

Headteacher Katharine Birbalsingh taken to High Court over Muslim prayer ban

The identity of the school and head mistress is [now in the public domain](#). As reported previously by [the Sun](#) and the [Mail on Sunday](#).

Britain's strictest headteacher is in a row with Muslim pupils over a decision to impose a "prayer ban".



Michaela Community School in Brent, north-west London, which is run by Katharine Birbalsingh, the Government's former social mobility tsar, is facing a High Court challenge from a Muslim pupil over its prayer policy.

The court heard that the school has faced an online campaign over its approach to religion, as well as threats of violence, abuse and false allegations of Islamophobia.

Conservative MPs are understood to be concerned about the challenge to the governing body of the free school, which achieves some of the best academic results in the country.

I would have chafed under the Michaela regime. But 60 years ago at my girls grammar school the climate allowed for us to

be left to exercise self discipline and appreciate our good fortune and the opportunities for an academic education. We were safe on and off the premises; our belongings were left in unlocked desks and I don't recall a single instance of theft. But that was then, this is now. Modern schools are not the same and if such strict discipline (eg detention for forgetting a pencil) is what is needed so be it.

A High Court hearing in London on Tuesday was told that the school's stance on prayers was first introduced in March last year by its headteacher, and later re-made by its governing body in May.

About 30 students began praying in the school's "wet" and "dirty" yard in March last year, using blazers to kneel as they were not permitted to bring in prayer mats, the court heard.

Lawyers for the school, which is opposing the legal challenge, had argued that proceedings should be held in private owing to concerns over past harassment, which included threats and a "bomb hoax". But following arguments by media organisations, Mr Justice Linden ruled that the hearing should be held in public and the school and headteacher can be identified.

Sarah Hannett KC, representing the Muslim pupil, told the court that the prayer policy had the "practical effect of only preventing Muslims from praying because their prayer by nature has a ritualised nature rather than being internal". The pupil, who cannot be named, claims the decision "banning prayer rituals" breaches her right to freedom of religion.

Jason Coppel KC, representing the school trust, said pupils seen praying outside contributed to a "concerted campaign" on social media over the school's approach to religion, including a since removed online petition attracting thousands of signatures.

Police were called to respond to claims of bombs being placed

at the school, prompting it to hire a security guard and close two days early at the end of term. Glass bottles were thrown over the school railings and a brick thrown through one teacher's window, leaving staff "fearing for their lives", Mr Coppel said, adding that the situation had since "calmed".

Mr Justice Linden noted the school had received "disgraceful" abuse but concluded: "I do not accept that the evidence in this case establishes a risk to the lives or safety of members of the school staff or the school community that would justify holding the hearing in private."

Mr Coppel is due to set the school's defence to the case on Wednesday, when the hearing is expected to conclude