

# Free for all?

What exactly are free schools? Are they a real opportunity to drive up educational standards or are they just an avenue for mobilising disgruntled middle-class parents. **Karen Glaser** investigates

**W**hen I first came across the notion of free schools, one word sprung to mind: insane. Was the Government seriously going to let businesses and parents set up our children's schools? Bring the market into education? Let sharp-elbowed, middle-class parents dictate the nation's educational policy? Utterly barking!

That was almost a year ago. Since then, I have come to slow conclusion that there is a lot of misinformation floating around about free schools, most of it by opponents of the principle of having state-funded institutions outside of local authority control. At the time of the writing, the most recent example comes from the Daily Mirror about a free school being set up in Wandsworth: "Poor kids snubbed by new bankers' school set up with public cash," screamed last week's headline.

## Ambitious plans

Of all the criticisms levelled at free schools, this is arguably the most fierce: namely that the proposed primaries and secondaries will be set up by the self-serving middle classes to educate their off spring. They will, say their detractors, provide the kind of academic education that ambitious middle-class parents want for their children but which they aren't getting, because they cannot, or will not, pay or pray for it.

In the case of the Wandsworth school, the claim that it's a bankers' school quickly fell apart. It turned out that a union activist had scoured a petition on the council website objecting to a planning application that had been submitted outlining a change of use of a long-empty local hospital and the proposed site of the new school. Of the 600 people who had signed the petition, 25 were connected to the banking sector in some way. And so a headline was penned.

Lesley Smith, communications director at ARK, the charity and academy group, behind the proposed free school, Bolingbroke Academy, sets the record straighter still. "Two of the four feeder primaries for the school have a higher than average percentage of children on free school meals - 31% and 41%. And because we are proposing a feeder school policy, children in local private schools are automatically at the back of the queue."

That said, she is not unsympathetic to the prevailing view that it is the middle classes who are mobilising themselves under the free schools system. "But I would say that even if this were true - and it certainly isn't always the case - if you have mechanisms such as a feeder policy in place, you can ensure that all local people will benefit from the new free schools. In London, where different areas sit cheek by jowl, this is particularly easy to bring about."

Peter Kessler, co-founder of Haringey Jewish Primary, one of the sixteen free schools due to open this September, believes the programme is blind to class. "I have never voted Conservative in my life, but to say that these schools will be exclusively middle-class just strikes me as a traditional hammer to knock Tory policy. In reality, most free schools are being proposed by teachers who want them to help short-changed kids in deprived areas."

## Unfair advantage

Of the first cohort of free schools, at least a third will be faith schools - giving rise to the argument that religious groups have some sort of unfair advantage under the system. "I don't get it," says Peter. "When a local authority decides to open a school, numerical need is its only criterion. Surely we should at least give a voice to some groups of people who say they recognise





a need in their local population which isn't being met – a need which those groups then need to categorically demonstrate exists. You have to make a very substantial case. There are a lot of documents to complete and there are many, many checks in place to ensure that it is not just one individual, or a small group who wants the school."

In fact, the application process is so onerous, Peter and his team hired a professional educational company to assist them. "We have utter dedication and they provide utter professionalism," he observes.

### Local problem

In the neighbouring borough of Camden, former educational psychologist and secondary school teacher Penny Roberts didn't have to shell out to an education company when she set about applying to open a new free school primary: she had 100-plus years of Church of England educational expertise to lean on. When it opens its doors for the first time this September, St Luke's Church of England Primary School will be one of one in four UK primaries whose schooling comes under the auspices of the Anglican church.

"The local church has offered to house a school in its undercroft. It's a great solution to a significant local problem -- in our corner of London, it's not a question of getting the school place that you want for your child, but of getting a place per se. There is a predicted shortage of 200 reception places for September 2011."

When it opens, the school, whose only entry criterion will be geography, will only slightly dent the figure. "We will be a half-form entry school. The undercroft is a lovely space, but it's very small."

A small club of which Penny's children won't be a part. "They are too old. But I have got involved in this project precisely because I remember how difficult it was to get a place for my children when they were reception age."

"Got involved," is putting it rather modestly. Setting up St Luke's has been an enormous amount of work – work for which Penny and all the hundreds of other volunteers who are busy establishing this new breed of school get no money. And, in Penny's case, no direct benefit either. If the expression 'Big Society' means anything, this arguably is it. ●



## Case study

### Hertfordshire parents' campaign for new school wins approval



On the last day of the 2009 Easter school holidays, Juliet Pomerance was picnicking at a local park with mothers of children at her son's

primary. Many of those present were feeling low: they had recently been informed of the secondary school places allocated to their children and very few had got their first or even second choice.

It was disappointing, but hardly surprising. The women live in Knebworth, and the Hertfordshire village is in a secondary school blackspot. As are the neighbouring villages of Woolmer Green, Codicote, Oaklands and Datchworth.

"Historically a third of families living in the village don't get one of their three secondary school choices. And last year one Year 6 girl didn't get an allocation at all," says Juliet. "Imagine how that feels for a child. All your friends are talking about their new schools, and you have to say that you aren't actually going anywhere."

Over the years, frustrated villagers have often responded to the problem by, if they can afford it, opting for a private secondary school or by leaving Knebworth altogether. "It's tearing our villages apart. Last year, 14 of 60 year 6 children left in son's class left Knebworth for good," says Juliet.

The remaining families who send their children to the region's comprehensive often find their offspring receive their schooling in Portakabins. "But how ever many Portakabins you erect, the schools



basic facilities such as the canteen remain the same size," notes Juliet.

The community's We Need A School Campaign ([WeNeedASchool.org](http://WeNeedASchool.org)) which Juliet chairs, was born against this background. In January this year the plan got a green light when Education Secretary Michael Gove allowed the proposal to progress to business case stage. It means that parents can now register an interest in sending their children to the school which may open as early as September 2012. At the time of writing, 1200 people had signed up.