



School Participatory Budgeting

A Tool to Foster School Democracy

Edited by

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School  PB

School Participatory Budgeting: A Tool to Foster School Democracy

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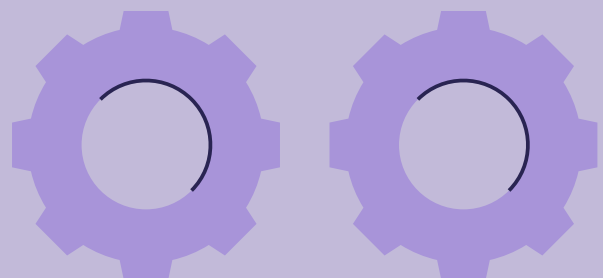
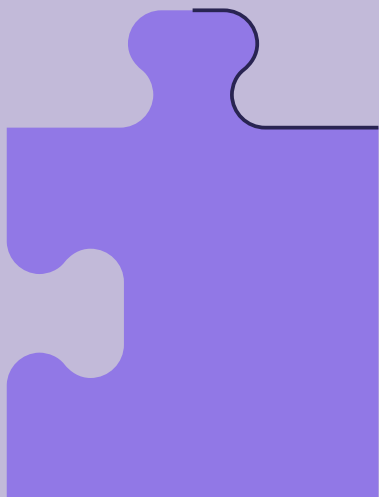
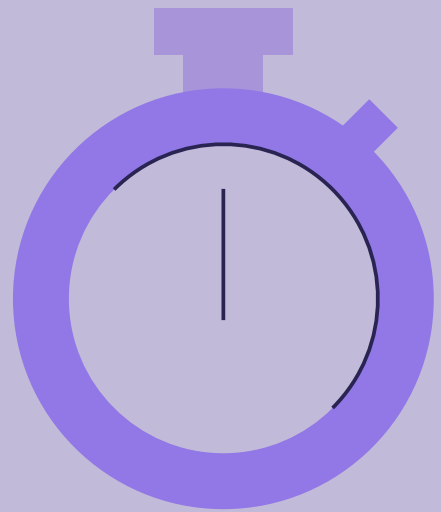
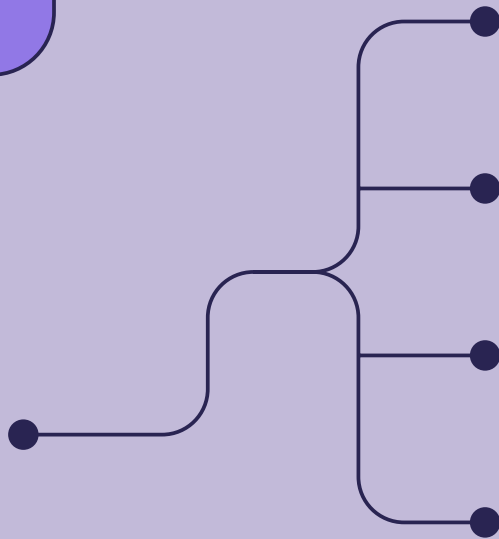
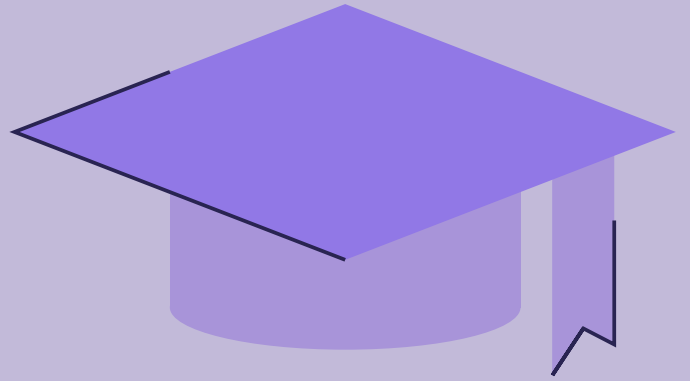
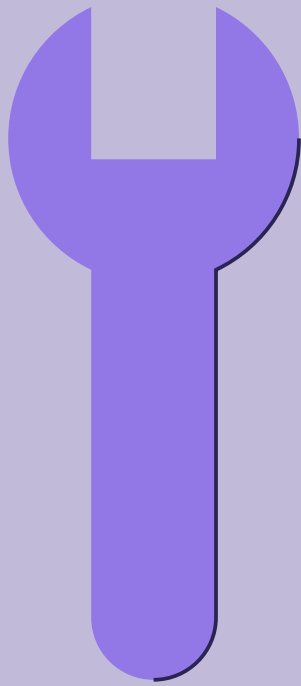
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Summary

The report in your hands (or – more likely – on your screen) is the result of a study on school participatory budgeting (SPB) conducted in 2024–2025 in Poland, Bulgaria, Italy, and Spain. The study was the first part of the project *School Participatory Budget – a Tool to Foster School Democracy* which we describe briefly in the first chapter.

The first chapter consists of four subdivisions, each dedicated to one of the four countries in which the study took place. They show how differently SPB functions depending on the legal and cultural context. In Poland, where participatory budgeting is a widespread phenomenon, SPB is also more common than in other European countries – we have estimated that almost 3% of all public schools implement it. In Spain, SPB is much less common than other participatory budgeting instruments intended for local communities. In Italy, only a few pilot SPB processes have been identified – most of them of very high quality but not recurring. In Bulgaria, where participatory budgeting is very much an uncharted territory, the SPB process funded as part of this study was – to our best knowledge – the first one in the country. Every subsection ends with specific recommendations for SPB development in each of the four countries.

The second chapter consists of five interviews with experts on participatory budgeting that put our findings in the broader European and global context.

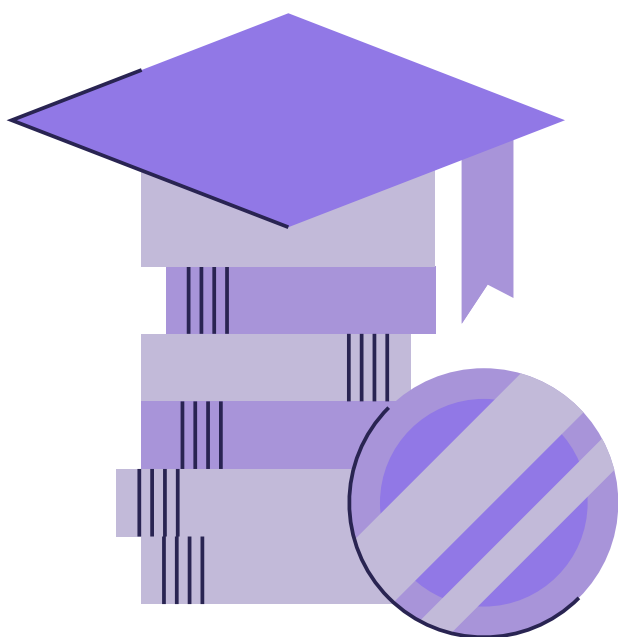
The third chapter presents the implementation of three School Participatory Budget (SPB) processes carried out as part of the project “*School Participatory Budget – a Tool to Foster School Democracy*” along with the results of a pupil survey conducted during their execution.

In the fourth chapter we put forward a set of principles that we feel should guide the SPB development – and especially our work as SPB advocates – regardless of the national context. We state that all attempts at school democratisation should be situated in and tailored to the experience and resources of the community in question. We believe that it is sometimes better to focus on the existing instruments of participation than introduce new ones (especially if they are all budget-related). To truly embed democratic practices in schools we should help them develop participatory

culture gradually, not with complex and well-funded – but unlikely to be reproduced – pilots. We should also support the SPB at schools in their path to resilience and financial independence from external funding. As the Polish cases show, not much money is needed for SPB to be an exciting and emancipating experience – students should not be led to believe that receiving an international grant or a government subsidy is the only way to make a meaningful change in their closest environment. Building resilient SPB also requires creating spaces, both online and offline, for the organic exchange of knowledge, such as conferences, workshops, internet forums. Incorporating School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) into legislation at any level – school, municipal, regional, or national – can effectively support and activate the participatory inclinations of school community leaders. By embedding SPB within legal frameworks, these leaders are empowered to transform their democratic aspirations into tangible actions. Last but not least, we encourage all advocates and practitioners to put the sense of community at the heart of all SPB processes, no matter how simple or imperfect they are.

In the fifth chapter we suggest directions for further research of school participatory budgeting.

Finally, in chapter 7 we describe the methods used in this study and their limitations.



About the project

The project *School Participatory Budget – a Tool to Foster School Democracy* is led by the Field of Dialogue Foundation in collaboration with partner organisations from Poland (SocLab Foundation), Italy (BiPart Impresa Sociale), Spain (Oficina de Proyectos Europeos del Gobierno de Cantabria S.L.), and Bulgaria (The Small Steps Foundation).

Its primary objective is to develop and promote School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) tools to enhance young Europeans' engagement in school life. The project is structured into four phases. The first involves researching the state of SPB in four partner countries. The second focuses on developing educational materials to address the issues identified by the study and equip practitioners – such as students and teachers – with the resources needed to implement or enhance SPB in schools. The third and fourth phases are dedicated to disseminating both the research findings and educational materials among schools and relevant authorities.

The project *School Participatory Budget – a Tool to Foster School Democracy* is funded by the European Union.

Project timeline and planned results

1

Research on school participatory budgeting (2024–2025)

- 4 research studies (Poland, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain)
- 4 SPB processes supported and examined (3 in Poland, 1 in Bulgaria)
- 4 national reports
- 1 combined report
- 5 interviews with SPB experts
- 25 new points on the Youth PB map

2

Tool and Pilot Creation (2025)

- 5 new tools for different stages of School PB
- 5 pilots
- 1 Learning & Training Activity for educators, teachers, and youth workers

3

Impact and Dissemination (2025–2026)

- 1 interactive e-course for teachers, educators and youth workers
- 5 international webinars
- 5 national events

4

Implementation to Public Policy (2026)

- 5 meetings with local stakeholders

Chapter



National reports



School Participatory Budgeting in Bulgaria

Liuba Batembegska

David Kiuranov

Sofia, April 2025

Abstract

The aim of this report is to assess the potential of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) as a mechanism for fostering democratic participation and student engagement in Bulgarian schools today. SPB has not been tried in Bulgaria as yet. However, there have been several initiatives focused on pupil participation in school governance as well as initiatives of citizens' participatory budgeting at the municipal level. That experience provides some basic information which constitutes a good point of departure.

The report examines the Bulgarian educational system, focusing on its funding mechanisms; citizenship education is studied as well. The goal is to assess to what extent the current situation could accommodate participatory budgeting as a tool for fostering active citizenship. Bringing together an analysis of existing pupil participation, municipal participatory budgeting efforts, and relevant best practices from other contexts, the report identifies the key barriers and opportunities for introducing SPB in Bulgaria.

At this stage, two indisputably positive factors exist. One is informational: there is a growing body of information on participatory governance available and a growing group of people who know about it and are interested in it. The other factor is legal: relatively recent changes in the legal framework have created opportunities for gradual decentralisation.

However, despite all that, the crucial negative factor still is the excessive centralisation of the educational system resulting in very limited school autonomy, as well as the lack of structured citizenship education at lower grades. On balance, the report concludes that the obstacles to progress are not insurmountable: it does make sense to support the development of participatory budgeting in Bulgarian schools today. To that effect the report provides policy recommendations and implementation strategies.

Introduction

The problems with developing school democracy are currently occurring in the context of growing issues with the democratic governance of the country. Three years 2022–2024 have seen repeated general elections that have failed to produce stable governance. This in turn has exacerbated the problems surrounding representative democracy, with voter turnout dropping to 32.5% (09 June 2024), the lowest result since the first democratic elections in 1990. Furthermore, only 12% of the voters were in the 18–30 age group ([data](#) Gallup International.)

Apparently Bulgaria has become part of a global trend of growing social apathy. In reaction to it, state educational systems and stakeholders have addressed the question of pupil participation in an effort to empower the young and help them to develop the skills and agency they need to participate meaningfully in the society¹.

School Participatory Budgeting could prove to be a viable mechanism for increasing the agency of young people. The gist of SPB is to engage students in budget allocation and decision-making with the aim to improve their school environment while learning democratic experience and internalising democratic values.

In order to evaluate the feasibility of introducing SPB as a democratic tool throughout Bulgarian schools, the report examines:

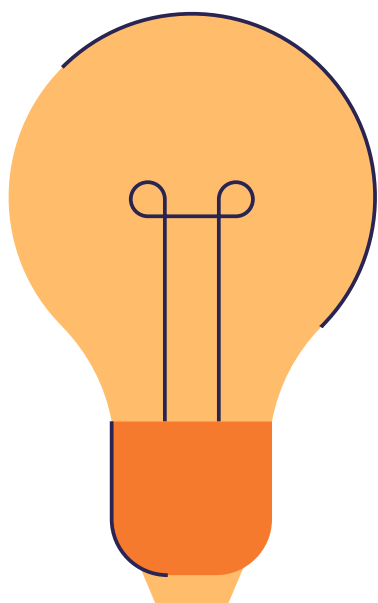
- The Bulgarian school system, its funding, and the environment for development of civic skills that it provides.
- The current state of citizenship education and student participation in Bulgaria.
- The existing pupil participation mechanisms in Bulgaria together with good practices.
- Examples of municipal participatory budgeting initiatives.
- Challenges and opportunities for implementing SPB.
- Policy recommendations for fostering participatory governance in schools.

1 Engaging young citizens: civic education practices in the classroom and beyond, OECD Educational policies perspectives, N 64, 03/01/2023, oecd.org/en/publications/engaging-young-citizens_2166378c-en.html

By analysing the existing good practices, and policy frameworks, this report aims to bridge the gap between theory and implementation, offering a roadmap for the future adoption of School Participatory Budgeting as a tool to enhance democratic school governance and student empowerment.

The report is developed under the project “School Participatory Budget – a tool to foster school democracy”. The report on Bulgaria is a part of comparative research carried out in Poland, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria on how school participatory budgeting works in selected European countries.

The conclusion for Bulgaria: Bulgaria has recently provided the legal framework for the gradual decentralisation and overhaul of its educational system. SPB can play an important positive role in this process. At present, only sporadic improvements are implemented. This should come as no surprise, given the scepticism towards change prevailing in the Bulgarian society, which is known for its dedication to tradition.



Education System in Bulgaria

1.1 Snapshot of the Bulgarian school education system

Formal education in Bulgaria is regulated by the Law of Preschool and School Education, and is mandatory up to the age of 16 under the Constitution (Art. 53).

As of the year 2020, children enter the educational system at the age of 4 at the latest, when they start two years of compulsory preschool education. The school education begins, at the latest, at the age of 7² as provided for by the Law on Preschool and School Education.

Legally, the school is defined as an institution in the system of pre-school and school education where students are educated, undergo character formation, and are socialised. It establishes the conditions for completing subsequent grades and stages and the requirements for acquiring a school diploma³.

