

Victory for community school fighting merger with church school

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Parents and teachers at a school in Dagenham who campaigned against its closure and amalgamation with a church school have won a victory after the local council announced that the school will remain open as a community school.

Barking and Dagenham Council agreed last night to reverse its previous decision to close Village Infants community school and amalgamate it with William Ford Church of England voluntary aided school.

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the National Secular Society, which supported the campaign against amalgamation, said: "This is an important victory, not only for the school, but also for the principle of inclusive, non-discriminatory community schooling.

"Local authorities and the Government need to be aware that while faith schools may be desirable for some, the imposition of faith-based education on those who do not want it for their children is completely unacceptable. It is vital that education free from religious influence, privilege and discrimination is strengthened in the UK, particularly given the long term decline in church attendance."

The plans to amalgamate the community school with a 'faith school' provoked what is thought to be the first ever strike over the unfair employment provisions in religious schools. Teachers at Village Infants belonging to the National Union of Teachers (NUT) voted to take strike action after their concerns over the merger with a church school were ignored by the local authority.

The Council's plans were opposed by teachers and governors at Village Infants as well as the majority of parents with children at the school. A petition against the proposals was signed by more than 700 local residents. During the consultation period the National Secular Society challenged the council over its failure to consult properly about proposals. When Governors at William Ford changed their minds and also voted against the amalgamation, the council was forced into an embarrassing U-turn.

A formal agreement to revoke the merger decision is due to be made on September 18.

Heather Douglas, outgoing head teacher at Village Infants, thanked the National Secular Society for its help throughout the campaign and said she was "delighted" for the children, who still had a community school to attend after the summer holidays. She said "We're absolutely thrilled. It was a real David and Goliath style battle, but finally the local authority has been forced to listen to the wishes of the local community".

Also see: BBC London's [coverage of the merger](#) featuring teacher Yolanda Cattle, Village Infants School head Heather Douglas, Stephen Evans of the National Secular Society and Tim Harrison of the National Union of Teachers.

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