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Watsonville Students Jump Into Sacramento's State Budget Fray

By JONDI GUMZ, Sentinel staff writer

SACRAMENTO - This is a story about teenagers trying to persuade adults to listen to them.

For students from Watsonville High School, it's a tough assignment. Maybe tougher than the essays they have written to get into college. But they are willing to try because they believe in their cause.

At 7:45 a.m. Wednesday, 60 teens boarded buses bound for the state capital - Jenny, Eder, and Oscar, to name a few. They joined about 500 high school and college students from around the state to rally support for programs that reach out to students and show them how to navigate the maze of requirements to get into both the University of California and California State University systems.

Students say these outreach programs work. Jenny Gama has been accepted at UC Davis, Eder Tostado at Sacramento State and Oscar Flores at UC Santa Barbara, opportunities they say wouldn't be possible otherwise.

But these programs, which cost $110 million a year, are targeted for elimination by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has proposed $700 million in cuts to higher education spending because of the state's fiscal crisis.

State Treasurer Phil Angelides, who has been lobbying for months to save the programs, invited Watsonville High students to Sacramento when he visited the campus in January.

With this week being spring break for Pajaro Valley schools, it was a perfect time for the Watsonville students to take up the treasurer's offer. He arranged for them to attend a press conference of outreach supporters attended by a roomful of reporters, a rally on the Capitol steps where leading Latino legislators vowed to save the programs, and personal visits with the chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg, and a representative from Santa Cruz, state Sen. Bruce McPherson.

The students all donned yellow T-shirts that read "Keep the Promise - Save College Access," courtesy of a generous donor.

It's not just Latino legislators supporting the outreach programs. African-American, Asian and Caucasian legislators were among the rally speakers.

The CEO of a high-tech startup came from Yorba Linda to explain how a company donation for outreach services helped prevent a promising student from becoming a college dropout.

But outreach is only one of many programs competing for state funds. Marchers demanding changes in workers' compensation interrupted the rally outside. Inside the Capitol, the halls were full of people showing support for child care subsidies, which are proposed to be cut. McPherson's senior policy analyst said she had already met with four groups lobbying for various issues earlier in the day.

So the debate is far from over.

Republicans, like Schwarzenegger, want to avoid raising taxes, but Democrats, like Angelides, would rather raise taxes, at least on the wealthiest Californians, before cutting services.

However, Democrats need six Republican votes to pass a state budget.

At the rally, Assemblyman Marco Firebaugh, a Democrat from southeast Los Angeles, threatened to hold the budget hostage until the outreach programs are saved.

That strategy, combined with the visit by students, could persuade the governor to change his mind, according to Assemblywoman Ellen Corbett, a Democrat representing Alameda County.

"I think this does make a difference when you see real people affected," she said.

McPherson, a moderate Republican, is trying to broker a deal. He met Tuesday with the governor, Latino legislators, and former UC Santa Cruz Chancellor Karl Pister, hoping to save half the money.

Rico Dominguez, an outreach counselor at UCSC, observed that when the 30 students meeting McPherson were asked if their parents had attended college, only one hand went up.

What makes outreach programs special, Dominguez said, is that students who participate become mentors to younger students once they are accepted to college.

Like Ana Olazava, a junior at UCSC who hails from Los Angeles. She visited UCSC as a high school sophomore participating in the "Magic School Bus" program, where she met Dominguez. Now she's an outreach counselor herself.

Despite the outreach success stories, Watsonville students found some people remain unconvinced. In one legislative office, they met a staffer who insisted outreach programs aren't needed.

"She was talking about her 14-year-old son and said he didn't need any help," said a frustrated Ana Ruiz, a freshman at Watsonville High. "We were trying to make her understand."