California students protest funding of prisons instead of universities

Jerry White
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More than 2,500 San Francisco-area high school students walked out of their classrooms Thursday and held a demonstration in nearby San Leandro to protest the state government's policy of reducing funding for college education while increasing spending on prisons and other correctional facilities. The protesters marched to an Alameda County Sheriff's Department station, chanting, 'Education, not incarceration.'

Raquel Lavina, 27, a leader of a Hispanic youth group that helped organize the protest, told the *San Fransisco Chronicle* that the state spends $60,000 a year to incarcerate a young person but only $8,000 a year to educate the same youth. 'The need isn't to build more prisons,' she said, 'it's to build better schools.' Referring to the thousands of student demonstrators who were filling the streets, she said, 'These are students speaking. They know that the jails look nicer than the schools.'

Ivan Garcia, 17, a student from Skyline High School in Oakland said, 'The schools are a joke. They keep building more fences. The schools look more like a jail all the time.' A spokesperson for the rally, Patricia Sanchez, added, 'Right now the state would rather imprison us than spend money to educate us.'

In a separate rally, about 1,000 more students protested outside the school district office in Fairfield, 40 miles away, to oppose the school board's plans to establish a year-round school schedule because of overcrowding and budget cutbacks.

The organizers of the San Leandro rally cited a report released September 23 by the Justice Policy Institute, a San Francisco-based research group, which compared funding for the correctional system to higher education between 1988 and 1998. The report showed that the state's higher education budget shrank by 3 percent while corrections spending jumped 60 percent.

Entitled, 'Class Dismissed: Higher Education vs. Corrections During the Wilson Years,' the Justice Policy Institute report notes that between 1980 and the present student fees have risen 303 percent in the University of California system and 485 percent in the California State University system because of reduced funding. At the same time, 21 new prisons have been built and prison guard salaries have more than doubled to $50,000 a year. On the other hand, only one new CSU campus has been built, while state university instructors, whose pay raises were vetoed by Republican Governor Pete Wilson, only earn between $32,000 and $37,000 per year.

California's spending priorities have had the harshest effect on poor, working class and minority youth. The study found that five black males are in prison for every black male in a state university, an increase from a ratio of four to one, from just one year before. Similarly, the study notes, 'three Latino males were added to the prison population for everyone added to California's four-year public universities.' Total male enrollment in the state's universities has decreased by 8 percent in the last eight years, while male incarcerations have increased 59 percent.

The report also noted that this was a national trend. States around the country spent more building prisons than colleges in 1995 for the first time. 'That year,' it said, 'there was nearly a dollar-for-dollar tradeoff between corrections and higher education, with university construction funds decreasing by $954 million to $2.5 billion, while corrections funding increased by $926 million to $2.6 billion. Around the country, from 1987 to 1995, general fund expenditures for prisons increased by 30 percent, while general fund expenditures for universities decreased by 18 percent.'

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