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Birmingham's Sikh Nishkam primary free school to open

By Susana Mendonca

BBC West Midlands political reporter

The first Sikh-ethos "free" school in the country is preparing to open.

The Nishkam Primary in Birmingham will be in the first batch of 24 free schools across the country to begin teaching children this September.

It has been set up by the Nishkam Education Trust - a charity which already runs a private nursery in Handsworth.

The group had planned to open a grant-maintained primary school three years ago, but could not secure the funding.

Head of school, Narinder Brach, says the coalition government's free school policy gave the chance to do to revisit the plans.

'Right time'

She said: "As a community it's allowed us to pursue a specific vision.

"And this policy came at the right time because there was already a need for this, parents had already identified a need.

"If this policy hadn't come along, what would have happened was it would probably have continued as an independent school, but it wouldn't have been available to the wider group of parents."

Free school status will give her more control than she she would have as a headteacher in a local authority run school, she said, but there is still scrutiny.

"We are answerable to the Department for Education, so I wouldn't like to think we are free to do whatever we like."

The coalition government wants parents, teachers, charities and community groups to be able to set up their own schools which are directly funded by the government - but operate outside local authority control.

The first of the so called free schools will open this autumn.

The Birmingham city councillor who runs local authority led education in the city is at odds with his party over free schools - which he thinks could "break down down cohesiveness between and within communities."

Councillor Les Lawrence said: "We know of some organisations that want to create a free school.

"I have a belief that it will create more divisions and exclusivity rather than the philosophy we have in this city, which is inclusivity."

The Nishkam School wants to include pupils from a wide range of backgrounds and faiths, but has so far failed to attract many non-Sikh children.

Of the 172, four-to-seven-year-olds joining in September, more than 80% come from Sikh backgrounds.

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