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## School board to discuss religion policy

*By Jonathan Starkey*  
*Staff Reporter*

The policies regarding prayer at graduations and religion in school that were adopted by the Indian River School Board on Oct. 19, 2004, after they heard complaints from a Jewish family, might be amended next week.

The board held a first reading on the amended ordinances Tuesday but deferred a vote until after an executive session on Tuesday, June 27. Board members and district Superintendent Lois Hobbs wouldn't comment on the specifics of the proposed amendments.

One board member did say, however, that the amendments provided much-needed "fine-tuning" to the policies, which were adopted to protect constitutional rights of students, employees and citizens in school and at school-sponsored functions.

Despite the passage of the original policies, Marco and Mona Dobrich — a Jewish family — along with another unidentified family filed suit in federal court in February 2005, claiming that the district had violated their First Amendment rights to freedom of religion by creating a district-wide "environment of religious exclusion."

The Dobriches extensive complaint specifically cites the invocation and benediction speeches at the 2004 Sussex Central High School graduation delivered by local pastor Jerry Fike.

"We pray that You direct them into the truth and eventually the truth that comes by knowing Jesus," Fike said in one of the day's prayers.

The graduation policy adopted by the board answered earlier complaints about Fike's speech, stating that the district may not censor student-delivered speeches or "organize prayer at graduation or select speakers in a manner that favors religious speech."

In the Dobriches complaint, though, Fike's prayers were just one example of how the district created the "exclusive" environment.

Other specifics cited in the complaint claim that a Selbyville Middle School teacher preached "one true religion," that other teachers handed out Bibles to students during class time and that students in school-sponsored Bible clubs received preferential treatment.

"No religious belief or non-belief shall be promoted, or disparaged by the District," the religion policy reads. "Instead, the District encourages all students and staff members to appreciate and be tolerant of the religious views of others."

The religion policy states that religious clubs — such as Bible clubs — are allowed to use district schools to meet but will not be sponsored by the school. It also states that while teachers can meet before school or at lunch with other members of staff for prayer or Bible study, they may not engage in such activity when acting as state representatives.

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“When acting in their official capacities as representatives of the state, teachers, school administrators and other school employees are prohibited from encouraging or discouraging prayer, and from participating in such activity with students,” the policy reads.

Both policies — and the one regarding school board prayer adopted the same day — can be read in full at Indian River School District’s Web site at [www.irsd.net](http://www.irsd.net), by clicking on District Profile and then Policies.

Most of Tuesday’s 7 p.m. meeting will be held in executive session but, by law, board members must vote on proposed policy in public. Board members could, however, defer the vote again, in which case specifics about the amendments might not be available immediately after the meeting. Read more in next week’s Coastal Point.

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