

Sarah Evans: Faith schools can be an inspiration

By Sarah Evans

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Faith groups are driven by a moral imperative to share their values with the young, so it is not surprising they have seized on the new Free Schools initiative.

Not everyone believes in faith schools. Opponents see them as divisive at best and hotbeds of fundamentalism at worse. However, parents are attracted to schools with a religious foundation, even if they have no faith or a different faith themselves, because they understand education has to be about the sharing of values.

Faith schools range from schools specifically for children of one faith where part of the curriculum is devoted to religious instruction, to schools that run along the lines of non-faith schools but where the daily life and ethos are informed by articulated moral values.

I was invited to meet the people behind the first Sikh ethos, multi-faith school in the Midlands opening under the Free School initiative this September. The Sikh community has already invested considerably to support the regeneration of parts of Handsworth. The striking Gurudwara on Soho Road is flanked by the [cutting edge](#) community centre, the Nishkam Civic Association. The new primary school is directly opposite this, next to the oversubscribed Nishkam Nursery.

I was hugely impressed.

Society is crying out for schools with the ethos of Nishkam Primary School. The Principal Designate, Ranjit Singh Dhanda, says the school is being established on the principle that children from all backgrounds, and of all abilities, can achieve success if they are given the right support, teaching and curriculum within a values-driven framework.

The children will see around them just what working for the common good means. The sensitive restoration of the nineteenth century terrace houses that will be the basis of the new school, is being undertaken largely by volunteers. When I visited with the Chair of Governors, Dr Mahon, I saw young women with paint brushes, young men pushing trolleys with refreshments across the Soho Road, as well as all the builders you would expect to see on any building site, but it was 9pm and most people had come there to help after doing their day job. It was simply an inspiration.

Nishkam Primary School wants children from all backgrounds, not to proselytise but to give them a first rate education and to reach out and share values that society as a whole holds dear. This is exactly the sort of diversity our education system needs. I wish them every success.

** Sarah Evans, Principal, King Edward VI High School for Girls.*