The school system offers two levels of education – primary and secondary (Art. 73 (1)). It consists of four stages: elementary (grades 1–4), pre-gymnasium (grades 5–7), the first gymnasium stage (grades 8–10) and the second gymnasium stage (grades 11–12). Young people would attend school for 14 years, until grade 12, or till the age of 19, including two years in preschool education. The compulsory part of education lasts for 12 years, until the end of the first gymnasium stage in the 10th grade.

2 Law on Pre-school and School Education, Art. 8 (2)

3 Law on Pre-school and School Education, Art. 25 (1)

Schools in Bulgaria are public, municipal, private or religious, distinguished by their ownership. Depending on the type of training, the schools can be general or specialised. According to the stage or level of education, the general schools are divided into: 1) elementary (grades 1–4); 2) primary (1–7); 3), gymnasium (8–12); 4) integrated (grade); 5) secondary (grades 1–12). According to the subject matter, high schools can be: 1) profiled education high schools; 2) vocational high schools.

The Law on Pre-school and School Education of 2016 introduced some key innovations. It implemented a competence-based approach to training and curriculum development. It set objectives centred around individual development and introduced a students' centred approach.

Another major shift was the structural change in the system of secondary education⁴. Primary education should continue until the 7th grade, instead of the 8th grade, as it had been the case under the law of 1999. The scope of secondary education has been widened from grade 8 to 12, and subdivided into two stages – the lower secondary stage (grade 8–10) and the upper secondary stage (grade 11–12). Therefore, students who attend school only up to the final age for compulsory education, can also obtain the secondary education diploma, albeit of the lower kind. At the same time, relevant amendments in the provisions for vocational education have also been made.

The introduction of a lower secondary education stage has been accompanied by the establishment of integrated schools which provide education to children from grade 1 to 10. This new type of school allows students to exit the system with certificates confirming completion of the lower secondary education stage. It is mostly former primary schools in villages that have transformed into the integrated schools, thus increasing the opportunities for students in rural areas to complete lower secondary education. However, there has also been a retrograde process, as some 1–8 grade smaller village schools accepted to educate students only till the age of 13 (grade 7).

Another crucial reform concerned the organisation of the curriculum introducing options for decentralisation, implicating system changes that would allow the creation of innovative schools with certain freedom of the curriculum. students councils

4 See p. 10, “Educational policies targeted to vulnerable groups. State of art report”, 2022, “Schools for inclusion” Project

and Public Oversight Boards became mandatory, enabling students and the public to influence schools. The question how those changes impact citizenship education, which is the gate to developing pupils' participation, is further investigated below.

1.2. Structure of the school curriculum

The Law on Education stipulates the division of the school curriculum into three types of classes: A – compulsory, B – elective and C – optional. The compulsory classes include both the general and the profiled education subjects within the secondary education stage. The content is organised around subject learning and defined at the national level. The elective classes are usually scheduled for the afternoon, after the regular program. The classes are defined at the school level. Both the compulsory and the elective classes (A + B) are paid for from the unified state budget and funds are used to pay teachers' salaries. The optional classes C include various extra-curricular activities such as dancing, music etc., and are aimed at students' individual development. The content of Chapter C of the curriculum is decided at school level. The funding would be usually provided through national programs, additional projects or would come from the municipality.

The profiled education starts at grade 8. Two of the profiled education subjects are compulsory and are determined by the Ministry of Education, while the rest are elective subjects, chosen by the school. However, each subject contains compulsory modules defined at the national level.

The school curriculum in Bulgaria is largely centralised and pre-defined at the national level via the course syllabi. However, over the last few years, teachers have been showing more and more initiative and providing more input, and have been even centrally encouraged to do so. The bottleneck of this approach is the fact that innovations and quality depend almost exclusively on the individual provider (teacher) and the school leadership. The window of opportunity opened by the flexibility of the elective and compulsory classes has indeed allowed more diversity and innovation; but so far it has not impacted the system as a whole.

1.3. Sources of funding

Schools in Bulgaria are funded through the state budget under a 'delegated budget' system based on the principle "the money follows the student". This simply means that the more students a school has, the larger its budget is. The delegated budget model, introduced to provide schools with financial autonomy, remains the primary mechanism for allocating state funding. However, additional financial resources from municipal budgets, national programs, and parental contributions are essential in order to bridge learning gaps and support school development.

Following the adoption of the Law on Preschool and School Education, private kindergartens and schools have also been granted the right to receive public funding, provided that no duplicate financing is granted for the same activity does not happen.

Delegated budgets are determined on the basis of **three key indicators**:

- **Number of students enrolled in the school** (known as the **Unified Expenditure Standard per Student**). This is a fixed amount, updated annually, and determined by the **Ministry of Education and Science**. It covers the following types of expenditures:
 - **Salaries and social security contributions** for teaching and non-teaching staff.
 - **Operational costs**, including utilities, building maintenance, and consumables.
 - **Educational materials and resources**, such as textbooks, learning aids (including digital resources), and specialized equipment for classrooms.
 - **Student-related activities**, including field trips, extracurricular programs, and additional learning support.
- **The type of school**, whether **primary, secondary, specialised, or vocational**.
- **Additional funding coefficients**, which account for factors such as:
 - School location (e.g. remote or rural areas);
 - Disadvantaged students;
 - Students with special educational needs;
 - Availability of specialised educational programs.

These additional funding coefficients support schools in small or rural communities with low student enrolment, ensuring financial compensation for economic inefficiencies related to maintaining infrastructure and retaining the minimum number of staff.

For vocational schools, additional funds are allocated for laboratories, workshops, and internship programs to support practical training.

One of the significant consequences of the introduction of the delegated budget system in 2008 is that schools, especially in smaller towns and villages, are making every effort to enrol as many children as possible. While in theory this may seem like healthy competition that benefits the children, in practice the most important consequence is that it results in the perpetuation of large schools in the country's large Romani neighbourhoods, which are practically segregated. A typical breach of the law is the inclusion, by the schools, of “dead souls” into students' lists. “Dead souls” are the names of children that no longer attend or have never attended classes, yet their spectral existence fills the school's coffer with real budgetary money.

Delegated budgets also tend to increase qualitative inequalities among schools, as the best funded schools are also the ones most preferred by families. In larger cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna and Burgas there are measures that mitigate that situation, but in smaller localities such “elitist” schools are scarce, while the rest continue to be inadequately funded and reduced to recruiting students *per fas et nefas*.

Municipalities serve as another key source of school funding, particularly in smaller settlements. Many municipalities allocate additional subsidies from local revenues to support schools with small class sizes, ensuring their continued operation. Additionally, municipalities often play a crucial role in securing funding for capital expenditures, for which they apply to the national budget.

Beyond these essential allocations, some municipalities also fund various educational initiatives and policies. For example, the Municipality of Ruse provides funding for religious studies and local history courses which are integrated into the optional curriculum (Section B) of the national education programme. The Municipality of Burgas promotes AI education and robotics teams as part of its local education strategy.

However, municipal educational programmes remain an exception rather than a common practice across the country.

A major source of school funding comes from the National Programmes of the Ministry of Education. These programmes are implemented in a one-year budget cycle and are updated annually. Their focus varies, but they typically support, among others: substitute teaching hours for teachers on medical leave, additional remedial classes to address learning gaps, the development of STEM laboratories, purchase of IT equipment, student participation in Olympiads and competitions.

Parents also represent a significant source of funding for schools. Contributions are collected both at the grade level and for the school as a whole. These funds are often used to cover: school trips and extracurricular activities, interest-based learning opportunities, classroom renovations and maintenance, and other expenses based on the specific needs of the school community.

1.4. Key stakeholders in education related with SPB at school level

When referring to the Bulgarian educational system as overcentralised, we should bear in mind, firstly, that there is a national curricular framework, developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, and subject to a decision of the Council of Ministers. In addition, there are other mechanisms of state control: state educational standards, subjects' syllabi, and the national programmes funding. Inspection is ensured by the educational Ministry through the state educational standard; then come the regional departments for management of education and the monitoring and reporting system of the national programs. Control is mainly executed at the district level by the regional departments of management of education, which provide administrative, but also methodological control.

Decentralisation was first introduced in the 2016 Law on Pre-school and School Education. In the newly designed process, school principals play a pivotal role as leaders and decision-makers. The Law also introduced Public Councils and Student Councils and granted them certain significant rights. These Councils were supposed to balance the enhanced power of the school principal, lest she or he start treating the school as their private fiefdom.

The school principal is the key decision maker when it comes to the school curriculum under chapters B and C of the law – the elective and optional classes. When a school decides to introduce a new curriculum or a specialised subject within vocational education, the principal takes the lead; still, the school's Pedagogical Council must approve the decision.

The school pedagogical council consists of the pedagogical staff and the deputy principals; the administrative staff is excluded. It adopts the school curriculum, and the annual school plan for activities. In cases of disagreement, practice has shown that school principals are usually confronted not with a Council's veto, but rather with an informal opposition from teachers, who would sabotage unpopular initiatives. The school management, i.e. the principal and the deputies, approve all school initiatives, including those proposed by Students' Councils.

Therefore, the extent of decentralisation depends on the principal's leadership style; proactive deputies may drive innovation, but no student self-governance or School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) initiative could proceed without the principal's approval.

The Law on Pre-school and School Education introduces **the Public Councils** (art. 265), mandatory for each school. **They consist of a representative of the local government, at least 3 parents, and at least 3 representatives of the students council.** Prominent members of the public could be invited as well. A representative of the School Board of Trustees could also be a member. The school principal can participate in the discussions, but does not have the right to vote. The Public Council approves the Strategy for the school development and the annual report of the principal on its implementation. It provides opinion on the budget proposed by the principal, and on the annual school curriculum. It has the right to request information from the school principal and to propose activities and measures. However, **despite the potential of Public Councils to provide supervision and balance in the school leadership, their performance remains largely decorative.**

As regards the School Boards of Trustees, they are not mandatory (Art. 306) and are registered under the Law on Non-Profit Organisations. Their primary function is to support school development, with an emphasis on fundraising. They have no official authority over the school budget or curriculum. A representative could participate in both the school pedagogical council and the School Board of Trustees. However, their real influence varies, depending on the school principal's leadership style and parental engagement. In some cases, School Boards of Trustees can propose curricular and extracurricular activities or even initiate an SPB to decide how to allocate the funds raised.

Students councils are legally mandated in every school. Each council consists of one or two representatives from each grade, elected by their classmates – though in reality the choice is often imposed by teachers. The school principal appoints an

adult coordinator, typically a member of the school Pedagogical Council or the deputy principal. The law recognizes the students councils as self-governance structures with significant rights. They can propose activities for the annual school plan and make recommendations on elective and optional classes (Chapters B and C). **Students council representatives also participate in the governing bodies mentioned above.**

Active students councils do organise school-related student activities, but decision-making and deliberation remain key challenges. Councils are often driven by a small core of active students who may not communicate effectively with or consult their peers. This is largely due to the lack of training in democratic procedures and leadership skills. This limits their effectiveness in representing the body of students.

1.5. Framework for innovations and civic education

Citizenship education is introduced in the school curriculum via the state educational standard for general education. The subject is offered in the 11th and 12th grades only. As a result, it remains outside the scope of compulsory education up to the age of 16 (until the 10th grade).

For the first time ever, Article 5 of the Law on Pre-school and School Education, sets some clear objectives for the formal education system. According to it, school education should foster the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical development of every pupil, providing support tailored to age, needs, interests, and abilities. The Law also assigns specific responsibilities to the schools to develop civic and participation competencies. In addition to promoting competencies related to the principles of sustainable development and the European Union's rights and obligations, *democracy* is explicitly listed as a key objective of the education system. The system must ensure the development of skills for active citizenship (Art. 3), as well as for understanding and applying democratic principles and encouraging active citizen participation (p. 7).

Article 76 (5) states that school education could include subjects from the domain of citizenship education along with entrepreneurship, education for sustainable development and global learning. The subject, its syllabus and duration are designed at the school level by the school principal. Therefore, despite the fact that citizenship education can be introduced in grade 11 only, the subject could be covered well at the school level.

Again for the first time, the Law on Pre-school and School Education provides an option for a curriculum different from the one set by the state. The opportunity is offered with a new institution: the so-called *innovative schools*. According to the Law:

Innovative schools are schools that achieve improvements in the quality of education by:

- 1 developing and introducing innovative elements in the organisation and/or content of learning;
- 2 organising the management, teaching and learning environment in a new or improved way;
- 3 using new teaching methods;
- 4 developing teaching content, curricula and syllabi in new ways⁵.

There were 521 innovative schools listed in Bulgaria for the 2024–2025 school year according to MoES. A decrease in their number since the previous academic year is mentioned⁶.

Point 2 of Art. 78 of the Law entitles the principals of the innovative schools to adopt a curriculum. This freedom, however, is not unlimited, as the school curriculum should still comply with the state standard for general education. Not only the subject but also the time allocated to it could be exempt from the state requirements (art. 80, (3)). That decision is also taken at the school level. (One of the pre-conditions for implementation of an innovative curriculum is that it should be developed at the school level and adopted by the pedagogical council of the school.)

The Ministry of Education in Bulgaria encourages new practices or trends at the school level via the national programs, which combine policy and finance. One of these national programs, renewed annually, is addressed to the innovative schools. The programme is aimed at networking and exchange of good practices between the innovative schools. It does not fund the development of the curriculum or the implementation of innovation. Nor does it support additional human resources linked

⁵ Art. 38 (7).

⁶ See [bgischools.bg, bgischools.com/%d1%81%d0%bf%d0%b8%d1%81%d1%8a%d0%ba-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%b2%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5-%d1%83%d1%87%d0%b8%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%89%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-2024-2025](https://bgischools.bg/bgischools.com/%d1%81%d0%bf%d0%b8%d1%81%d1%8a%d0%ba-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%b2%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5-%d1%83%d1%87%d0%b8%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%89%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-2024-2025)

with the school innovations. It has limited impact on the innovative character of the schools, but does encourage their growth.

Applications for the status of *innovative school* are assessed by a committee of experts appointed by the MoES. However, MoES is not bound by the experts' recommendations and could revise them. As of February 2025 there is still no public register of the innovative schools, although a website is under development. The current public information consists of names and locations of the schools and an annually updated list of the schools awarded the “*innovative*” status under the national program. Web research shows that innovations could vary from introducing STEM teaching to introducing sewing.



Citizenship education in Bulgarian education system

Citizenship education is an integral part of the mandatory general education curriculum, formally established as a dependent subject “Citizenship Education.” As it is introduced in grades 11 and 12, it falls within the second stage of upper secondary education, beyond the age of compulsory schooling as defined by the Bulgarian Constitution. Citizenship education may also be delivered through extracurricular activities, i.e. student self-governance, clubs, and projects aimed at fostering civic engagement and social competencies.

The regulatory framework for citizenship education is embedded within one of the 12 mandatory state educational standards, namely, the Standard for Citizenship, Health, Environmental, and Intercultural Education. According to this standard, citizenship education is implemented through interest-based activities, student self-governance structures, and various initiatives for personal development and support.

