

Class work about Islam stirs some Georgia parents' concern

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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Some Georgians are complaining that their children are learning about Islam in the classroom, but a school district that is getting some of the criticism says it's not doing anything new.

"This is against my religious beliefs," said Steven Alsup. "When I'm at church, I'm not worshipping Allah."

The Georgia Department of Education requires schools to teach about Islam, a religion with about [1.5 billion adherents](#).

In seventh grade, Georgia middle school students must be able to describe the cultures of the Middle East and compare and contrast the prominent religions — Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. "It is important that students understand the differences between each of these religions to help them understand the tensions that exist in the region," says the state guide for teachers, known as the Georgia Performance Standards.

The state sets the goals and leaves it to communities to figure out how to reach them. School districts develop their own curriculum, though the state offers resources they can choose to use. In this case, one such resource seems to have provoked a backlash: a homework quiz that one of Alsup's daughters brought home from a freshman class at Walnut Grove High School a couple of weeks ago: "Allah is the (blank) worshiped by Jews & Christians," the document said. The child filled in the blank with "same God."

A [Facebook group](#) called "Georgia's Islamic Curriculum" was born, and by Tuesday was claiming more than 2,000 members. Reporters descended on Walton County.

"My daughter had to learn the Shahada and the Five Pillars of Islam, which is what you learn to convert," parent Michelle King [complained to Channel 2 Action News](#). She added that the school didn't teach the Ten Commandments "or anything about God."

Kim Embry, a spokeswoman for Walton County Public Schools, was puzzled by the sudden attention.

"We are teaching the same stuff that everyone else is teaching," she said, adding that the district hasn't changed its curriculum on the topic in nine years. Her son, a senior in high school, told her he remembers doing a quiz like the Allah is the "same God" one when he was in seventh grade.

Embry said parents are complaining that they don't want their children exposed to Islam, but, "if you're learning about the Middle East, it's very difficult not to teach about Islam." She added that the schools spend "a little more time" on Islam than Christianity "because nobody knew anything" about Muslims and their religion, considered the second largest in the world after Christianity.

Rusty Linder, the Walton assistant superintendent for curriculum, said Georgia's standards require students to know about world cultures, of which religion is a part, because they need to understand "that the forces which shape culture have an impact which is relevant to them today."

Similar [complaints](#) about Islam in schools elsewhere bumped around the Internet, inspiring a handful of calls to the Georgia Department of Education.

Matt Cardoza, a spokesman for the agency, said the concerns were not widespread, and most seemed to be reacting to news reports. He said it doesn't appear that there is something wrong with the state standards.

He also said the state doesn't develop worksheets like the one the father, Alsup, complained about.

Georgia does provide resources that suggest how to teach, though. One such document says sixth-grade students must be able to describe the major religions of Europe, and includes links to resources, including a [guide](#) with a fact sheet and sample quiz.

The fact sheet says Judaism, Christianity and Islam have the "same" deity with different names (Yaweh, Jehovah and Allah). The true-or-false quiz asks whether the three religions have the same God. The correct answer, it says: true.

Embry said the complaints came from two of the district's three middle schools, Loganville and Youth, but none of the teachers was teaching inappropriately.

"The curriculum department went through all of it last week," she said, "and they did not find anything they were concerned about."

Alsup said he objects to the idea of teaching something as profound as religion in a public school setting, by teachers who may have only superficial knowledge of the topic. If they're going to teach about Islam, he said, then they need to broach the topic of extremists and terrorism, which he said they are not doing in Walton. He doesn't want Islam, Judaism or Christianity taught in the schools, and especially not to children in middle school or even the early high school grades.

"They're calling it a history lesson, which is false," he said. "Religion to me is deeper than that."