

AUGUSTA COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD

Dr. Eric W. Bond
Division Superintendent

18 Government Center Lane
PO Box 960
Verona, VA 24482

Phone: 540-245-5100
Fax: 540-245-5115

December 15, 2015

We appreciate parents bringing concerns directly to our attention, and we are always willing to meet with parents about curriculum questions and concerns. On Friday, December 11, 2015, the principal of Riverheads High School, one of its teachers, and central office staff met with parents to discuss such concerns. Superintendent Dr. Eric Bond agreed to meet one-on-one to further discuss such concerns with a parent on Tuesday, December 15, 2015, at 11 a.m., but the parent declined to attend that meeting. School administration believes any discussion about curriculum should be based on a clear understanding of the facts.

As a part of a high school world geography course and consistent with the Standards of Learning, when students study a particular geographic region, the Virginia Department of Education Curriculum Framework and Scope and Sequence for World Geography includes the region's culture, language, economy, foods, predominant religions, and political climate. As a part of each regional unit, students are invited to participate in hands-on activities intended to give them a better objective understanding of the region and its culture (including its religions) and to allow for interactive learning.

When they study a geographic region, students study the religion and written language of the region. Consequently, students learn about Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam, among others. In one class, an assignment on religion and culture in the unit on the Middle East involved an Islamic statement of faith, written in Arabic. The students were presented with the statement to demonstrate the complex artistry of the written language used in the Middle East, and were asked to attempt to copy it in order to give the students an idea of the artistic complexity of the calligraphy. The statement presented as an example of the calligraphy was not translated for students, nor were students asked to translate it, recite it or otherwise adopt or pronounce it as a personal belief. They were simply asked to attempt to artistically render written Arabic in order to understand its artistic complexity. The students in the class will engage in similar calligraphy and drawing assignments when they study China, its unique written language and the yin and yang (a traditional symbol in Taoism and Confucianism).

Students learn material from the SOL Curriculum Framework in order to recognize cultural regions around the world by identifying characteristics of the "cultural landscape" such as dress, architecture, statues, monuments, music and art so the student can understand how cultural differences and similarities can link or divide regions. Students also learn about the cultures and the religious practices of the geographic regions they study. In one class during their study of the Middle East, students were taught about the modest dress adopted by many in the Islamic faith and were invited to try on a scarf as a part of an interactive lesson about the Islamic concept of modest dress. The scarf used in the activity was not an actual Islamic religious hijab. The students in the class can engage in similar assignments when they study China and Africa: student volunteers will be able to try on actual traditional Chinese clothing (chan song) and traditional African clothing (shuka). In addition, the students will be invited to observe and touch Buddhist prayer beads during the unit on China.

Neither these lessons, nor any other lesson in the world geography course, are an attempt at indoctrination to Islam or any other religion, or a request for students to renounce their own faith or profess any belief. Each of the lessons attempts objectively to present world religions in a way that is interesting and interactive for students.