

July 18, 2007 12:17pm AEST

## Parents split over Steiner program

Milanda Rout | July 09, 2007

**A CURRICULUM under which children are not taught to read and write until they are seven is being reviewed amid debate over whether it should be offered in public schools.**

Steiner education has flourished in the private sector across Australia and is being offered at government primary and secondary schools.

But the move into at least 10 public schools in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland has divided parents.

Critics say Steiner does not belong in public schools because it is too religious and does not pay enough attention to reading and writing in the early years, while supporters argue that it provides a more holistic approach to learning.

Parents at an inner-city Melbourne school are divided over the issue, and the Victorian Government has stepped in to try to resolve the standoff.

The Bracks Government dissolved the Footscray City Primary School council late last year and, with the interim council, is conducting an independent review of the Steiner curriculum offered at the school, in the city's west.

A Melbourne University expert has been appointed to carry out the evaluation to see whether the school's Steiner program adheres to government guidelines.

The curriculum is based on the teachings of 20th century Austrian educationist Rudolf Steiner, who advocated devoting the first seven years of a child's life to building a healthy body.

Under the approach, children are discouraged from using computers and watching television, and have the same teacher for the first seven years.

Victorian Council of School Organisation president Jacinta Cashen said alternative programs did not belong in government schools. "Some of the elements of Steiner programs make some sense but a lot does not," she said. "And if we are striving for high-quality education in state schools, that is exactly the reason why public schools shouldn't teach it."

She said the dispute at Footscray City Primary came to a head when parents wanted to review the Steiner program, which had been in place for six years.

Parent Yoni Prior, who has her eight-year-old son in the mainstream program, said the school was "strife-torn" over the program. "As a (social) experiment it would not have passed any research committee in the land," she said.

Another parent said she had withdrawn her two children from the Steiner stream, and then from the school.

"The most serious concern we had was the Steiner curriculum was clearly religious and the children were taught a creationist view of the world," she said.

"That should not happen in our secular state schools."

But parent Bo Christensen, whose child is enrolled in the Steiner program, said the dispute was centered more around the way Steiner was introduced than the curriculum itself.

"The school had a bit of a culture shock and it wasn't handled as well as it probably should have been," he said.

Mr Christensen said criticism of Steiner education, especially concerning reading and writing, was unfounded, with Steiner students doing better than their mainstream counterparts on literacy and numeracy tests.

Rudolf Steiner Schools of Australia executive officer Rosemary Gentle said running Steiner streams in state schools had been successful across the country.

"This (Footscray) seems to be the exception. Parents at other schools seem to be delighted," she said.

Ms Gentle denied that the education system was religious. "We have got a structure focusing on social and emotional development of the child because it is a very holistic approach to education," she said.

She said Steiner did not believe in teaching "abstract symbols" such as reading and writing until children were seven.

"The reading and writing we prefer to hold back until they are seven," she said.

"But they are still doing literacy and numeracy through speech and games and constructing things."