The educational standard is designed to integrate four key domains – citizenship, health, environmental, and intercultural education – into the broader curriculum. Apart from the inclusion in elective and optional courses, the standard mandates their incorporation and linkage to specific thematic areas (Article 11), such as patriotic education, disaster and emergency preparedness, counterterrorism measures, and media literacy. However, these topics are not explicitly linked to the development of civic competencies, nor do they establish a clear connection to health and environmental education.

The subject Citizenship Education comprises 36 hours of instruction per year in Grade 11 (one class per week), with 50% of the coursework dedicated to practical activities, including project development, case studies, and discussions. The curriculum emphasizes foundational concepts and key legal documents, such as individual civic rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. However, considerably less attention is devoted to an in-depth exploration of the basic democratic elements, such as elections, individual rights, civic participation, decision-making processes, and institutional accountability. A core component of the curriculum involves students developing projects and proposing solutions relevant to their school and local communities.

The Citizenship Education syllabus sets out the goal of the development of five key competencies, among them team work, tolerance, civic participation.

Figure 2. Key competencies, Subject “Citizenship Education”



- **Critical Thinking and Rational Argumentation:** Objectives include a) Students learn how to understand complex social topics, b) form their opinions based on facts and c) defend their positions with convincing statements.
- **Teamwork and Project Management:** Student-led projects help collaboration in small teams and develop skills for planning and management.
- **Media Literacy:** The programme helps students to recognise fake news and to develop critical approach towards the online and offline media information.
- **Tolerance and Social Awareness:** Students are introduced to different cultural identities and backgrounds; they are expected to develop openness to diversity and become aware of the importance of non-discrimination.
- **Active Civic Participation:** The curriculum includes development of skills, teaching students how they can work within local communities and how to apply their civic and democratic competencies.

However, the curriculum falls short of effectively fostering these skills: its structure and content provide limited opportunities for meaningful engagement. **The emphasis on theoretical knowledge, rather than practical application, restricts students' ability to develop essential civic competencies such as active participation, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving.**

2.1. Topics related with democracy and civic participation, incorporated into the citizenship education curriculum

The citizenship education curriculum, applied in grades 11–12, encompasses a broad range of topics related to democracy, economy and globalisation.

The Law on Pre-school and School Education and the State Educational Standard for Citizenship Education provide ample opportunities for incorporating citizenship education into the curriculum – whether through subject integration, extracurricular activities, or elective courses. The framework also outlines key related competencies, including media literacy, critical thinking, social awareness, and tolerance. However, in practice, its implementation remains largely discretionary, as citizenship education is not embedded in the mandatory curriculum for Grades 1–10.

Moreover, the provisions of Article 11 of the State Educational Standard, which associate citizenship education with civil defence, counterterrorism measures, and patriotic education, do not equip students with practical skills for civic participation.

The topics covered in the curriculum and the expected learning outcomes by the end of the first stage of upper secondary education (Annex 1) focus on fundamental civic rights, European values and identity, and the foundations of democratic processes and institutions. However, they do not provide meaningful practical knowledge of the mechanisms for exercising civic rights, the functions of institutions, or concrete forms of civic engagement.

2.2. Links between the citizenship education curriculum and the school participatory budgeting idea

The citizenship education curriculum for grades 11 and 12 in Bulgaria provides a strong foundation for the implementation of SPB. Both emphasise active citizenship, informed decision-making, and democratic engagement. Participatory budgeting, as a practice, allows students to propose, discuss, and vote on projects that affect their school environment, making it an ideal real-world application of the theoretical knowledge and competencies developed through the citizenship education curriculum.

One of the fundamental goals of citizenship education in the 11th grade is to encourage students to become active participants in their school and community. The curriculum promotes understanding of democratic governance, participation in decision-making processes, and engagement in student self-governance. Students are expected to evaluate the opportunities for democratic participation, including the ways in which they can influence their school environment. This aligns directly with the principles of participatory budgeting, as SPB empowers students to collectively decide on budget allocations and experience personally the mechanisms of democratic decision-making.

A significant part of the citizenship education curriculum (50%) is dedicated to project-based learning, which serves as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application. In the 11th grade, students are encouraged to develop projects that contribute to their school environment and local communities. Similarly, in the 12th grade, students are expected to design projects aimed at addressing local and global social issues. Participatory budgeting serves as a perfect mechanism for applying these skills in a meaningful way. Through SPB, students can develop, refine, and vote on projects that directly impact their school life, fostering a deeper sense of responsibility and ownership over their educational space.

Financial literacy and understanding of the public budgeting process are also core aspects of the 12th-grade citizenship education curriculum. Elements of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) are embedded within the citizenship education curriculum through project-based learning focused on resource management. The practical task module comprises 50% of the curriculum. Students are given an opportunity to plan and budget community-oriented projects, which allows them to analyse the needs of their environment, allocate resources strategically, and explore effective solutions to real-world challenges. Students examine public budgets as tools for economic, financial, and social policy at both state and municipal levels.

Beyond fostering financial awareness, PB also contributes to students' leadership development and sense of social responsibility. The curriculum encourages students to critically analyse social and democratic issues, identifying the role of both, individuals and communities in solving them. It also fosters understanding of global challenges and the importance of solidarity in addressing them. Participatory budgeting allows students to take an active role in finding solutions to real-life issues within their school community.

The citizenship education curriculum also places strong emphasis on democratic practices and student self-governance, elements that are central to the participatory budgeting process. Students are encouraged to initiate and participate in school and local community events while also examining school governance from a democratic perspective. Through PB, students do not merely learn about democratic principles in an abstract sense; they actively engage in decision-making, building consensus, and experience first-hand the responsibilities that come with democracy.

Finally, the integration of participatory budgeting into citizenship education ensures that students not only learn about democracy but also practice it. PB aligns with multiple dimensions of the curriculum, enhancing students' democratic engagement, financial literacy, leadership skills, and sense of responsibility. To fully integrate participatory budgeting into citizenship education, schools can use PB projects as part of student assessments, empower student councils to manage the process, and collaborate with local government and NGOs to provide additional funding and support.

All these points of contact between the citizenship education curriculum and SPB show that, on paper, there is potential for the school subject and the practice (SPB) to meet and that it should be this subject that should be the SPB's gateway to the school. In reality, however, things are happening quite differently. Last year, David Kiuranov led a small research study as part of the "Listening to Youth" project, which involved 5 focus groups with teenagers from 5 schools from the capital. The groups were moderated by respondents' peers. One of the questions asked what democracy is. No clear answer to it was obtained (no definitions were expected, but some show of basic understanding). The schools in question ranged from modest neighbourhood establishments to extremely popular and prestigious state and private schools. The experience of SPB work in the 108th school in Sofia, obtained during the research, showed that children who had got acquainted with the idea had a clear understanding that it was a way to influence decision-making, but that did not lead to any practical activity and/or project submission. Of course, these haphazard data can serve, at best, as vignettes: they cannot be taken as indicators.

If we go back to the normative documents, however, we can revisit the analysis attached to the State Educational Standard for General Education (compulsory). The standard is competence-oriented, in practice fully reflecting the European Commission's 2019 edition of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. The Standard discusses in detail the skills that are acquired by students in the relevant subjects, and, furthermore, notes which skills contribute to which key competence. Thus, it is clear that, according to the Standard, the skills acquired in the subjects of mathematics (15%), Bulgarian language (9%), biology and health education (7%) and man and nature (7%) contribute most to the social and civic competences. Skills acquired in the subject Citizenship Education contribute to the competence "Social and civic skills" by 2 out of 100 exactly. This may be a document blunder. But even so, it is revealing about the attitude of the Bulgarian educational system towards citizenship education. Which brings us back to the fact that SPB can only be introduced in schools with the active support of the head teacher, a teacher or teachers who understand the meaning of the process, and passionate pupils.

SPB in Bulgaria

3.1. Participatory budgeting in Bulgaria and youth participation

In Bulgaria, participatory budgeting was first introduced in 2021 in Sofia through the initiative “Sofia Chooses.” However, that practice did not spread to other places. In Sofia, it continues as an annual initiative, but lacks consistency and a sustainable framework. Student participatory budgeting within schools was implemented for the first time as part of Work Package 2 under the project “School Participatory Budget – a tool to foster school democracy”

This chapter explores data on close-to-school participatory budgeting initiatives that focus on child participation addressing democratic capabilities

Research findings from a representative survey among young people aged 15–29 (Jan. 2023⁷) showed that the participation settings for most young people were charity (32%) and volunteering – (27%). The researchers investigating the level of engagement of young people in different settings of activism (petitions, voicing citizens’ positions, taking part in demonstration, volunteering) conclude that engagement of young people remains relatively low.

7 Research findings from survey on young people’s attitudes, commissioned by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Gallup International, Jan, 2023, gallup-international.bg/46587/important-survey-youth-in-bulgaria/

The results of this Survey further confirmed the findings of the study “Child Participation and Activism in Bulgaria” (Know-How Centre for Alternative Care, 2022) which researched the key domains and mechanisms through which school-aged children and youth engage in activism. It was an attempt to map the existing initiatives, programs, and projects in the field of child participation and civic engagement in Bulgaria. It was conducted between November 2021 and April 2022.

During the fieldwork phase, data were gathered from over 170 organisations, with 62 actively contributing through sub-surveys or interviews. The approach was a mixed-method: Google Forms surveys, online research, and the “snowball sampling” technique. The resulting Child Activism Map covered 140 organisations, excluding those no longer operational.

The study identified three key domains of child participation:

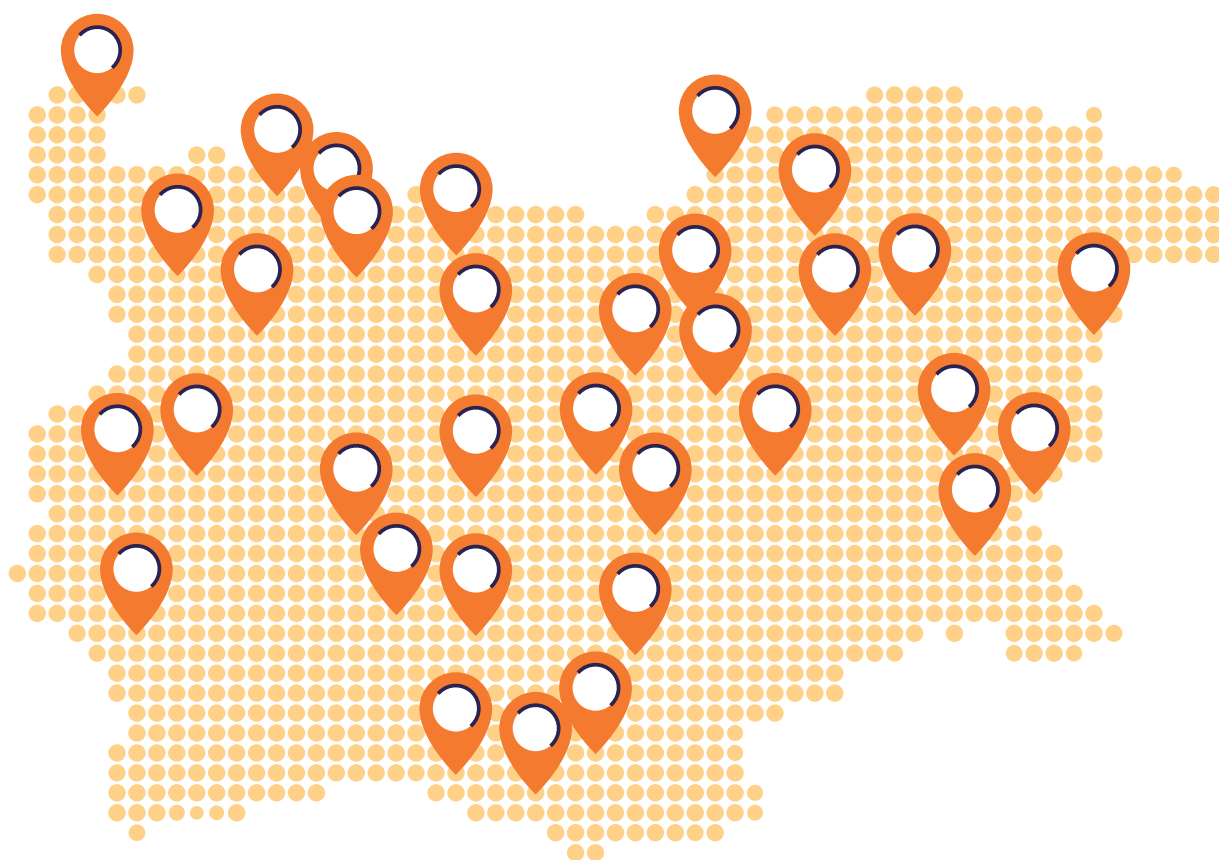
- Volunteering and Philanthropy: initiatives such as tree-planting campaigns, charity support, students’ sales designed to raise funds for charity.
- Civic Engagement: Involving participation in youth advisory councils, civic education programs, media literacy initiatives, and activities fostering critical thinking.
- Advocacy and Human Rights: Focused on empowering marginalized groups, including Romani children and children with disabilities. In most cases, students from vulnerable backgrounds are either consulted or invited to participate in advisory processes.

The Map of Children’s Participation Initiatives shows that the predominant share of child and adolescent activism is concentrated in the fields of charity and volunteerism. Organising charity markets on Christmas and Easter aimed at supporting peers from disadvantaged backgrounds or a specific cause is one of the most widespread types of events in schools, initiated by students. It is customary that the children themselves set the objectives of the market.

The study places particular emphasis on Student Councils, which the authors regard as the most prominent and sustainable forms of children’s participation in the country currently⁸. However, they observe that while initiative and creativity are encouraged to varying extents, these structures seldom do any real work.

8 See p.18, Report “Child activism and participation in Bulgaria”, Know-How Centre, 2022, knowhowcentre.nbu.bg/kakvo-e-detski-aktivizam-tuk-i-sega/

Figure 4. Map of child activism and participation in Bulgaria



Source: Research on child activism in Bulgaria,
Know-How centre for alternative care (2022)

“Evidence of this is the fact that as soon as the engaged adults stop investing in these structures, they perish. Otherwise, new children come in to replace the old ones, while the Student councils are often focused on school events organisation and improvement of the school environment. Matters of the educational process and extracurricular activities, or the dynamics between students and teachers, are not the areas they usually address as Councils. Some of the key powers of the Students Council remain untapped.

