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Teacher hits church's free shows

Bridie Smith
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A PENTECOSTAL church has been accused of using state schools to spread its message by offering free concerts, barbecues and kung fu classes to students.

A teacher from a Richmond secondary school said yesterday his principal had threatened him with suspension after he opposed a hip-hop concert by an American Christian group, the Nubian Gents. The group was brought to Australia by a youth arm of the Assemblies of God.

The teacher's concerns, backed by the teacher union, has highlighted the increasing role the church plays in secular state schools.

English and psychology teacher Brendan Bailey said students at Lynall Hall Community School should have been made aware that yesterday's concert was put on by a religious group and called for an alternate program for students who did not want to attend.

But he said the secondary school refused and the principal threatened him with suspension.

Principal Eddie Crouch denied he threatened suspension, instead suggesting Mr Bailey go home to calm down after a heated confrontation with another staff member.

The Australian Education Union said the Assemblies of God church had gained a greater presence in schools by offering free extracurricular programs at lunchtime and after school.

The union's Victorian branch president, Mary Bluett, said make-up classes for girls, kung fu for boys, dancing lessons and barbecues were being offered.

She said the programs had little religious content, though students were often invited to weekend youth clubs run by the church.

She said that while free activities at school might be appealing, students' parents must be informed.

About 300 students, including some from other schools, attended yesterday's hour-long concert by the Nubian Gents.

The director of the church's youth movement Youth Alive, David Molyneux, said the church had paid for the US group to perform in 12 Melbourne public and private schools.

"There was nothing Christian about the concert," Mr Molyneux said. "In state schools we never talk about religion, we talk about young people making positive choices."

The Nubian Gents' website describes the group as "warriors of praise and leaders of worship" who are "equipped by God with talents ... which we use to glorify Him". The lyrics of one song, *One 4 My God*, state "Ladies and gentlemen, the universe is seated at the feet of God. The time is coming, and is already here, in which the Bible will no longer be known as a book of fairytales but prophesies being fulfilled."

In 2005 the State Government reviewed the Education Act, confirming secular education as a cornerstone of the state education system.

But Mr Bailey said he was concerned at the role of religion in state schools.

He said the Richmond Assemblies of God has provided a fortnightly Friday barbecue for students of the school, which caters for at-risk students.

The school has won funding for a chaplain under a \$115 million Federal Government program giving schools up to \$20,000 a year for a chaplain of any religious affiliation.

Mr Bailey said: "We need counsellors, but we don't need any more religious stuff. We've had kids here who are gay or who have had abortions ... we're an at-risk school and at-risk kids have those sorts of issues."

He said he voiced his objection because the Assemblies of God had a conservative attitude to social and moral issues such as gay rights and abortion.

An Education Department spokeswoman said it was up to schools to make decisions about extracurricular activities.

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