

**CASTLEMAINE SECONDARY COLLEGE**

**AUDIT OF COLLEGE 'STEINER' PROGRAM AGAINST NEW DET  
APPROVAL CRITERIA**

**Ian Stevens**

**May 2007**

## CONTENTS

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE	PAGE 1
BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CASTLEMAINE STEINER PROGRAM	1
KEY FINDINGS	3
KEY ISSUES	6
SUGGESTIONS FOR COLLEGE CONSIDERATION	7
The Question of Viability/Equity	7
The Question of Continuity	8
The Question of Name	8
Communications	9

## CASTLEMAINE SECONDARY COLLEGE

### Audit of College 'Steiner' Program Against new DET Approval Criteria

#### 1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

In September 2006 the Department of Education and Training issued new "*Guidelines for the Provision of Specialised Curriculum Approaches in Years P-10 in Victorian Government Schools*". Included in these Guidelines are "*Key Approval Criteria*" against which new applications by schools seeking to conduct such programs would be assessed. These criteria are listed as follows.

1. *Capacity for the proposed approach to deliver quality educational outcomes for all students.*
2. *Demonstrated evidence of responsiveness to the existing school culture and local school community needs.*
3. *Evidence of effective delivery of existing school programs and the ability to meet Department of Education & Training curriculum policy and legislative requirements.*
4. *Evidence of community support and the capacity for governance arrangements and resource allocation to continue in a sound manner under the proposed approach.*
5. *Demonstrated capacity to ensure equity and access for all students in the school community, including students with special needs.*
6. *Evidence of quality assurance mechanisms to ensure quality teaching standards and educational outcomes are met.*
7. *Capacity to operate a specialised curriculum in a transparent manner, including reporting and communicating to the school community in an open manner.*

As the Castlemaine Secondary College Steiner Program commenced before the publication of these guidelines the College is not obliged to make any submission based upon them. However the College believes it prudent that an independent audit of its program be undertaken against the above criteria and that is the purpose of this paper.

#### 2. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CASTLEMAINE STEINER PROGRAM

Following a College Council resolution late in 2004 supporting the introduction of the program, planning took place throughout 2005 and the program commenced in Year 9 in 2006. Key points relating to the introduction of the program are as follows.

- There is a widespread belief/assumption that the key driver for the introduction of the program was the desire to maximise student numbers in the face of potential declines in enrolments driven largely by local demographic realities. Notwithstanding this, there exist a number of more altruistic

subsidiary motives for the program, including the desirability of keeping as many of the local youth in education with their district peers as possible. Further to this, it was recognised that there existed in both the Secondary College and the Castlemaine Steiner School a common strong focus upon the Arts, including visual and performance arts and especially music, and that the transition of students from the Steiner School to CSC would not only provide continuity in this field for the students but would also further enhance the depth and reputation of the CSC program.

The need to maintain enrolments is itself, of course, a reflection of the desire to optimise the opportunities for all students by ensuring that the resources available to the college are not diminished as a result of falling enrolments.

- The motion passed by Council followed representations to the then College Principal by parents of students at the Castlemaine Steiner School who were seeking a preferred local alternative for their children when they completed the Prep-Year 8 program offered at that school. The matter was discussed at a College Parent forum convened as part of the Triennial Review process to consider various issues relating to the future of the College. The discussions were led by the then College Principal who subsequently sponsored the motion to Council.
- During 2005 five members of the teaching staff (voluntarily) undertook the approved secondary teacher training in Steiner methodology in Melbourne.
- The 2006 program began with 21 Year 9 students, 12 of whom came from the Castlemaine Steiner School. Another 3 came from other Steiner schools, with the remaining 6 from Year 8 at Castlemaine Secondary College (CSC).
- Despite the perceived logistical problems, the Year 9 program was located at the senior campus to avoid the need for the students to undertake two transitions in successive years.
- In 2007 the Year 9 program has 19 students, 11 of whom are from the local Steiner school, seven from CSC Year 8 (2006), and one from another independent school. The Year 10 program has 12 students at present.
- During discussions about College program priorities for 2007 it became apparent that the 2007 Year 10 group would be relatively small, caused in part by students who were in the 2006 Year 9 group choosing to 'mainstream' for Year 10, often to gain access to elective classes otherwise not available to them. Whilst serious concerns were expressed in relation to the resource levels required to maintain the program the view was taken by the College Staff Consultative Committee and the College Council that a commitment had been made to this first group of students and that the program should be extended to Year 10 to honour this commitment.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

Criterion 1: *Capacity for the proposed approach to deliver quality educational outcomes for all students.*

(Note that this is one of several of the Key Approval Criteria containing some ambiguity when applied to the Castlemaine context. This ambiguity sometimes has been exploited in order to justify opposing views of the program.)

