

**Ian Townsend:** All this community involvement seems to work well for Beaconsfield State Primary School.

But Beaconsfield is also doing something that in Victoria recently, created a storm of controversy. It's running a Steiner class at the school. The Steiner method of teaching does look very odd at a public primary school.

It follows the ideas of Rudolph Steiner, an Austrian philosopher. Steiner believed the spirit wasn't quite used to the world until the child got his or her second teeth. So children aren't taught how to read until the age of six or seven. They're discouraged from using black when they paint. The children sing 'blessings' before school. There's a lot of talk of spirits and souls. Behind the Steiner school system is a much deeper philosophical movement and some say it's a religion, even a cult, and has no place in a secular school system. Others, though, say it's simply a philosophy and Steiner classes are a creative way of teaching children.

**Teacher:** What I'm going to do is I'm going to have a special box up here, and inside that box there's going to be some bits and pieces of things relating to the countries we've been looking at. There might be something from China, there might be something from - where else have we been?

**Child:** England.

**Child:** South Africa.

**Teacher:** Wonderful. Maggie?

**Child:** Papua-New Guinea.

**Teacher:** Papua-New Guinea. Where else?

**Child:** Fiji.

**Child:** Thailand.

**Teacher:** Well, Gypsy?

**Ian Townsend:** In recent years, the Steiner movement, which runs a number of private schools around the country, has been eager to enter the public school system.

One Steiner website has handy hints about how to start a Steiner course in an Australian public school.

**Reader:** Remember, you must be able to influence the selection of your class teachers. If the Education Department wants to appoint a teacher, it might be okay for the first one or two, but at some stage it won't work. At some stage the principal will retire or move on, so you need to be aware of how a new appointment will be made. Will the department appoint someone who may not be interested in Steiner, or does the school have a say in who is chosen?

**Ian Townsend:** In the case of Beaconsfield State Primary School, it was the Queensland Education Department that told the principal, Paul Richardson, to run the program. The department pays the salary of the Steiner teachers.

**Paul Richardson:** It came from negotiations between the Blue River Steiner Association here in Mackay and Education Queensland and this school was chosen as the campus for it to be on. So yes, it is a partnership between Education Queensland and the parents who originally set up the program. Now it's become the Beaconsfield Steiner program, it's got its own parent reference group and all those sort of supports.

**Ian Townsend:** Do you get any extra resources running a program like that? How does that work?

**Paul Richardson:** The program is resourced the same. The children are state school children so they get the same resourcing as the rest of the state school. The parents by choice will add extra resources themselves if they want things that are above and beyond what we would normally provide to a state school program.

**Ian Townsend:** Beaconsfield Primary School principal, Paul Richardson.

There's a link to some of the Steiner school groups on the Background Briefing website.

The movement is just one example of an interest group that's managed to bend the ear of a government and get its program running in a public primary school.

Tony McGruther runs the Primary Principals Association in Queensland and he's not so much worried about the types of programs, but by the sheer number of them.

**Tony McGruther:** At a broad level there is a very large number of very powerful pressure groups who are exerting pressure on politicians and community groups and having their voices heard in the media in terms of their particular focus, and I suppose the analogy we would say is 'Look, that's all fine, we don't have a problem with the principles underpinning your request, it's just that there is only a limited amount of time and focus that we can give to any of those in a day.' It's sort of like having 40 very good friends, but only having a room that will fit 20 to the birthday party. You know, you're going to have to make some tough choices.