

Sikhs looking to open more free schools, separating their children from the mainstream

Posted: Fri, 2nd Mar 2012

The latest Sikh free school, the Nishkam Primary School, catering to primary children in Birmingham, was opened in the city in September 2011. The school is linked to a local gurdwara or temple.

The secondary section of the Nishkam School is scheduled to open later this year, according to the Department of Education. There are demands that similar Sikh free schools be opened in Leicester, Leeds and Smethwick.

Britain's first state-funded Hindu school opened in the London borough of Harrow in 2008. The first Hindu free school opened in Leicester last year in Leicester and called the Krishna Avanti Primary School. Both schools are operated by the I Foundation.

In Leicester, which has a large Sikh population, community leaders have applied to the government for permission to create a free school and are in talks with the local authority over where it could be located.

Indy Panesar, president of Ramgarhia Sikh Temple in Leicester, said: "A lot of parents have approached us about setting up a school and after consulting with them and seeing that there's a demand, we have put together a business case for the Government to look at."

He told the *Leicester Mercury*, that there is a huge Sikh community in Leicester and parents would like the option of sending their child to a school which has a background in the faith, so after considering it for some time we have decided to go ahead with this application.

He said the school "will be vegetarian" and if approved, it could be launched in September 2013. Although the school's ethos will be from the Sikh faith, it is claimed it will teach the national curriculum with 50 per cent of pupils coming from all backgrounds and religions.

In Leeds, community leaders hope to utilise a disused building near a local gurdwara for the school. Sukhraj Singh, a spokesperson for the project, said that the plan was "to set up a school teaching more subjects based around science. We want to give something back to the community and offer a new opportunity for our younger children, to set them in the right direction for a professional career."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society commented: "This is a very undesirable development. Religious members of the Sikh community seem absolutely intent on shutting their children away from the mainstream in these schools. This not only deprives them of the opportunity of proper integration into the society they actually live in, but also deprives children from other parts of the society from getting to know and understand Sikhs through interaction at school."

Mr Wood said the idea that 50% of places would be taken up by people from other faiths is disingenuous. "Giving the impression that the school will somehow be open and inclusive might play well with the Department of Education, but the reality will almost certainly be that the pupils at

these schools will be exclusively from Sikh families. We've heard the promise that Muslim schools would take pupils from the wider society, but, of course, it never happened. People of other religions and none simply don't want their children educated in schools so heavily influenced by a religion they don't share."

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