

How a lesson on Islam led to school closings in Virginia

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Schools in a Shenandoah Valley county in Virginia were closed and weekend activities were canceled after the schools became inundated with angry phone calls and e-mails regarding a world geography assignment that involved learning about Islam.

The assignment in question was for a ninth-grade class at Riverheads High School. The assignment was meant to teach students about calligraphy, and used the *Shahada*, the Muslim statement of faith, as an example. Translated from Arabic, the statement is, "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."

Outraged parents accused the teacher of crossing the line between teaching students about religion as a subject and incorporating religious teachings into a public school education.

The Virginia Board of Education and the Commonwealth's Standards of Learning require students to learn about the regional and cultural differences among the world's peoples. The lesson that the teacher drew from also included assignments that discussed the Jewish and Christian faiths.

School officials said that the purpose of the lesson was intended to showcase the "artistic complexity" of Arabic calligraphy, and should not have been interpreted as a promotion of any one religious system.

"As we have emphasized, no lesson was designed to promote a religious viewpoint or change any student's religious belief," the school system concluded their statement by saying. "Although students will continue to learn about world religions as required by the state Board of Education and the Commonwealth's Standards of Learning, a different, non-religious sample of Arabic calligraphy will be used in the future."

The flood of angry calls and emails prompted the schools to close all schools in the county. School administrators also canceled a fundraiser intended to benefit a local family, and all athletic games and practices were canceled through the weekend.

School closings in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., in response to online threats of violence made headlines this week. School officials with the Augusta County school system assured parents that there were no specific threats targeting the schools, but they were examining all communications to the schools from both within and outside the area over the past several days, and were increasing police presence near the schools out of an abundance of caution.

“While there has been no specific threat of harm to students, schools and school offices will be closed ... through the weekend,” a statement from the school division reads. “We regret having to take this action, but we are doing so based on the recommendations of law enforcement and the Augusta County School Board out of an abundance of caution.”

*This report contains material from the Associated Press.*