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WASHINGTON (ABP)—Two civil-liberties watchdog groups have filed the first known lawsuit to prevent public schools from teaching the theory of "intelligent design."

Critics of the theory, including supporters of evolution, call it "junk science" and say it is a back-door way to teach creationism. Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the American Civil Liberties Union filed a federal lawsuit against the Dover, Pa., school board to bar the district from teaching intelligent design.

The theory argues that an "intelligent agent" guided the development of life on Earth, using that assertion to explain alleged gaps or inconsistencies in the theory of evolution. Conservative evangelical Christians have been intelligent design's main promoters.

Many mainstream scientists, including many Christian biologists and

anthropologists, have criticized intelligent design as pseudo-science.

On Oct. 18, the Dover Area School District Board passed, by a 6-3 vote, a resolution requiring students to "be made aware of gaps/problems" in evolutionary theory. The district—in a small town near the state capital of Harrisburg—then produced a statement that ninth-grade biology teachers at Dover High School would have to read to their classes.

The statement asserts that "gaps in the theory (of evolution) exist for which there is no evidence" and points to an intelligent-design text, "Of Pandas and People," as available for students who "would like to explore this view."

The groups filed the lawsuit on behalf of 11 Dover parents who oppose the teaching of intelligent-design theory in their children's classrooms. It charges that such teaching violates the First Amendment's ban on government endorsement of religious views.

The Supreme Court has previously ruled that public schools could not teach creationism, which is the belief that God created the world—according to many advocates, in six literal, 24-hour days several thousand years ago.

"Intelligent design is a non-scientific argument or assertion, made in opposition to the scientific theory of evolution, that an intelligent, supernatural actor has intervened in the history of life, and that life 'owes its origin to a master intellect,'" the suit charges.

Dover science teachers opposed the policy at the time of the board's vote, and the three board members who voted against it later resigned in protest.

The suit further contends that "Of Pandas and People" was published by a group that promotes so-called "creation science" and Christianity, and that the school board's purpose in recommending it was religious.

"As far as we know, this is the first (legal) challenge of the intelligent-design concept being taught in science classes," said Americans United spokesman Joe Conn. Intelligent design is "clearly not coming from the science community; it's coming from ideological sources," he said.

A statement posted on the school district's website said that the schools' attorney was reviewing the lawsuit and that administrators would not comment on the case until the review was completed.

The Seattle-based Discovery Institute, which promotes intelligent design, nonetheless called the Dover school policy "misguided" and said it should be "withdrawn and rewritten."

"When we first read about the Dover policy, we publicly criticized it because according to published reports the intent was to mandate the teaching of intelligent design," said John West, associate director for the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, in a Dec. 14 press release. "Although we think discussion of intelligent design should not be prohibited, we don't think intelligent design should be required in public schools.

"What should be required is full disclosure of the scientific evidence for and against Darwin's theory," he continued.

The case is *Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District*.

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