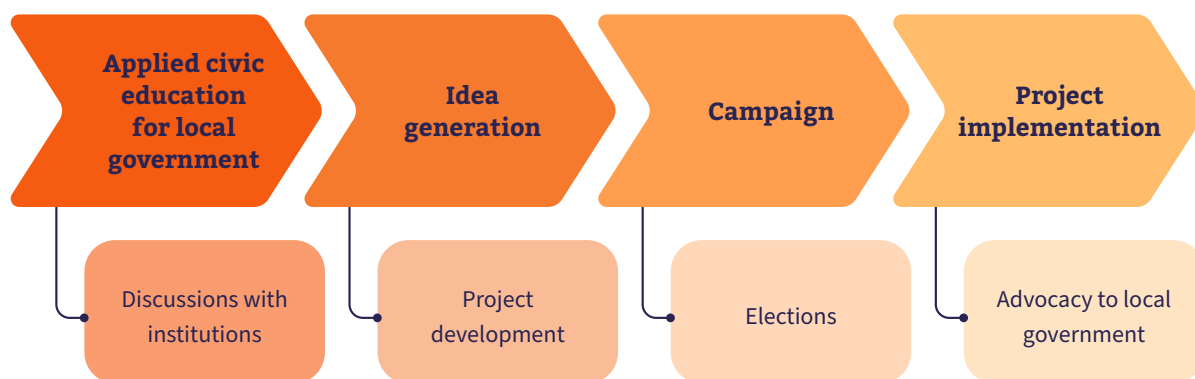
The findings suggest that the primary reason here is the fact that student councils operate within rigidly predefined frameworks established by adults, which restricts the youngsters’ autonomy and creative expression. The study further argues that the councils’ level of activity is closely tied to the level of engagement and initiative of the adults facilitating the councils.

The study highlights six exemplary practices of youth participation. One of them, the Youth Parliament in Ruse, is showcased as a model with structured procedures for election of members, such as internal statute and election through balloting. The parliament is facilitated by one adult whose functions are to hear out students’ proposals and support their implementation. The youth parliament organises campaigns and leadership trainings, and takes part in meetings with the local government to discuss municipal youth policies. The practice is distinguished as a model where students not only participate in civic initiatives, but also independently elect their leadership and execute projects with minimal external interference.

3.2. School practices akin to the students' participatory budgeting

School participatory budgeting hasn't been tried in Bulgaria until the social experiment under the current project. The “Small Steps” Foundation integrated a participatory budgeting module into its programme “Child participation in decision-making at local level”. This approach embeds key principles of student-led budgeting – idea generation, empowerment through democratic deliberation, and self-organisation – into school initiatives developed in partnership with “Small Steps.”

The programme for applied citizenship education and pupil participation in governance consists of four interconnected modules: 1) Practical citizenship education with a focus on local government structures; 2) Student-driven ideas generation and project development; 3) Campaigning and electoral processes; 4) Implementation of school improvement initiatives and advocacy for broader community reforms.



3.2.1. Structure

The “Child participation in decision-making at local level” programme is conducted at the school during one academic year. It is implemented as part of the regular classes, chapter B of the curriculum, with the decision of the school principal. The programme is composed of the following modules:

1**Stage 1: Applied education for the local government**

Through gamification and case studies students learn about the competencies of the local government and its connection with their everyday life, as well as about the mechanism of citizens engagement. A discussion on their perspective of the community they live in is encouraged. At the end of the module, they meet with representatives of the local government and counsellors to share views and ask questions.

2**Stage 2: Ideas generation**

Students are encouraged to share their ideas about the community and the school. At this stage, if their ideas address local policies and improvements, they will receive feedback from the facilitators on the policy procedures and how to follow up. If needed, a meeting is organised with an expert on the topic of interest. Soft skills such as research and project development are trained. At the stage of idea generation, each student develops a project proposal and receives feedback as a learning task. Ideas to do with the school and the community have different forms, as tailored to the specifics of the two different processes – SPB and advocacy to local government. The majority of the ideas proposed by the students are usually related to the school and fall under the category *initiative to be implemented with SPB*.

An Idea map is produced, based on the individual proposals, prioritised.

3**Stage 3. Proposal development**

At this stage, the discussion focuses around the rules for project creation and initiatives selection. Once this is completed, the official submission of proposals is announced for those who would like to go on with the process and engage further. Students who would like to continue with proposals related to the local government, receive specific mentorship support on how to submit a proposal to the local government. Facilitation and advocacy are provided for a hearing at a municipal committee and meeting with the local government to present the proposal. Proposals related to the school take part in the SPB process. As part of the training process, the authors receive feedback about the strengths and weaknesses that require improvement.

4**Stage 4. Campaign and selection**

This is the phase of opening the process to peers in the school. A period for campaigning and presenting the proposals is scheduled by the students. The selection process is organised by the students with administrative and technical support of adults, if needed. Results are announced by students through their social channels and class groups and by the management through the school official media channels (Facebook, website, communication board).

5

Stage 5. Implementation

The implementation of school-related projects is the responsibility of the school principal or the deputy supervising the process. As part of the proposal, students make specific commitments on how they will contribute. The overall coordination of the implementation lies with the external facilitators.

Projects under the responsibility of the local government receive mentoring and advocacy support throughout the cycle of submitting a proposal, advocating and receiving a reply.

3.2.2. Key actors

Although in Bulgarian schools the approval of the school principal to launch a process outside the curriculum is necessary, the initiators and catalysts for implementing the programme could vary. In all the cases, the process was organised following decisions of the school leadership.

The key stakeholders who have initiated the students' process of civic engagement and participation in decision-making have included:

- **Local government:** in two of the cases, in which the mayor has been a supporter of citizenship education and empowerment of adolescents, the local government has introduced the programme into the municipal schools. It is a common practice, although not that popular, for it needs the mayor or his deputy responsible for education to recognise the importance of an educational initiative and undertake steps to introduce it at the municipal level. People within the local government are usually aware of the attitudes of the local school principals, so they approach the pro-active ones. The initiative of the local government does not have imperative character, nor does the local government have any bidding power, either formal or informal.
- **School Board of Trustees:** it has predominantly fundraising functions under the Law on Preschool and School Education. In practice, the active Boards of Trustees are well engaged with the school infrastructure, and hold opinions on the educational programme. However, the Board has far less power than the school principal when

it comes to the school curricula. In the case of a school agenda, with the curriculum chapters B and C, and the competition among proposals of different NGO-s, the recommendation of the Boards of Trustees could be essential for what should be included. In any case, the final decision remains with the school principal.

- **Principal or Deputy:** The law is clear that the principal represents the school. The process of internal deliberation has evolved to a level at which deputies to the principal could propose ideas and this could be a solid base for a proposal to be adopted by the principal. However, as we will see below, no matter whether the decision comes from the principal himself or the broader management, the actual development depends strongly on the willingness and openness of the teachers.

There are several key reasons articulated by the stakeholders under the implemented programmes in different schools to prioritise a citizenship education and students' participation program, and clean up a space within the busy school agenda.

- **Adopting students' self-governance as a school priority.** It has been the case of one school only where students' self-governance was adopted as a priority and a school innovation practice, implemented sustainably in the course of four years. "We need to transform the school into a space where students come for reasons other than learning. It should be a place where they have a reason to come back the following day" (A.B., deputy principal). The tool to do it, according to the management, was to provide space for students' initiatives. Students' self-governance has been developed as a strategy to tackle drop-out and increase motivation for learning through pupils' ownership. Drop-out remains a significant challenge in rural areas. The school started with activating the students council and supporting pupils through various initiatives, originated by them: school radio broadcasts, charity initiatives and home support of elderly members of the community, visits to the municipal council. Additionally, building civic competencies of pupils from an early age has been recognised as a value. In this context, the proposal from Small Steps and the local government to implement an applied citizenship education and participation programme would complement an existing school strategy already in practice.
- **Raising civic competencies** of students has been a value recognised by all stakeholders (local governments, parents and school leadership) in all localities where the child participation programme has been implemented. It has been the driving force in all other cases of implemented programmes, too. Developing citizenship awareness within the age of formation, prior to having full citizens' rights, has been the motive of the Public Council to contribute to the implementation of

the programme in one of the schools. “It’s our responsibility to ensure that citizens and students have trust in the institutions. It’s good for students to know what the functions of the local government are. I’d like to know what they have to say to us.” (K.P., mayor). “The school has to raise active citizens” (A.B., deputy-principal).

- **Developing project management competencies:** the experiment, part of the current project, was conducted in a general education school with a business management profile. The training component in project development had been among the key reasons for the principal to adopt the SPB initiative. The students’ participation programme was applied in a vocational high school with a finances profile. The addition to the curriculum, a training course in project skills was also perceived by the school management as a key added value, prompting it to incorporate the participation programme into the curriculum of one school term.

3.2.3. Internal management and adults responsible for the process

The school management approach to implementing the process, as observed by us, has been influenced by three key variables: proactive teachers, proactive classes, and grade levels not subject to state external exams (these are administered in the 4th, 7th, and 10th grade, with final state exams in the 12th grade).

One of the biggest challenges for school management is to secure support from staff willing to implement new initiatives. This challenge is rooted in the management of Bulgaria’s formal education system, where teachers face a heavy administrative burden and strict compliance monitoring.

Additionally, the National Programme (see above), a key source of supplementary funding for equipment and activities, imposes rigorous reporting requirements. As a result, any programme initiated by school management or an NGO competes with teachers’ willingness to take on additional responsibilities and workload to the ones they already have.

Based on our experience and different school management approaches, we have identified several organisational models, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.

External Facilitation Model

A deputy principal supervised the programme, while implementation was fully led by external facilitators. The programme was piloted in five proactive classes, with no additional responsibilities assigned to the teachers. The deputy principal coordinated activities within the school administration, while facilitators kept class leaders and school community stakeholders informed.

Delegating to non-formal educators allowed for the implementation of non-formal learning tools and gamification outside traditional teaching methods. This increased the participation of students who would develop various proposals. Once engaged, students took full ownership of the participatory process, leading the campaign, selection of projects and project implementation. This ensured student ownership of the process.

A key weakness of the model is its reliance on an NGO, which limits internal capacity building for teachers and hinders long-term sustainability. This approach is most suitable for piloting initiatives and developing a successful model for wider dissemination.

Hybrid Model: Principal-Led with External Facilitation

In a school with innovative principal but a predominantly conservative teaching staff resisting innovation, the programme was sanctioned by the principal and tasked to external facilitators. It was piloted in three classes, selected due to their pro-active teachers standing out from the majority. Training was led by external facilitators, with support from teachers. Students designed the selection process, while teachers took the lead in project implementation.

Working with teachers who have established trusted relationships with students accelerated the process of building trust and overcoming the scepticism of adolescents to invest time and effort in community activities. Teachers supported students throughout idea generation and proposal development. However, challenges arose during implementation. Despite the principal's approval, teachers had to navigate resistance from deputy management responsible for project execution. At this stage, teachers' willingness to challenge hierarchical structures and the internal resistance to the process became a critical factor – some continually engaged in advocating

within the school, while others have been stopped by the internal hierarchy and decision-making process. External facilitators provided advocacy support to navigate these challenges, and implement students projects.

Whole-School Approach with Peer Leadership

Supported by the deputy principal, this model combined external facilitation with a youth peer leader on site. The programme was implemented across all grades (5–12) as part of the school's strategy to prioritise student participation and civic education. Teachers received a one-day citizenship education training on decision-making and competencies of the local government to enable them to support the programme using educational resources. However, the programme was implemented by external facilitators.

Due to limited teacher engagement, the school management appointed a recent graduate and former students council chair as an internal organiser. The youth facilitator, administratively supported by the deputy principal, coordinated the students council, which led the design and organisation of the elections.

Co-facilitation with a youth leader significantly increased student motivation. The whole-school approach engaged all students council members in a participatory process with their classmates. The peer organiser, actively involved in all training steps and working with each class, effectively conveyed diverse ideas. Combined with the deputy principal's support, this contributed to student-led selection design and organisation, ensuring broad peer participation.

Democratisation and students' ownership

The participation programmes have been only pilot ones engaging limited human resources. Therefore, implementation has been limited to a certain number of classes in each school. Project submission was open to all students, both individuals and teams from those classes. The number of submissions was not limited. Ideas were generated in class and also at home, during stage 2 of the programme. In order to motivate students and create space to spark and support individual initiative, the idea collection module provided 3 hours, including group discussion for prioritisation at the class-level. A separate deadline for project submission and for feedback was set.

Non-eligible activities were defined in advance through facilitated discussion with all students. Feedback was limited to mentoring and project quality control. The team providing feedback had the right to eliminate a project only if it did not meet the eligibility criteria.

The authors were responsible for campaigning and raising support for their proposals among peers. The design team's was also to provide some minimum publicity.

To ensure transparency, vote results were communicated through different channels, identified in advance by students, aiming at the maximum peers reachout. Additionally, the results and the winning projects were announced on the official school communication channels.

The vote results were decisive for the decision-making: unlike other student-led initiatives, in this case the school principal did not have a say. Voting students had all the power over their project.

The organising team was composed of students who took the responsibility for organising the selection process and executing the tasks designed by the group. Students willing to engage stepped forward during stage 2 of the programme (idea generation). In two of the implemented programmes, these willing students came from the Student Council. In order to avoid a situation where decisions were made by adults and members of the Students 'Council, rules were discussed at the class level.

Inclusiveness in Participation

The selection rules and project eligibility criteria were discussed with all students in the pilot classes during the second stage of the programme. The framework was developed based on their proposals, and rules were adopted by consensus. Students agreed to open the voting to the entire school, including the primary grades. Students were the only legitimate voters, teachers, parents, and non-administrative staff were excluded.

When the students Council organised the selection process, the rules were formulated and agreed upon by the students, with the Council serving as the executive body.

- To enhance participation, the selection rules was discussed with students, focusing on effective ways to disseminate information across all grades and create an accessible voting process. In all cases, the selection process spanned multiple days to maximise outreach and participation. Voting methods varied, from Google Forms to bailout boxes.

Resources and sustainability

The programme, in its full scale, did not reach sustainability due to lack of human resources in the schools. The programme did not manage to deliver the applied citizenship education for the local government and to facilitate the participation and advocacy process with the local government. The students' participatory budgeting component was not continued with school resources. However, all schools were willing to continue and expand the learning process with external facilitation. In Chapter 5 the potential for the involvement of the local government as a sustainability driver shall be investigated.

3.2.4. External support:

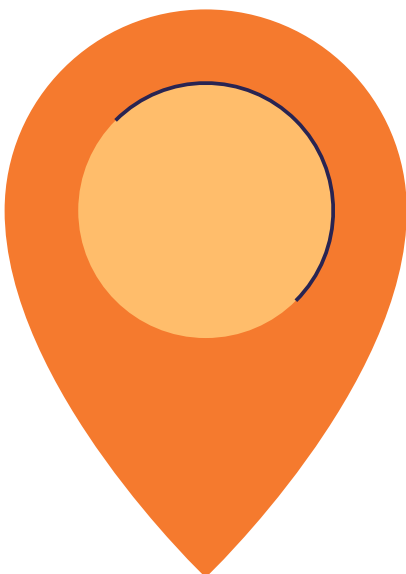
Schools receive support from an external organisation that provides expertise, facilitates the learning-by-doing process, coordinates internal school stakeholders, and lobbies the local government. Teachers involved in the process are supported through mentoring.

Lessons learned indicate that the biggest challenge is the lack of civic competencies required to facilitate decision-making with the municipality. Local government functions and mechanisms for citizen participation are not included in the school curriculum, nor are they part of university teacher training programs. While external training and mentoring can be offered, few educators feel confident in these areas. The success of programme delivery largely depends on the civic competencies of teachers.

