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Alternative education programs are flourishing in Victoria's state primary schools.

THE idea of a one-size-fits-all education system is largely spurned these days.

Most parents and teachers embrace the view that children learn at an individual rate, and have varying interests and backgrounds.

That attitude has given rise to many specialised and alternative programs being introduced at state primary schools.

But it takes a huge commitment by the school council, parents and teachers, who need special training, to get an alternative program up and running.

Last year the Department of Education introduced stringent guidelines for what it calls "specialised curriculum", which runs in parallel with the mainstream curriculum.

Programs such as Steiner, Montessori, Reggio Emilia and the International Baccalaureate (IB) must meet the Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

The Department of Education says eight government schools offer the Steiner stream.

At least five state schools offer the IB Primary Years Program (PYP) and others integrate Montessori and Reggio Emilia philosophies into the mainstream curriculum.

But Victorian Council of School Organisations president Jacinta Cashen questions the value of such programs.

"There has been no research about how Steiner and Montessori, which have been around for more than 100 years, stack up in the 21st century," Cashen says.

"The IB and Reggio Emilia have come out of the 20th century, so there is the sense that they are based on more current understandings of teaching and learning.

"But in the absence of real research, no one can confidently say that, in the long term, these things are in the best interests of our children. That has been one of my concerns."

Cashen says the University of Melbourne is reviewing the Steiner program at Footscray City Primary School, after concerns it is incompatible with secular public education.

"The current review into Footscray City Primary aims to ensure the school adheres to the legislative requirements and the Departments policy requirements," a education department spokeswoman told Learn.

Learn talked to teachers at four schools that have embraced the various programs:

International Baccalaureate

SET up in Geneva in 1968, the IB Diploma aimed to give students a diploma recognised by universities around the world. The IB program has since expanded to offer a universal education to children of all ages.

Auburn South Primary School introduced the IB primary-years program in 2003. Principal Gary Campbell says the IB offers an "inquiry approach" to learning.

"Children go through a questioning process with the teacher, and set about finding the answers to those questions," he says.

"That process is fairly rigorous and that's one of the reasons it's a very good program because it challenges children to move outside their comfort zone."

The IB has a strong focus on global understanding.

"It is more about the way children learn than the content," Campbell says.

Steiner education

AUSTRIAN philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) identified major phases of child development and an educational style to meet their needs. His best-known principle is that children shouldn't start reading until age seven to allow their imaginations to flourish.

Steiner is seen as a holistic system that nurtures a child's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development.

The curriculum includes arts, music, painting, verse, storytelling and eurhythmy (a form of physical education).

There is an emphasis on a strong bond between teacher and student, and students usually have the same teacher for the first eight years of school.

Briar Hill Primary School in Melbourne's north runs a Steiner stream for children in prep to year 4 and plans to extend it to year 6 by 2009.

Acting principal Margaret Hirth says the program is "driven by community demand".

Nearly half the school population is in the Steiner stream, but these students join in mainstream physical education, environmental education and library classes.

"Steiner aims to give children practical skills, empathy, imagination and clear thinking," Hirth says.

Montessori

THE Montessori educational philosophy is named after its founder, Maria Montessori (1870-1952). She had success educating impoverished children that many people considered ineducable.

Mitcham Primary School principal Ian Sloane says the Montessori method was introduced as a stream in 2004.

"I encourage teachers to use inquiry-based learning because it's open-ended and children end up taking responsibility for their own learning, which is what happens in the Montessori grades," Sloane says.

"It's guided by the teacher, of course, because children lack the experience of life to know what they need to know.

"The essence of Montessori is that they enjoy learning because they learn about what they want to and within that freedom is structure."

Classes are multi-aged: six to nine-year-olds in one class, and nine to 12-year-olds in another.

"Every teacher in the Montessori stream negotiates with their children at the end of the week for the work and pursuits they will have the following week," Sloane says.

"It's recorded and agreed, and children are accountable for achieving what they are expected to."

Reggio Emilia

THE Reggio Emilia philosophy is named after the region in Italy where it was first used after World War II.

Aimed at pre-school and primary students, it is based on a belief that children learn best when they have some control over their own education.

The approach also states that children learn from each other, their environment and all adults they are in contact with, including parents and teachers.

Keir Jasper, specialist in the Reggio Emilia method at Findon Primary School, says the Mill Park school was drawn to the system because it focuses on the child as a partner in the learning process.

"The children can learn not only from the teacher but also from their environment and from each other and from other adults, rather than the teacher-at-the-top-and-children-underneath model," he says.

He says the school acknowledges the important role that parents play in education, both in and out of school.

www.montessori.asn.au/

www.reaie.org.au/

www.ibo.org/

www.steiner-australia.org/

Steiner chalks up strong partnership

Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition brings together the work of German artist Joseph Beuys and Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner.

The NGV exhibition examines Steiner's teachings on politics, economics and intellectual freedom and his influence on Beuys' artwork.

It includes 40 blackboard drawings by Steiner.

Find out about educational programs and workshops at www.ngv.vic.gov.au