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Brethren schools get funds meant for poor students

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RICH Exclusive Brethren schools are receiving the same generous rate of government funding as the nation's poorest schools, including those in impoverished Aboriginal communities.

The Rudd Government has pledged to continue paying millions of dollars to the religious sect despite the group boasting that its students are "found in the middle to upper levels of the socio-economic group".

One of the architects of the Education Department funding scheme has told *The Sunday Age* that money distributed to schools at the highest rate was intended for the nation's most destitute children.

Jim McMorrow said schools funded under "category 12" were typically "the poorest schools in the lowest-income communities in the country".

"They were meant to be very, very poor, with very, very low income, and largish average class sizes," he said.

However, government documents obtained by *The Sunday Age* show Brethren schools in NSW and South Australia receive category 12 funding despite not meeting these criteria.

The controversial religious sect was awarded the lucrative school funding under the Keating government, according to a sect spokeswoman.

The funding deal — in which the cashed-up sect's six schools will receive \$50 million in coming years — was then cemented by the Howard government and will be continued for at least the next four years by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Education Department documents also reveal that the Exclusive Brethren regarded former prime minister John Howard as their most influential supporter and ally of last resort.

In 2000, the sect's elders asked Mr Howard for special assistance on school funding because of his "sympathetic support in the past and the contact with you over the years".

Federal school funding documents show that the Brethren's multi-campus NSW school, Meadowbank, and the South Australian school, Melrose Park, were funded at the same rate as "special schools", giving them the same per-student funding as Nyangatjatjara College, in the Northern Territory, the Giant Steps school for autistic students and schools for the hearing-impaired.

The Brethren's MET school in Meadowbank does not meet the criteria for category 12 funding: it is in suburban Sydney, has small class sizes, and is financially supported by a community that boasts it has no poverty.

The sect's Victorian school, Glenvale, which has campuses at Glenroy, Lilydale and Melton, receives a

lower rate of funding.

In 2004, the Brethren told then education minister Brendan Nelson that "a survey of the Brethren over past decades would establish that they are in the middle to upper levels of the socio-economic group. Any unemployment or poverty ... is not left unattended."

In May 2000, four Brethren elders wrote to Mr Howard seeking federal funding for the Sydney school because of a dispute with the NSW Government.

"Because of your sympathetic support in the past ... we felt compelled to bring this matter to your attention," the elders wrote.

A month later, a federal government bureaucrat wrote back to the Brethren saying, "(education minister) Dr Kemp has asked that the department consider ways in which recurrent funding may be made available".

The poverty list

Schools funded at the Category 12 or special rate in 2001-04^{*}.

- **Kulkarriya Community School**, Fitzroy Crossing, WA
- **The Alice Springs Steiner School**, Alice Springs, NT
- **Nyangatjatjara College**, Yulara, NT
- **Bellhaven Special School**, Young, NSW
- **Mansfield Autistic Centre**, Mansfield, VIC
- **St Gabriel's School for Hearing Impaired Children**, Castle Hill, NSW
- **Melrose Park School**, St Marys, South Australia^{**}
- **MET School**, Sydney, NSW^{**}

* In the 2005-08 funding round, "special" schools were put on a higher rate. ^{**} Exclusive Brethren school.

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