3.2.5. Types of projects proposed:

Students' proposals for school improvement range from infrastructural improvements to new learning opportunities, enabling better health and wellbeing. They could be classified as follows:

- **Infrastructural** : aimed at improving the physical space, proposals could vary, from improvements in the existing gym and sports facilities, to restrooms, to renovation of the classrooms.
- **Improving learning experience**: improved internet access, new blinds to see the interactive boards better, an open-air learning space, renovation of the library and creating a cosy learning corner, opening a chemistry lab, adding new equipment for educational purposes.
- **Leisure and social activities, well-being**: to create places for relaxation, support mental health, to get a vending machine with healthy food.



Five cases of SPB



4.1. Case study 1: “Applied citizenship education through students’ participation”

Estimated Cost of the Project (in euros): 3,730

Start Date: 01.02.2020

End Date: 31.12.2020

One-Time or Annual: Project-based, funded under the “Active Citizens Fund,” Small Grants Scheme of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism

Project Status: Completed

Approximate Size of the Community: the 35th General School “Dobri Voynikov” is a community-based, municipally owned public school located in the Lozenets neighbourhood of Sofia. The school educates 1,110 students from grades 1 to 12.

Age Range of Participants: 504 students, grades 1 to 12

Decision-making mode: Projects were selected through online voting using a Google-based survey tool. All students from grades 1 to 12 were entitled to vote. Each student had the right to multiple voting, allowing them to support up to three projects, with one vote per project.

Description: This one-term pilot programme focused on student participation in the decision-making process within their immediate environment – the school and the local community. The programme consisted of four modules: 1) applied citizenship education about local government functions; 2) idea generation and project development; 3) campaigning and voting; and 4) project implementation of school-based ideas and advocacy to the local government.

Preparation: The programme was organised in partnership with the Parents’ Association and approved by the school management. The SPB was a key component of the applied citizenship education and student participation programme implemented

at the school. An interactive set of non-formal education resources based on gamification was developed by the “Small Steps” team for two age groups: grades 5 to 7 and grades 8 to 12. The objectives of the learning block were: 1) to engage students in proactively shaping the school community, 2) to generate students’ ideas about how to improve the school environment, and 3) to build students’ skills to research, plan, and implement their own initiatives.

Implementation: The pilot programme was introduced in five classes during the second term of the 2020–2021 school year, amidst the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Classes were delivered online once a week. Prior to the idea generation phase, a set of interactive classes dedicated to citizenship education about local government and its links to everyday life were conducted. Students were encouraged to reflect on both the city and the school environment. Discussions with representatives of the local government and a municipal councillor were organised, allowing students to share their perspectives with decision-makers.

The idea generation stage lasted one month and included student-paced work and mentoring. The process involved all students at several stages: 1) developing individual projects aimed at building soft skills and identifying project ideas; 2) mapping and prioritising ideas at the class level; and 3) issuing an open call for individuals and teams to develop proposals for the student budgeting process and the school-wide selection process.

Submitted proposals were introduced to the main community stakeholders, including peers, the students council, the school leadership, and the Parents Board. To further open and discuss the process within the whole school community, students had two weeks to campaign and raise support for their proposals. The selection process lasted three days. The winning projects were implemented during the summer break. Students who lobbied the local government for their proposal for separate garbage containers next to the school received mentoring and participated in joint advocacy efforts with the local government.

Results: As a result of the programme and participatory process, several improvements were made: restroom doors were repaired, the internet connection and student access within the school were improved, and one classroom wall was decorated. Students lobbied the school management and fundraised for improvements to the chemistry lab, with additional funds provided by the Parents Board and the student budget. As a follow-up, the following year, the school management applied for and

implemented another student idea – a pavilion for open-air classes. After that, the process has not been continued.

Role of Young People: Young people from the classes participating in the pilot programme were engaged throughout the entire process, from the idea generation to implementation. Students from the pilot groups, together with the students council, were involved in discussing and deciding on campaigning and voting procedures. Authors of the ideas, along with interested peers, took part in the project implementation.

Positive Aspects of the Process: The module dedicated to local government functions triggered discussions about the school environment and prepared the groundwork for ideas generation. Meetings with local officials to introduce students' perspectives and ideas improved trust in institutions. Follow-up advocacy for students' ideas sensitised institutions to young people's perspectives on the school and the community as well as their participation in the decision-making process. The district mayor and municipal councillors who engaged in the process, in the subsequent years continued to support students' proposals. The district mayor initiated a project proposal for a student budgeting process as part of the citizens' budgeting mechanism.

Main obstacles to the process: The internal lack of coordination in the school has been a major problem for the project's implementation. Despite the support of a deputy principal, the actual implementation was placed under the supervision of another member of the management team. Delays and internal tensions have been tackled through external facilitation.

Tips: Do not extrapolate adults' "wisdom" on what is possible to students' endeavours. Young people's motivation could be a powerful driving force reaching surprising results. Be fair about challenges, but do not discourage their bold attempts to find solutions.

Links to examples of application forms, voting styles, tools: thesmallsteps.org/bg/news/handbook-5-8



4.2. Case study 2. “Brave kids change the world around them”

Location: “Paisii Hilendarski” General School, v. Scalitza, Tundja Municipality

Estimated cost of the project in euros: 900 Euro

Start date: Feb. 2022

End date: Dec. 2022

One-time or annual: the project has been corresponding to the school policy for mainstreaming students’ self-governance. “Paisii Hilendarski” School has been an innovative school with respect to students’ self-governance with a tailored programme. The policy for mainstreaming students’ self-governance has been introduced as part of the national programme “Schools for innovation”. The management included students’ participation as part of the school policy to increase motivation of young people to learn and attend classes regularly. It has been a drop-out prevention mechanism as well.

Prior to the project’s implementation, the school changed the way of supporting the students council. It encouraged and supported student driven initiatives – volunteering to help elderly people, providing social support, equipping a relax corner in the corridor, co-hosting a students’ radio-show. Additionally, the deputy principal responsible for the students Council organised meetings with the local government, including visits to the municipal council.

Project status: completed

Approximate size of the community involved in the initiative: 150 students

Age range of participants: 6–18 y.o.

Way of voting: in-person vote, ballot box

Description: the programme took place during one school year, and the first term of the following year. Applied citizenship education program, one instruction hour per week had been implemented in all grades 5th to 12. Idea generation and selection phase followed. After implementing students projects related with the school environment, advocacy support and facilitation for meetings with local government were been provided.

Preparation: One day on-site training on citizenship education for the local government was delivered to the school staff. The training was aimed to equip the teachers with tools to lead the participation programme, with the support of external mentors.

As a result, the programme received better support from the school team, but no one volunteered to put it into practice. External facilitators took on the implementation. A young peer, fresh graduate, working as school mediator, was tasked with providing support and organising students' participation at the school. Educational resources have been adapted to the rural context and the interests of the students.

Implementation: During the second term of the 2021–2022 school year, students from grades 5 to 12 got introduced to the citizenship education programme for the local government. In order to spark broader individual engagement, the idea generation stage was extended. Training was conducted with the participation of the youth mediator. By the end of the second term, ideas had been collected.

Implementation continued during the following school year with increased engagement of the youth organiser and the school principal. Students presented their proposals related to the community at a meeting with the mayor, the chair of the municipal council and the councillors. Voting for the project related the school were organised by the students council. All students from grades 1–12 were entitled to vote.

Role of young people: the role of young people has been essential. The young organiser who was also a role model and leader for the peers played the key role in motivating the others to engage in the process. Working with the external facilitators, she kept record of all students' ideas across the grades and was able to have them discussed. Additionally, she helped the students council to organise the comprehensive selection process, reaching everyone. All the young people in the school aged 11 were involved in the idea generation. students council members participated in the process along with their peers in class. Final decision on the implemented projects was taken by the students.

Positive aspects of the process: Applying the participation programme in all grades enabled a real deliberative process at the stage of idea generation and engagement. Working at the class level, where students council members are equal to non-members, eased the power balance and brought more of an organisational role than initiating and decision-making functions. Extending the instructional hours according to the needs helped overcome barriers in the initial interest and willingness of students to engage with the participatory process. Having students' self-governance as part of school policy ensures stronger engagement and support from the management for the process.

Main obstacles to the process: human resources has been the key challenge in both the implementation and sustainability of the process. External facilitators had to commute a long distance to deliver classes. A more serious challenge was the lack of internal staff resources to sustain the process and facilitate students' self-governance. The school ceased its participation in the Innovation schools programme, as it did not provide funds for implementation of the innovations, nor did it secure sufficient human resources. Hiring new/additional staff was not possible.

Tips: Engaging a peer leader who is a role model as organiser and trainer changes the dynamics, the motivation and the trust of students. A role model could have added value by preventing school-dropout and increasing learning motivation.

The case study illustrated the weakness of the national programme for innovation: its failure to provide the human capital necessary for implementing the innovations.



4.3. Case study 3: Sofia citizens budgeting 2020 – sabotaging the participatory budgeting

Survey on Citizens' Attitudes Toward a process of Participatory Budgeting for Sofia

Introduction

In 2020, an initiative group from the (then) Save Sofia movement decided to implement a project to help introduce the practice of PB in the Sofia Municipality. The project was mostly focused on advocacy, with the team having conversations with various stakeholders and decision makers. David Kiuranov participated as a researcher, conducting focus groups with citizens, municipal officials and journalists, and analysing data from the quantitative survey of Sofia citizens and the online conversation, which was aimed at gathering both quantitative and qualitative information.

Eventually, the municipality adopted the idea and allocated funds for citizens' projects, creating the "Sofia Chooses" programme, without, however, including at all key stages of PB, such as working with the district town halls, and working directly with citizens on projects preparation. Nevertheless, the research provided information on the attitudes of Sofia citizens towards the concept of PB.

The 2021 study followed up on an earlier survey from August 2020 to assess the impact of the “Citizens’ Budget for Sofia” campaign and to measure the perception of the municipal programme “Sofia Chooses,” which was launched in response to citizen demands for participatory budgeting.

Key Findings and Trends, related to PB

Awareness and Reception of the Citizens’ Budget Initiative

Awareness of the term “citizens’ budget” increased from 10% in August 2020 to 17% in January 2021. Among those familiar with the campaign, 67% expressed a positive opinion, viewing it as a tool for strengthening democratic dialogue between citizens and local authorities. However, many people confused the “Citizens’ Budget for Sofia” initiative with the municipal programme “Sofia Chooses,” which enjoyed higher recognition (40% awareness).

Comparison with the “Sofia Chooses” Programme

While “Sofia Chooses” received stronger municipal promotion, the public sentiment was mixed. 48% had a positive impression, while 10% believed the results were manipulated, and 5% criticised poor communication. Despite this, the demand for participatory budgeting remained strong, with support for the allocating part of Sofia’s budget through direct citizen decision-making rising from 88% to 92%.

Findings from the Online Public Consultation

An online discussion involved 900 registered citizens, 495 completed surveys, and 241 active participants. The demographic data shows that the participants were of economically active age (90% were between 18–55 years old), highly educated (83% had a university degree, 15% had a secondary education), and lived in Sofia (96%). On the one hand, this profile suggested the possible involvement of the participating citizens in the topics related to the civic budgeting and the development of Sofia. On the other hand, the profile showed that significant social groups, such as older people (only 8% of participants were over 56 years old) and the less educated, did not participate in the conversation. The gender distribution showed a slight predominance of men (56%), compared to 43% women.

How Citizens Want Participatory Budgeting to Work

According to the preferences expressed by citizens in the citizens’ budgeting survey, the process should respect two basic principles:

- 1 allocate funds based on identified needs, which are strongly prioritised by citizens (36%), ahead of attributes such as the number of residents in the neighbourhood/area (13%) and the neighbourhood/area size (3%).
- 2 the process should be transparent and close to citizens, with as much citizen participation as possible. The analysis of the proposed ideas showed that the citizen budgeting process would face the fundamental difficulty of separating proposals that are part of the municipality's obligations from genuine citizen proposals.

Territorial or (and) thematic?

Support for whether the budget should be allocated territorially or thematically was around the same level, with a slight preference for the territorial principle (58% vs. 51% for the thematic principle), indicating that it is advisable to have a combination of the two principles, with the most pressing needs identified leading the way.

Voting should be wide open to all who would want to have a say in the development of their neighbourhood – especially those who live permanently in Sofia (respondents with a permanent address – 70%, permanent residents – 70%), but also those who study and work in the city (36% each), and those who spend more than half of the year in Sofia (34%). Besides, the opening of the vote to civic organisations gains the support of 42%.

Voting directly with the participation of all interested citizens is by far the most supported option for selecting projects (88%)

Two main risks are expressed – that the administration could use the civic budgeting process to “shut the eyes” of the citizens and that the process could remain on paper and be used to absorb money by actors and NGOs close to the municipality.

Expectations for the First Edition of Participatory Budgeting

- The first cycle should focus on small, successful projects in order to build trust.
- The municipality must prove its commitment to transparent implementation.
- Popular ideas should include replicable small projects and strong municipal oversight.

Challenges & Recommendations

- Engaging citizens beyond voting is crucial; special outreach efforts are needed for marginalised groups.
- Preventing PB from becoming a substitute for municipal obligations is a key concern.
- A transparent selection and execution process is necessary to maintain public trust.

Final Conclusions & Recommendations

The survey confirms strong public demand for participatory budgeting in Sofia. Awareness is growing, and nearly all respondents support the allocation of municipal funds through direct citizen voting. Transparency and citizen oversight are essential to its success. The municipality must ensure that PB is seen as a genuine democratic tool rather than a symbolic gesture.

In order to fully integrate PB into Sofia's governance, it is recommended that the first cycle should focus on achievable, community-driven projects while ensuring broad citizen engagement. The municipality must commit to long-term sustainability, with ongoing refinements based on citizen feedback.



4.4. Case study 4: Sofia citizens budget 2024

Location: City of Sofia

Estimated cost of the project in euros: 2 650 000

Start date: 01.09.2024

End date: 08.12.2024

One-time or annual: this is the third participatory budgeting initiative of the municipality of Sofia as there hasn't been a continuum so far. In November 2023, for the first time since 2009, the municipality had a new local government whose initiative was the 2024 PB. The municipal leadership has not announced its further plans. The deadline for project implementation is 30.03.2026.

Project status: in progress.

Approximate size of the community involved in the initiative: 15 476 have voted

Age range of participants: 18 + The case is explored, as we see it, as a practice that could serve as the foundation to embed students' participatory budgeting within the citizens' budgeting process.

Way of voting: Voting was online with an option for in-person vote cast in the municipal offices. It has been open to all citizens provided that they met the multiple eligibility criteria: 1) having permanent residence in Sofia and in the specific district; 2) being 18 + and entitled to vote; 3) having registered online at the platform; 4) having certified

e-signature and identification number. The requirement for an electronic signature undoubtedly significantly reduced the number of those eligible to vote.

Those meeting the criteria 1 and 2 could vote in person in the municipal office.

