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# Families Challenging Religious Influence in Delaware Schools



Jamie Ross for The New York Times

Mona Dobrich and her daughter, Samantha, above, playing a board game in their new home.

By NEELA BANERJEE  
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GEORGETOWN, Del. — After her family moved to this small town 30 years ago, Mona Dobrich grew up as the only Jew in school. Mrs. Dobrich, 39, married a local man, bought the house behind her parents' home and brought up her two children as Jews.

For years, she and her daughter, Samantha, listened to Christian prayers at public school potlucks, award dinners and parent-teacher group meetings, she said. But at Samantha's high school graduation in June 2004, a minister's prayer proclaiming Jesus as the only way to the truth nudged Mrs. Dobrich to act.

"It was as if no matter how much hard work, no matter how good a person you are, the only way you'll ever be anything is through Jesus Christ," Mrs. Dobrich said. "He said those words, and I saw Sam's head snap and her start looking around, like, 'Where's my mom? Where's my mom?' And all I wanted to do was run up and take her in my arms."

After the graduation, Mrs. Dobrich asked the Indian River district school board to consider prayers that were more generic and, she said, less exclusionary. As news of her request spread, many local Christians saw it as an effort to limit their free exercise of religion, residents said. Anger spilled on to talk radio, in letters to the editor and at school board meetings attended by hundreds of people carrying signs praising Jesus.

"What people here are saying is, 'Stop interfering with our traditions, stop interfering with our faith and leave our country the way we knew it to be,'" said Dan Gaffney, a host at WGMD, a talk radio station in Rehoboth, and a supporter of prayer in the school district.

After receiving several threats, Mrs. Dobrich took her son, Alex, to Wilmington in the fall of 2004, planning to stay until the controversy blew over. It never has.

The Dobriches eventually sued the Indian River School District, challenging what they asserted was the pervasiveness of religion in the schools and seeking financial damages. They have been joined by "the Does," a family still in the school district who have remained anonymous because of the response against the Dobriches.

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Meanwhile, a Muslim family in another school district here in Sussex County has filed suit, alleging proselytizing in the schools and the harassment of their daughters.

The move to Wilmington, the Dobriches said, wrecked them financially, leading them to sell their house and their daughter to drop out of [Columbia University](#).

The dispute here underscores the rising tensions over religion in public schools.

“We don’t have data on the number of lawsuits, but anecdotally, people think it has never been so active — the degree to which these conflicts erupt in schools and the degree to which they are litigated,” said Tom Hutton, a staff lawyer at the National School Boards Association.

More religion probably exists in schools now than in decades because of the role religious conservatives play in politics and the passage of certain education laws over the last 25 years, including the Equal Access Act in 1984, said Charles C. Haynes, senior scholar at the First Amendment Center, a research and education group.

“There are communities largely of one faith, and despite all the court rulings and Supreme Court decisions, they continue to promote one faith,” Mr. Haynes said. “They don’t much care what the minority complains about. They’re just convinced that what they are doing is good for kids and what America is all about.”

Dr. Donald G. Hattier, a member of the Indian River school board, said the district had changed many policies in response to Mrs. Dobrich’s initial complaints. But the board unanimously rejected a proposed settlement of the Dobriches’ lawsuit.

“There were a couple of provisions that were unacceptable to the board,” said Jason Gosselin, a lawyer for the board. “The parties are working in good faith to move closer to settlement.”

Until recently, it was safe to assume that everyone in the Indian River district was Christian, said the Rev. Mark Harris, an Episcopal priest at St. Peter’s Church in Lewes.

But much has changed in Sussex County over the last 30 years. The county, in southern Delaware, has resort enclaves like Rehoboth Beach, to which outsiders bring their cash and, often, liberal values. Inland, in the area of Georgetown, the county seat, the land is still a lush patchwork of corn and soybean fields, with a few poultry plants. But developers are turning more fields into tracts of rambling homes. The Hispanic population is booming. There are enough Reform Jews, Muslims and Quakers to set up their own centers and groups, Mr. Harris said.

In interviews with a dozen people here and comments on the radio by a half-dozen others, the overwhelming majority insisted, usually politely, that prayer should stay in the schools.

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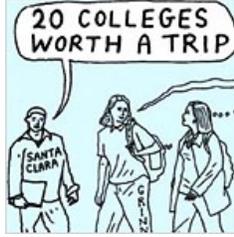


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