LETTERS

Examining the evidence

Readers suggest that "the problem with environmental education" (right, green education) might not be one of "biased" agendas so much as lack of teacher training or "harassment of science teachers." Is "exciting progress" being made in the field of fusion, or are there "unresolved structural integrity problems" that would preclude a sustained reaction? Web sites that might be helpful to neuroscientists are listed. Research on defractive lenses for x-rays and neutrinos is described. And "how the brain responds to increased comprehension demand" is discussed.

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Green Education

The problem with environmental education is not that the teaching is poor, but that in many schools it is not being taught at all. (K. F. Schmidt, "Green education under fire," News & Comment, 13 Dec., p. 1828). Although ecological and environmental principles are key disciplines in biology, modern science textbooks typically devote only one or two chapters, usually at the very end, to these vital areas. Many teachers, lacking training in how to teach this relatively new science, often omit ecology entirely.

No doubt some teachers use the "bully pulpit" of the classroom to further their own, sometimes biased, agendas. Responsible teachers, however, use real-world issues to advance scientific understanding. The environment is as much a part of young people's lives as their own bodies, the food they eat, or the genetic principles that govern their lives. News of the environment—whether it concerns endangered species, water quality, deer overpopulation, forest management, an expanding ozone hole, or, yes, global warming—touches us every day. Students will not let teachers ignore these issues, nor should they.

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There is much bitter irony in the juxtaposition of Philip H. Abelson's excellent editorial "Preparing children for the future" (13 Dec., p. 1819) and the following News & Comment article "Green education under fire." Much "green" material in the public schools could use a great deal of improvement and correction, but much of the critique of green education is part of a sustained campaign by logging, mining, chemical manufacturing, and other such corporations. These corporations, or at least their champions in the educational arena, are attempting to censor the content of classes and textbooks, to eliminate all that might be taken as even indirectly suggesting that the activities of these corporations damage the environment. Some overzealous opponents of environmental education have resorted to what can only be described as intimidation—including threats of lawsuits and firings.

This new problem joins itself to the continuing problem of harassment of science teachers by creationists and racists. Science teachers must also deal with media that hype every lunatic fringe book that comes along presenting "balanced" teams of "experts" who are portrayed as equally competent and representative. (Do half the scientists in the United States really believe that Elvis was sighted last week in a flying saucer?) In general, the public school science teacher finds himself or herself targeted by increasingly large numbers of increasingly angry parents, all wishing to impose their views dogmatically on the children, and all agreeing that free inquiry and unbiased examination of the evidence are absolutely deadly threats to mortality and society.

There are no easy answers to these problems. The AAAS has to address these issues if science education is to survive—let alone flourish—in the United States.

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