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Exclusive Brethren schools to get \$10m subsidy

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THE secretive Exclusive Brethren religious sect is to receive more than \$10 million from the Federal Government this year, despite Prime Minister Kevin Rudd having described it as an extremist cult that breaks up families.

The money will be paid to five schools run by the Brethren. The largest, in the north-western Sydney suburb of Meadowbank, known as M.E.T. Meadowbank, will receive \$4.3 million. Over the next four years, the schools, which operate across many campuses, will collect almost \$50 million in subsidies.

An additional \$502,000 was secured by the Brethren under the previous government's now defunct Investing in our Schools program, which allowed grants for projects costing less than \$75,000. These grants faced only cursory scrutiny. Mr Rudd and Education Minister Julia Gillard have said Labor would retain the Howard government's controversial private school funding scheme for at least the next four years.

The SES (socioeconomic status) scheme transfers money to all non-government schools based on the relative wealth of the area where parents of students at each school live. The scheme does not take into account what facilities a school has or what fees are charged.

The Brethren schools are Melbourne's Glenvale, with campuses at Glenroy, Lilydale and Melton; Oakwood at Glenorchy in Tasmania; Woodthorpe Drive Secondary School in the West Australian town of Willeton; Agnew school at Norman Park, Queensland; and Melrose Park School at St Marys in South Australia.

There is also a "super-campus" at M.E.T. at Meadowbank, which is the head office for NSW campuses at Armidale, Campbelltown, Cardiff South, Cowra, Goulburn, Kellyville, Leeton, Orange, Ryde, Tamworth, Condobolin, Katoomba, Darkes Forest, Albury, Young and Wagga Wagga.

NSW Greens MP John Kaye, a critic of the private school funding system, said the Rudd Government was caught by its promise not to change the former government's subsidies formula.

"Funding of the Brethren schools is growing at a massive rate," Dr Kaye said. "Our analysis shows that from \$7.4 million in 2005, (funding) is on track to blow out to \$10.1 million in 2008.

"Sooner or later someone in government has to have the honesty to say that there is something deeply wrong with public funding of schools that refuse to enrol children who are not members of the sect."

Last week *The Age* finally received, after 14 months of attempts under freedom-of-information laws, access to letters of support that the Brethren sent to former prime minister John Howard. The sect is under investigation in Australia and New Zealand for election funding irregularities. This includes the transfer of \$370,000 into the Howard government's election campaign in 2004.

Private or religious schools have an exemption from school licensing authorities for various religious

practices and can choose which students will attend a school.

In the case of the Exclusive Brethren, only the children of Brethren members may attend such schools.

During the election campaign, Labor raised questions about the Brethren's approach to computers and the internet, which the sect regards with deep suspicion.

A mass rollout of computers in schools was a central plank of Labor's education policy.

But a spokesman for the Brethren, Tony McCorkell, said yesterday the group wrote to Mr Rudd during the campaign, advising him that although the organisation was wary of "morally unacceptable material" being available on the internet, it did not ban the use of computers by students.

Mr McCorkell said the religion's schools were funded on the same basis as other independent schools and had to meet the same curriculum and financial probity requirements of each state to qualify for funding.

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