

## Press Release

5 September 2006

# Call to Minister of Education for clear policy on dual-stream schools

A recently formed action group, People for State Education (PFSE), is calling on the Minister for Education, Lynne Kosky, to make clear the government's policy on dual-stream schools.

"Dual-stream schools are dysfunctional schools," says Julianne Barclay a parent from the Castlemaine Secondary College community. Castlemaine Secondary College houses a Steiner<sup>1</sup> stream, one of a dozen such schools in Victoria.

"A government school cannot operate effectively when the core values of Victorian public education have to compete daily with a spiritual and lifestyle philosophy. There are inherent contradictions which cannot be resolved and which result in bitter conflicts within school communities."

This is amply demonstrated by the situation at Footscray City Primary School, according to Jenni Lans, a parent at the school, which has been operating a Steiner stream.

"We have trouble with many activities that are considered reasonable in any other Australian public school. Parents at school wanted to have a movie night as a school community event. Steiner teachers actively opposed this even though School Council had approved it. Brochures advertising the event were taken out of children's information pockets."

Steiner pupils are not allowed to watch television or use computers<sup>2</sup>, competitive sport is actively discouraged and they are not taught to read or write until they are seven, and in many cases, even older. This is because, according to Rudolph Steiner after whom the method is named, children are not at the right stage of development for reading or writing until their adult teeth come in<sup>3</sup>.

"Before the Steiner stream was introduced, the then Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) stated in writing that it did not support Steiner streams in government schools," says Jenni Lans. "The Department supplied the

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Steiner was a nineteenth century mystic (died in 1925) who developed the theory of Anthroposophy the philosophy on which all Steiner/Waldorf schools are based. "Anthroposophy holds that the human being is fundamentally a spiritual being..." from Waldorf Answers website: <http://www.waldorfanswers.org/>. Retrieved 2 September, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "Computers as toys are inappropriate, because they present a two-dimensional abstraction of the world to the young child." From the Steiner in Australia website: <http://www.steiner-australia.org/other/overview.html>. Retrieved 2 September 2006.

<sup>3</sup> "...the teacher reserves the formal teaching of numbers and letters for the child's next developmental stage, signalled physically by the change of teeth, at about the age of seven." From the Steiner in Australia website: <http://www.steiner-australia.org/other/overview.html>. Retrieved 2 September 2006.

School Council with a formal memorandum that clearly states that Steiner education does not comply with departmental policy<sup>4</sup>.

“We therefore want to know why the government continues to let these alternative streams into public schools?”

In a recent statement<sup>5</sup>, a spokeswoman for the Education Department said “new and rigorous criteria” were being developed for schools planning alternative streams.

“We have been hearing this from the department since October 2005” says Julianne Barclay. “We are dubious that they will do anything as there has been no research into the Steiner method and no monitoring by the Department of the problems these alternative philosophies have caused in the public system.”

According to Lans, statements such as those made by the Department presuppose that schools such as Steiner have a rightful place in the public system.

“This is a matter of public concern,” she says. “The theories put forward in Steiner education, such as delaying reading, should have been thoroughly researched and debated within the public arena and by educationalists before they were allowed in to government schools.”

“We urge the government and the Department to act now to fix the problems in these dual-stream schools and not fail in their duty of care towards children in the public school system.”

PFSE has been providing information to Ombudsman Victoria, and has requested a thorough investigation of these matters by the Office of the Ombudsman.

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PFSE members, Jenni Lans (0415 434 744) and Julianne Barclay (54752080) are available for interview.

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<sup>4</sup> Executive Memorandum No. 2000/02 Specialised pedagogical and methodological approaches to education. Letter from Greg Gibbs, Acting Regional Director, DEET, to Principal of Footscray City Primary School, 14 November 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Sunday Herald Sun, 3 September 2006.