For Zack Kopplin, it all started back in 2008 with the passing of the Louisiana Science Education Act. The bill made it considerably easier for teachers to introduce creationist textbooks into the classroom. Outraged, he wrote a research paper about it for a high school English class. Nearly five years later, the 19-year-old Kopplin has become one of the fiercest — and most feared — advocates for education reform in Louisiana. We recently spoke to him to learn more about how he’s making a difference.

Kopplin, who is studying history at Rice University, had good reason to be upset after the passing of the LSEA — an insidious piece of legislation that allows teachers to bring in their own supplemental materials when discussing politically controversial topics like evolution or climate change. Soon after the act was passed, some of his teachers began to not just supplement existing texts, but to rid the classroom of established science books altogether. It was during the process to adopt a new life science textbook in 2010 that creationists barraged Louisiana’s State Board of Education with complaints about the evidence-based science texts. Suddenly, it appeared that they were going to be successful in throwing out science textbooks.

A pivotal moment
"This was a pivotal moment for me," Kopplin told io9. "I had always been a shy kid and had never spoken out before — I found myself speaking at a meeting of an advisory committee to the State Board of Education and urging them to adopt good science textbooks — and we won (http://ncse.com/news/2010/12/biology-textbooks-approved-louisiana-006357).” The LSEA still stood, but at least the science books could stay.

No one was more surprised of his becoming a science advocate than Kopplin himself. In fact, after writing his English paper in 2008 — when he was just 14-years-old — he assumed that someone else would publicly take on the law. But no one did.

"I didn't expect it to be me," he said. "By my senior year though, I realized that no one was going to take on the law, so for my high school senior project I decided to get a repeal bill."

Indeed, it was the ensuing coverage of the science textbook adoption issue that launched Kopplin as an activist. It also gave him the confidence to start the campaign to repeal the LSEA.

Encouraged by Barbara Forrest, a philosophy professor at Southeastern Louisiana University — and a staunch critic of intelligent design and the Discovery Institute — Kopplin decided to write a letter that could be signed by Nobel laureate scientists in support of the repeal. To that end, he contacted Sir Harry Kroto, a British chemist who shared the 1996 Nobel Prize in Chemistry with Robert Curl and Richard Smalley. Kroto helped him to draft the letter — one that has now been signed by 78 Nobel laureates (http://www.repealcreationism.com/endorsements).

In addition, Kopplin has introduced two bills to repeal the LSEA, both of which have been sponsored by State Senator Karen Carter Peterson. He plans on producing a third bill later this spring. And along with the Nobel laureates, he has the support of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), New Orleans City Council, and many others.

But as the early results of his efforts have shown, it's not going to be an easy battle.

"We've had gains over the last few years," he says, "But our first attempt to repeal the LSEA was defeated 5-1 in committee, and in our second attempt we lost 2-1." Kopplin is hoping to get out of committee this year.

He also has his eyes set on vouchers. After an Alternet story came out about a school in the Louisiana voucher program teaching that the Loch Ness Monster was real and disproved evolution (http://www.alternet.org/story/155926/the_loch_ness_monster_is_real%3B_the_kkk_is_good%3A_the_shocking_content_of_publicly_paid_for_christian_school_textbooks), Kopplin looked deeper into the program and found that this wasn’t just one school, but at least 19 other schools, too.
School vouchers, he argues, unconstitutionally fund the teaching of creationism because many of the schools in these programs are private fundamentalist religious schools who are teaching creationism.

"These schools have every right to teach whatever they want — no matter how much I disagree with it — as long as they are fully private," he says. "But when they take public money through vouchers, these schools need to be accountable to the public in the same way that public schools are and they must abide by the same rules." Kopplin is hoping for more transparency in these programs so the public can see what is being taught with taxpayers' money.

Facing opposition

His efforts, needless to say, have not gone unnoticed — particularly by his opponents. He's been called the Anti-Christ, a stooge of "godless liberal college professors," and was even accused of causing Hurricane Katrina. Kopplin coolly brushes these incidents aside, saying they're just silly distractions.

But some of the most aggressive broadsides, he says, have come from state legislators.

"I'm not talking threats or name calling, but they were really something to experience," he says. [In addition to the video at left, Kopplin provided other examples that can be seen here (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52kuwnKyroS) and here (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQobb3veQA)]

"I don't enjoy upsetting people, but you have to brush the attacks off," he says."I know that I'm fighting for a good cause — and I would be neglecting my duty if I stopped my campaign just because I felt uncomfortable about opposition."

