

SECTION

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METRO

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Throwing the Books at Criminals

■ **Courts:** New law requires offenders to attend classes as a condition of probation.

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One way to teach a criminal a lesson is to send him to school.

That is the basis of a new law that authorizes two Los Angeles County courts to demand that offenders serve time in a classroom as a condition of probation.

The African American churches that pushed for the legislation are learning some lessons too—about how to use the system to shape public policy and help solve community problems.

The new law, signed by Gov. Pete Wilson this month, authorizes a five-year pilot program to require adults convicted of nonviolent and less serious offenses to enroll in classes toward earning the equivalent of a high school diploma.

For some, it will mean first learning how to read.

Believed to be the first of its kind, the law, which will go into action Jan. 1, is rooted in the idea that education will improve the lives of those on probation and reduce the likelihood they will return to crime. That philosophy, championed by a local group of ministers, has won the support of many in the criminal justice system.

"I think it beats the heck out of being in jail," said David Davies, who heads the Los Angeles County Probation Department's Adult Field Services Bureau. "I think most people will see this as a positive opportunity toward employment or better employment."

Assemblyman Carl Washington (D-Paramount), who sponsored the bill, said the new law will show "there are a number of individuals who have been waiting for a second chance."

The law also is significant for the collaborative effort that brought it into being—the work of 37 African American congregations known as Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches.

With no funding from the state or federal governments, the group has



LUIS SINCO / Los Angeles Times

The Rev. Richard Byrd was among a group of clergymen and their congregations who lobbied for the new law.

agreed to find and provide schooling for men and women in the program. They have worked long and hard for the job for one reason.

"Ultimately these are our children," said the Rev. Richard Byrd, a member of Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches and pastor of Christ Unity Center For African Spirituality. "The real thrust of the program for us is the returning of our children back to us so that we can have the type of influence that we desire to have as examples for their lives."

The ministers have been fueled by a sense of urgency, backed by some staggering statistics.

In California, one-third of African American men between the ages of 19 and 29 are either in jail, in prison, on probation or on parole, Byrd said.

"You're taking away from our

community a vast resource of talent, of fathers, of mothers' sons, of husbands who cannot be the type of force in the community and in their families' lives and in our churches that they desire to be and that we need them to be," Byrd said.

About 70% of repeat offenders are illiterate, according to a U.S. Justice Department Report. They are often caught in a cycle. After release from jail or prison, still lacking the skills needed to survive in the workplace, they often end up returning to crime and incarceration.

African American churches have a long tradition of promoting education. So local ministers decided to use that tradition to tackle this modern problem.

"Rather than blame anyone for the problem, we decided it was the

church's responsibility to create a long-term solution to that problem," said the Rev. Eugene Williams, director of Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches.

The ministers organization offered to provide the training and leadership. The group's only request was for the state to make the education compulsory.

Early on they gained support from Los Angeles Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti, who drafted the legislation, and Washington, who agreed to sponsor it in the Assembly. Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke lent her support.

"Gil Garcetti was pivotal in this entire process," Williams said. "On this one, he stepped up to the plate and was with us from day one."

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To help push the bill into law, the ministers prodded and prayed. They rallied their congregations to demonstrate the community's support.

"The churches believed and convinced a number of people that this was a good idea, that this is something worth trying," said Eric Middleton, a legislative analyst with the Los Angeles County Department of Probation. "A lot of people would have been frustrated or given up at the end of the first year. When people draft bills, for what sounds like a good idea, they think it doesn't have to be sold to 120 members of the Legislature."

Ultimately, the bill passed with bipartisan support.

Outside the Legislature, the law is seen as long overdue, given the connection between illiteracy and crime. If judges can order a criminal to jail, or a drug addict into treatment, say supporters, why not demand education?

"Punishment systems that are wholly based on locking people up and keeping them away from society create no hope for reintroducing those people back to the community with dignity," said Yxta Maya Murray, a professor of criminal law and criminal sentencing at Loyola Marymount University. "This seems

like one of the more optimistic and idealistic laws that Wilson has signed as of late."

The Los Angeles Urban League also sees solutions in the new law.

Some people who want to enroll in the organization's automotive training program, for example, can't read an automotive manual. Those applicants are sent to the Urban League's literacy center and encouraged to reapply.

"Anything that will allow them to receive an education is a very worthwhile effort and something that I think will make us all a better society," said Patrick Harris, the Urban League's chief operating officer.

Under the new law, only those convicted of nonviolent crimes such as auto theft or burglary will be allowed to participate, said Davies of the probation department.

After conviction, men and women will be asked to supply proof that they graduated from high school or earned an equivalent degree.

"If they don't have that proof, they will be assigned to the program," he said. "We will allow the programs to determine what further needs the person has."

The ministers are now gearing up to complete their daunting task. In designing a network of educational

centers, they are relying on experts, including California Literacy.

This year, the organization has given an award to Charlotte Beal, a Yolo County resident who teaches inmates to read and who has helped 18 to earn the equivalent of a high school diploma.

A local judge had ordered some of those inmates to participate, Beal said. Whether they participate voluntarily—or by court order—the impact is the same.

"It changes their attitude. It changes their personalities," said Beal, who tutors in the Yolo County Monroe Facility.

Pride, self-esteem, hope—they are intangibles. But those analyzing the impact of education on the criminal justice system will look for concrete evidence, such as a reduction in recidivism.

The new law authorizes the pilot program at the downtown Criminal Court Building and the Inglewood courthouse. The program will be evaluated by academicians at Cal State Los Angeles.

For now, the ministers are working to ensure that the program succeeds, that lives are changed.

"Our energy and our love must be turned to rebuilding ourselves," Byrd said. "Nobody is going to do it for us."