

[Home](#) » [National](#) » Article

Sect schools reap federal grants

Michael Bachelard
December 28, 2006

EXCLUSIVE Brethren schools are receiving tens of thousands of dollars in Federal Government building grants despite having among the richest and most generous parents in the country.

Former principals, teachers and students of the Brethren schools say the sect is able to raise millions of dollars a year from parents at fund-raising concerts and auctions, called "fun days". *The Age* has been told the most recent fun day in Sydney took a massive \$1.3 million from Brethren members, many of whom run highly successful small and medium-sized businesses. Sums of \$500,000 or more are commonplace.

But the Brethren's growing number of schools are putting out their hands for government grants under programs including the low-scrutiny federal program Investing in Our Schools.

Fun days might be held at Brethren schools three or four times a year. "At one of the first fund-raisers, in Sydney, (sect leader Bruce D. Hales) and his brother Stephen bid against each other for a pumpkin (apparently left over from the kids' *Cinderella* play). BDH got it for \$100,000," former Brethren member "Janie," said. "It makes a huge amount of money. Even in a little country town they could get \$80,000 on a Saturday, and they probably do it three to four times a year."

The Brethren sect owns and runs secondary schools in all six states, with 38 campuses educating 1441 students in 2005. Some country campuses have as few as 15 students. Their purpose is to educate Brethren children with minimal "contamination" from other, "worldly" Australians. The sect has recently started building primary schools to help complete their separation.

The schools receive more than \$6.6 million in Federal Government recurrent funding under the SES (socio-economic status) model, on a generous scale of up to \$5471 per student per year because the campuses tend to be based in poorer suburbs and towns. Government records show Brethren schools have received \$313,000 in Federal Government capital grants in the past two years under the Investing in Our Schools Program, as well as a \$219,000 capital grant in 2004.

Meadowbank school, in Prime Minister John Howard's electorate of Bennelong, was given \$70,000 this year for the "upgrade of furniture and resources for classroom", as well as "design and technology equipment", library resources and playground equipment. The school has 70 students. Grants were approved this year for a campus of the Tasmanian school (\$30,000 for 42 students to upgrade a manual arts area) and a South Australian campus (\$63,600 for 37 students for a science area and canteen). *The Age* has learned that Victorian school Glenvale has also applied for a \$70,000 grant.

Under Federal Government guidelines, a school does not need to open its books for scrutiny if the grant application is for less than \$75,000. All the Brethren applications fit under this threshold. "We don't look at the finances for the smaller grants: there is no financial assessment required," according to Ray Whitfield, chief of the NSW Block Grant Authority, which determines the grants.

Accounts of the Melbourne school vehicle, Glenvale Education Inc, and Sydney vehicle Meadowbank Education Inc, obtained by *The Age*, show that, in recent years, no fund-raising has been declared as income. A June statement to the Senate by three senior Brethren members said the schools "satisfy the same criteria as all funded non-government schools, including the provision of all documentation, compliance with all registration and accreditation procedures which require the acceptance of full audit assessment and financial accountability".

A former principal who helped set up Brethren schools in one state said their tiny numbers would not have been accredited by state officials under normal circumstances, but the Brethren had made the case that they were different campuses of one school.

When you see news happening: SMS/MMS: 0406 THE AGE (0406 843 243), or [email](#) us. [More](#)

[Get The Age home delivered for as little as \\$3.00 a week*](#)

Copyright © 2006. The Age Company Ltd.