And perhaps not surprisingly, a number of people have refused to take Kopplin seriously on account of his age. "Oh, for sure — there have absolutely been people who have dismissed me because I'm still a kid," he told us. Some of his opponents have even suggested that his parents are really the ones behind the campaign — an accusation he flatly denies.

"They have their own lives to live, and certainly don't have time to run a public issue..."
"What disturbs me though, is when other kids are the ones to dismiss me based on age," he told io9. "They see a 19 year old kid and can't believe that I can actually go out and change the world. Too many of my peers have this attitude that they need to dress nicely, sit quietly, and wait until we are adults to change things. This attitude must change. My generation needs to speak out for what we believe."

**It's simply not science**

And indeed, Kopplin is a passionate defender of scientific inquiry, and vociferously rejects the notion that creationism and evolution should be taught side-by-side.

"Creationism is not science, and shouldn't be in a public school science class — it's that simple," he says. "Often though, creationists do not, or are unwilling, to recognize this." Science, he argues, is observable, naturalistic, testable, falsifiable, and expandable — everything that creationism is not.

But what also drives Kopplin is the inherent danger he sees in teaching creationism.

"Creationism confuses students about the nature of science," he says. "If students don't understand the scientific method, and are taught that creationism is science, they will not be prepared to do work in genuine fields, especially not the biological sciences. We are hurting the chances of our students having jobs in science, and making discoveries that will change the world."

He worries that, if Louisiana (and Tennessee, which also has a similar law) insists on teaching students creationism, students will not be the ones discover the cure to AIDS or cancer. "We won't be the ones to repair our own damaged wetlands and protect ourselves from more hurricanes like Katrina," he says.

Moreover, he's also concerned that teaching creationism will harm economic development.

"Just search creationism on Monster Jobs or Career Builder and tell me how many creationist jobs you find," he asks. Kopplin tells us about how this past Spring, Kevin Carman, the former Dean of LSU’s College School of Science (now the Executive Vice President and Provost for the University of Nevada, Reno) testified in the Louisiana Senate Education Committee about how he had lost researchers and scientists to other states because of the Louisiana Science Education Act.

"But it also violates the separation of church and state," he says. "Teaching Biblical creationism is promoting one very specific fundamentalist version of Christianity, and violating the rights of every other American citizen who doesn't subscribe to those beliefs. So it would be stomping on the rights of Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Buddhists, Humanists, Muslims, Hindus, and every other religious group in the country.

These creationists, he argues, would be horrified to see the Vedas being taught in science class. "And they would have every right to be," he says, "That's how the separation of church and state works and it's the foundation of our country."

**Changes needed**
Kopplin is also concerned about the future, and how unprepared the United States has become.

"We don't just deny evolution," he says, "We are denying climate change and vaccines and other mainstream science. I'm calling for a Second Giant Leap to change the perception of science in the world."

To that end, Kopplin would like to see $1 trillion of new science funding and an end to denialist science legislation. He wants to see the American public become more aware and better educated about science.

"My generation is going to have to face major challenges to our way of living — and the way to overcome them is through rapid scientific advancement," he says. "But as of right now, America has a science problem."

How 19-year-old activist Zack Kopplin is making life hell for Louisiana’s creationists


The most hilarious (and frightening) thing about the Creationist mindset is the sheer egotistical quality of the movement. ‘I’m an attorney!’ It’s all about them. On some level these are insanely selfish, solipsistic people who are afraid of anyone who thinks differently from them — and that scientific expertise and experience amount to nothing more than “little letters.” Kurt Vonnegut once said that the keystone of a legalistic mind was the insistence that there were “two sides to every story” even in the face of opposing evidence. These guys are the true moral relativists.

It reminds me of reading an account of a former Creationist who was sent by her organization to infiltrate actual biology conferences at universities, expecting to find some juicy information they could use to undermine godless secularism. She was shocked to discover that 99.9% of all the lectures were about science, and not how to destroy organized religion or spread "evolutionist" propaganda. It was a key experience in making her realize that her peers were totally bonkers.

That is hilarious. I’m sure that in the eyes of her former peers she fell victim to the evolutionists’ insidious brainwashing unawares.

Wait. So, are you saying that secularism is liberalism, and faith is postmodern?

You know Mark, the more I learn about different faiths the more I’m beginning to wonder if interpreting the Bible is comparable to interpreting the constitution. All of these things do follow rules and systems but at the end of the day they rest on one person’s subjective assessment about what was the "Core" message of the text.

