

Catholic school revolt brews

**ROB HARRIS AND
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CATHOLIC schools are threatening a revolt over a federal funding overhaul they claim could force a dramatic increase in students fees.

The Turnbull Government has announced a new funding deal for public, independent and Catholic schools that will provide a \$30 billion boost, including a \$2.2 billion injection in next week's Budget.

Commonwealth funding for Victorian education will almost double over the next decade with an extra \$3.6 billion to 2027. The Catholic sector will be boosted by \$1 billion, around \$3424 for each student.

But a stand-off with the Catholic system threatens to cause division within the federal government, as Prime

Minister Malcolm Turnbull is likely to face worried backbenchers next week.

Catholic Education Melbourne says the overhaul is a "fundamental change" that will challenge the future of its school systems. Executive director Stephen Elder said the government's claim Catholic schools should not be concerned about the changes because of a 3.7 per cent funding boost was "simply a diversion".

"Under these proposals,

many Catholic primary schools will be forced to charge students thousands of dollars more in fees each year," Mr Elder said. "There is no evi-

dence that our primary schools can do this and remain viable."

The group claims the Catholic system will lose flexibility to set fees for each school based on what they can actually raise.

Mark Soldani, principal of St Robert's Catholic Primary School in Newtown, said the families of his 373 students couldn't afford higher fees.

"The bottom line is quite clear to us," Mr Soldani said. "If our families don't have the capacity to meet that deficit the impact will be tough.

"We either find the funds from somewhere else or some things will have to give."

More than 150,000 Victorian students attend about 300 Catholic primary and sec-

ondary schools. The federal proposal has been largely welcomed by state school systems with 85 per cent of students who attend about 9000 schools to receive more resources.

Funding will be cut to 24 independent Catholic and pri-

vate schools, while a further 353 "overfunded" independent schools would have a lower share of extra funding.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham said there was "a lot of exaggeration" coming from some in the Catholic sector. "Ultimately there's no reason why Catholic parish schools in regional areas of Australia or outer suburban areas should face any penalty."

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