Description: “Sofia decides” 2024 is a participatory budgeting initiative of the municipality of Sofia. The current city authorities originated from the citizens’ opposition movements that have been confronting publicly the governments notorious for their corruption as well as taking control over the judicial system. Citizens’ participation, transparency, and adopting modern practices of city governance and planning have been of key importance for those movements.

The PB, for the first time, comprised decentralised citizens budgets for each of the 28 administrative districts in Sofia, apart from the budget for the city as a whole. The 2024 initiative has several innovations compared to previous attempts:

- mainstreaming participatory budgeting at the neighbourhood level through local citizens’ budgeting processes for each district;
- e-voting with certified provider and increased security of the voting platform;
- option to vote in person
- right to vote for more than one project until reaching city or district budget limit
- the local administration takes over responsibility for project implementation.
- increased funds allocation by 500%.
- a platform launched for public monitoring of the process cycle – submission, voting, implementation.

Preparation:

The terms and conditions of the citizens budgeting process were adopted with a decision of the Municipal Council. In terms of human resources, a contact person at the municipal office has been appointed, and tasks were delegated to experts at each district with an executive ordinance of the Mayor. A new platform was developed with several functionalities: individual registration and profile, e-voting and implementation updates. Projects were submitted using a simple application form.

The call for proposals was published at the official website. The municipality did not launch a communication campaign. The first media coverage appeared days before the submission deadline, which was extended by a month. Taking into account the high priority of the citizens participatory budgeting for the municipality with budgets at the neighbourhood level and the increased allocation of funds, the lack of information campaign was a policy failure.

Implementation:

The projects submission stage took two months with the extended deadline. Our experience shows that the administration was not prepared to answer questions due to unclear procedures. For example: guidelines stated that project implementation was to be executed by the administration and there were no restrictions on the eligibility of the activities. Whereas delivery of direct cultural and educational activities was beyond the competencies of public officials. At the same time, expenditure on human resources was not eligible.

There was no clarity about the participation criteria till a week before the selection started. The experts from the district administration who interacted with the citizens had not received information about whether different tools for e-identification were allowed, e.g. a qualified electronic signature.

It was not announced in advance when the campaign for the submitted projects would start and how long the voting would take. After the extended submission stage, the PB calendar was not updated. There was no information, either, where the submitted projects would be published. That prevented citizens from promoting their proposals and giving additional publicity to the participatory process.

In total, 247 projects of which 26 at the city level, and 221 in total from the city districts were submitted. The average number of projects from a district varied from 10 to 3. Three districts stood out, submitting 16 to 23 proposals.

The campaign and voting stage took 10 days. The PB website had additional functionality that presented, in real time, the number of votes for each project. A simple and user-friendly graphic allowed citizens to select as many projects at both the city and the district level as the maximum budget allowed. The platform architecture allowed several clicks for an average 5 minutes to register and complete the voting process. A special corner at the district administrations' office with extended work hours was opened for those who preferred to vote in person and/or did not have e-signatures.

In total, 15,476 citizens voted. The participation rate varied at the district level with the highest number of citizens voting for a project of 1,221 (Pancharevo district) and the lowest – 55 (Ilinden district). This number corresponds to approximately 2% of Sofia's adult population.

The Project implementation is expected to take 15 months.

Role of young people:

The initial voting code allowed young people of 16 to vote. However, the final rules set 18 as the minimum age. Thus, many young people were excluded from the voting process. However, two district administrations allowed proposals for students' participatory budgeting to be submitted in the competition for the citizens' budgeting.

There was no age limit for project submission. Theoretically, young people were eligible to submit a project. The city authorities did not encourage young people in any special way, nor did they treat them as a target group.

Positive aspects of the process:

The PB initiative for the first time encouraged citizens' participation at the neighbourhood level. The allocated funds allowed implementation of more than one project, which engaged citizens in shaping their city. The functionalities of the platform allowed live monitoring of the vote cast for each project, which boosted transparency and sparked citizens' engagement.

Designing the PB in such a way that the administration takes over the implementation, demonstrates citizens-driven policy-making. On the other hand, improvement of the regulation is needed, so that projects outside public administration competencies could be realised. The e-certification precondition to vote ensured a fair process and decreased the possibility of vote manipulation.

Main obstacles to the process: The mandatory certified digital identification limited the participation. Another obstacle has been the requirement of permanent residence, which also deprived many citizens of their right to vote.

The key factor that led to the limited participation of only 15,000 out of 1,000,000 citizens was the lack of communication campaign by the municipality. The initiative had limited media coverage. There was no information campaign although the PB remained a policy priority during the annual budget cuts.

Links to examples of application forms, voting styles, tools: reshava.sofia.bg



4.5. The Social Experiment “School Participatory Budgeting” in Bulgaria – 108 Secondary School “Nikola Belovejdov”, Sofia

Preparation Phase

We contacted the principals of two typologically different schools in Sofia – 51 Secondary School and 108 Secondary School. Both principals expressed interest in being the first schools in Bulgaria to implement SPB. We selected 108 Nikola Belovezhdov Secondary School for several reasons: it is located in a relatively peripheral district of the city and initiatives are less likely to emerge there, while the 51 School is very popular (its principal is currently an advisor to the Minister of Education) and many projects are being conducted there.

We arranged an initial meeting with the school principal, briefing her on the timeline of the project we were proposing and asking her to invite her colleagues and students to be part of the Coordinating Council. The Council comprised: four students (two 11 grade boys and two 9 grade girls), a vice-principal, and the pedagogic adviser.

We held a series of Coordination Council meetings where we presented the School Participatory Budgeting methodology and went through various exercises to introduce the approach to the students and the school representatives. We guided the members through the process of creating a project and developed the rules and the terms of reference for conducting school participatory budgeting. Actively involving the students was more difficult, as they were not used to teachers (and other adults) treating them as equals and, particularly, asking them for (and respecting) their opinions.

Student Information Campaign

The principal recommended that we work with the school’s students council. Each class from grade 5 to 12 elects two representatives for the Council. The students council members loved the idea (“So we can make decisions too!”) and committed to presenting the School Participatory Budgeting to all grades 6 through 12. The Coordination Council had decided that all students in those grades would be eligible to submit projects. For the presentations, the students council’s members could use

a PPT that we had developed. In addition, a member of the students council designed visual materials that included the SPB rules and an information flyer. The campaign took place in the second half of November.

Entry and final study

The entry and exit surveys are difficult to compare because of the composition of their samples. Both are relatively small (entry survey n=83, exit survey: n=115), which means that even with non-trivial differences in proportions (up to about 13%), there are no statistically significant differences between them. The composition of the samples was also different – in the entry survey there were no respondents from grades 9, 11 and 12, while in the exit survey respondents from these grades totalled 44, thus having significant weight in the sample (38%). In the entry survey, 43% of the sample were pupils in the 7th grade (36), while in the exit survey they accounted for 20% (23). The analysis will make an effort to summarise the main differences.

Grade	Entry survey		Final survey	
	N = 83	%	N = 115	%
6th	13	16	19	17
7th	36	43	23	20
8th	21	25	14	12
9th	0	0	8	7
10th	13	16	15	13
11th	0	0	14	12
12th	0	0	22	19
Total	83	100	115	100

The samples are practically identical in terms of gender distribution (54% female, 46% male in the entry survey vs. 52% female, 48% male in the final survey). However, given the low number of respondents, comparisons between the two groups should be interpreted with caution.

Despite the differences in the sample structure, there is no fundamental change in students' key attitudes towards school. The strengths of the school lie in the administration's communication with students and – more significantly for students' social life – the fact that they feel accepted in the school. If there is a significant weakness, it is the perceived lack of teacher support for students.

Key Attitudes (Mean Scores on a Scale from 1 to 5)	Entry survey	Final survey
I enjoy engaging in activities that are not related to mandatory school subjects.	3.51	3.49
The school administration effectively informs students about upcoming events, investments, renovations, and changes.	3.49	3.51
I feel accepted at school.	3.47	3.58
I can freely express my opinion at school.	3.34	3.18
I feel safe at school.	3.29	3.46
I can always rely on my teachers for support.	3.01	3.2

There are differences in students' self-assessments between the entry and final survey (marked in orange), but these are mainly due to variations in the sample structure. Otherwise, no significant changes are observed in fundamental self-assessments – students see themselves as striving for achievement (though it is unclear whether they interpret “achievement” as grades or as qualitative accomplishments). They describe themselves as relatively healthy, confident, cooperative, and capable of understanding others' perspectives. The lowest self-assessments are in mathematical abilities and artistic skills.

Self-Assessment (Mean Scores on a Scale from 1 to 5)	Entry survey	Final survey
Self-Assessment Statement	3.72	3.57
Striving for achievement	3.62	3.52
Physical health	3.58	3.50
Confidence (in interacting with others)	3.52	3.45
Cooperation	3.51	3.34
Ability to see the world from another person's perspective	3.47	3.36
Creativity	3.39	3.27
Leadership ability	3.34	3.48
Emotional health	3.34	3.32
Openness to people with different beliefs	3.33	3.53
Confidence in my knowledge and skills	3.07	2.94
Public speaking ability	3.06	3.33
Artistic abilities	2.75	2.66

There is no significant difference in the participation of the most active students between the two surveys, but in the final survey, a statistically significant increase in the percentage of generally active students (combining “Very often” and “Often” responses) is observed – 25% in the entry survey vs. 42% in the final survey. This suggests that the school offers more opportunities for older students, particularly given the emphasis on entrepreneurship.

Frequency of participation in school activities (%)	Entry Survey	Final Survey
Very often	12	19
Often	13	23
Sometimes	34	27
Rarely	24	15
Very rarely	17	17

Student Influence on Decision-Making at School

There is an improvement in students' perception of their influence on school decisions, which may be attributed to various factors, including the student civic budgeting process. However, given the sample structure, it is possible that older students feel more recognized (34% agree with the statement in the final survey compared to 19% in the entry survey).

Statement: "I believe that my opinion and suggestions are taken into account in school decisions" (1–5 scale, %)	Entry Survey (%)	Exit Survey (%)
5	14	23
4	5	12
3	34	28
2	19	13
1	28	24
Mean Score	2.59	2.96

Students feel that they have the knowledge and potential to influence what happens at school, but, on the other hand, they feel less supported by the school in their endeavours and projects.

Perceptions of the students' influence at school	Entry study
Students influence what happens in our school	3,42
I have the knowledge and skills to speak up about the issues at my school	3,09
The school supports me in my various projects and activities	2,72

The students council is perceived to be somewhat of a factor that matters and can positively influence the school, with no significant differences in scores between the entrance and final surveys. Students' willingness to run for membership in the students council is below the scale mean (1.8–2.2 on a scale of 1 to 5). Percentages with no statistically significant difference in the two surveys (12% entry and 20% exit) indicated that they had applied to the Council.

Assessment of the School Council	Entry study	Exit study
The students council is an important part of the school's work	3,29	3,43
Students council's activities can have a positive impact on the school	3,1	3,41
I would like to run for the students council at the next opportunity	1,83	2,2

Are students' opinions taken into account?

Many of the answers to the open-ended questions were negative: "I don't know", "I don't remember", "It doesn't happen". The overall impression from the data is that the practice of listening to and taking into account students' opinions is not present in the school. We do not analyse the responses to the two open-ended questions in the entrance and final surveys in a comparative way, as there is no significant difference, so we use them in the analysis as a source of qualitative information about the situation in the school.

The main thrust of pupils' meaningful responses is their desire to be listened to, with some clustering of responses indicating that it is mostly about being listened to by teachers, with aspects that indicate children's perceptions of neglect and unfairness:

- “Teachers must listen to and understand the students.”
- “Teachers to have respect for students and not to threaten them”
- “Others and especially teachers to accept other opinions and not to respect theirs and theirs alone as 1100% correct...”
- “Students to really be listened to and not be lied to by the principal and the teachers.”
- “Teachers to take our words more seriously. Never mind that we are not adults, we still have opinions and are reasonable (not all). They need to start listening to us more and trust us.”

There were very few the situations described where children felt that their views had had a real impact, and these mostly related to improving the material conditions of the school:

- “Last year, myself and other children in my class, voiced our opinion about the poor condition of room 306 and it was renovated.”
- “When they made the grass field.”
- “When the toilets were improved.”
- “Because of us active athletes, the volleyball net was replaced.”

In one instance, SPB participation was mentioned as such a situation:

- “We participated in the “Student Budgeting” along with everyone else who participated with ideas to change or improve the school, and we all won, and now our ideas will come to fruition.”

School Participatory Budgeting for Students at 108 Secondary School “Nikola Belovezhdov,” Sofia

More than half (54%) of the students sampled in the baseline survey said that they voted for a project from School Participatory Budgeting, but with one important aspect – 35% voted and the remaining 19% said they voted for a project they liked but did not know if it was part of SPB. This shows that the campaign to promote SPB was not active enough.

A total of 21% of students submitted projects, with 15% confirming that they were for SPB and the remaining 6% confirming that they had submitted a project but did not know whether it was part of SPB.

The potential for a vote in the next Citizens' School Budgeting campaign is not small – 58% would vote and another 20% are unsure. Nearly one in four students (22%) would not vote.

Nearly a third of students (29%) are likely to submit a project in a future SPB campaign. The largest proportion (41%) said they were unsure. 29% would not submit a project.

Key Findings

- The key point to note – and this is evident in both, the entry and exit surveys – is the students' perception of lack of support and even neglect from teachers. Certainly practices such as SPB, which involve teachers and students working together, can help to gradually change this attitude.
- Otherwise, students feel generally accepted at school and feel safe there. They also see the school as a place where they can express their opinions – but this does not mean, firstly, that everyone does so, and, secondly, that their opinions are taken into account. There are also reports of age discrimination, which is a typical phenomenon in Bulgaria ("Because we are children and they don't care what we think", from an open-ended question).
- Students feel that they have the potential to influence what happens at school, including, to some extent, through the students Council; however, they do not feel strong support from the school for their initiatives.
- The results of the SPB campaign show that there is potential to develop in this direction, with a significant number of students willing to vote, and about 1/3 willing to submit projects in the future. The current campaign has not managed to gain much popularity among the students.

The school launched the public campaign with a post on its website on 5.12.2024. The publication is entitled "Students get a budget for their projects!" and contains full information about the campaign, including the rules of the campaign, the submission form, the deadlines for the upcoming initiatives and the information flyer (see: shorturl.at/4bjks). The original deadline for project submission was 19.12, but this was extended as only 2 projects were submitted in this period.

One of the reasons may be the fact that the students council members were not very active during the presentation, and the students themselves were not very much involved, which we were warned about by the students council.

Eventually, a total of 5 projects were submitted:

- 1 **“Save the Toilets”**
Authors: Two boys and two girls from the 6th grade
- 2 **“Toilet Project”**
Authors: Two boys from the 9th grade
- 3 **“3D Printer”**
Author: A girl from the 7th grade
- 4 **“Financial Literacy”**
Authors: the 12th grade
- 5 **“Volleyball Poles: Aluminum vs. Steel Profile”**
Authors: Two boys from grade 9B

These projects revealed two main patterns:

- The focus was predominantly on improving the school infrastructure with ideas benefiting all students, except for the financial literacy project.
- Teamwork was evident, likely occurring mainly among friends.