It might represent better the dichotomy between fundamentalists and conventional Christians to compare it to the divergence of...
How 19-year-old activist Zack Kopplin is making life hell for Louisiana’s creationists

I just watched this video (this was one of the vids posted in the article), and @ 1:00, look at the lady wearing the white sweater. The facepalm is priceless, made my day actually.

That woman is far more magnanimous than I would be in that situation.

The first problem the creationists like this dumbshit make is in believing evolution is some linear path from single-celled organism to full-fledged human. Like they think the Simpsons intro where homer turns from fish to lizard to dinosaur to small mammal to larger mammal to human is a first-hand count of how it works.

Go check out the beef industry, it’s a “prime” example of evolution at work. Germans evolved a cow with twice the meat of a regular cow. We’ve been evolving animals since we started walking, wolves to dogs for one example. Anything harvest for food is another.

Forcing either side to accept the other’s as absolute truth in a vacuum of evidence is nothing short of “intellectual rape”. Yeah, there, I said it... Rape... Now deal with it. :-)

Creationism is not science, it is religious studies at best. It doesn't belong in science. Until relatively recently (during early 20th century Progressivism) was there even a desire or need to argue that science canceled out spiritual belief or visa versa.

stupidburneraccts
yeah agreeing with thunderevermore on this one. I personally believe that children should learn about all of the major religions as a point of social study and philosophy. But to lump them in with hard sciences like biology and chemistry is absolutely criminal.

Darkcraft and 48 others...

32 participants

Frankie89
I'm from Italy and my country's got a shitload of problem. But when I read that in the USA, the great land where lots of my people migrated to in search of some fortune, some dumb fucks are discussing about creationism I feel a lot more lighter and not so sad for the conditions of my country. I mean even we know that creationism is bullcrap. And we have the Pope! And even him probably thinks creationism is for dumb fucks.

Temperance
You have Mignini and his bizarre Satanist theories. From where I sit, elected officials having ridiculous religious beliefs isn't uniquely American.

Sajanas1
Don't feel too good, your country just jailed scientists for not predicting an earthquake. On a less flippant note, how are you taught evolution in Italy? I really didn't get much of it until the 9th grade, but I really didn't get anything in depth till I went to a specialized science and math school.

To further stupidburneraccts' statement, this isn't about which is greater, science or religion. It is about public — and private via the voucher system — schools receiving government (whether state or federal) funding and teaching religion as fact when there is a separation of Church and state. The creationist movement seeks to cancel out scientific facts and theories. As I mentioned in another thread, while yes, Newton, Galileo, et al, were Christians, they did not let their religion blind them from scientific fact or discovery. Nor did it cause them to deny scientific fact. In fact, Galileo was excommunicated in the 17th century for scientific theories that contrasted with the Church and was subsequently placed under house arrest. This did not cause him to waiver in his faith in either his religion or his scientific theory. Religious beliefs vary wildly, especially in Christianity, because religion/religious texts are open to interpretation. There is a time and a place for religion, but it's not in a science class in a publicly funded school.

Joz Jonlin
Personally, I believe that creationism or intelligent design should be taught in the school. I'm not talking about religion. There...
are legitimate theories out there postulating that we might even be a computer creation, that we're all just lines of code. That theory is just as valid as the Big Bang theory. Why? Well, because we really don't know how the universe was created. We have ideas, and we postulate theories, but I'm not sure we will ever be able to prove one way or another how the universe truly came to be. Anyone who tells you otherwise is lying, deluded, or trying to sell you something. So, leave the Intelligent Design law in place and teach all the other creationist views out there. Oh, you say those other ideas aren't science? Well, science hasn't been able to prove how the universe came to be, either, so drop the scientific snobbery and throw out some other ideas.

Remember, when most theories are first thrown out, there is a general process which occurs.

The process of acceptance will pass through the usual four stages:

1. This is worthless nonsense;
2. This is an interesting, but perverse, point of view;
3. This is true, but quite unimportant;
4. I always said so.

Evolution is not the same thing as the big bang theory, they do not address the same issue.

Evolution is a fact and a scientific theory. evolution via natural selection does not, and has never claimed to, ever, "describe how the universe was created"

the rest of your post fails because you dont understand what you're talking about because you conflate origin stories of myths with abiogenesis and evolution. its not scientific snobbery its you being unable to understand the conversation
How 19-year-old activist Zack Kopplin is making life hell for Louisiana's creationists

michaelintoronto

lady teach this in your basement to your own brats

1/15/13 5:08pm