

Churches plan to lend hand in public schools

By Bill Osinski

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bosinski@ajc.com

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Prayer may not have a place in the public schools, but prayerful people do.

That was the message to pastors in a coalition of Gwinnett, Fulton, Cobb and DeKalb churches who met Friday to launch an Adopt-A-School program. The idea is for churches to send their members into the schools — not as religious missionaries but as volunteer tutors, teachers' assistants and anything else the schools need to boost their struggling students.

Some churches are already doing these things, and school officials at the meeting said they value the churches' efforts and would welcome more.

"There's a lot of enthusiasm about the Body of Christ [Christians] making an impact on schoolchildren and their families," said Chip Sweney, executive director of the Unite coalition. Sweney also serves as outreach pastor at Perimeter Church, where Friday's meeting was held. Sweney said Unite is urging participating churches to target schools in their area and then go to the principals to ask how they can help. One need in Gwinnett, for instance, is working with students who don't speak English well, he said.

The Adopt-A-School concept got high marks from Louise Radloff, a member of the Gwinnett Board of Education. "I'll take any help that will make a difference in the lives of our children," she said. Though Radloff said she is a firm believer in the separation of church and state, she believes this program does not cross any constitutional lines.

"The churches don't have an agenda. They don't have to preach," she said. However, she added, when the volunteers give of their time to help a student, those actions model religious values such as integrity, honesty and caring for others. "That kid is going to come on board and follow," she said.

Some area churches have already put the Adopt-A-School concept into practice. Bill Sim, pastor of New Church of Atlanta, a predominantly Korean church in Norcross, said college and high-school students from his church are involved in tutoring public school students, most of whom are Hispanic. "It's like what we went through 20 or 30 years ago," Sim said. Jody Vickery, pastor of Campus Church of Christ in Norcross, said members of his congregation are working with students at Meadow Creek Elementary School practically every school day.

Some of his volunteers are high school students on their lunch periods, and others are adults who have flexible work schedules. Overall, the students in the special tutoring programs have experienced a jump of 2.5 years in their reading levels over the past year, he said.

Anji Bowers, a teacher at Meadow Creek Elementary, said the efforts of volunteers from the church and elsewhere were instrumental in getting her school removed from the federal "Needs To Improve" list.