

Teachers in Dagenham to strike over 'faith school' plans

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Teachers at a community school threatened with amalgamation with a religious school are to stage a one day strike in protest over the plans.

Teachers and Governors at Village Infants community school in Dagenham are angry at proposals to amalgamate their school with the William Ford Church of England Junior School. The 14 members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) have voted to walk on Thursday 5 July.

The council's plans are also being opposed by the majority of parents with children at the school. A petition against the proposals was signed by more than 700 local residents.

Under the proposals Village Infants would close and become part of an expanded William Ford Church of England voluntary aided school. Teachers and parents are concerned that, as a voluntarily aided school, William Ford is allowed to discriminate against pupils on religious grounds. They fear non-religious children could be turned away if the merger goes ahead.

As a Church of England school, William Ford claims to provide education "within a Christian context". Teachers at Village Infants, currently employed by the local authority, are also unhappy that they are being forced to work for a new employer.

One of the teachers, Yolanda Cattle, told the Barking & Dagenham Post that she and her colleagues did not take the decision to strike lightly.

"We don't want to disrupt the pupils or their families, but we feel this may be the only way the council will listen to us," she said. "We've tried talking to them and we don't seem to have been taken seriously."

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the National Secular Society said: "The obduracy of the council in steamrolling through plans to impose a faith-based education on those that do not want it for their children is deeply alarming.

"The council claims the schools will benefit from a 'unified vision' if amalgamated but clearly fail to recognise that a Christian vision is simply not appropriate for all pupils.

"It is also unacceptable for teachers who chose to teach in a community school to suddenly find themselves under the employment of the governing body controlled by the church.

"We urge Barking and Dagenham to take the concerns of local citizens and the rights of the non-religious seriously and reconsider their plans to hand over this much-loved and well performing community school to the church."

In response to concerns over admissions, governors at William Ford have committed to review the admissions policy if admissions from Dagenham Parish Church exceed 10% to "make sure it remains a school committed to serve its local community."

Heather Douglas, the outgoing head teacher at Village Infants commented:

"We believe that this undertaking is far too vague and unenforceable. As the admission criteria stand, children with religious connections, including those outside the local area, will have priority for the vast majority of places, including those who do so indirectly by virtue of being siblings of pupils already at the church school.

"While existing teachers at the infant school may benefit from preferential transitional arrangements, the next generation of teachers will not. They risk simply not being employed unless they pretend to have religious views in sympathy with the school."

Local residents wishing to object to or make comments on the proposals should write to Janet Caliste Corporate Director of Children's Services, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, Town Hall, 1 Town Square, Barking, IG11 7LU or by email to janet.caliste@lbdb.gov.uk. **The consultation closes on 10 July.**

The full proposals can be read online [here](#).

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