

# Pupil loses battle to wear purity ring

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A teenager spoke of her "disappointment" after the High Court ruled yesterday she had no legal right to wear a "purity ring" to school as an expression of her belief in Christian values.

Lydia Playfoot, 16, said wearing the ring, which is engraved with a Biblical verse, was a demonstration of her commitment not to have sex before marriage.

She was one of a group of girls who joined a movement started in the US called the Silver Ring Thing and said she started wearing her ring in June 2004.

But the Millais School in Horsham, West Sussex, banned such rings as contrary to its "no jewellery" school uniform policy.

Lydia, who recently left the school after completing her GCSE examinations, said its stance was "anti-Christian" as it allowed Muslim and Sikh students to wear headscarfs and religious bracelets.

Lydia and her father, Philip Playfoot, argued the ring was "part of her faith and not decorative" like ordinary jewellery.

Family lawyer Paul Diamond said the ban imposed by the head and governors of the maintained non-denominational girls' secondary school violated Lydia's right under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights to freedom of religion and to express her faith.

Mr Diamond contended that it was not for the courts to rule "on religious truth" and what were appropriate ways to manifest religious belief.

But today, deputy High Court judge Michael Supperstone QC dismissed the family's application for judicial review, saying the school had not violated Lydia's rights or acted unlawfully.

The judge stressed that the school had a flexible dress code dating from the early 1990s and did allow pupils to wear items which were "a requirement of their faith".

As well as a Muslim girl, a pupil who was a member of the Plymouth Brethren - a Christian religious group - was allowed to wear a headscarf.

But the judge ruled that the purity ring was not "intimately linked" to the belief in chastity before marriage.

He said: "The claimant was under no obligation, by reason of her belief, to wear the ring, nor does she suggest that she was so obliged."

He refused the family permission to appeal, although they can still petition the appeal court to hear their case.

Lydia's father was ordered to pay £12,000 towards the school's costs in fighting off the family's legal challenge.

The order attracted criticism among the family's Christian supporters.

They pointed to the fact that Muslim schoolgirl Shabina Begum had been allowed to bring her High Court human rights claim - also ultimately unsuccessful - for the right to wear the full-length jilbab gown to school without her family having to face any similar order for legal costs.

Later, headmaster Leon Nettley said the school was "clearly delighted with the outcome of the court hearing", but its success was tinged with regret that it was necessary.

He said: "Throughout, we have only ever been trying to uphold a better standard that has established our excellent reputation within the local community, who clearly recognise and appreciate the quality of the educational experience that we provide.

"Any suggestion that our school is anti-Christian is not correct."

But Lydia, who was not in court today, said she was "very disappointed" by the court's decision.

She said she believed the ruling "will mean that slowly, over time, people such as school governors, employers, political organisations and others will be allowed to stop Christians from publicly expressing and practising their faith".

She added: "Over two years ago, I was concerned at the number of teenagers who were catching sexually transmitted diseases, getting pregnant and/or having abortions.

"The Government's sex education programme is not working, and the pressure on young people to 'give in' to sex continues to increase. This is often because of the media's focus on sex and the expectations of others."

But Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "This is entirely the correct decision.

"Lydia's parents run the British chapter of the Silver Ring Thing and had a vested interest in being able to spread its message in schools."

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "Once again, a judge has supported a school in a case where a parent has challenged school uniform.

"Such cases waste a lot of time and resources for schools and I hope that today's judgment will send a strong signal to parents and pupils that schools have every right to set a uniform and that pupils should abide by it."