The ‘Steiner’ program was, of course, never intended for all the students; however it does seem likely that it has the capacity to deliver quality outcomes for the students involved in it, and early indicators (including Year 9 subject honours, AIM data, student survey data, and parental satisfaction) appear to confirm this expectation.

On the question of its impact on ‘non-Steiner’ students it is noted that others have been able to access the program (based largely on the College’s opinions of appropriateness to individual need and likely levels of student commitment to success), and anecdotal advice is that some very positive outcomes already have been achieved by some of these students.

On the broader scale, the question of the impact on outcomes for the mainstream student cohort through the very existence of the ‘Steiner’ group is one that has already been noted and clearly requires further consideration, particularly in light of any significant differences in the levels of resources needed to sustain various College programs. This matter is dealt with further in para.5.1 of this report.

It is also noted here that in introducing the program the College was careful to ensure that the learning of students in the program was directed by the integrated approach involving the Main Lesson and the identified topics rather than by strict adherence to Steiner philosophies. (In fact, most of the teachers involved in the program are not trained Steiner teachers and are unlikely to have detailed knowledge of his philosophies.) Great care appears to have been taken to ensure compliance with the Victorian Essential Learning Standards and to avoid introducing anything other than what might be regarded as ‘normal’ curriculum content. In particular, consideration of religion on a comparative basis was accepted in line with the way in which it is likely to have been delivered in a SOSE class.

Criterion 2: *Demonstrated evidence of responsiveness to the existing school culture and local school community needs.*

The community served by the College is diverse in most areas other than ethnicity, with significant levels of disadvantage, as reflected in its relatively high proportion of families in receipt of the Educational Maintenance Allowance. The College itself has a record of responsiveness to local school community needs through its long-standing commitment to deliver a wide range of programs to its students and its engagement at the forefront of various educational developments over the years.

If the “existing school culture” is as promoted in the College’s current Vision and Values statement there seems no reason to suggest that the introduction of a ‘Steiner’

program is, of itself, contrary to that culture. On the other hand, vigilance is required to ensure that the conditions under which the program is conducted in the future do not undermine, or give the appearance of undermining, the general culture implicit in the expressed vision and values.

It is argued by some that introduction of the 'Steiner' program itself was evidence of a response to an expressed local need, albeit one of a minority group, and at a time when it appeared that there was a likely long-term convergence of the interests of that group and those of the existing school community.

Issues surrounding this criterion are also canvassed further at para.5 of this report.

Criterion 3: *Evidence of effective delivery of existing school programs and the ability to meet Department of Education & Training curriculum policy and legislative requirements.*

Information available from School Level Reports and the Triennial Review process indicates that the College is generally at least holding its own in comparison with similar colleges in the effective delivery of existing programs and in meeting DE&T curriculum policy and legislative requirements. Particular indicators of successful program delivery lie in

- the sound data returned in the (state-wide) AIM testing at Years 7 and 9, not only in terms of the College means in comparison with those of like schools, but also in terms of the growth attained by the matched cohort of students moving from Year 7 to Year 9.
- the College's consistently strong VCE data, with "All Study" means and proportions of study scores above 40 both consistently above those of like schools in recent years.

It is also tempting to suggest that the huge reductions in student absence rates recorded in 2006 is a reflection of more effective delivery of existing programs and compliance with DE&T policy and requirements.

Advice from the Regional Office of DE&T confirms an official departmental view that the expectations of Criterion 3 are being met by the College. Notwithstanding this, however, both the region and the College are sensitive to the threats posed by adverse recent data in the areas of student retention from Years 10 to 11, attitudes to school expressed by the senior students, and the Parent Opinion Survey.

