

# Community and church school amalgamation plans criticised by secularists

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The National Secular Society has challenged a London council over its failure to consult properly about proposals to close a community school in order to amalgamate it with a Church school.

The Village Infants community school in Dagenham has been earmarked for closure with plans to amalgamate it with the William Ford Church of England Junior School. The council's plans are being opposed by the overwhelming majority of parents, staff and Governors at the school.

Earlier this month, Barking and Dagenham council sent out a letter to parents and staff at the community school seeking views on the proposal but failed to mention that the new school would be a Voluntary Aided (VA) church school.

The omission is significant as VA schools can set their own admissions criteria and discriminate against pupils on religious grounds if oversubscribed. VA schools are also permitted to discriminate against teachers who do not share the faith of the school when considering appointments and promotions.

Department for Education guidance of school closures states that those bringing forward proposals should "provide sufficient information for those being consulted to form a considered view on the matters on which they are being consulted". The National Secular Society has criticised the Council for not giving local people the full facts.

Stephen Evans from the National Secular Society said: "Not informing parents and staff of the full implications of becoming a VA school before seeking their views reveals a flawed process.

"In an area already short of primary school places, it is completely unacceptable for a council to hand over such a successful and well loved community school to the Church, who prioritise children of churchgoers over local children."

A teacher at the school commented; "Why risk merging the schools where the admissions criteria could exclude local children from school places? Barking and Dagenham is at crisis point and do not have enough school places for local children. Why then create a school that could potentially be filled with children from other Boroughs?"

The Church school has historically taken all children from Village Infants, but if the two schools amalgamate the link status will be lost and admission of local children will no longer be able to be taken for granted.

Heather Douglas, the Head Teacher at Village Infants, said; "I worry that vulnerable families will be excluded from their local school and the effect that this could have socially within the local community".

Parent Shailey Proctor, who has one child at Village Infants and one at William Ford, told the Barking & Dagenham Post: "Our family does not go to church and if I was applying at the new school my child may not get a spot."

Nicola Tilley, parent of a Village Infant child and a dinner lady said: "There's a risk that families from a religious background but not from the area will get places instead of local families.

Eleven out of 14 teachers from the infant school have voted against the plans in a union ballot.

Dominic Byrne, borough NUT divisional secretary, said: "The teachers and the governors believe that religious affiliation will mean there will be admissions criteria, disadvantaging local children. They are also not happy that they would work at a faith school".

A council spokesperson said the merger plans are in the informal consultation stage and said all parents had been consulted. The formal consultation is likely to begin at the end of May or beginning of June.

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