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I spent last week at the National Science Teachers Association's [Summer Congress](#) [7]. This was my first Summer Congress, as I was recently elected to [NSTA](#) [8]'s Board as the Division Director of Research in Science Teaching. The Congress is also attended by teacher delegates from almost every state, so I had the great privilege of talking with science teachers from all over the US and Canada.

One of the unanticipated pleasures of the meeting was hearing English spoken in every regional accent; cadences I have greatly missed for many years. It was a reminder that like politics, all education is local. The people I met at the Congress are deeply networked in their home regions; they teach in unique communities, each with its own dynamics and challenges.

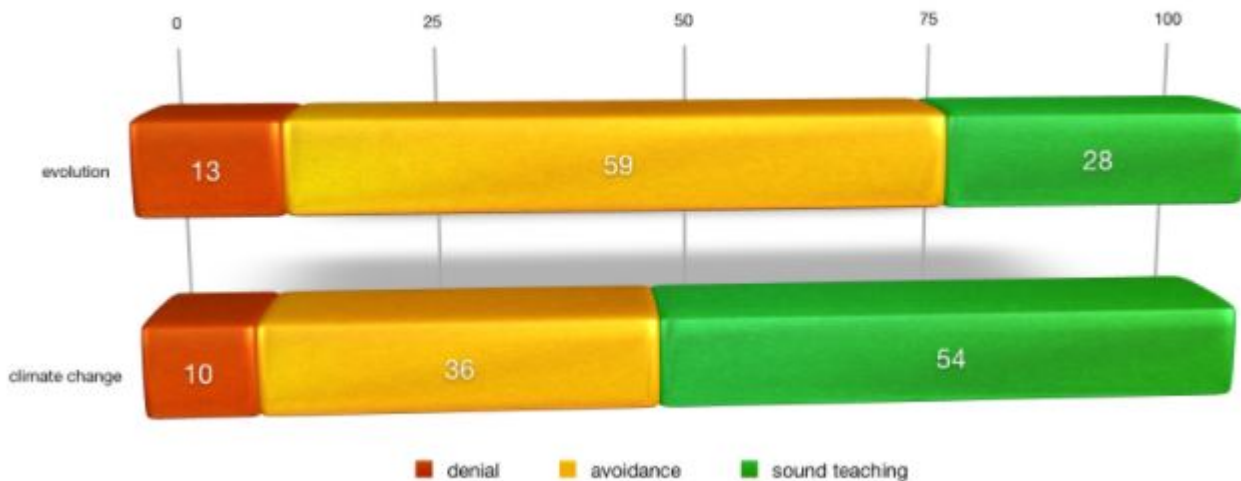
When people asked me where I was from, I told them I was in the process of leaving Iowa and moving to California. I met many people from Iowa, a healthy contingent from Illinois, and even a staff member from my high school, the Illinois Mathematics and Science [Academy](#) [9]. People were impressed that NCSE had gotten off the ground in Iowa, because they had heard education is very troubled there these days. And as you know from my previous stories, many teachers in Iowa are indeed struggling with big demands and [small budgets](#) [10].

lowan teachers are not alone. Many of the teachers I spoke with at the Congress struggled with annual budgets of less than a dollar a head for their students. The worst story came from Alaska, where a teacher from Juno received \$125 a year for her class. That budget would be grossly inadequate even to cover classroom supplies and lab equipment, but this teacher also had to feed her students. Many of her students receive free or reduced fee breakfast and lunch at the school, but what they receive is neither sufficient nor healthy. The free breakfast at my son's school was usually some kind of sugared starch and a corn syrup based drink. This is not because the people in charge of these programs don't care. It is because these are the foods they can afford.

Of course, the teacher from Alaska did not successfully supply her classroom and feed her students with \$125 a year. She spent money out of her own pocket. Most teachers told me they spend around \$500 per year. Many teachers spend \$1,500 out of pocket a year, with some spending as much as \$3,000. I asked teachers what material supply they most needed, and by far the most common response was paper. Teachers described the frustration, and the humiliation, of needing to beg for paper. Some of them were given a single ream of paper for their classes for the year. Students' parents, many of whom work multiple jobs at irregular hours, cannot afford to contribute classroom supplies, much less afford to adequately feed their children.

One thing these families have going for them is their teachers. Their teachers just keep showing up, and caring. And these teachers are what keep me from losing hope in the whole enterprise of American education. Talking with these science teachers from all over the country was beautiful, because of what they all have in common. They are science teachers despite the low pay, extraordinary demands, and frequent local newspaper editorials blaming them for the breakdown in the educational system. They are science teachers because they love science, and they love their students. Every one of them I spoke with agreed that they could not do their job without love; without loving their students, even against nearly impossible odds. These people are heroic. These people are fighting, every day, against a system that appears determined to scapegoat them. They stay in a job where they get assessed on how well their students improve on tests—when less than thirty percent of their students are in their class for the full school year. They stay in a job where they are given new standards to dictate their performance, but not the training nor the supplies to meet those standards. And they stay in a job where they know that to meet state standards they must teach topics, like evolution and climate change, that are highly contentious in the communities in which they live.

We know, at NCSE, that a lot of science teachers hedge when they teach evolution or climate change, or avoid them altogether. Those are the teachers who make up the yellow bars on the graph below.



Many of the teachers I talked with would fall into that yellow zone. Some people reading this may wonder what the heck is wrong with those teachers. Why don't they just teach the science?

I can tell you, from talking with many teachers who do hedge, that most of them are great teachers—dedicated, hard-working professionals. And they are out there fighting the good fight in places where teaching these topics is really challenging. Think about the struggles they are facing in their classrooms. The inadequate supplies, the inadequate support, the hungry students. Would you leap headfirst into controversy in such a situation, or would you do what good you could? Would you really want to cause yourself more trouble?

We should see those yellow bars as indicator lights telling us that nearly sixty percent of American teachers aren't getting the support they need to do their jobs.

We can help give them that support.

Science Booster Clubs do raise financial support for teachers. With the cash donations Clubs raise, they can buy a hell of a lot of paper. But even more importantly, the Clubs build social support. When we destigmatize topics like climate change and evolution in communities where the topics are contentious, we make it easier for great teachers to feel safe and supported enough to teach these topics.

At NCSE, we're doing more than complaining about what's going wrong in the science classroom. We're finding out what's getting in the way of teaching evolution and climate change, and then doing what we can to help.

It's worth noting the situation is not all doom and gloom. How can it be, when you get to know some classroom science teachers? These people are beacons of hope. They have great senses of humor. They like to get their hands dirty. They think creatively. And they're the ones showing kids, by their own example, that they can grow up to solve problems. Even when things are really tough.

Let's work together to get them what they need.

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