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## Warning on state Steiner schools

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A BITTER dispute at a Melbourne primary school over Steiner education has prompted a call for the State Government to strengthen its guidelines on the controversial teaching method, in which children are not taught to read and write until they are seven.

An independent review of the Steiner stream offered at Footscray City Primary School has recommended that, in future, schools must rigorously assess "specialised curriculums" and prove they are well supported by parents before they are introduced.

Footscray City Primary School introduced the Steiner program in 2001, with some members of the council believing it could broaden the curriculum, boost the school's public profile and increase enrolments.

But the move divided the school and tension rose to the point that the council was unable to govern because of infighting, forcing the Government to intervene.

The report, conducted by Melbourne University academics on behalf of the Education Department, found the Steiner stream did not comply with basic standards, including literacy in the early years, at the time it was introduced.

"Nevertheless, the implementation of Steiner at FCPS went ahead, and concerns regarding compliance in the curriculum requirements remain evident," the report said.

The Steiner curriculum is based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, a 20th-century Austrian educationist.

Children have the same teacher for the first seven years, and are discouraged from using computers or watching television.

Critics say the program does not belong in public schools because it is too religious and does not pay enough attention to literacy during the critical early years. Supporters, however, argue it provides a more "holistic" approach.

The report noted that divisions at Footscray were symptomatic of the broader debate on whether Steiner constituted a religion. It said that at the primary school, teachers and students were known to "recite daily verses", which some people regarded as prayers. The curriculum also included studies from the Old Testament and the study of the lives of the saints.

One parent, who did not wish to be named, said she moved her son out of the school after a Steiner teacher recommended he repeat prep "because his soul had not been reincarnated yet".

"I just don't believe it is educationally sound," she said.

The review called for the school to be transparent about its curriculum and provide parents with more information about how it is taught.

It also recommended that the department's policy for specialised curriculums in years prep to 10, such as Steiner and Montessori programs, be strengthened so that schools are required to provide evidence of council and community support for their program, as well as a detailed implementation plan.

Education Minister Bronwyn Pike declined to comment on the issue yesterday.

Education Department spokeswoman Anna Malbon said: "As all Victorian schools continue to move to the full implementation of Victorian Essential Learning Standards (the new curriculum standards), the Steiner stream will need to ensure its curriculum also complies."

Victoria has 17 schools with specialised curriculum streams, eight of which run Steiner streams.

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