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Remarks of John Calvert to the Kansas State Board of Education – May 11, 1999

I am John Calvert, a resident of Lake Quivira, Kansas. I am here today to speak only on behalf of my two grandchildren, J.D. and Katie Robb, who attend public schools in Iola, Kansas. JD is a sixth grader and Katie is in the third grade. Although I am a lawyer, I represent no other group or organization at this hearing and I am not here on behalf of my law firm. Although I earn my living practicing law, I am also a geologist and have pursued that discipline for many years as an avocation. Being a geologist, I find no fault with most geologic estimates concerning the age of the earth and the times at which various stages of life appear to have come into being. I am not a creationist as that term is frequently used in the press and by the scientific community to describe one who believes in a literal and narrow interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2. However, I do believe that life has resulted from design rather than by chance. Having given you my background, let me get to my remarks.

What is the critical question in this debate? First, I don't believe that the real question in our debate is whether life has evolved. I will guess that most do believe that the complexity of life has progressed over time. Thus, the real question is not whether life has evolved. Rather, the debate is about the cause of that evolution. There are two major and fundamentally conflicting theories on this subject. One theory is that life has resulted from natural selection fueled by random mutations - a mechanism of chance. The other theory is that the observed complexity of organisms strongly suggests that life results from design. For example, I believe there is a scientific consensus that the earliest cell that populated the earth 3.5 billion years ago was nothing less than a very sophisticated information processing system, one that contained a cpu, a memory, an application program, and input and output devices - all the ingredients necessary to process information. It has been credibly argued that it is statistically improbable for this computer to have come into being by chance and that it is more likely to be the result of design. So the real question in this debate may be stated as follows:

Does life result from natural selection fueled by chance mutations or by design?

Stating the question more simply, in plain English we may phrase the question as follows:

Does life result from chance or design?

Having isolated the point of our debate, we should then ask ourselves whether this question is one that is appropriate for school? The courts have indicated that if it is a question of religion it does not belong in the school, but if it is a question of fact then it is a question appropriate for scholastic discussion. The question then becomes: is our question one of fact or religion? I think we can all conclude that a question which seeks a scientific explanation of the origin of life is a question of fact. It must be or it would not be addressed in the text books. If it is a question of religion, then there should be no mention of what fuels evolutionary change - the inquiry should stop there. However, when our teaching attempts to explain what fuels evolution it addresses the question - the teaching raises the issue of what has fueled or caused the development of life.

Since we allow the text books to address the issue of what accounts for life, then it must be a question of fact, otherwise we are allowing science to dabble in religion - and that is not allowed. Accordingly, I believe the question of whether life results from chance or design is one of fact and is one that our children should consider. The question facing you as the Board of Education is how the teaching should address the question of whether life is the result of chance or design. What standards should be applied to the debate. This is an awesome responsibility. It is one that you are properly taking very seriously. I can not think of any more important question that Katie and JD will confront in their education than whether life results from chance or design. So in laying the ground rules for discussing this issue with my grandchildren, what should guide you?

- * You should make sure that credible scientific evidence on both sides of the issue is disclosed. Furthermore, you should require that the disclosure include the scientific pros and cons of each side of the debate.

- * You should also ask yourselves whether discussion on either side of the question is being improperly suppressed.

Although I have not had an opportunity to review the fourth draft of the Standards I have reviewed the third draft. In my opinion, the standards reflected by that draft entirely ignore the design side of the debate on this critical issue. In fact I believe it has been intentionally excluded. That leaves Katie and JD with only one choice. If I was selling you stock, I could go to jail if I disclosed only the benefits of the proposed investment and not the risks. If I am selling stock I am required by law to inform investors of all material facts that might influence their decision. Is not an investment in life more important than an investment in stock? The proposed science standards are devoid of any discussion of the scientific basis for the conclusion that life has derived from design rather than by chance. Why is this discussion missing? Why are we not informing our children about the factual circumstantial evidence and statistical studies that support the theory that life derives from design?

If one seriously considers the evidence that does exist, I don't think you can conclude that the notion is non scientific or otherwise lacking in evidentiary merit. The evidence of life being caused by design is far more substantial than the evidence that Nicole

Simpson died by design rather than by accident. In that case even the defense agreed that the circumstantial evidence was sufficient to show that she died by design rather than by accident. It did not take a rocket scientist to reach that conclusion. The case for design is compelling. If you think not, then look at the polls. Is there anyone in this room today that actually believes that life is the result of chance rather than design? Why is this discussion missing from the standards ?I think the discussion is missing because many have consciously or unconsciously incorrectly labeled “design” as a “religion.” By incorrectly labeling design as religion, scientists who wish to promote the other side of the argument need not contend with the competing theory.(N1)

This is a bootstrap argument that is a catch 22 if you follow it. I have no problem letting people look for alternative explanations for the origin of life. However, I do have a problem with them telling Katie and JD that their chance based theories are the only objectively sound ones that may be considered. Ultimately, the answer to the question as to whether life is derived by chance or design is really a very fundamental question of fact. I agree that once you answer the question, either way, you open the door to much religious and philosophical discussion. However, answering that question of fact does not in itself require any theological or religious thinking, inquiry or evidence. Accordingly, I believe you should, as a Board, acknowledge in the standards:

1. That a debate exists as to whether Life is derived from chance or design;
2. That teachings should encourage instruction that discloses credible scientific evidence and theories about both sides of that issue;
3. That significant religious and philosophical issues arise from any conclusion on the issue; and
4. That the teachings should not encourage discussions with regard to the religious and philosophical implications of either side of the issue.

I have only briefly reviewed the standards and do not at this time have specific suggestions. However, I believe substantive revisions are probably necessary to incorporate all of the above points. Thank you for listening and providing this forum for public debate on this most important issue.

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Note 1:

“Similarly, the existence of bacteria and other living beings, all of which are much more complex than a watch, implies the existence of a creator, as only a higher being could design creatures so fit for their function. We will not take this escape route in our book, for we are committed to seeking an answer within the realm of science.....We must look for another solution if we wish to remain within science.”[Shapiro, Origins, at 119 (1986)].