POLITIFACT TEXAS

Texas spends more incarcerating prisoners than educating students

Trend nationwide is to spend more for penal facilities than schools.

By Fauzeya Rahman PolitiFact Texas

Statement: Says Texas spends “more per day to house an inmate than we do on a student.”

Former teacher Virginia “Jennie Lou” Leeder said during her Texas Senate campaign that she’d like to see the state do more for students. As it is, the District 24 Democratic nominee declared: “We spend more per day to house an inmate than we do on a student.”

Really?

Of course, prisons are 24/7 operations that provide housing, meals, rehabilitation programs and other services for a housed population. Meanwhile, students in public schools attend classes for roughly eight hours a day, five days a week, for about 180 days each year.
Regardless, it’s not uncommon for people to compare prison and school spending as an example of what they consider unbalanced budget priorities.

In 2013, for instance, PolitiFact Oregon ruled True a claim that Oregon was spending about $10,000 a year per student compared with $30,000 per inmate, a move the governor said showed the state prioritized prisons over schools. In 2015, PolitiFact Virginia rated Half True a statement by Sen. Bernie Sanders that it costs more to go to prison than to the University of Virginia. Sanders based his claim on what it costs to house a federal prisoner, but at the state level the cost comes out to less than a year’s fees to attend the university, particularly if considering out-of-state tuition.

Fox News found in 2011 that most states, “despite spending more money overall on education, are spending three to four times more per capita incarcerating prisoners than they are educating students.”

In July 2016, the U.S. Department of Education released a report that compared the rise in spending on prisons with the rate of spending on public education. The report found that nationwide, public pre-K through grade 12 expenditures went up 107 percent while state and local corrections expenditures increased by 324 percent over a 33-year period.

Before Leeder lost to Republican Dawn Buckingham of Lake-way, Steven Rivas replied on behalf of the campaign to our request for her factual backup by emailing us web links from a briefing book that Rivas said the candidate took on the road while meeting with teacher groups. Leeder’s statement, made in an American-Statesman article, didn’t specify if she meant Texas or the nation in saying “we,” but the provided web links focused on Texas.

Among the candidate’s sources: a May 2013 CNN Money infographic, “Education vs prison costs,” presenting a state-by-state breakdown showing variety in such spending state by state in 2012. Nationally, every state spent more to hold inmates than it did to educate students, according to the presentation, with New York having the biggest dollar difference, spending about $40,000 more per inmate per year, and Kentucky appearing to have the smallest difference, annually spending $6,000 more per inmate.

In Texas, according to the graphic, the cost per student hovered below $10,000 while the cost per inmate landed near $20,000.
To get an up-to-date grasp on Leeder’s comparison, we checked figures from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the agency tasked with running the state’s prisons and jails.

In 2012, the agency had an operating budget of $3,087,899,321, and there were 152,303 offenders incarcerated, agency spokesman Jason Clark told us. Based on these numbers, the fiscal 2012 per inmate cost worked out to $20,275.

Next we searched the Census Bureau website to find its breakdown of per student spending in 2012. In a 2012 report called “Public Education Finances,” Texas was shown to spend $8,261 per student in fiscal 2012.

This report added up revenues from federal, state and local sources and calculated how much is spent per student. We found a similar 2015 report from the National Education Association, a teacher labor union, that estimated the annual per student cost in 2015 for Texas at $8,935, based on federal, state and local government data from the Census Bureau.

We independently confirmed figures with the Texas Education Agency. According to the agency’s online database, the 2011-12 school year’s budget for all school districts totaled $49,623,331,143, and districts spent $9,969 per student, according to the agency’s calculation, which divided the state’s total revenue for school districts by the total number of students, excluding those taught for less than two hours per day that year.

**Our ruling**

Leeder said Texas spends “more per day to house an inmate than we do on a student.”

This contention holds up, though it’s important to acknowledge that inmates are in the state’s care around the clock and students are not.

By our calculations, based on agency budgets, Texas spent about $20,000 per inmate in 2012 while spending nearly $10,000 per student.

We rate the claim True.

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