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Brethren schools net \$18m funding

Anna Patty, Education Editor
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SCHOOLS run by the secretive Exclusive Brethren religious sect receive more than \$18 million a year in government funding, including \$2 million from NSW taxpayers, new figures show.

The figures obtained through freedom-of-information laws show that state governments injected \$5.8 million into the schools managed by what the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has derided as an "extremist cult".

Last year the NSW Government provided \$2 million to the Meadowbank Education Trust School in Meadowbank, up from 842,317 in 2002-03. The school also received \$5.1 million from the Commonwealth, which gave all Brethren schools a total of \$12 million last year, according to figures obtained by a NSW Greens MP, John Kaye.

Dr Kaye said the growth in public funding for the Brethren schools could not be justified as long as they operated behind closed doors and refused the enrolment of children who were not sect members. "Neither state nor Commonwealth money should be used to subsidise the sect's deeply divisive agenda of indoctrinating vulnerable children, he said.

"With total state subsidies climbing to more than \$6 million dollars each year, the growth of Brethren schools is now also a direct responsibility of the state education ministers."

Brethren schools receive the maximum level of Commonwealth funding that is usually reserved for schools in severely disadvantaged areas. Their funding has been maintained at historic levels under the Howard, and now Rudd, government's "no losers" policy, which prevents cutting funding from any school even when their demographic profile improves.

In his book *Behind The Exclusive Brethren*, the journalist Michael Bachelard reveals a letter written by the sect in 2004 to the former minister for education Brendan Nelson. It said a survey of members over previous decades had shown they were found in the "middle to upper levels of the socio-economic group".

"Any funding system which delivers poverty-level funding to a group that boasts of its average wealth, needs to be reviewed," Mr Bachelard said.

A spokeswoman for the NSW Minister for Education, Verity Firth, said funding for the school had increased as a result of increased enrolments.

Under the NSW Education Act, private schools could qualify for Government funding if they were not run for profit and if they taught the NSW Board of Studies approved curriculum. They were also required to comply with child protection guidelines and teacher qualification standards set by the NSW Institute of Teachers.

"There is no religious test for school funding," the spokeswoman said. "If there is credible information that the Exclusive Brethren schools are not complying with the criteria as set out in the Act, the minister would urge that information be sent to the NSW Board of Studies."

Dr Kaye said enrolments at the school have grown from 119 in 2001 to 828 this year.

A recent Federal Education Department review singled out the Meadowbank school as an example of schools gaining an unfair advantage by establishing campuses. If they were called new schools, they would not qualify for the parent school's funding.

A Brethren Church spokesman said: "Our schools are receiving funding they are entitled to under independent government assessment."

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