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# Private school funding sham

**John Gauci, Sydney**

16 February 2008

**Over the last few weeks, a series of *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* articles have revealed the corruption of the federal Socio-Economic Status (SES) funding model, used to allocate education funds to private schools.**

The articles followed the leaking of a report of a closed-door review by the Department of Education, commissioned by the Howard government and completed in 2007. The Rudd government refused to release it to the *SMH* under a freedom of information request.

A NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) press release on February 12 identified the key inequities inherent in the SES model. "The current federal system of funding private schools is based on census data (postcode) not family income. Schools' resources are also not taken into account when determining funding. Wealthy private schools in particular are able to use government funding to expand facilities while continuing to increase student fees."

The 2007 review found that the Exclusive Brethren schools — of which there are 16 campuses throughout NSW — is one of the "biggest winners" in this funding arrangement, increasing its funding by building new campuses, according to the February 11 *SMH*. The Brethren's MET school at Meadowbank "is the parent school for the other 15 campuses. Only one of these, at Kellyville, is within 50 kilometres of the parent school. One, Lavington, is 600 kilometres away in Albury ... If they were called new schools, they would not qualify for the same generous funding. But as 'campuses', they keep it", the article says.

The MET school was found to already be receiving more funding than the funding formula entitles it to, and according to the report this is not uncommon: half of all private schools are funded above their entitlement.

"This overfunding has cost taxpayers more than \$2 billion over four years", the *SMH* article says "and, according to the review, will cost taxpayers \$2.7 billion over the next four-year funding cycle, starting next year".

By establishing new campuses, schools such as MET have been able to work this already unequal system to their greater advantage.

Australian public schools are open to all children and educate the overwhelming majority of students from Indigenous, non-English speaking, low income and special needs backgrounds. However they receive only around a third of the total federal government funding allocated to schools.

The NSWTF is calling upon state and federal governments to increase the recurrent, sustainable funding for public schools. The federal government's own ministerial taskforce has estimated that an additional \$2.9 billion minimum per year is needed for public schools to reach national educational goals. The NSWTF has called on the federal government to commit the additional funding required for public schools.

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Prior to the federal election, and after a massive advertising and lobbying campaign conducted by the Australian Education Union, ALP education spokesperson Stephen Smith was explicit in stating that no federal government funding would be taken away from private schools.

Following the series of *SMH* articles, the federal government has now decided to conduct a review of the SES funding model. On January 5, the NSWTF called for the review to be an open inquiry into funding arrangements for public and private schools, with the opportunity for individuals and organisations to make submissions. Announcing the review on February 11, education minister Julia Gillard claimed that it will be open and transparent.

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