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Evolution

A Decisive Election in a Town Roiled Over Intelligent Design

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)

DOVER, Pa., Nov. 9 - In the end, voters here said they were tired of being portrayed as a northern version of Dayton, [Tenn.](#), a Bible Belt hamlet where 80 years ago a biology teacher named John Scopes was tried for illegally teaching evolution.

On Tuesday, the residents of Dover ousted all eight school board members running for re-election who had put their town in a global spotlight and their school district on trial for being the first in the nation to introduce intelligent design as an alternative to evolution in science class. In swept the full Dover Cares slate of eight candidates, which had coalesced to oppose the change in the science curriculum.

"I think the people of Dover are tired of the attention over such a minuscule thing and they want a change," said Lonny Langione, who had served on the board in years past and supported the challengers. "A lot of the people I talked to were upset because the school board came to using taxpayer money to advance their own agenda."

Before it took up intelligent design, Dover was a typical American town experiencing typical growing pains: family farmers selling out to developers, fields sprouting McMansions, crowded classrooms, S.U.V.'s speeding down roads built for tractors.

By wading into the great reawakening of a national debate over the teaching of evolution, the town of Dover was diverted from bread-and-butter issues, and found itself divided in surprising ways.

The lines were not neatly drawn. Christians who belonged to the same church found themselves on opposite sides. Fathers quarreled with sons. Next-door neighbors posted dueling lawn signs. Registered Republicans cast their party affiliations aside to run with the victorious Dover Cares slate when election rules forced all eight of its candidates to run on the Democratic line.

Voters themselves crossed party lines to vote for the candidates they favored. If they had not, the school board incumbents, all of whom ran on the Republican line, would probably have prevailed in a district

where 70 percent of voters are registered Republicans.

In the end, the election was close. Only 26 votes separated the winner of one seat from his rival.

"I'm surprised that we won all eight seats," said the Rev. Warren Eshbach, the spokesman for Dover Cares, whose son, Robert, was among the winners. "It shows what good bipartisanship can do."

The incumbents did not return phone calls seeking comment.

The election came only four days after closing arguments in a six-week trial of the Dover school board and administrators in Federal District Court in Harrisburg, about 25 miles to the northeast. Eleven parents had sued the Dover board on constitutional grounds, saying that intelligent design was an outgrowth of religious creationism. The case will be decided by Judge John E. Jones III, who said he expected to rule by early January.

The majority of voters rejected the board's argument that it was only trying to expose students to a variety of theories about the development of organisms. The policy did not tell teachers to teach intelligent design, just to mention it in a statement to be read to students.

The statement said that evolution is "not a fact" and that students can explore intelligent design by reading "Of Pandas and People" in the school library.

The debate over Darwin versus intelligent design has played out in places like Myers Barbershop, where the owner, Barry Myers, has been trimming the hair of Dover residents for 37 years.

"I just don't think we got here by some Big Bang," said Mr. Myers, who said he voted for the incumbents. "I think if they have the right people to teach it, it should be taught."

Teaching intelligent design, he said, would help bring a "moral compass" to the classroom.

His son, Matt Myers, 34, expressed a decidedly different view, saying: "I'm glad the board's been voted out. I don't think science teachers are qualified to teach intelligent design."

Matt Myers said intelligent design should be offered as an elective, a position advocated by several Dover Cares candidates.

The campaign was hard fought and at times nasty. Board members sent out a mass mailing accusing the Dover Cares slate of allying with the American Civil Liberties Union, a group, it said in the mailing, that had also defended terrorists and the North American Man/Boy Love Association. The A.C.L.U. is representing the plaintiffs against the board.

Bryan Rehm, a member of the Dover Cares slate and a plaintiff in the lawsuit, said, "That's the level they were willing to sink to."

The suit will not be affected by the election in the short term, lawyers involved in it said. The judge must still issue a ruling on the intelligent design policy as it stands. But the new school board, which takes office in early December, could decide to revoke the current policy.

Terry Aguayo and Gary Gately contributed reporting for this article.

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