



First group of 24 'free' schools to open next month

Faith schools and advocates of Latin and yoga are among those chosen to receive state funding

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One school stresses the importance of yoga, a second insists its pupils learn Latin, and five different faith groups will get the chance to run their own state-financed schools, the Government has decided.

Welcome to the brave new world of Secretary of State of Education Michael Gove's flagship "free" schools – 24 of which will be opening their doors for the first time at the start of the new term next month.

The successful candidates have been selected from 323 that applied to the Government for funding. They include a couple of existing schools which have converted to "free" status: the Maharishi School in Lancashire, which follows the beliefs of the former Beatles' guru and introduces its pupils to yoga, and a long-established independent school, Batley Grammar, which has forsaken selection so that it can receive state funding.

The religious groups include the first state-financed Sikh school, the Nishkam School in Birmingham; two Jewish primary schools in Haringey and Mill Hill, north London; a Hindu school, the Krishna-Avanti Primary School in Leicester; and a Church of England school, St Luke's in Camden, north London, an area where there is a shortage of school places.

Then there is the West London Free School pioneered by the journalist and author Toby Young, which will provide a "traditional" academic curriculum with an emphasis on Latin.

The "free" school scheme has been fiercely opposed by Labour and teachers' leaders. They argue that it could destabilise existing schools and make them unviable by taking away pupils in areas where there is no shortage of places. Andy Burnham, Labour's Education spokesman, has, however, said he would be prepared to allow them to continue to operate if they have proved successful.

The decision by the Government to turn down the bulk of the applications has soothed fears that ill-thought-out proposals could get the go-ahead in an attempt to maximise the impact of the scheme. The schools will be given the freedom to set their own curriculum and employ unqualified staff as teachers if they wish.

Already applications have flooded into the Department for Education for a second tranche of "free" schools to open next year – including one from a Christian organisation in Newark, Nottinghamshire, which sees creationism as central to its philosophy.

In all, the 24 include 17 primary schools, five secondaries and two that will take pupils all the way through from three to 18. The Department for Education said that half of the 24 were cited in the most deprived 30 per cent of communities in the country. The Government reveals today that the capital cost of setting up the 24 schools will range from £110m to £130m.

"The most important thing for any parent is to be able to send their child to a good local

school with high standards and strong discipline," said Mr Gove.

"Too many children are being failed by fundamental flaws in our education system. By freeing up teachers and trusting local communities to decide what is best, our reforms will help to raise standards for children in all our schools."