

6 December 2017

Mr Dominic Herrington
Regional Schools Commissioner for South-East England and South
London
Regional Schools Commissioner's Office
South East and South London
Trafalgar House
1 Bedford Park
Croydon
CR0 2AQ

national
secular
society

25 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL
TEL: 020 7404 3126
FAX: 0870 762 8971
EMAIL: enquiries@secularism.org.uk
WEB: www.secularism.org.uk

Dear Mr Herrington,

Floreat and Avanti Trusts Merger

We are writing to express our concern that the planned merger between Floreat Education Academies Trust and Avanti Schools Trust may result in previously secular schools gaining a religious ethos, and that the merger risks blurring the distinction between secular and faith schooling.

Floreat currently operates three non-denominational primary schools, while Avanti runs five primary and two secondary Hindu faith schools. If the merger goes ahead, it will result in a multi-academy trust with both Hindu and secular schools under a single board of trustees.

Although Floreat founder Lord O'Shaughnessy has stated that the Floreat schools will retain their existing ethos following the merger, the National Secular Society is unconvinced that this will be the case. Being a smaller Trust currently experiencing financial difficulties, Floreat is in a weaker position than Avanti and is likely to find itself the "junior partner" in all decision-making processes. Inclusion of Avanti trustees on the board controlling the Floreat schools will inevitably allow those with an agenda to promote a faith ethos to easily do so in the formerly secular schools.

Schools operated by Avanti are governed by the Hindu Education Authority Ltd (Formerly iFoundation Ltd). This charity has an explicit agenda to evangelise the Hindu faith (specifically ISKCON, also known as 'Hare Krishna', teachings). According to the Charity Commission, *"The objectives of the I-Foundation are to advance, transmit, spread and propogate [sic] the religion of Hinduism, as revealed in the teachings of the Hindu scriptures, specifically Bhagvad Gita and Shrimad Bhagvatam, to provide educational facility and support to Hindu faith education initiatives and to act as the religious authority for state-funded schools with a Hindu faith designation."*

The faith ethos of Avanti schools is made very clear in its online [policies document](#). It says that "Schools are sacred places, no less than places of worship" and devotes a number of pages to outlining its religious ideology and practices, including its strict dietary rules and Collective Worship requirements for pupils and staff.

The policies document states that "Once established in their final building location, all Trust schools will follow, without compromise, the agreed daily Collective Worship model, where all elements of worship are linked to learning." Considering the uncompromising nature of this requirement, the NSS is particularly concerned that these Collective Worship policies will also be imposed on the Floreat primary schools when they come under Avanti control.

Avanti Schools Trust and its governing charity the Hindu Education Authority have explicitly stated that their goals are to take control of more non-denominational schools, and to further the promotion of the ISKCON faith ethos. Avanti's chairman and chief executive told the TES: *"One of our strategic aspirations has always been the inclusion of non-denominational schools within the Avanti trust."* On its website, Avanti also states, *"We are currently in conversation with a small number of community schools who are aligned in their vision for educational vision and who may wish to join the Avanti family...Please do get in*

touch with us if you feel like your school might be interested in a conversation about joining the Avanti multi-academy trust."

The [2016 financial statements](#) for the Hindu Education Authority state, *"The charity's main aspirations are to continue to follow its core educational objectives throughout the forthcoming years by assisting the Avanti Schools Trust to develop its faith ethos and educational material for use in its schools."*

Other medium and long term strategies stated by the Hindu Education Authority in its most recent online [Summary Information Return](#) include, *"Continue improving the RE curriculum provision within schools; Increase capacity and training of S48 inspectors; Increased school visits and potential expansion into pastoral/chaplaincy work"*.

These statements clearly indicate that the governing body of Avanti is on a mission to further promote its religious ideology through its schools. Combined with Avanti's eagerness to solicit non-denominational schools to come under its control, this suggests that Avanti may push its faith ethos on to the Floreat schools once Avanti trustees are put in charge.

All state-funded schools in England, including secular schools, are required by law to hold an "act of collective worship" every day. We fear that Avanti will use this legal requirement as a 'back door' means to impose its religious practices on the Floreat schools, without the schools necessarily being registered with a religious character or ethos. Additionally, with the Hindu Education Authority's focus on "improving the RE curriculum within schools," there is also the risk that ISKCON beliefs will be taught in a confessional and evangelical manner through religious education at Floreat schools.

The NSS is aware of an increasing number of academies, for example those run by Oasis Community Learning, which promote a faith ethos within their schools without a designated religious character or religious ethos recorded by the Department for Education. We are concerned that a similar situation will potentially arise at the Floreat schools, where an ISKCON ethos will be imposed by stealth.

Parents who send their children to the Floreat primary schools have chosen a secular education. If the Floreat schools were to become religious, by 'unofficial' means or otherwise, this would undermine parents' rights to raise their children in accordance with their beliefs, and violate children's religious freedom. It will also set a precedence for other faith bodies, including those of other minority faiths, to use similar strategies to impose their ideology on non-denominational schools.

The NSS would be grateful if you could assure us that these concerns will be addressed in your consideration of the Trusts' report following the consultation on the planned merger, and that the merger will not be permitted to take place if the Floreat schools' secular status is found to be under threat.

Thank you for your time on this matter. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Evans
CEO