

Let Bamm-Bamm write science curriculum

- Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Giving Idaho's lawmakers a veto over agency rules presumably keeps the process accountable to you.

But you have to wonder sometimes if it just leads to more political mischief.

Case in point: Idaho's attempts to replace its outdated and vague public school science standards.

Beginning in 2015, a group of 14 science teachers, assisted by experts from Idaho National Laboratory, the University of Idaho and Boise State University, devised what Idaho students should be expected know about science at each grade level.

Before the standards could be adopted as a new state rule, the Legislature had to sign off.

That proved to be more difficult than you might expect.

After all, this is a place where the chairman of the House Resources and Conservation Committee, Rep. Dell Raybould, R-Rexburg, believes Rush Limbaugh knows more about climate change than NASA.

"Listen to Rush Limbaugh once in a while. See what he thinks about it. He'll tell you that this is just a bunch of nonsense," Raybould said.

Collectively, this is a group of politicians who preferred to disregard their own state constitution by passing Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll's bill to transform the Holy Bible into a public school text. Said Nuxoll, the Bible was "embedded" in the country's heritage.

Only Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's veto stopped it from becoming law.

And this is a place where a legislator, such as Rep. Lance Clow, R-Twin Falls, gets heartburn about expecting students to know that "human activities have significantly altered the biosphere, sometimes damaging or destroying natural habitats and causing the extinction of other species."

"Significantly?" Clow said. "Compared to what?"

So earlier this year, the proposed science standards went off to the legislative dustbin, leaving in place a series of 10-year-old measures that Boise School District science and social studies supervisor Christopher Taylor described to Idaho Education News' Clark Corbin as unsuitable in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) world.

"I feel the current science standards are very broad and there is precious little science in there, to be honest," Taylor said.

But your children will have to toil under them a bit longer. As The Associated Press' Kimberlee Kruesi reported last week, the new standards won't reach lawmakers until 2018. Only science is being so thoroughly scrutinized; classroom standards on English, mathematics, humanities and other subjects are on track to be submitted to lawmakers next January.

"We just want to make sure (the science standards are) fully vetted," says State Department of Education spokesman Jeff Church.

Surprised?

Ask science teachers and they'll talk about the scientific method - the testing of hypotheses with evidence and facts.

But a politician deals in the warm fuzzy world of religion, philosophy and popular opinion.

A science teacher will describe the theory of evolution as the best explanation yet for the presence of fossils.

Talk to some Idaho politicians and you might wind up with something just a notch or two more sophisticated than "The Flintstones' " Barney Rubble and Bamm-Bamm.

Someone who works with science will chronicle the expansion of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere since the burning of fossil fuels and its subsequent effect on the climate.

A politician will consult his corporate campaign contributors.

A science teacher will refer to carbon dating and astronomers in describing the Big Bang Theory and the age of the planet.

A politician might be tempted to check in with his religious-minded voting base.

So come 2018, people who teach or engage in science for a living will pursue standards that encourage students to indulge their curiosity, sort through facts and think for themselves.

First, however, they'll have to get past an elected leadership that seems more inclined to indoctrinate young people in whatever happens to be popular at the moment. - M.T.