Selection Results

The school organised a public presentation of the projects for students on February 7, followed by the selection process conducted both online and offline. The results were as follows:

- 1 **Volleyball Poles: Aluminum vs. Steel Profile**
131 votes
- 2 **Save the Toilets / Toilet Project**
73 votes
- 3 **3D Printer**
44 votes
- 4 **Financial Literacy**
32 votes

Out of nearly 800 students, 280 participated in the selection process, representing a 35% voter turnout.

With funding from the “Small Steps” Foundation and the school, all projects were financed and implemented.

Main Conclusions

- Even before there is progress in getting SPB adopted at the municipal, or even higher level, there are opportunities to work in individual schools on a project basis, as the decision to engage with such projects is up to the school principals, and a significant number of principals can appreciate and like the idea.
- A major barrier to running a successful SPB campaign is the lack of participatory practices in schools, and the unequal treatment of students' views. In addition to our direct observations and research, this is confirmed by public debates, such as the one about introducing a complete ban on mobile phone use in the school, in which students were not asked about their views at all. This means that different forms of student activism need to be introduced gradually but continuously; in many cases this also means dealing with teachers who either have no practice of consulting students, or do so in an undemocratic way (often students council members are nominated by teachers, or the school students council coordinators 'drop orders' to students).
- If school principals are open to the idea of SPB, the possibility of the school providing match funding for the students' projects can be sought (as in this case, successfully).
- At least in the initial SPBs, the NGO experts facilitating the process must be willing and able to devote sufficient time to work in two main directions – empowering the school and especially the students, and demonstrating the meaning of democratic procedures and, in particular, SPBs.

The future of SPB in Bulgaria – SWOT analysis

The chapter investigates different opportunities, and challenges related to introducing SPB in Bulgaria, through entry points within the formal education system, and at the municipal level. It further explores strengths and weaknesses of embedding school participatory budgeting within a broadly applied citizenship education and participation at the community level programme.

Driving factors	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Role of the school principal and management	Proactive leadership, initiator who introduces the participatory mechanism at school. Supports the implementation model	Dependence on the figure of the school principal. Low chance of implementation in case of no management initiative. Dominating the initiative and impeding students' proactivity	Introducing learning programs beyond school curriculum; Empowering students council	Limiting the practice to single schools. Uninterested teaching staff, constraining the initiative at the bottom level
Teaching staff	Motivated teachers provide additional support to students, boosting motivation to engage.	Not motivated to engage which leads to external facilitators, therefore breaks the sustainability of the process. Constraining introduction of innovative programs at the school, which is an opportunity enabled by law	Building capacity on SPB methodology. Co-leading the process and providing mentorship support	Low motivation to take additional work due to administrative overload; or/and weak civic competencies
Parents School Boards of Trustees	Initiator of developing civic competencies at school. Fostering community engagement	High dependence on the active parents	Positive influence on the decision of the school management. Could use SPB as a tool to invest the community funding	Additional human resources to identify and approach Parents Board members.

Students councils	Creativity, autonomy, and skills demonstrated by students in managing processes, deliberate information, boost inclusiveness. Co-organise the process	Limiting inclusivity of peers and low students empowerment. Commonly popular occupations (organising charities, festivals)	Equity with fellow peers and engaging students council members at class level first. Mainstream tool for students self-governance	Limited connectivity and transparency to peers decrease engagement of individual students with SPB. Largely formal structures depending on adult organisers
External facilitators	Spark interest through interactive tools. Support internal coordination needed for process implementation	Not investing in internal capacity. The process stops after their exit	Driving factor in initiating the programme	Limited human resources and outreach. Dependence of the process on external financial and human resources
One school term programme at class level	Implementation at the class level allows broad students engagement and skills development	Dependence on human resources, often external ones. Limited school coverage	If the practice becomes a sustainable budget distribution and participation tool, time investment will not be needed	No pre-defined space in school curriculum. Competitive extra-curriculum agenda
Preparatory stage via citizenship education module	Cultivate space for civic engagement and boost the idea generation process. The continuous process facilitates students engagement and inclusivity	Depends on additional academic space granted by the school. Depends on the civic competencies of the teaching staff	Embeds civic competencies for the local government. Could be a tool to tackle distrust of young people in institutions and investment in civic engagement	ICCS 2016 ⁹ results indicate only 6.1% of teachers have been trained in areas of citizenship education. Local government and public budgeting are not covered in school and teaching syllabus
Dedicated time for ideas generation	Facilitates individual students engagement, therefore the democracy experience	Often requires external facilitators	Dedicated teachers training on SPB methodology, supported by coaching	Requires granted academic space. Challenging in pro-active schools with busy project agenda
Participation and Communication	Extensive involvement of the school community through multichannel communication strategies and creativity	Limited and ineffective school internal communication, including between teachers and among students	Improve internal and external communication by student ownership and peer to peer communication.	Low trust in community engagement, incl. at the class and school levels
Organisational and Structural Support	Member of the school leadership responsible for the process; facilitates internal organisation and guarantees project implementation. Partnership with external organisations providing methodological help, coordination, and resource support.	Limited support from teachers for conducting the process. Strong dependence on external drivers	Mainstreaming SPB as a school democracy tool. Developing internal capacity to facilitate the process	Common understanding of participation as limited to groups of active young people and students councils

Curriculum structures	Provide academic space for SPB and citizenship education	Use of opportunities depends on the school management, and the teaching staff	If the popularity of SPB increases, the curriculum flexibility could provide academic space for it.	Lack of measures to boost decentralised curriculum
National programme for Innovative schools	In terms of school vision, it could be a tool to encourage students' self-governance as a school policy	Does not provide funds for backup human resources and activities, which limits sustainability	Popular policy tool accessible to all schools	Programme design does not control the quality of innovation. Annually based, does not provide tools for sustainability of the innovations
Municipal education programmes	Emerging initiatives of local governments encouraging the implementation of a specific programme at local level	Limited practice strongly dependant on political leadership	Increasing recognition of youth and citizens engagement as values	Limited / missing policy for citizens and youth engagement. Predominant understanding of students council as the participation mechanism
Social and Cultural Context	Making young people realise that investing time in community social change may not be a waste of time	High levels of distrust in public engagement of all community stakeholders	Integrating SPB as a tool to enhance sense of belonging in the community and focusing school environment around students	Contexts of low proactiveness of schools in terms of entrepreneurship in citizenship education. Growing apathy in the society and political alienation

5.1. Opportunities within the education framework

Embedding school participatory budgeting and students participation at the school level is tightly linked to the normative education framework. That framework is civic-friendly, as it prioritises among its objectives the development of competencies for active citizenship. It decentralises the initiative at the school level and provides for structural space within the curriculum.

However, as long as the state remains the main holder of school education outcomes in a centralised education system, whatever is planned and implemented at the national level within the curriculum has the greatest impact on students. From this perspective, despite the objectives set out in the law, the education framework neglects the development of civic competencies of students. Citizenship education is introduced at the secondary, and the state standard on intercultural, citizenship, environmental and health education is full of references to patriotism, civil defence, and even counter terrorism. To illustrate the trend, the national programmes, which

are the main policy triggers for the MoES, contain measures dedicated to exploring national history and preserving and exploring traditions of the Bulgarian army, but there are none on students' self-governance and civic competencies.

5.2. In-house environment for school participatory budgeting

As soon as a conservative system such as the one in Bulgaria starts to rely on the school level to boost and introduce innovation, the stage of development of each school becomes a factor. Additionally to the role of the school principal and leadership broadly discussed above, the teaching staff remain essentially important for dissemination of the process and its sustainability. Teachers could not only block the implementation of the leadership's proposals, but are the key stakeholder at the school level who engages students into an inclusive and proactive process. ICCS results on the percentage of teachers trained in aspects of citizenship education (below 7%) indicates that this hasn't been a priority within state policy for teachers qualification. Despite the state approved curriculum for the subject Citizenship Education, which provides that at least 50% of the instruction classes should be devoted to practical tasks, and student-led issues, the ICCS data shows that only 9% of teachers ask students for topics, and only 15% of the students work on projects requiring research outside the school. Fostering the internal capacity of the teaching staff would be a precondition for increasing civic participatory practices at school.

Exploring the school level-enabling factors, we should distinguish the active Parents School Boards of Trustees – an external stakeholder at the school level that could be a change driver and initiator of additional learning programmes. Despite Public Boards provided by law, with functions related to the school curriculum, in practice the structures tend to be just a façade and do not influence the way in which education is delivered. The other external stakeholder is the local government whose potential is investigated below.

5.3. From a school practice to a policy

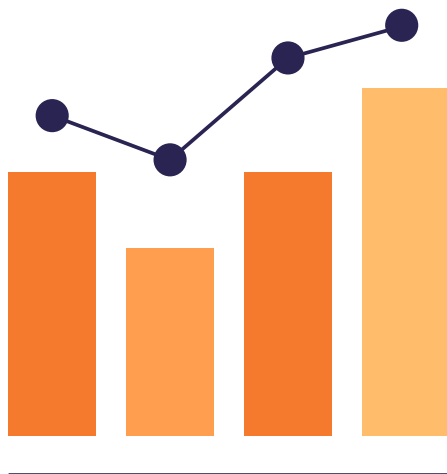
Local governments have the potential to become key stakeholders in mainstreaming school participatory budgeting (SPB), raising their status from isolated school initiatives to municipal policies that engage a larger number of schools. The municipality is a stakeholder empowered not only to disseminate, but also to assure sustainability. Several enabling factors support this process:

- **Growing Recognition of Youth Participation and Support for Youth Initiatives:** There is an increasing appreciation for youth involvement in civic processes. Although still exceptional, municipalities such as Varna, Ruse, and Burgas have introduced local calls for youth-led projects. However, it is important to distinguish between traditional municipal funding for projects led by registered organisations and schools, and the more inclusive nature of participatory budgeting processes, which targets individual pro-active engagement.
- **Emergence of Municipal-Funded Educational Initiatives:** Over the past two years, changes in local government leadership have prompted several municipalities to launch educational programmes for schools in their administrative scope. Examples include municipally supported programs on artificial intelligence (Burgas), local history (Ruse), Google Education (Varna), and environmental sustainability (Gabrovo). These measures appear to compensate for the lack of comprehensive national educational reforms.

A venue for further exploration is the integration of budgeting process for young people as a component within citizens' participatory budgeting. Currently, citizens' participatory budgeting is primarily practiced in Sofia, where the political leadership prioritises civic engagement. The decentralisation efforts and the introduction of district-level budgeting align with these political commitments. Some district mayors actively support student participation in decision-making processes, creating a conducive environment for SPB initiatives. Nevertheless, for SPB to be adopted city-wide, approval from the Municipal Council and initiation by the City Hall are necessary.

International Context: In Poland, several municipalities have successfully adopted SPB as a municipal programme. In contrast, Bulgaria's current framework, exemplified by Sofia's citizens' budgeting, has yet to evolve into a policy supporting SPB at the municipal level.

Challenges to Mainstreaming SPB: A significant barrier to the broader adoption of SPB is the prevailing understanding of child participation. Often, this is limited to consultations with selected groups of active children or the establishment of youth councils where only a few youth leaders or children with diverse backgrounds, selected on quota basis, are invited to share their perspectives. While local politicians may recognise the value of youth engagement, this consultative approach, promoted by prominent NGOs such as the National Network for Children and supported by state institutions like the State Agency for Child Protection, restricts the implementation of more inclusive participatory models, including the SPB.



Recommendations

At the statutory level, the 2016 Law on Preschool and School Education introduced innovations that should ensure the development of children as citizens – both in the objectives of the law and through the introduction of the 9 key competences, including social and civic competences. However, an analysis at a lower level shows that there is a mismatch between the skills acquired when learning a given subject and the relevant competencies, as set out in the Ordinance on General Education, stating which skills contribute to acquiring which of the competences, for example, the skills acquired in the subject “Citizenship Education” contribute 2 % of the social and civic competences¹⁰.

There are indicators that the principles of democracy are difficult to get across, especially in a rigid and hierarchical system such as the education system; giving space, listening and, above all, taking into account the opinions of students are particularly difficult.

In this context, the implementation of practices and processes such as school participatory budgeting is crucial to developing citizenship skills, especially in the midst of the devaluation and disempowerment of democratic instruments nationally and internationally. PB gradually begins to face criticism because of campaigns conducted by the Sofia Municipality that were incomplete and inaccessible for most citizens. However, the campaigns themselves were not public enough to occupy a significant place in public opinion, so PB has not yet been discredited.

At this stage, the introduction of SPB should be addressed at several levels and with several approaches:

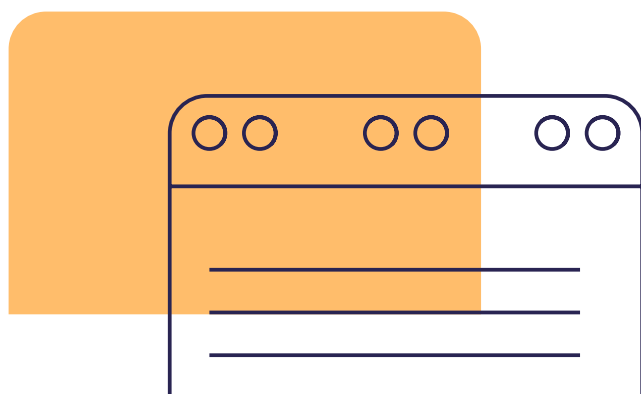
¹⁰ The Ordinance on general education includes 998 performance requirements in 21 compulsory subjects. For each of these requirements it is indicated which of the nine key competences it contributes to. A quantitative analysis discovers that the skills acquired in the subject ‘Citizenship education’ contribute just... 1% to the Social and Civic Competences. In comparison, the subject, which contributes most to these competences is mathematics (15%).

- Project-based, involving school principals, students councils and even school boards that may be interested in the idea. On the one hand, schools in Sofia and other big cities can, in theory, be expected to have a higher civic culture, but on the other hand, practice has often shown that in small towns and villages there are school leaders and students who are much more enthusiastic and willing to work actively on an interesting project.
- Advocacy at municipal level: once good examples of SPB have been accumulated, the relevant municipalities should be contacted and presented with the process, work and results. If desired, students can also participate in the presentation. The ultimate goal would be for municipalities to allocate even a modest budget to schools that want to do SPB, and those that have already done it can help by sharing their experience.
- National level: the classic steps of an advocacy campaign can take place at the initial stage – to identify the target (e.g. the Ministry of Education setting up a special programme to fund or co-fund schools that run SPB), to map potential allies and opponents at the national level and to have initial conversations. An effective campaign can begin once enough good examples have been accumulated from schools and, better still, from communities that have adopted the practice.
- Training of others willing to implement the practice: NGOs, head teachers, teachers, pupils, including from international experts from the People Powered network.

