

EDUCATION

Climate Miseducation

How oil and gas representatives manipulate
the standards for courses and textbooks,
from kindergarten to 12th grade

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try stopped the practice of whaling for blubber that could be turned into fuel. “Oil and gas literally saved the whales,” she said.

The industry also had a new champion on the board: Will Hickman, who had just been elected in November 2020 for a district outside of Houston. Hickman’s experience in education included serving on parent groups at his kids’ schools, coaching community sports and teaching Sunday school. He’d held the same day job since 2004: senior legal counsel at Shell Oil.

In the January hearing, Hickman’s first, his opening question was where in the proposed standards he could find the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of energy. The next day he offered an example that might be raised in class: “Everyone thinks renewable power’s a great idea, and Germany adopted it on a large scale,” he said. “But the cost-benefit—it ended up raising their power prices to about 2.5 times our power prices.”

The writing committees had already included a reference to cost-benefit analysis in the “scientific and engineering practices” section of each of the elective courses, and the standard for the environmental science course had a second mention. But at the next board hearings, in April, Hickman pressed for more. Another member, Rebecca Bell-Metereau, a professor of English and film at Texas State University, who had just been elected to represent Austin, pressed back: “The very phrase ‘costs and benefits’ places the primary emphasis on money, not on society or well-being or human health.” The board nonetheless approved a motion by Hickman to add another mention of costs and benefits, to aquatic sciences.

Moulton began showing up at the board hearings with additional proposed changes. His colleagues on the writing group had accepted some of his suggestions but not all of them, so he wanted the board to consider adding them as amendments. In the final hearing in June, board member Hardy asked Moulton if he’d heard the “newest stuff that’s been coming out on climate,” which, she said, was that the climate crisis was not unfolding as scientists had predicted. Moulton suggested that the consensus about warming had been exaggerated by scientists in pursuit of grant money.

Hardy began proposing amendments word for word from Moulton’s suggestions. This elicited an outcry from Bell-Metereau. “Do you not think that if someone’s area of work is in fossil fuels that they might have some bias on this issue?” she asked Hardy. “It might be that I have a bias for the fossil-fuel industry,” Hardy answered.

Bell-Metereau and others on the board threatened to delay the entire adoption if Hardy insisted on moving the changes forward. Ultimately Hardy dropped the proposals. But Moulton and the council had already succeeded in important ways: The new elective standards had multiple references to cost-benefit analysis. The terms “renewable energy” and “nonrenewable energy” were removed in several places. The single mention of the effects of burning fossil fuels in the old standards was gone, and the strongest description of climate change had been weakened.

THE CLIMATE EDUCATION ADVOCATES had failed to install a robust presentation of the science surrounding the climate crisis in any of the high school core or elective classes, as they had watched the Texas Energy Council volunteers achieve one goal after another. But they held out hope for the K–8 standards. Nearly every middle schooler takes the same sciences, and the classes cover weather and climate systems, an obvious and effective place to discuss the crisis for a generation of students that would have to live with its consequences.

“Inactivism” doesn’t deny human-caused climate change but downplays it, deflects blame for it and seeks to delay action on it.

While retaining Focus on Cost-Benefit Analysis, it is necessary to emphasize equally, if not more, Renewable Energy Sources for Survival of Living Beings (Particularly Human Beings, who are endowed with a Perfect Microcosm in their Brains to Cope with the Impending Ravages of Nature (Macrocsm)).

On a 96-degree day at the end of August 2021, the board held a public hearing on the K–8 standards, in person and virtually. The writing groups had labored over the drafts, adding a single passage mentioning climate change. Eighth grade science students, the draft declared, would be expected to “use scientific evidence to describe how human activities can influence climate, such as the release of greenhouse gases.” One writing group, which included the executive director of a natural gas foundation, had also appended a note stating it had not been able to reach consensus on a proposal to add another line: “Research and describe the costs and benefits of reducing greenhouse gas emissions versus global energy poverty.”

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At the hearing, two of the professional content advisers who had reviewed the standards gave the board radically different opinions. Ron Wetherington, a retired anthropology professor from Southern Methodist University nominated by Pérez-Díaz, argued that the climate standards needed significant strengthening. Among other things, he advocated that the word “can” be dropped from the phrase “describe how human activities can influence climate.” “Can” implies that something is a possibility, but an abundance of evidence shows that the influence is already taking place. He also asked the board to add an expectation that students explore efforts to mitigate the crisis. Because students would learn that it’s happening, he posited, they should learn what people are doing to fix it.

Gloria Chatelain, a longtime educator and CEO of her own consulting firm called Simple Science Solutions, who had been nominated by Hardy and Cargill, stood in absolute opposition. She began her testimony by praising the “absolutely amazing job” the Texas Energy Council had already done in improving the