It is noted here that a view does exist in some elements of the College community that some programs previously conducted appear now to be at risk, or worse, and that if this perception is true then it may be due, at least in part, to increased strains on resources occasioned by the introduction of the 'Steiner' program. This matter is also canvassed further at para.5.

Criterion 4: *Evidence of community support and the capacity for governance arrangements and resource allocation to continue in a sound manner under the proposed approach.*

Considerable effort beyond the perceived scope of this review would be required to obtain reliable data on the real level of community support for the program. The methodology adopted in this study relied on persons with an interest self-identifying and making themselves available for consultation. Unsurprisingly, this attracted those strongly supportive of the program, and those strongly opposed. The views of the vast 'silent majority' can only be assumed, although some indicators are available. These include:

- Anecdotal advice from the College that there appears no evidence of widespread opposition; rather the visible opposition appears to be limited to a relatively small number of people.
- College Council elections in 2005 and 2006 which saw outspoken opponents of the program fail in bids for election to Council.
- The nomination and subsequent appointment to Council of parents associated with the 'Steiner' program.
- The testimony of a small number of parents who felt that the general community attitude was positive or neutral rather than antagonistic.

It would appear that the College's governance arrangements have so far proven sufficiently robust to continue in a sound manner following the introduction of this program. The question of resource allocation is a matter that is considered annually as part of College procedures and is dealt with further elsewhere in this report (see para.5.1).

Criterion 5: *Demonstrated capacity to ensure equity and access for all students in the school community, including students with special needs.*

(See also criterion 2 above.)

A common view here appears to be that the introduction of this program has simply broadened the range of offerings and opportunities for local students. The introduction of the new program does not appear to have had any direct negative impact on the wide range of programs offered by the College to ensure equity and access for all. On the contrary, it might be argued that the extra resources available to the College through the additional enrolments can be used to maintain or enhance the levels of support available to all students.

Further to this question, it is noted that the numbers of students in Year 9 this year would have demanded the formation of exactly the same number of class groupings with or without the existence of the 'Steiner' group. Whilst comment has been made in para.2 of this report in relation to the small Year 10 'Steiner' group, the College is firm in the view that there are no program options previously available to students that are no longer available due to the existence of the 'Steiner' groups. It is acknowledged however, that the College is operating under serious budget constraints, partly due to declining enrolments and particularly in relation to its

teaching budget and staff profile, and that this has placed significant pressure on program decisions.

Criterion 6: *Evidence of quality assurance mechanisms to ensure quality teaching standards and educational outcomes are met.*

The College complies with DE&T requirements in relation to quality assurance. Further, the members of staff involved with the 'Steiner' program are also involved in other areas of the College program and are subject to the same performance requirements and criteria as all other staff.

Criterion 7: *Capacity to operate a specialised curriculum in a transparent manner, including reporting and communicating to the school community in an open manner.*

There appears no reason to suggest that the structures and processes available to the College do not provide the capacity to operate this program in a transparent manner and for reporting and communicating to its community in an open manner. Notwithstanding this apparent capacity, there have been questions raised about information and communication matters, and these are discussed further at para.5.4.

#### 4. KEY ISSUES

The main issues raised by those concerned about the program are summarised as follows.

- The introduction of the program (particularly with the present numbers of students) is perceived to have deflected resources from mainstream students, including those with special needs.
- There should be no place in government schools for a program which has at its heart a religious philosophy.  
(It is noted here that this is now not a matter to be argued at the local level as DE&T Memorandum E004-2006 specifically authorises "Steiner" programs in government schools. In this context it should be sufficient for the College to satisfy itself that its programs and/or resources are not being used to promote a particular religious or philosophical cause.)
- The program offered bears so little relationship to a bona fide "Steiner" program that it is inappropriate that its title should include the word "Steiner".

Other expressed matters of concern include:

- An alleged lack of transparency/consultation in the processes used prior to Council approval for the introduction of the program.

- Allegations of ongoing shortcomings in the level of information available about the program.
- Perceptions of favoured treatment of one group of Year 9 students (based at the Senior Campus) over the rest.
- A view that the anticipated increases in the numbers of students from the local Steiner school have not been/will not be achieved and that there has been undue disruption to the College on behalf of a relatively small number of relatively advantaged students.

