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Clergy gets support on bill for ex-cons to get their GED

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A coalition group of churches in the five-county Philadelphia area traveled to Harrisburg this week and won support of area lawmakers for a bill to require ex-offenders to get their GED certificate as a condition of parole or probation.

Citing statistics which the coalition said shows that 45 percent of prison inmates failed to complete high school, the group said a GED initiative could go a

long way in reducing the rate of repeat offenders.

"Our main concern is that there's no hope. There's no hope because they're unemployed. They're unemployed because they're uneducated," said the Rev. William Gaffney, pastor of the New Covenant Presbyterian Church and president of the Congregations Organized for Public Engagement.

The group also spoke to the lawmakers about the state restructuring public schools.

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Gaffney said there seems to be a direct link between the lack of education and the tendency toward crime that disproportionately affects minorities, who comprise 70 percent of the state's prison population.

"In our communities we see that played out in reality every-

day," said Gaffney, who added that 45 percent of inmates never finished high school and 78 percent are repeat offenders.

Operating under the banner of the Regional Conference of Neighborhood Organizations (RCNO), 25 leaders representing five organizations and 30 churches in the five-county area went to Harrisburg Tuesday and met with Reps. Dwight Evans, John Myers, Thaddeus Kirkland, Anthony J. Melio and Timothy Hennessey.

Each of the representatives threw their support behind the bill.

"I certainly would be ready to sponsor a bill around this initiative," said Myers, who has sent the proposal to the legislative reference bureau to be drafted. "There are a number of questions though, that I have."

Myers offered other initiatives which could be included, such as a prison-to-work program.

The Philadelphia churches are

following the example of the Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (LAMC) which has been working for the last three years on a similar plan. The California bill is a five-year pilot program for Los Angeles and other participating cities.

In Pennsylvania, the GED program would begin as a pilot program in the southeastern part of the state.

Kirkland was "supportive of the entire package." But he said he would also like to see trade skills opportunities also made available for those getting out of prison.

A few of the representatives were concerned sentences would be extended if inmates failed to pass their GED test prior to release.

Hennessey said he could support the bill if it proved constitutional. Each legislator voiced concern over the language of the bill. A more detailed discussion would take place once the mea-

sure is introduced.

Another concern among the clergy and lay persons was the takeover school districts in Philadelphia, and in Chester.

Lucille Gynat of the Network of Congregational Development in Chester County, said there were no hearings in her area before the state placed the Chester-Upland School District in receivership several years ago.

The cry was echoed later in the day when some 200 members of the Philadelphia Student Union, an organization of high school students, descended on the Capitol Rotunda for a noisy demonstration. The students wanted state legislators to pump additional funds into the Philadelphia school system.

Last week, the General Assembly voted to allow the state education secretary to take over the district once he concludes that it is distressed.

The issue arose after Philadelphia School Superintendent

David Hornbeck says he would close the schools next March if the state did not come up with another \$85 million to close the district's budget gap.

"We are not recommending that the district had to be closed," said Paula Hess of the legislative commission on restructuring Pennsylvania's urban schools. "That was one of the options. It's always an option."

The coalition group invited and received commitments from the state representatives to revisit the GED and other educational issues at a June regional meeting in the Philadelphia area which RCNO expects between 500 and 1,000 congregants to attend.

"Our objectives were met," said Gaffney. "We got total sponsorship, which we were trying to do. We also got commitments from representatives ... to come back and meet with us and dialogue."