

## Free schools open against the odds

**The Free School Norwich was set up by parent backers who were frustrated by the lack of primaries that cater for busy working families**

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The Nishkam school in Birmingham has been refurbished by volunteers (Adrian Sherratt)

One of the government's new free schools has been set up by parents in Norwich despairing at the lack of schools that fit in with their working day.

Another in Lancashire specialises in transcendental meditation, while the founder of a third, in London, objects to the "politically correct gobbledegook" of the education establishment.

The first wave of 24 state-funded "free schools", set up by parents, teachers and charities outside council control, is to open for the autumn term over the next fortnight.

They include Aldborough E-Act primary school, housed in a former community centre in Redbridge, east London, which accepts its first pupils on Thursday.

The schools, set up in response to parental demand, were at the heart of the Tories' education plans in last year's election manifesto. Critics see them as a risky experiment that will starve existing schools of money and pupils, favour the pushy middle classes and open state education to eccentrics and religious extremists.

However, Michael Gove, the education secretary, believes they will harness the benefits of parental choice to improve educational standards.

The first batch, which will educate about 2,000 children in this autumn's intake, includes 17 primaries, five secondaries and two all-age schools, with about half in the southeast.

Rachel Wolf, director of the New Schools Network, which advises backers, said she expected about 100 to be open by autumn 2012, educating about 60,000 pupils between them when each year group has been filled.

Gove, who is providing up to £130m to help set up the first wave, expects them to be far cheaper than recent new schools, which have often cost more than £30m for a large secondary academy.

Many will be housed in converted buildings, including a north London garden centre, Victorian terraced houses in Birmingham refurbished by unpaid volunteers and a 19th-century villa in West Sussex.

## Class of their own

### **Aldborough E-Act, Redbridge**

Shorter holidays to improve results

### **All Saints Junior, Reading**

Temporarily housed in church hall

### **Ark Conway primary, Hammersmith**

Ed Vaizey, arts minister, to send son

### **ARK Atwood primary, Westminster**

700 objectors have signed petition

### **Batley Grammar, Kirklees**

Former private school

### **King's Science academy, Bradford**

Will fight city 'ghettoisation'

### **Bristol Free, Bristol**

Local heads battling to stop it

### **Canary Wharf College, Tower Hamlets**

Serves fast-growing population

### **Discovery New, Crawley, W Sussex**

Montessori primary, admission by lottery

### **Eden primary, Haringey**

Jewish, head ran school in New York

### **Etz Chaim, Barnet**

Jewish primary in former garden centre

### **Krishna-Avanti, Leicester**

England's second Hindu state school

### **Langley Hall, Slough**

Village primary set up by husband and wife



**Stour Valley Community, Suffolk**  
 Five-year battle to replace closing school

### **Maharishi school, Lancashire**

Transcendental meditation, inspired by Beatles guru

### **Moorlands school, Luton**

Former private prep school

### **Nishkam School, Birmingham**

Sikh school built by volunteers

### **Priors Free, Warwickshire**

Village school saved by local parents

### **Rainbow Free, Bradford**

Founders believe others are sub-standard

### **Sandbach school, Cheshire East**

Was private but council-funded

### **St Luke's C of E primary, Camden**

Parish church filling place shortage

### **West London Free, Hammersmith**

Toby Young offers compulsory Latin

### **Woodpecker Hall primary, Enfield**

Deprived population, high special needs



**The Free School, Norwich**  
 Hours to suit working parents

Gove said: “Too many children are being failed by fundamental flaws in our education system. In spite of years of investment, the situation is worsening.

“By freeing up teachers and trusting local communities to decide what is best, our reforms will help raise standards for children in all schools.”

The projects Gove has highlighted include the Free School Norwich, whose parent backers were frustrated by the lack of schools that cater for busy working families. The primary, for 168 children aged 4-11, will offer childcare outside teaching hours and be open for 51 weeks a year, six days a week, from 8.15am until 5.45pm.

The Nishkam school, set up by the Sikh community in Handsworth, Birmingham, typifies the self-help ethos the free schools are meant to harness.

Ranjit Singh Dhanda, the principal-designate, said: “All the tradesmen and builders have given their time for free. We have had students on vacation and people taking time out of their annual leave to come and help us — not just painting walls, they have been plastering, building walls, knocking out walls. No more than 10% of the refurbishment has been done by contractors, the rest by volunteers.”

Some have faced bitter local opposition. Bristol free school has been threatened with legal action by local head teachers who accuse it of being “middle class and socially divisive”. It faces losing the building it wanted after the council backed a proposal to open a primary on the same site.

Others who have faced strong opposition include Andrew Snowdon, a business consultant from Crawley, West Sussex, who with his wife, Lindsey, is setting up the Discovery primary school in a listed 19th-century villa. It will be based on the Montessori method of allowing children to learn at their own pace.

He said he had been subjected to criticism that was “occasionally upsetting, not pleasant, when it is false and personally directed”.

Etz Chaim, a Jewish school established in the former Wyevale garden centre in Mill Hill, north London, has faced criticism that it is destroying a cherished community facility.

Some of the schools will have an unconventional approach. They include the Maharishi, a former private school near Ormskirk, Lancashire, which encourages pupils to practise meditation.

“Restful alertness combines profound physiological rest with inner alertness,” Derek Cassells, the head teacher, says in a promotional video.

The West London free school, backed by the writer Toby Young as a “grammar school open to all”, will teach a highly traditional curriculum including Latin. He recently said schools’ “politically correct, gender-neutral gobbledegook” made his flesh creep.