

And the Children Shall Lead -- New Jersey Students Fight Back

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And the children shall lead. They were in the front lines of the Civil Rights movement. They have marched against war, hunger, and child labor. They are the hope and future that President Obama keeps promising. And the children shall lead.

New Jersey high school students are at the forefront of the battle against budget cuts and to save education in the United States. They understand, what adults, politicians, and government officials don't get, if you vote down school budgets, lower taxes, and cut school funding you undermine both the economy today and the future viability of the nation. A week ago 58 percent of New Jersey school district budgets rejected school budgets and Governor Christie is calling for reductions in state aid to schools, funding freezes and teacher layoffs.

18,000 students signed up to walk out on a Facebook site promoting the protests. The largest rally was in Newark, New Jersey where approximately two thousand high school students from seven schools marched on the City Hall. They held signs and chanted "Save our schools!"

Student protesters were everywhere. At Columbia High School in Maplewood 200 students marching around the building with signs declaring "We are the future" and "We love our teachers." In West Orange high school students rallied in the football stands. At Montclair High School half of the schools 1,900 students gathered outside the school chanting, "No more budget cuts." About 50 students at Gateway Regional High School in Deptford held up hand-made protest signs or wore white shirts with black marker. At Old Bridge High School, about 200 students marched around the building chanting, "no more budget cuts." About 80 Parsippany High students walked out of class. At High Tech High School in North Bergen County over 100 students protested in the school's parking lot, while dozens of students walked out of Ocean Township High School after a larger group staged a sit-in protesting cuts in state aid.

Johanna Pagan, 16, a sophomore at West Side High School in Newark, told the crowd there, "It feels like he is taking money from us, and we're already poor. The schools here have bad reputations, and we need aid and we need programs to develop."

"This is not our mistake and we will not suffer for it," senior Robert Wilson shouted at West Orange High School as he led a chant: "Enough cuts! Enough is enough!" At Montclair High School, Carolina Noguera said she was willing to serve detention for the cause. "I want to be a teacher when I grow up, but the way things are going it looks impossible," she said. "There are barely even any books here anymore."

Michael Drewniak, press secretary for Governor Christie released a statement denouncing the demonstrations and saying that students belonged in the classroom and dismissed the protests as "youthful rebellion or spring fever." Bret D. Schundler, the education commissioner, urged schools to enforce attendance policies and not let students walk out of class. Even the New Jersey Education Association urged students to return to class.

What education officials failed to realize was that the real education was taking place in the streets and parking lots. These students were organizing, speaking, thinking, protesting, and learning. They were showing adults the way. If these protests had taken place in China, Russia, or Iran, officials would be celebrating them as an advance for democracy. What they fail to realize is that the struggle for democracy is going on right here.

And the children shall lead.

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