

## **All schools shut in Virginia county over Islamic lesson backlash**

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**Verona, Virginia:** Schools in a Virginia county were closed on Friday and a weekend holiday concert and athletic events were cancelled amid an angry backlash about a school exercise about Islamic faith.'

School officials said they had not received any specific threats but were alarmed by the volume and tone of the complaints, including some from outside Virginia, according to news reports. In response, additional police were stationed at schools Thursday in Augusta County in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

Anger over the lesson has escalated since a teacher at Riverheads High School had students in her class complete an assignment one week ago. It involved practising calligraphy by copying the shahada, the Muslim declaration of faith, in Arabic.

The statement translated to: "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."

At a forum Tuesday, one parent said the assignment promoted a false religious doctrine, while other parents expressed outrage. Some demanded that the teacher in question, Cheryl LaPorte, be fired. LaPorte had apparently not designed the exercise herself, but had taken it from a standard textbook on world religions.

The teacher's lesson was drawn from instructional material that also includes Judeo-Christian assignments. School officials said the aim of the lesson was to illustrate the complexity of the written Arabic language, not to promote any religious system.

A group on Facebook, started by former student's of LaPorte, has been supporting her exercise and has condemned the backlash.

In a statement, district officials said they will use a different example of Arabic in future classes.

"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," Doug Shifflett, Augusta County's assistant superintendent for administration, said in a statement.

- AP