

Parents defend Steiner program

By Sonja Viduka

PARENTS with children enrolled in an alternative-teaching stream at Footscray City Primary School have spoken out against critics comparing the program with a "cult".

The Steiner program is one of three streams offered at the school, along with a mainstream and English program. The Steiner program is founded on the teaching methods of 19th century Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner and has an emphasis on arts and music.

Footscray City is one of 12 Victorian state primary schools that offers Steiner in addition to a mainstream curriculum.

However, the program, introduced at

the school in 2001, is now under threat from a Department of Education review. The move comes after the stream was attacked by some parents because children were not taught to read and write until they were seven.

Some critics believe the stream conceals a spiritual basis that has no place in a secular government school. There are also fears by some parents of children in the mainstream course that unless safeguards are put in place, the school may be "captured" by the Steiner stream if its enrolments become the majority, as has been the case at Collingwood College.

One father, whose five-year-old son was enrolled in the stream, withdrew the boy from the school after he was

allegedly told by a teacher that his son could not progress from prep to grade one because "his soul is not fully incarnated yet". The father was also concerned about a blessing or a "verse" said every morning in class.

But one mother, who hoped to enrol her child in the Steiner stream at Footscray City next year, said parents should be given the choice.

"We don't have a problem with mainstream education because mainstream education works for a lot of children," she said.

"But as a taxpayer and as a single parent who doesn't have much money, I want to be able to have the option to choose the educational system that suits my child."

The mother, who did not want to be named, said her daughter was flourishing at a Steiner-based kindergarten.

She said she had done extensive research on the teaching methods and denied cult comparisons.

"People who are comparing Steiner education to a cult or to Scientology don't actually understand anything about it."

The mother said she believed the father who had removed his child had misunderstood the terminology used by the teacher and may not have known enough about teaching methods before enrolling his child in the program.

"The parent was initially quoted as saying they chose Steiner because of its non-competitive nature," she said.

Responding to criticism that the stream taught Christianity, the mother said it applied more secular than mainstream teaching methods because it looked at all religions and did not promote Christianity.

"It doesn't teach religion, but it certainly speaks about religion when teaching history," the mother said.

She said the stream offered a balanced holistic education that taught children how to think for themselves.

"Some parents are bothered that reading is delayed, but by grades three and four the children are reading at the same level."

Schoolprincipal Win Warren said the Steiner program was under review, but he did not want to comment further.