



## Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

**Petition Number:** [PE01530](#)

**Main Petitioner:** Spencer Fildes on behalf of Scottish Secular Society

**Subject:** Creationism in schools

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to issue official guidance to bar the presentation in Scottish publicly funded schools of separate creation and of Young Earth doctrines as viable alternatives to the established science of evolution, common descent, and deep time.

### Background

The petition asks for specific government guidance that creationism should not be taught as science. It is not asking that discussion of different world beliefs is curtailed.

#### ***Curriculum for Excellence***

The broad outline of the curriculum is set out in guidance published by Education Scotland. It leaves considerable scope for teachers to decide on the detail. The content of national qualifications is set by the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Principles and Practice for science includes among the purposes of studying science that children and young people, “demonstrate a secure knowledge and understanding of the big ideas and concepts of the sciences.” It does not however list what those ‘big ideas’ are, although it might be expected that evolution would be considered a ‘big idea.’

Education Scotland published “concept development in science” which explains how evolution is introduced around P5 (second level)  
[http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/Conceptdevelopmentinthescienc es2\\_tcm4-550290.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/Conceptdevelopmentinthescienc es2_tcm4-550290.pdf)

Evolution is introduced at the second level (**SCN 2-01a**), where learners relate the physical and behavioural characteristics of living things to their survival and extinction. They develop their understanding of the diversity of plants and animals by exploring a range of resources, including the local environment. They can explore simple adaptations which have taken place in plants and animals, such as features that allow flight and swimming, feeding mechanisms, and plant adaptations

for drought or living on water. The concept of evolution can be introduced by studying the evidence of fossil records to develop an appreciation of organisms which have become extinct. Learners could study features which did not allow these organisms to survive in the changing environment e.g. flightless birds such as the dodo; and dinosaurs. Examples of living things under threat due to environmental changes can also be discussed.

### ***Creationist beliefs in Scottish Schools***

In September 2013, the head teachers at a South Lanarkshire primary school were removed from their posts following publicity in the media about classroom assistants handing out books that supported creationism. The classroom assistants were members of the Church of Christ and had worked at the school for 8 years. See:

<http://www.scotsman.com/news/education/creationist-row-headteachers-removed-from-school-1-3091562>

### ***Guidelines in England***

There is far more detailed prescription of the curriculum at national level in England, and the outline of the curriculum is statutory. It is necessary to consider the guidelines on creationism within this wider context.

In 2007, [guidance](#) was published for maintained schools in England. Similar provision has since been extended to cover academies and free schools. The 2007 guidance states:

Creationism and intelligent design are not part of the science National Curriculum programmes of study and should not be taught as science. However, there is a real difference between teaching “x” and teaching *about* “x”. Any questions about creationism and intelligent design which arise in science lessons, for example as a result of media coverage, could provide the opportunity to explain or explore why they are not considered to be scientific theories and, in the right context, why evolution is considered to be a scientific theory.

In September 2014, the new primary curriculum included a new unit on evolution. See [British Humanist Society](#) for further information on the campaign against presenting creationism as science.

### **Scottish Government Action**

In answer to a PQ by Patrick Harvie, MSP asking for specific guidance on creationism, Michael Russell said:

The curriculum in Scotland is not based on statutory prescription. It is for schools, in light of the curriculum framework within which they operate, to determine how best to organise the syllabus.

However, there are no plans to include intelligent design within Curriculum for Excellence guidance and there is no evidence to

suggest that intelligent design is being taught in science classes (PQ S3W-39797)

In answer to a more recent question about the measures which are in place to prevent the teaching of creationism in Scotland's schools, Alasdair Allan, MSP said he expected teachers to use their professional judgement, referring to support materials published by Education Scotland (S4W-1754, answered 29<sup>th</sup> October 2013).

During education questions on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2013, Minister for Schools, Alasdair Allan, MSP and Patrick Harvie, MSP had an exchange on the issue of creationism. The Minister said:

the content of biology and physics courses, for example, promotes none of the ideas that he listed. I therefore have complete confidence in our teachers to deal objectively with contentious issues as they arise. I make it clear that the science curriculum in Scotland is not dictated by any of the agendas that the member suggested influence it (Official Report 21<sup>st</sup> November 2013).

A Scottish Government spokesperson was quoted in the Sunday Herald on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2014 as saying:

“Teachers, head teachers and professional educationalists decide what is taught in Scotland’s schools. This longstanding tradition that politicians should not determine the curriculum is highly valued and remains a cornerstone of Scottish education.”

### **Scottish Parliament Action**

Patrick Harvie, MSP and John Farquhar Munro, MSP have asked PQs on this issue, the answers to which are summarised above under ‘Scottish Government Action.’

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