

Opinion - School officials are still arguing about teaching climate change

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Really? We're *still* arguing about this?

5 Partisan sniping about whether human fuel-burning is warming the planet — about which there is no reasonable debate — and whether society should do anything about it feels more like 2003 than 2023. Yet officials in states such as Texas continue to fight a rearguard action against reality. July marked the hottest month ever recorded on Earth. This summer has tested Texas in particular, with record-breaking temperatures straining the state's electric power grid, forcing Texas to issue eight energy conservation requests in August. An extended blackout would have almost certainly meant widespread deaths. Yes, Texas always gets hot in the summer. But the severity and frequency of extreme heat will only increase as the world warms, driven by burning fossil fuel.

15 Contrast this reality with the debate on what to teach Texas students about climate change, currently raging on the state's board of education, a body with outsize power to decide not only what Texas students learn — but those in other states, too.

20 The board is considering which science textbooks Texas eighth graders can be given. Because the board approves which books can be used in the huge state, it can influence the national textbook market. State curriculum standards require only that textbooks note that human activities “can” influence climate. Since those standards were adopted, the board has drifted further right.

25 Will Hickman, a Republican board member who works as a senior legal counsel for the oil giant Shell, asked whether Texas textbooks should also discuss the benefits from burning fossil fuels, given that modern life is still powered by hydrocarbons such as oil and gas. Patricia Hardy, another board member, said at a board meeting that students should learn that fossil fuels and naturally occurring climatic changes can both lead to increasing temperatures, which would downplay conclusive research showing fossil fuel use is rapidly warming the planet.

30 Of course, the world still depends on fossil fuels; students should know what their parents are putting into their gas tanks and where the electricity comes from when they flip on the lights (still often natural gas or coal-fired power plants). But that requires a full and unvarnished exploration of the fossil-fuel economy's escalating costs, too.

35 Yet, Texas officials are not alone in their attempts to weaken climate education. Florida approved for use material from the conservative Prager University Foundation, which includes climate change denial videos. North Carolina lawmakers tried to replace a required earth science course, which includes instruction on climate change, with a computer science class. Utah's state school board barely mustered a majority to keep climate change as part of its state science curriculum.

40 Americans largely recognize that human activity is causing climate change, with 74 percent of people agreeing. This number should only grow. Schools can prepare a rising generation of students with facts about how their environment is changing. Or they can continue engaging in a desultory argument about reality that should have ended decades ago.