Despite political rhetoric that education has become a top priority, states’ spending on prisons is growing at a faster rate than spending on schools, a new study of state budgets has found.

The survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NASL) shows that, although education still gets about 50 percent of state budgets, the percentage allocated to it is decreasing while Medicaid and prisons are getting more money.

"Drugs and law and order are issues that are much more salient than education. Because of the pressure on those, they will continue to be more competitive for state funding," said Russell Edgerton, president of the American Association for Higher Education, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

Spending on prisons rose by 14.1 percent and Medicaid increased by 10.4 percent among the states. Higher education funding, on the other hand, increased only 7.3 percent.

"The cut in money to education means that students will have to pay a bigger cost," said Steve Gold, the NASL’s director of fiscal affairs. "However, as tuitions are rising, there has also been an increase in the availability of loans."

Gold and Edgerton noted some states did better. West Virginia budgeted 25.7 percent more for education. Next were Illinois, with a 17.7 increase, Nevada and New Hampshire (16.8), Ohio (15.2), and Georgia (14.7).

Massachusetts, on the other hand, cut $39.3 million from its higher education budget. Students had to make up much of the difference with a 7.7 percent tuition increase.

The cuts in Massachusetts translated into 1,900 canceled courses for the 120,000 full-time students, and job losses for 1,200 part-time teachers.