Palin unlikely to push evolution issue

The vice presidential nominee faces scrutiny over issues like evolution.

By NICOLE DOBO
Daily Record/Sunday News
Article Last Updated: 09/07/2008 06:43:56 AM EDT

In the days after Republican presidential candidate Arizona Sen. John McCain named Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin his running mate, many are learning about her and her positions on political issues.

The nation learned in recent weeks about Palin's personal life and her stances on issues such as abortion, gay marriage and teaching evolution, an issue that put Dover Area School District in the national spotlight in 2005.

During a 2006 gubernatorial debate in Alaska, Palin was asked if she supported teaching an alternative to evolution.

"Teach both," Palin said at the televised debate, according to a news story in the Anchorage Daily News. "You know, don't be afraid of information. Healthy debate is so important, and it's so valuable in our schools. I am a proponent of teaching both."

It's not clear if she was asked specifically about creationism or intelligent design.

After the debate, Palin told the newspaper she would not push the state board of education to add evolution alternatives to the mandatory curriculum, nor would she base appointments to the board on the candidates' views on the issue.

Since the December 2006 debate, the issue hasn't come up, several educators in Alaska said. The state did have a controversy when it was suggested evolution should be removed from the science curriculum, but that was before Palin was governor.

"As far as I know, Gov. Palin has not been aggressive on this front," Matt Olson, a biology professor at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, said in an e-mail. "Up to now she has not pushed an agenda to teach creationism in public schools."

Palin, a self-described "hard-core conservative," hasn't attempted to push her views about social issues into policy as governor.

"She has basically ignored social issues, period," Gregg Erickson, an economist and columnist with the Alaska Budget Report told The Associated Press.

It's not clear if Palin believes in evolution, or if her stance on encouraging debate of evolution has changed since 2006. McCain and Sen. Barack Obama have said they believe in evolution.

Responding to a request for clarification of Palin's stance, a spokesman sent a list of news stories from when she was governor.
Based on quotes in those stories, it appears Palin believes children should be allowed to talk about alternatives to evolution in class, but does not believe creationism or intelligent design should be part of a mandatory curriculum.

If she is elected, it's unlikely Palin will make the debate over a "politically sticky" issue such as teaching evolution a focus of her vice presidency, said John A. Altman, an associate professor of political science at York College.

"When you get to that level, I don't think that's going to be an issue," he said.

Based on Palin's acceptance speech last week, it seems she is setting herself up to work on energy concerns and advocating for special needs, Altman said, rather than taking on adding creationism or intelligent design to classrooms as an alternative to evolution.

Alan Bonsell, former president of the Dover Area School Board, said he believes that intelligent design should be part of a rounded education.

He agrees with Palin that more information, rather than less, is important, he said. All sides should be presented in class no matter the subject, he said.

"Basically, I am for critical thinking," he said.

The judge in the Dover case ruled that intelligent design was essentially the same as creationism, so it violates the establishment clause and cannot be taught in science class.

For Carol Brown, a former school board member who voted against adding the intelligent design statement to biology classes, it would be troubling to see the issue re-emerge, she said. It is too divisive an issue, she said.

"I would be dismayed if this became a national issue," she said. "We've been there, done that, and I really don't want to see it happen to the country."

Same As Creationism?

The Discovery Institute, a leading proponent of intelligent design, says it is not the same as creationism. Intelligent design, the institute says, doesn't try to identify the designer, while creationism holds that God is the creator.

However, U.S. Middle District Court Judge John E. Jones III ruled in the Dover case that intelligent design amounted to the same thing as creationism -- it is a religious view, not a scientific theory.

Why Dover Mattered

It was the most significant court challenge to evolution since 1987, and it was the first time a court had been asked to rule whether intelligent design could be part of public school science class. Jones' decision is not legally binding outside the Dover district, but it is regularly cited in ongoing discussions about whether intelligent design should be taught in public schools.
INTELLIGENT DESIGN

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, the Republican candidate for vice president, was asked during a gubernatorial debate in 2006 whether intelligent design should be taught in public schools.

"Teach both," she said. "You know, don't be afraid of information. Healthy debate is so important, and it's so valuable in our schools."

However, she said that as governor she would not push the state to add creation-based alternatives to the curriculum, the Anchorage Daily News reported. "I won't have religion as a litmus test, or anybody's personal opinion on evolution or creationism," she said.

U.S. Middle District Court Judge John E. Jones III ruled in the 2005 trial in Dover that there was "overwhelming evidence" to establish that intelligent design "is a religious view, a mere relabeling of creationism, and not a scientific theory." Thus, it cannot be taught in public school science classes, he ruled.

John West, Discovery Institute spokesman, said the ruling was "an attempt by an activist federal judge to stop the spread of a scientific idea and even to prevent criticism of Darwinian evolution through government-imposed censorship rather than open debate."

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

--- Des Moines, Iowa, school board candidates were asked during a joint appearance Aug. 28 whether they would support teaching intelligent design in science class. Five said no, one said he favors "freedom of thought" and another did not specifically answer the question but previously had indicated he did not think it should be taught in science class.

--- In February, Florida's education department changed its curriculum to require public schools to teach evolution.

--- The Butteville Union Elementary School District in California on Aug. 13 discussed adding intelligent design to the seventh-grade science curriculum.

Sources: The Des Moines (Iowa) Register, The New York Times, Mount Shasta (Calif.) Area Newspapers