity of this community than anything that's happened since I've lived here"**  
LARRY SNOOK,  
longtime resident



it hard for her to accept Darwin. Says Bowers: "I grew up with this confusing idea—'Gee, is God a monkey?'" As a result she finds ID a far more compelling way to think about the origins of life. "When you look into it, it holds more water than the theory of evolution," she says.

The split among parents is reflected in the student body at Dover High. Senior Steve Diana, 17, disagrees with

the board's decision. "I don't think they should teach those things in school," he says. "That's something between you and your family." Meanwhile Josh Rowand, 17, a senior at Dover High who describes himself as a strong Christian, and whose pastor father, Edward, is pro-ID and has recently joined the school board, maintains that many students at his school have no problem with mentioning ID. "I know one girl who's an adamant atheist, and she said to me, 'That's it? Why do we have a lawsuit over this?'" says Josh.

Once the trial, which is expected to last more than a month, is over, the case could end up in the Supreme Court. For Jeff Brown, the saddest part is that the affair has led to a lot of ugly stereotyping. "One side thinks the other are godless atheists going to hell, and the other one thinks the other are religious-fanatic nutcases," he says. The reality, he contends, is that it is possible to believe in some form of higher being and yet want to be grounded in solid science. "I feel like I am one of those people in the middle, and I think probably most of the community is," he says. "But you know, in a war there is no middle position."

By Bill Hewitt, Sean Scully and Nicole Weisensee Egan in Dover

## OLD DEBATE, NEW APPROACH

The vast majority of scientists consider it case closed in favor of evolution. But that has not stopped the intelligent design camp from questioning Darwin. Points of contention: ● ID stresses that there are gaps in the fossil record that should connect related species. "It is true you can imagine evidence that we have not found," says Kenneth Miller, a Brown University biology professor

and coauthor of the text used at Dover High. "But that's not the same thing as evidence against."

● Above all, ID stresses the complexity of organisms as evidence of a higher maker. Michael Behe, a professor of biology at Lehigh University and one of the leading proponents of ID, likes to use the example of Mount Rushmore, where he contends that it is obvious that some outside force has shaped the terrain. "We've come across things like Mount Rushmore in life," says Behe. That is not a scientific argument, replies Miller: "Science, by definition, confines itself to what it can see and what it can test about the natural world."

