

# Free school built by Sikh community prepares to open doors

Birmingham primary gets ready for new term and will be 'open to all faiths and races'

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Nishkam free school in Handsworth, Birmingham, is one of the first to be introduced under the coalition government. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

When the building for Nishkam primary school was first bought eight years ago, pigeon droppings covered the floor and most of the window frames were missing. The Regency style grade II listed house on busy Soho Road in Handsworth, [Birmingham](#), had been a hotel, then a nightclub. Parts had been left abandoned since the 1970s.

Today, it has fireplaces in its classrooms, patterned wallpaper and a grand staircase. It is ready for the 170 pupils aged four to six who start on 5 September.

Nishkam – which means selflessness or altruism in Punjabi – will be the Midlands' first "Sikh ethos" school and one of just five Sikh schools in the country. It will also be one of the first 24 [free schools](#) introduced under the coalition government.

The school, which will have compulsory Punjabi lessons for all pupils, has been a labour of love and duty for Birmingham's 200,000-strong Sikh community. Sikhs as old as 90 and as young as five have helped strip floorboards and paint, says principal-designate Ranjit Singh Dhanda.

He says that one of the core concepts of the Sikh faith is Daswand – donating a minimum of a tenth of your earnings, time, knowledge and prayers to a noble cause or a social service.

Some 130 members of the community have helped, unpaid, on a daily or weekly basis. They include Amardip Singh Suri, manager of a plastics factory, who has come after work almost every day when the workmen leave, to sweep up until the early hours.

Another volunteer, Darshan Kaur, a recent graduate from Canada, heard about the project from friends and spent a summer holiday sorting out the school's filing system.

The community – largely made up of working-class immigrants – managed to raise £1.3m to buy the building. This was supplemented by a £900,000 lottery grant. So far, the school has not received funds from the Department for Education, but will do so soon as part of the free schools scheme.

Much of the initial money was collected opposite the school at the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha gurdwara.

But while, so far, it has been Sikhs who have mainly sponsored and volunteered to get the school off the ground, the headteacher, Narinder Brach, is emphatic that this primary is open to all.

Brach, who has been a teacher for 30 years and was until recently an education lecturer at Birmingham City University, says Nishkam is "not here to convert people".

She adds: "We don't want this school to be seen as a Sikh school; we want a community school open to all faiths and races.

"Sikh values are all about giving and service to the community and we will try to develop that in our pupils. We want to nurture a faith-inspired humility and a selfless approach to life."

If there are more applicants than places, the school will pick Sikh children, but only up to half of all pupils.

At present, it has a waiting list only for its reception class. Of its eight teachers and six "associate teachers", half are Sikh.

However, all pupils will be expected to learn Punjabi for 40 minutes a week. Each week, one pupil will be chosen to receive a reward for community service or "selflessness", in recognition of Sikh values.

Community elders such as grandparents will be invited to share their skills in sewing, cooking and storytelling. "I don't want these skills to be wasted," Brach says. "I imagine the school to be buzzing with community."

The school will be closed every year on the birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and on Vaisakhi, a harvest festival that also commemorates the establishment of the Khalsa – the collective body of all baptised Sikhs. The canteen is likely to serve pakoras, curry, kofta and daal alongside more traditional shepherd's pie and chocolate sponge with custard.

Brach is aiming for high educational standards and intends to be in the top quarter of national results for primary school tests in English, reading and maths.

The idea for Nishkam came originally from a group of local Sikhs who had become parents. Nirmal Singh, one of them, says they started to ask themselves "fundamental questions about what kind of childhood we wanted for our children".

Gopinder Kaur, another parent, says there was a "common feeling" that they had

benefited from close contact with their grandparents and the community, and wanted that for their children. "We wanted a modern school, but one with a healthy connection to our heritage and families."

Singh remembers wearing a turban was not always easy in a non-Sikh school: "My school was 99% non-Sikh and although I am a positive and confident person, I did find it hard at times.

"Nobody wants that for their son. I have worried that people will be laughing at him."

The building for Nishkam had been bought before the coalition had been elected.

The school would have gone ahead as a private school had it not been for the free schools policy. It's an added extra, says Brach, that the school doesn't have to ask for fees.

"I'm so excited by the whole thing," she says. "How many teachers get the opportunity to be involved in shaping the vision and ethos of a new school? It's the stuff that dreams are made of."

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