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Exclusive Brethren schools treble rolls

A network of Exclusive Brethren private schools has more than trebled its roll from 476 to 1555 in five years.

Figures released to The Press reveal the reclusive sect's burgeoning school roll will see it benefit from more than \$2 million of government funding this year, despite having "an enormous amount of money".

The usually media shy Brethren has gone on the front foot over its Westmount schools, declaring them superior institutions.

Marcella Marshall, administrator for the Westmount school in Templeton, south of Christchurch, said the schools were popular because they had a better environment than "normal" schools. "The kids respect there's never been a fight here at school," she said.

"You just don't get any of the things you get at normal state schools. I'd say the kids are more of a higher class.

"They're still normal kids, you do get behaviour problems, you just don't get the graffiti, and the chewing gum and the knives and whatever else you get at normal schools."

The Brethren's Westmount Schools were established in their current form at Mangere, in Auckland, in 2004.

There are now 15 "satellite" schools nationwide, including in Templeton, Oamaru, Invercargill, Nelson, Timaru, Westport and Blenheim.

Massey University historian Peter Lineham, who was brought up as a Brethren and has studied the sect, said the Brethren's Westmount schools were growing because Brethren were worried about their children being socialised in to wider society.

"They would have generally been concerned about some science instruction but they were mostly allowed to go through normal schooling," he said.

Lineham said the Brethren had "an enormous amount of money" to spend on their schools. "It's not that difficult to set up a school, and if they can find that much money for a silly political campaign, they're much more likely these days to put their money in to schools because, as they learned to their cost, they're not so popular when they try to influence the outcome of the election."

Marshall said the Templeton roll had gone up from 90 last year to 140 this year. Children came from Rangiora and Ashburton to attend the school, which has 17 teachers.

Teachers at the schools are all non-Brethren because members of the religious group do not attend tertiary education so cannot be registered teachers. Only practising Brethren children can attend the schools, however.

An Education Review Office report said the Westmount national office in Mangere set policies that reflect a Brethren ethos and encouraged a learning environment conducive to the Brethren philosophy.

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