

[Home](#) » [National](#) » Article

## Steiner a potential 'handicap'

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A LEADING school parents group has criticised Steiner-style teaching in state schools, claiming it could handicap children already at risk of not learning to read.

Victorian Council of School Organisations president Jacinta Cashen said Steiner school teaching should not be promoted in the state system. Ms Cashen said it used untested education methods and was neither secular nor free — two cornerstones of public education.

Moves to use the Steiner system in low socioeconomic areas such as Collingwood and Footscray were jeopardising reading for some children who already had literacy hurdles to overcome, she said.

Steiner has been an option in some Victorian state schools since 1991.

"In the past, (Steiner) has been a bit of a middle-class thing and the children of those parents have protecting factors — those children are pretty much going to be OK because of what happens at home," Ms Cashen said.

"But Steiner is now running in schools where those protecting factors aren't there and that's a risk for those kids."

Under the Education and Training Act, state schools must be secular and free, although the meaning of secular is not stated. Ms Cashen said Steiner stream schools were neither of these, as they had extra costs and used "blessings".

Steiner schools follow the teaching of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher. Under his method, children are taught to knit and engage in hands-on play to promote imaginative thinking. They are discouraged from using the colours black and brown and are not taught formal reading before their adult teeth appear, usually about age seven.

Ms Cashen spoke out after the Education Department launched a third investigation into the curriculum of state schools offering a Steiner program. It was reported last week that 60 per cent of Collingwood College's preps failed to meet standards on reading and maths. Children up to year 2 were not achieving expected reading levels compared with similar schools, but by year 10 they met literacy standards.

Monash University education expert Dr Anne Kennedy said research on Steiner in the US had shown that its students did well at university, but she had not seen any studies that were "weighted" for socioeconomic advantage. "It has been perceived as something of interest to arty-farty types," she said.

She also said there was a tendency to get children to "bark at text", in which they recited the words without understanding the meaning.

Academic Dr Charles Livingstone, a parent of two children in the Steiner stream at Footscray

City Primary School, said the first Steiner school had been established in the 19th century for the disadvantaged children of factory workers in Austria.

"While parents might have a disadvantaged background, they are still capable of monitoring the progress of their child," Dr Livingstone said.

A Department of Education and Early Childhood Development spokeswoman said there was no plan for a wider review of the program at Footscray City Primary.

### **Signs your child is ready to read**

- Holding a book up the right way.
- Independently looking at pictures in the book.
- Turning pages.
- Telling the story to "teddy".
- Understanding and remembering what happened in the story.
- Recognising letters: "That one is in Mummy's name."

*SOURCE: MONASH UNIVERSITY*

*EDUCATION ACADEMIC DR ANNE KENNEDY*

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