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School Board to Pay in Jesus Prayer Suit

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

A [Delaware](#) school district has agreed to revise its policies on religion as part of a settlement with two Jewish families who had sued over the pervasiveness of Christian prayer and other religious activities in the schools.

One family said it was forced to leave its home in Georgetown because of an anti-Semitic backlash.

The settlement, which was approved Tuesday, includes payments to the families that both sides would not disclose. Although the settlement resolves many complaints in the suit, against the Indian River School District, the parties are proceeding with litigation over the school board practice of beginning its sessions with prayer.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs and defendants said their clients were satisfied with the settlement. On local blogs, the anger many people felt toward the families for protesting Christian prayer at school events has flared anew.

Mona Dobrich, 41, whose family was a plaintiff in the suit, said such a furious reaction had exacted a profound toll on her family and might indicate that the settlement would alter little on the ground.

"I feel that it is a good settlement because the rules are out there," Mrs. Dobrich said in a telephone interview, referring to new policies the board has agreed to adopt. "Do I think life is going to change in Sussex County or all the other Sussex Counties in the country? No."

Mrs. Dobrich, an Orthodox Jew, grew up in Sussex County. Though often the lone Jewish student in school, she said, she did not have problems with Christians or others. For years, while her daughter, Samantha, now 21, attended local schools, Mrs. Dobrich said, she listened to Christian prayers at school potluck dinners, award dinners and meetings of parent-teacher groups.

At Samantha's high school graduation in 2004, a minister's prayer proclaiming Jesus as the only way to the truth nudged Mrs. Dobrich to ask the school board to consider more generic and less exclusionary prayers, she said.

As news of the request spread, many local Christians saw it as an effort to limit the free exercise of religion, residents said. Anger spilled onto talk radio, in letters to the editor and at school board meetings attended by hundreds of people carrying signs praising Jesus.

In the settlement, the district did not concede that it had violated the First Amendment through its practices, said its lawyer, Jason Gosselin. The board approved the accord unanimously.

It mandates that within 30 days the district has to amend its religion policy to clarify what practices are

constitutional. A detailed list of “real world examples” are to be sent to staff members and parents, including situations like prayer before sports events and the distribution of religious materials at schools.

The accord stipulates that school officials may not organize prayer at graduation. People will also be able to complain anonymously about violations about religious liberty or any other policies.

“I hope that the publication of these policies, training and education about them means there will be compliance in the district and things will get better,” said Thomas J. Allingham II, the plaintiffs’ lawyer.

The second family in the suit chose to remain anonymous. The family has remained in Sussex County.

Mrs. Dobrich’s decision to leave her hometown and seek legal help was made after a school board meeting in August 2004 on the prayer issue. Hundreds showed up to protest her position.

Her son, Alex, then 11, had written a short statement that said in part: “I feel bad when kids in my class call me ‘Jew boy.’ I do not want to move away from the house I have lived in forever.”

After the family received threats, Mrs. Dobrich said, she and Alex moved to Wilmington. Her husband, Marco, stayed in his local job to make sure that the family had health insurance.

They sold their house. But rent and expenses in Wilmington consumed their money.

Samantha dropped out of [Columbia University](#) because of the financial problems. Alex, who had attended public school, did not fit into to the Orthodox day schools he was attending and left, his mother said.

The financial settlement, which will be paid by the district’s insurer, will pay off the debt that the Dobriches accrued as they moved. The family has settled in Dover, Mrs. Dobrich said.

The Dobriches tried once to take Alex back to live in Georgetown and understood that they could not return.

“We tried to have Alex live with my sister in Georgetown,” Mrs. Dobrich said. “Alex was in the yard, and some kids came up and said, ‘There’s that boy who’s suing Jesus.’ ”

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