

# Birmingham's first free school taking shape in Handsworth

By Kat Keogh | [Apr 9 2011](#)



Principal Ranjit Singh Dhanda and the site of Nishkam Primary School, in Soho Road, Handsworth.

At the gateway to the bustling Birmingham suburb of Handsworth, two derelict buildings are slowly being brought back to life.

Once home to two nightclubs, the Grade II-listed buildings now echo with the sound of hammers and drills as the site prepares to become Birmingham's first free school.

Five months from now, the scaffold-covered buildings will be filled with the sound of children, in the first intake of pupils at the Nishkam Primary School, the first Sikh ethos, multi-faith school in the Midlands.

The free schools model, which has been championed by the Government, allows groups of parents and teachers to form schools away from local authority control.

Free schools are also able to set their own pay and conditions for staff, set their own curriculum and changes the length of terms and school days.

One man keeping a watchful eye on the Nishkam Primary School will be Education Secretary Michael Gove, who said in a letter to the school board just a week ago he saw it as a "flagship free school".



Also keeping a close eye on the work, albeit from an office in the Nishkam Centre across the road, is school principal designate Ranjit Singh Dhanda.

“See that man there, going in now,” he says, pointing to a young man carrying what looks like a sack of sand through an imposing Regency door.

“He’s a graduate student who volunteers every week to help with the work. Because they are listed buildings, we have to make sure the restoration is sympathetic as well as meeting the needs of the school.

“We will be working night and day for this to be ready, and the number of volunteers shows this is something the community wants and supports.”

The Sikhs who created the school belong to the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ) based in the large domed gurudwara just across the Soho Road.

The Nishkam Education Trust was set up in 2004 to develop educational initiatives, and in 2009 opened the Nishkam Nursery, which was one of the first in the UK to be based on the Sikh way of life.

The calming white walls and hi-tech classroom equipment found in the nursery will be replicated in the primary school next door.

“The nursery sets the tone for the school,” added Mr Dhanda, who has more 25 years experience in education.