

Jersey City high-school students defend April 27 walkout

A reporting team
3 May 2010

On Tuesday, April 27, tens of thousands of students in New Jersey walked out of their classes to protest \$820 million in education budget cuts being implemented by Governor Chris Christie. The protests were spontaneously organized on a Facebook group, and spread by text-message and word of mouth. The cuts will average 11 percent statewide, with mass teacher layoffs and severe cuts to athletic and arts programs.

Other walkouts across the state occurred on Wednesday and Thursday. Another Facebook group announced plans for a statewide school walkout on May 12.

The largest protests took place in some of the poorest schools districts, notably in Newark. About 5,000 students rallied at City Hall, demanding to see Mayor Cory Booker, where “virtually every uniformed cop in the city was being called to control the crowd”, as nj.com noted.

Many students who participated in the walkout were threatened with loss of privileges, detention, and, in some cases, suspension. At Cresskill High in Bergen County, 45 students were suspended, but later had the punishment revoked after meeting with administrators.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, police stopped 500 students who walked out from East Side High in Paterson. Seventeen students were arrested. Donnie Evans, the Paterson Schools Superintendent said that he “will be handling disciplinary action”.

In Parsippany-Troy Hills Township in Morris County, approximately 100 students from Parsippany High School who walked out and were marching to the town’s municipal building, were stopped by police, loaded on to a school bus and driven back to school. They are being given Saturday detention as punishment.

On Wednesday police were called into Parsippany High because of alleged disruptive behavior by students in the cafeteria and the pulling of fire alarms. According to nj.com, “Some school board members expressed concerns about a lockdown-style academic environment and reports of a disorderly high school”.

Governor Christie on Wednesday blamed “some administrators and teachers, if not organizing, encouraging students to protest, looking the other way as they headed for the exits or later lauding their actions.”

A spokesman for the teachers union, the New Jersey Teacher’s Association, which has worked to impose the budget cuts on its membership, said that students “should pay the piper.”

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to students at William L. Dickinson High School in Jersey City, asking them about the impact of the budget cuts as well as their views on the walkouts.

Jersey City is a city of about 250,000 located just across the Hudson River from New York. Students at Dickinson, County Prep High School, James J. Ferris High School and Lincoln High School all walked out on Tuesday. There were reports of more walkouts at Lincoln on Wednesday.

Yalitsa, a senior at Dickinson, told the WSW: “On Tuesday at 1:15, I saw about 30 or so [students] at my side of the school and I heard there were more out front. I think things started at Country Prep. Ferris High School walked out on Tuesday the same day we did. Lincoln walked out on Tuesday, and they walked out again on Wednesday.

“The principal said if anyone walks out they would be punished. I would say 100 people walked out, including some of my friends. There are probably 3,000 students at the school.

“One reason we walked out was for our education, another was for the teachers. They are cutting money from their pay. If that happens, teachers will leave and the classrooms will get more crowded. We will lose all of the individual attention that we need from our teachers. Now there are about 20 to 30 in a classroom, but some classes have more than that. The after-school programs are being cut. I can’t be active in sports because I have to work, but I have a lot of friends who play sports. Some get scholarships for it to go to college.”

Amish, a sophomore, said, “Many people were ready to walk out, but they stopped after they were threatened by the principal and the police outside.”

His friend Mohammad, also a sophomore, said, “They are cutting down on educational materials like paper. So next year we will have to bring our own paper to school, or we will be without it. They said they were either going to cut paper or textbooks. We don’t know what is going to happen next, but we think there should be more demonstrations and walkouts.”

Momo said, “I forwarded a text message I received from a friend for the walkout. I forwarded it to my phone book with about 35 people at Dickinson. The budget cuts will take away sports from us. They want to cut the teachers’ pay by 12 percent. I’ve heard ten teachers, the newest teachers, are going to be cut. This wasn’t on the text message I forwarded; I’ve heard this from other sources. At the walkout I saw a lot of students from Lincoln walking around trying to advertise it.”

Jason, a freshman, said: “We had planned that 5,000 students would go to Trenton on Tuesday, but the principal stopped us, and there were a lot of cops outside to keep us from walking out. There were Jersey City cops. We saw at least three cop cars. They are cutting out every sport from football to soccer. They are cutting the marching band, and they are cutting other arts. They are also cutting the Educational Opportunity Funds (EOF) for students who want to go on to college. They will reduce the EOF this year and eliminate it next year.”

Another freshman, John, told the WWS: “I was one of the students that walked out of this school at 1:15 PM. The time was proposed on Facebook. A friend told me about it.

“I would say that about 100 students walked out. The principal kept saying on the loudspeaker not to walk out. If we walked out, there would be serious consequences.

“I disagree with their cutting school budgets. There are a lot of cuts in sports. Now there are no freshman and junior varsity teams. There is no more money for coaches. They are taking away buses to go to the games. They are eliminating field trips. There used to be field trips for all the clubs.”

Rouel, a junior, added: “Although I did not walk out, I did support and agree with it. If the principal did not speak out on the public address system, I, as well as almost everyone in the school would have walked out. The school security guards were at every door to prevent people from leaving.”

Mary Martinez, a junior: “I did walk out. I don’t agree with the budget cuts. We said, ‘No budget cuts. Save our schools.’ They cut the football team—I don’t agree with that, and I support the teachers.

“They say that there is no money. But why are the banks getting bailout money? The cuts in education are not right. It is not fair that they give to the rich and take from low-income families.

“The principal kept getting on the loud speaker and making announcements that we had better not walk out or there will be consequences. The only consequences that I have heard about is that all the students who walked out will not be allowed to attend the once-a-year multi-cultural event, where all the clubs like the Spanish club, the Afro-American club, West Indian club get together. Everyone in the school goes. There is a lot of music and dancing.

“If the principal didn’t make the announcements, more students would have walked out. Most likely the whole school would have joined in protest.”

Kimberly, a senior said: “I believe in the cause. I am against the

budget cuts in the sports program, and other after school programs. The football team is gone. The arts and music programs will supposedly be cut. It’s ridiculous. Why should we suffer like this? We need after-school activities so we can have something creative and positive to do.

“Sports are part of our educational opportunities. One of my friends got a scholarship to go to play college football. These scholarships will be eliminated.

“They bail out the banks and other financial companies like Goldman Sachs, and they are cutting our programs which helps us develop our creativity. If they cut these out, there is nothing left.

“We support our teachers. I love all my teachers. They are all amazing. There are a lot of new ones in the school. Their jobs are being threatened. I hate to see them go. I like school. We have teachers that are creative and cool.

“I have already been accepted to go to New Jersey City University. The state is cutting the EOF [Education Opportunity Fund] summer programs. This is a program where for six weeks during the summer, the high school student takes college course. The program helps you go to college in part by giving the student credit and thereby helping pay for tuition. They are cutting the program from six to three weeks, and then cutting it completely.

“Governor Chris Christie says that we should have stayed in school. But what he says makes no sense—the purpose of the walkout is to fight these cuts so that we can stay in school. These cuts are threatening teachers, students, and parents. Our parents work hard to send their kids to college. But if they cut financial aid, we can’t afford to go to college.

“They say we are the future, and that’s true. But if they take away our education then what kind of future will there be?”



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