

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 8, 2006 at 2:43pm

Pro-evolution school candidates win in Ohio

by Scott Stephens by Religion News Service

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CLEVELAND ? Ohio's scientists laid down their test tubes and flexed some political muscle Nov. 7 as four pro-evolution candidates they backed were on their way to capturing or retaining seats on the state Board of Education.

In the race that drew national attention, Tom Sawyer, a former Akron mayor and 16-year congressman, was beating incumbent Deborah Owens Fink nearly 2-to-1 for a board seat.

?I believe the state Board of Education should have a far stronger voice than it had,? Sawyer said Tuesday night.

State board races are nonpartisan, but Owens Fink fell victim to a strong Democratic turnout and an opponent who is a former teacher and state legislator who once was chairman of the Ohio House Education Committee.

?In reality, it's a very, very Democratic area and a tough place to be a Republican,? she said.

Like the bitter school board battles in Kansas last summer, the Ohio board races produced high drama. Voters were treated to the unusual sight of Kenneth Miller, a nationally renowned biologist, stumping like a ward heeler for pro-evolution candidates, and Pastor Ernie Sanders, an evangelical radio host, blasting Sawyer as a merchant of sin.

Sawyer was recruited to run for the seat by Help Ohio Public Education, a group of scientists angered by the board's flirtation with intelligent design, which courts have barred from science class.

"We were looking first and foremost to raise public awareness, and these numbers were much higher than past years," said Patricia Princehouse, co-founder of HOPE.

Three other HOPE-backed candidates appeared headed for victory Tuesday, but the group's biggest target was Owens Fink, who was one of the most prominent advocates of a model lesson for 10th grade biology teachers that called for a "critical analysis" of the theory that life on Earth descended from common ancestors.

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