The following suggestions for consideration by the College are made in light of the need to ensure ongoing compliance with the above criteria and also having regard to the general thrust of the views expressed in opposition to the current program.

## 5. SUGGESTIONS FOR COLLEGE CONSIDERATION

### 5.1 The Question of Viability/Equity

The notions of viability and equity are linked in this context because “viability” is here interpreted to mean that the program does not deflect resources from ‘mainstream’ student programs or from those students who would normally be expected to receive additional levels of resources due to their recognised special needs. Such judgements are made routinely and usually at least annually, around considerations of which programs should receive priority for scarce resources, which programs should pay for themselves, and which should be subsidised to ensure their continuity.

The author is aware that this is a matter already the subject of consideration by the College leadership and that it is therefore very likely that most of what follows will already have been discussed. However some thoughts upon this central issue are as follows.

- Some serious monitoring and documentation of likely future intakes from the Castlemaine Steiner School is needed. This should include the actual proportions of students coming to CSC from this source in 2006 and 2007 compared with the numbers/proportions attracted prior to these years (including those transferring at the end of Grade 6 rather than Year 8), and, of course, projections of future proportions/numbers.
- Regular analyses of the effectiveness of the program need to be undertaken based not only upon student achievement data, but also on student, parent, and teacher interviews, with the results used to inform the development of this and other College programs.
- Perhaps there is a further opportunity here for the College. Some thought might also be given to the possibility that a wide range of CSC students in Years 7 and 8 would benefit from the introduction of an alternative program which exposes them to fewer teachers and incorporates a central extended

thematic approach along the lines of the “main lesson”. This suggestion is based on

- (a) the fact that such programs have been implemented with considerable success elsewhere,
- (b) the fact that the College has already identified students for whom this approach might be appropriate at Year 9. Might it be better if students were identified earlier, in consultation with their feeder primary schools?
- (c) the prospect that such a group would guarantee the viability of such a cohort in Years 9 and 10,
- (d) the fact that the College will face the reality of dealing with the needs of a new group (albeit a relatively small one) in two years’ time when the Winters Flat Primary School “community class” reaches secondary age,
- (e) the expectation that the College already believes that such an approach is likely to have merit because of its endorsement as suitable for Years 9 and 10 students,
- (f) the view that such an approach might lead to a viable Year 9 cohort on the Junior Campus, thus also negating arguments/perceptions that one group of Year 9’s receives favoured treatment on the Senior Campus.

Note that this suggestion is further based on the assumption that it could be appropriate to the particular learning styles of students with a wide range of interests and abilities.

## 5.2 The Question of Continuity

The College needs formally to decide and communicate whether or not it has any intention of continuing this special program stream into VCE. If not, then any future program offered to students entering at Year 9 should be clearly represented as a “transitional program” in preparation for VCE or other pursuits.

## 5.3 The Question of Name

It is suggested that the College seriously considers the name by which this program is known if it is to continue. On the one hand, it is apparent that the program now offered in Years 9 and 10 is the product of various necessary and agreed compromises to a pure ‘Steiner’ approach; on the other hand, the very existence of the word “Steiner” in the program name is the subject of concern/frustration/anger for some. It seems to the author that the current name is unhelpful and it is suggested that this issue be considered even if nothing else changes. In the event that the suggestions in 5.1 above ever lead to other program changes in the College, then such a change would seem even more desirable or, indeed, necessary.

#### 5.4 Communications

It is suggested that the College consider the publication of its Council Minutes or Executive Summaries thereof on its website and/or in various hard copy alternatives.

It is also suggested that every effort be made to ensure that this program is subject, and seen to be subject, to the same planning, monitoring, reporting, and recognition processes as other College programs.

As an immediate response to expressed concerns about transparency and the availability of information, it is suggested that the College consider the publication of a 'Question and Answer' sheet dealing with the key issues it has faced in relation to this program. Examples might include:

- Compliance with VELs
- Science programs and students' scientific literacy
- The "College of Teachers" and links within and beyond the College
- The role of Anthroposophy
- Years 9 and 10 curriculum structures
- Options beyond Year 10
- Resource issues.

Ian Stevens  
May 2007