

No uni for Exclusive Brethren kids

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They attend well-equipped schools with low teacher-student ratios and solid HSC results, but none of them will be going to university.



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They are the children of the Exclusive Brethren, and for them university is taboo.

They can study at TAFEs and other tertiary institutions, but not at universities.

You won't find Brethren children watching TV programs, either, or going to the movies, or visiting google on the Internet.

It's all part of their belief in separation from the sinful world around them, and elders admit that can mean they can grow up ignorant of the extent of that wickedness.

The university ban is one aspect of the Brethren lifestyle that outsiders, known as "worldlies", find hardest to understand.

It means that the 15,000-strong Australian Brethren community is producing plenty of accountants but no doctors, lawyers or teachers.

Which means, ironically, that no Brethren teachers are tutoring the 2,300 students at 43 Australian schools run by the Christian sect, which was described by Labor leader Kevin Rudd last year as an "extreme cult" that broke up families.

Every teacher is a worldly.

"I would say it's not much different from teaching in any other school," says Ewoud Vogel, principal of the original Brethren school at Sydney's Meadowbank, founded in 1994.

"In fact I would say it's my most positive teaching experience in Australian schools," says the South African-born teacher after stints at a Greek Orthodox school and another Christian school in Sydney.

"The students are most compliant to work in the classroom."

Meadowbank has 120 students, 80 in high school and 40 primary.

It has a well-equipped science lab, food tech kitchen, computer room, playgrounds and other facilities.

The teacher-student ratio of less than one to 10 at Brethren schools around Australia is up to three times lower than public schools.

The principal, who also takes geography, has a current HSC geography class of six students.

"I have not found my teaching restricted in any way, or had to change any of my programs," he said after leaders of the secretive Brethren sect went public to correct what they said was years of untrue and negative stories about them.

"About the only difference is that I can't just pull a video off the shelf and show it to students without first having its contents scrutinised.

"And that's probably a good thing."

The school's televisions are used only for showing educational programs.

"I can't come in and ask my students if they saw reports of Hurricane Gustav on the news last night, because I know they haven't," said Mr Vogel.

"So I just open up the newspaper, and we talk about it that way."

Even Disney films are out.

"They're really just entertainment value," said Mr Vogel.

"Some of our children are reading Charlie And The Chocolate Factory at present.

"They won't be going to see the movie, but I think their imagination is enhanced and heightened by reading rather than seeing the movie."

Internet use on the computers is strictly controlled.

Rather than applying filters that block out certain subject material, the Brethren has gone the other way, allowing access only to approved sites and links.

Clearly, the almost ubiquitous google search engine is a no-no.

"From an educationist's point of view, it's great," said Mr Vogel.

"The kids don't get distracted or waste hours on unnecessary material," he said, though he conceded Brethren students may not have as much practice in digging out information as others.

"I am a Christian by faith so I enjoy teaching in a Christian atmosphere," Mr Vogel said.

"I believe in what they (the Brethren) basically stand for, even if I may not believe in all of their interpretations of the scriptures.

"We all believe in the same Bible and the same God."

Brethren schools receive government funding in line with other non-government schools, but overseer David Stewart denies they get any special treatment.

He says the curriculum of all schools is approved by the Board of Studies.

The Meadowbank school ranked 96th of 800 in NSW in terms of HSC results, he said, but that won't lead to university for any of the students.

A chat with senior elder Daniel Hales makes it clear the hippie generation of 1960s and 70s changed all that.

"Universities were once Ivy League bastions of conservative Christianity," he said.

"Then came Flower Power and professors advocating drugs, and so on.

"They became the vanguard for re-engineering society."

"I was enrolled myself once," said the 58-year-old father of five.

"I was going to study law or medicine.

"Then I thought it all through, and I realised it would draw me away from my Christian faith and my family."

"We feel our children would find their faith being challenged (at universities).

"The first thing they learn at university is to question everything.

"We are not afraid of them but we don't see why our children should be subject to that."

"We're not goody-goodies. I have tried cigarettes, and I have seen movies in my wayward youth."

Source: AAP



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