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Survey Indicates Science Teachers Feel Pressure to Teach Nonscientific Alternatives to Evolution

ARLINGTON, VA, March 24, 2005—The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) today released results of an informal survey to gauge how much pressure, if any, science educators feel regarding teaching about evolution in the science classroom. The survey is being released a week before the start of the NSTA National Convention in Dallas on March 31. More than 12,000 science educators will convene there to address important issues in science education, including evolution. When asked if they feel pressured to include creationism, intelligent design, or other nonscientific alternatives to evolution in their science classroom, 31% of teachers responding said they did. When asked from whom, teachers indicated most of the pressure is coming from students (22%) and parents (20%). When asked if they feel pushed to de-emphasize or omit evolution or evolution-related topics from their curriculum, 30% agreed, indicating the most pressure is coming from students and parents (18% each). Very few respondents indicated that pressure is being exerted by administrators or principals (5% and 3% respectively). “A teacher’s job is to foster a deep understanding of science in students and help them better understand the natural world around us. But something is not right when science educators feel pressure to teach a variety of religious or nonscience viewpoints. It’s not fair to our students to give them anything less than good science,” said Gerry Wheeler, NSTA Executive Director. NSTA also gauged educators’ ability to discuss the issue with parents and other community members. When asked if they feel well prepared to explain the reasons why it is important for students to understand evolution, a strong 85% said they did, with only 11% indicating they did not. When asked how successful they have been at helping parents and others understand the reasons why it is important for students to understand evolution, more than 62% said they were successful, with only 5% indicating they were not.

“It’s encouraging that teachers report success in helping parents and others understand the importance of evolution,” said Anne Tweed, NSTA President and former science teacher at Cherry Creek School District in Englewood, Colorado. “Science educators are well qualified to explain why evolution is the foundation of science, but they don’t necessarily feel comfortable in the role of community advocate. We are encouraging science teachers to consider playing a more vocal and visible role in this dialogue. Science teachers must be

prepared to respond clearly to community questions about evolution to stem the progress being made by anti-evolution groups.”

NSTA is working to support science teachers nationwide as they face this issue. The National Congress on Science Education, comprised of top leaders from NSTA’s State/Province Chapters and Associated Groups, will address the challenges to the teaching of evolution at a meeting this summer. The association is also seeking ways to engage and energize its members across the country.

“The fact is that the vocal minority is picking and choosing from a laundry list of nonscientific concepts and demanding that they be taught in the science classroom. This does nothing to raise the bar in science education and everything to lower it,” said Wheeler.

Finally, when asked if teachers think they must de-emphasize or omit from their lessons the term “evolution” so as not to draw attention to it, 74% disagreed, while about 19% agreed. And more than 72% of educators responding to the survey indicated they are aware of the positions taken by the National Academy of Sciences and other top scientific organizations on the teaching of evolution.

The informal survey was conducted in March via NSTA Express, NSTA’s weekly e-mail communiqué. More than 1,050 teachers participated in the survey. The majority, 51%, are high school teachers, while 26% are from middle level; 12%, college/graduate level; and 6%, elementary.

The Arlington, VA-based National Science Teachers Association is the largest professional organization in the world promoting excellence and innovation in science teaching and learning for all. NSTA’s current membership includes more than 55,000 science teachers, science supervisors, administrators, scientists, business and industry representatives, and others involved in science education.