

The Senate Committee on Education and Youth offered the following substitute to HB 451:

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT

1 To amend Subpart 2 of Part 1 of Article 16 of Chapter 2 of Title 20 of the Official Code of
2 Georgia Annotated, relating to compulsory attendance, so as to provide for public school
3 students to be permitted to attend courses in religious moral instruction provided by an
4 individual or organization independently of a public school, subject to certain conditions; to
5 provide for such conditions; to provide for students to receive academic credit for such
6 courses; to require local education agencies to adopt certain policies; to prohibit students who
7 participate in such courses from being counted as absent from school; to provide for
8 responsibilities of the Department of Education; to require criminal records checks; to
9 provide for immunity; to provide for definitions; to provide for a short title; to provide for
10 related matters; to provide for an effective date; to repeal conflicting laws; and for other
11 purposes.

12 BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF GEORGIA:

13 **SECTION 1.**

14 This Act shall be known and may be cited as the "Student Character Development Act."

SECTION 2.

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Subpart 2 of Part 1 of Article 16 of Chapter 2 of Title 20 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to compulsory attendance, is amended by adding a new Code section to read as follows:

"20-2-692.5.

(a) As used in this Code section, the term:

(1) 'Local education agency' shall have the same meaning as in Code Section 20-2-167.1.

(2) 'Released time course' means a course in religious moral instruction provided by an individual or organization independently of a public school.

(b) By August 1, 2026, each local education agency shall adopt a policy that permits all students to be excused from school to attend a released time course for at least one hour per school week. Such policy shall require that:

(1) The student's parent or legal guardian gives written consent for the student to attend the released time course;

(2) The individual or organization providing the released time course maintains attendance records and makes such records available to the officials of the school in which the student is enrolled;

(3)(A) Transportation to and from the location of the released time course, including transportation for students with disabilities, is the responsibility of the student or his or her parent or legal guardian; and

(B) If the individual or organization providing the released time course is to provide student transportation from school, appropriate consent shall be provided by the student's parent or legal guardian;

(4) The individual or organization providing the released time course verifies to the local education agency that such individual or organization assumes full responsibility for the student at all times such student is participating in a released time course activity.

41 including, but not limited to, transportation provided by such individual or organization
42 to and from such activity;

43 (5) Except as necessary to award academic credit for the completion of a released time
44 course, as provided for in subsection (d) of this Code section, no local education agency
45 funds except de minimis administrative costs are expended in providing or
46 accommodating the released time course;

47 (6) Released time courses are not to be held on public school property unless permitted
48 under a neutral policy of equal access opening such school property for use by
49 community groups; and

50 (7) The student assumes responsibility for any missed school work.

51 (c) The policy adopted by a local education agency under subsection (b) of this Code
52 section shall include a requirement for a criminal records check of individuals providing
53 a released time course to students pursuant to this Code section.

54 (d) A local education agency may adopt a policy that provides for academic credit to be
55 awarded for the completion of a released time course. In determining the academic credit
56 to award for completion of such course, the local education agency shall evaluate the
57 course based exclusively on secular criteria that are substantially the same criteria used to
58 evaluate similar courses for purposes of determining the academic credit to award for such
59 courses. The decision to award academic credit for a released time course shall be neutral
60 to, and shall not involve any test for, religious content or denominational affiliation. Such
61 secular criteria may include the following:

62 (1) The number of hours of classroom instruction time;

63 (2) A review of the released time course syllabus that reflects released time course
64 requirements and materials used;

65 (3) The methods of assessment used in the released time course; and

66 (4) The qualifications of the released time course instructor.

67 (e) No local education agency or official or employee thereof shall be liable in any civil
68 action for injury allegedly arising from a student's transit to or from a released time course
69 when private transportation is used under a released time course policy adopted under
70 subsection (b) of this Code section.

71 (f) While in attendance in a released time course, a student shall not be considered absent
72 from school.

73 (g)(1) The Department of Education is authorized and directed to take all steps
74 reasonably necessary to maximize the amounts of state and federal funding local
75 education agencies receive regardless of the number of students who participate in a
76 released time course.

77 (2) The Department of Education shall promulgate model policies and procedures
78 consistent with this Code section to be available for use by local education agencies."

79 **SECTION 3.**

80 This Act shall become effective upon its approval by the Governor or upon its becoming law
81 without such approval.

82 **SECTION 4.**

83 All laws and parts of laws in conflict with this Act are repealed.