At the school level: Spreading the practice of participation is a process. It takes a multifaceted methodology to tackle the challenge resulting from the fact that students are not self-motivated to actively participate in such a process, mostly because they have no experience in being active and having their opinions sought. Below, we highlight several recommendations, drawn from our experience, that encourage students' engagement:

- Introducing an additional module of citizenship education for the local government and community engagement enhances students' involvement in the process. Given the prevailing distrust toward civic participation and community engagement, additional time is needed to motivate more students to actively contribute ideas for improving their school and local environment.
- A preparatory phase allows students to get motivated to take ownership of organising the process. Providing additional space to invite students to contribute to the community – by engaging through gamification, dedicating time to listen to their voice, prior to the start of the SPB process, all that helps to inspire young people to take part in the process. With such a base, peers could be “recruited” to organise the process, thus following the bottom-top approach.

- This ensures that students councils act as facilitators rather than decision-makers, reducing the risk of limiting participation to only a small group of active students. Instead, broad student involvement and community outreach can be promoted.
- Since the process is time-consuming and often facilitated by external educators, the introduction of SPB in schools without prior experience should begin with a focused approach in select pilot classes. Concentrating resources on a smaller scale makes it possible to provide high-quality, individualised support that fosters proactive student participation and the development of well-thought-out proposals. Ensuring the quality of proposals and fostering a sense of competition among students are crucial factors in sustaining engagement and encouraging wider peer involvement.



Methodology

School Participatory Budgeting – The Bulgarian Case

The report investigates the potential of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) to be introduced in the Bulgarian education system as a transformative tool serving student participation and democratic experience at school. The research is based on a comparative methodology developed by the lead partner Pole Dialogu. It reflects the country specificity, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for introducing SPB into the education system. The study aims to analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) related to SPB implementation, as well as to examine the external conditions affecting its sustainability and expansion.

This research follows a **case study approach**, focusing on selected schools and municipalities where SPB initiatives have been piloted.

The exploration is guided by five research questions investigating the key features of implementation of the school participatory budgeting process:

- 1 What are the normative prerequisites and barriers for the Introduction of SPB in schools?
- 2 What are the links between citizenship education, SPB and the empowerment of the participatory and democratic experience of students;
- 3 Examination of popular settings for adolescents' participation and activism. Analysis of pilot students' participation practices that include participatory budgeting and could contribute to the process development;
- 4 Practices in schools and municipalities that are close in nature to citizens participatory budgeting.
- 5 Potential for introducing the students' participatory budgeting in schools – SWOT Analysis.

Desk Research

Overview: The desk research phase involved a systematic review of existing literature, reports, and official documents related to citizenship education and adolescent activism in Bulgaria. This included research articles, government publications, and reports from NGOs and international organisations.

Review of Policy and Legislative Frameworks – Examination of the **Law on Pre-school and School Education**, regulations concerning school autonomy, state education standards, citizenship education, and youth participation policies.

Analysis of Existing Reports and Studies – A synthesis of **previous studies, governmental reports, NGO publications, and EU-funded research** related to participatory budgeting, civic engagement, and school governance in Bulgaria.

We analysed previous participatory budgeting initiatives, such as “Sofia Chooses” and the municipal participatory budgeting calls in order to identify trends that could contribute to developing adolescents’ participatory budgeting practices, as well as constraints on the participatory process.

Interviews were conducted with representatives of school management and experts from NGOs working on child participation.

Limitations of the Study

While this report aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of SPB in Bulgaria, the following limitations should be noted:

Limited Scope of Implementation – Since SPB is in its early stages in Bulgaria, data is drawn only from a small number of pilot initiatives.

Reliance on Secondary Data – Most findings are based on **desk research and expert consultations**, with limited direct student feedback due to the early-stage nature of SPB in Bulgaria.

Variability in Local Implementation – Differences in **school autonomy, local government support, and student participation levels** may affect comparability across cases.

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School Participatory Budgeting in Italy

Christian Recchia

In collaboration with **Lorenza Sganzetta** and **Stefano Stortone**

Abstract

In recent years, School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) has been an innovative tool recently adopted from urban Participatory Budgeting (PB) by a few Italian schools whereby citizenship education has been integrated with participatory and deliberative democracy. In Italy, the PB practices have had thirty years of experience, and only since 2017 they have been implemented in schools to enable students to propose, develop, and vote on projects funded by a portion of the school budget. The study examines SPB as an educational and governance tool, exploring its impacts, challenges, and opportunities through a qualitative analysis of five representative case studies in Italian secondary schools.

The Italian school system, characterised by strong centralisation and limited resources, provides a complex yet fertile ground for innovation. Through interviews, documentation, and secondary sources, this research highlights how SPB fosters key skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and resource management, thus contributing to the formation of active and informed citizens. However, the adoption of SPB faces challenges, including hierarchical dependencies, resource limitations, and the absence of structured national guidelines.

The findings show that inclusive school leadership and greater student autonomy are critical to the success of SPB. Furthermore, the support of third-sector organisations and the integration of digital tools are essential for ensuring sustainability and scalability. Recommendations include the need to institutionalise SPB, balance the role of school leadership, and promote a participatory culture.

SPB showcases the capacity to reimagine schools as dynamic spaces where the principles of active democracy are not only taught but practiced. By involving students directly in decision-making processes, SPB serves as a practical platform for educating young people about civic engagement, democratic values, and collective problem-solving. Moreover, this approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility and belonging among students, teachers, and staff, ultimately strengthening the cohesion and sense of community within the school environment.

The research report emphasises the critical role of public policies in fostering and sustaining such initiatives, advocating for robust frameworks that can provide the necessary support. It also offers adaptable, replicable models designed to suit the unique needs of various school contexts, ensuring broader applicability and scalability. Furthermore, the study highlights the pressing need for continued research to assess the long-term effects of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB). Specifically, it calls for deeper exploration into how SPB influences young people's democratic participation over time and contributes to the revitalisation of democratic institutions, with schools serving as the foundational starting point for these transformations.



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The project “School Participatory Budget – a tool to foster school democracy” focuses on developing and popularising SPB tools in order to increase engagement in the school environment among young Europeans. The project is coordinated by the Field of Dialogue Foundation in cooperation with partner organisations from Poland (SocLab Foundation for Social Research and Action), Italy (BiPart Social Enterprise), Spain (Oficina de Proyectos Europeos del Gobierno de Cantabria) and Bulgaria (The Small Steps Foundation), focusing on providing practical tools for the effective management of democratic decision-making processes to young people and educators.

The following report represents a section, curated by Bipart Impresa Sociale of the Work Package 2 of the project, the *Research on school democracy and school participatory budgets*.

The project includes social research on how school participatory budgeting works in various European countries, and will gather experience, knowledge and information on the challenges of introducing SBOs and good practices. Thanks to the research, we will attempt to answer the question of what impact participatory budgeting tools have on democratic practices in school environments. BiPart Impresa Sociale is a social enterprise dedicated to empowering people by strengthening their decision-making abilities through the introduction of innovative forms of democratic governance and decision-making processes in local communities, civic organisations, and social enterprises.

The main goals include:

- Encouragement of aggregative dynamics in the definition of intervention priorities
- Sharing information and expertise among members of a community
- Circulation of ideas and opinions
- Valorisation of civil society members as activators and enablers of the community
- Creation of collaborative networks between groups and communities
- Establishment of inclusive and dynamic deliberative bodies and rules intended as tools of self-organisation and legitimisation

BiPart Social Enterprise, as the Italian project partner, contributes to achieving these objectives by leveraging its key tools and expertise developed over time.

These include:

- a methodology which involves designing and testing participatory processes and governance models in real-life contexts;
- a technology, represented by an e-participation software platform that integrates these processes and governance frameworks, enhances their sustainability, and enables communities to experiment with them;
- a strategy, utilising role-playing games and social networks to disseminate knowledge and foster engagement.

BiPart Social Enterprise's activities encompass a range of initiatives, such as informative events, training courses (in schools and universities via seminars, workshops, and role-playing sessions using the game Empaville¹¹), and research projects.

Most notably, the organisation provides consultancy services, organises and facilitates participatory processes, and offers its dedicated software platform (accessible via both desktop and mobile) to support these efforts.

11 Empaville is a role-playing game that simulates a participatory budgeting process, where players collaborate to identify community needs, propose solutions, and compete for funding through collective decision-making. For more information visit empaville.bipart.it/intro

Introduction

School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) is an educational adaptation of urban Participatory Budgeting (PB), a democratic process commonly known to allow citizens to decide how to allocate part of a public budget. PB was first introduced in Italy in the early 1990s as an innovative approach to decision-making at the municipal level. Initially designed to engage citizens in the allocation of public resources, PB has since expanded and diversified into various models tailored to different contexts. Among these is School Participatory Budgeting (School PB), a distinctive adaptation that integrates participatory decision-making processes into educational institutions, empowering students, teachers, and school communities to collaborate on decisions that directly impact their environment and priorities.

In SPB, students actively participate in proposing, debating, and voting on projects funded by the school's budget. This process enhances citizenship education by putting democratic values into practice, encouraging collaborative decision-making among young people, and empowering them to improve their learning environment and be active leaders in their school governance. As a learning-by-doing approach, School PB helps reimagine civic education by fostering a deeper understanding of democratic processes. It seeks to renew the pedagogical framework of citizenship education, moving beyond traditional knowledge-based models – which, while teaching important concepts such as the Constitution, the role of governing bodies, and historical struggles, do not necessarily inspire active student engagement.

In 2017, the first pilot experiment of SPB took place in a high school in Milan. Since then, 12 other SPB have been implemented by other upper secondary schools across the peninsula. Although still in its early stages, initial implementations provide an opportunity for a detailed examination of its internal strengths and weaknesses, external opportunities for growth, and challenges to long-term sustainability. These will face challenges in scalability and sustainability due to Italy's centralised education system and resource limitations. The Italian school system, detailed in Chapter One, provides both constraints and opportunities for SPB's integration, as high schools retain a degree of autonomy to address local needs, albeit within a complex funding framework.

Citizenship education in Italy, discussed in Chapter Two, is another key context for SPB. Formal initiatives, guided by recent legislation, aim to develop transversal skills but struggle with limited resources and overcrowded curricula. Informal approaches, including student assemblies and collaborations with third-sector organisations, often prove more effective in fostering bottom-up participation and student empowerment. Against this backdrop, SPB emerges as a powerful tool at the intersection of governance, citizenship education, and participatory democracy.

Chapter Three delves into the SPB model's methodology, phases, and stakeholders, illustrating its role as a democratic innovation that blends learning with action. Students gain first-hand experience in decision-making, budgeting, and project implementation, enhancing their sense of belonging and responsibility. The tool's capacity to integrate citizenship education with participatory practice positions SPB as a transformative approach to preparing informed and active citizens.

Chapters Four and Five present the study's methodology and findings from five SPB case studies, highlighting strengths, weaknesses, and lessons learned. Interviews with participants reveal both the empowering impact on students and the reliance on visionary leadership from school principals. Challenges include financial constraints, uneven participation, and dependence on external organisations, which limit scalability and sustainability.

The research underscores SPB's potential to shift from episodic experiments to a systematic practice embedded within Italian schools. Strategies for long-term adoption include fostering institutional support, building national networks, and securing stable funding. By addressing these challenges, SPB could become a cornerstone of citizenship education, shaping a generation of engaged citizens ready to contribute to their communities.

How does the education system work in Italy?

Snapshot of the Italian education system

The foundations of the Italian school system trace back to the 1923 Gentile Law, which established a centralised and selective structure. With the advent of the Republic and the 1948 Constitution, within the context of democratic reconstruction, it has undergone several reforms to enshrine the right to compulsory and free education¹². There are two main significant reforms that transformed the school system significantly, trying to modernise and democratise it: the 1962 unified middle school¹³ and the 1990s increased the school's autonomy and the 2015 – the so called *La Buona Scuola* – strengthened the role of the principals and introduced work-study programs (ASL – Alternanza Scuola Lavoro, now PCTO – Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e per l'Orientamento) aiming at connecting the school with the labour market. With the transition from ASL to PCTO, there has been increased attention to the issue of participation. European policies, since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty¹⁴, have promoted education harmonisation, emphasising mobility (Erasmus) and key competencies, which Italy has adopted. The system continues to evolve towards inclusion and digitalisation, in line with EU directives¹⁵.

12 Republic of Italy. (1948). Constitution of the Italian Republic.

13 Law of 31 December 1962, No. 1859. Establishment of the unified lower secondary school. Official Gazette of the Italian Republic.

14 European Communities. (1992). Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty). [online] Available at: eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/it/txt/?uri=celex:11992m/txt.

15 European Commission. (2006). Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council. [online] Available at: eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/it/txt/?uri=celex%3a32006h0962.

The Italian education system mostly consists of public schools, complemented by private, and paritarian schools, that work under the same national standards. The national standards regulate defined learning objectives within the constraints of European legislation, which allows Member States significant flexibility regarding education (Art. 165 of the TFEU – Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). Public spending on education in Italy accounts for 4.1% of GDP, compared with the European average of around 4.7%. The Italian education system is defined and regulated by the Consolidated Act on Legislative Provisions in Education (Legislative Decree 297/1994) and several subsequent minor reforms. These legislative acts establish the rights and duties, structure, and objectives of the national education system. The Ministry of Education and Merit, formerly the Ministry of Public Education, sets the core curriculum while granting schools and teachers some autonomy in planning activities and teaching methods to adapt to the specific needs of local areas and students¹⁶. However, schools must account for their achievements and compliance with national standards through periodic assessments.

The educational pathway unfolds through a series of compulsory and optional stages. The first level of education in Italy is the optional preschool (ages 3–6), which prepares children by developing their cognitive and social skills. Mandatory schooling begins at the age of 6, with primary school and continues until the age of 16, encompassing ten years of compulsory education¹⁷.

The main stages are represented by the primary school (ages 6–11), also called elementary school and the lower secondary school (ages 11–14), or middle school. They last five and three years, respectively. During this phase, students acquire the foundational education in core subjects¹⁸. At the end of the lower secondary school, students face an important milestone with the middle school exam, followed by their first choice aimed at specialising their studies¹⁹.

16 Ministry of Education, University and Research. (1999). Presidential Decree No. 275 of 1999. Available at: archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/news/1999/dpr275_99.shtml [accessed 20 November 2024].

17 Law of 27 December 2006, No. 296. Official Gazette, General Series, No. 299, 27 December 2006, Ordinary Supplement No. 244. Available at: gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricadettaglioatto/originario?atto.codiceredazionale=006g0318&atto.datapubblicazionegazzetta=2006-12-27 [accessed 20 November 2024].

18 Ministry of Education, University and Research. (2012, November 16). Ministerial Decree No. 254 of 16 November 2012. Available at: mim.gov.it/documents/20182/51310/dm+254_2012.pdf [accessed 20 November 2024].

19 Ministry of Education and Merit. (n.d.). Upper Secondary School. Available at: mim.gov.it/scuola-secondaria-di-secondo-grado [accessed 20 November 2024] For further information visit: mim.gov.it/scuola-secondaria-di-secondo-grado.

Then we have the upper secondary school, which is further divided into a mandatory two-year phase and an optional three-year phase²⁰.

Main Stages of Education

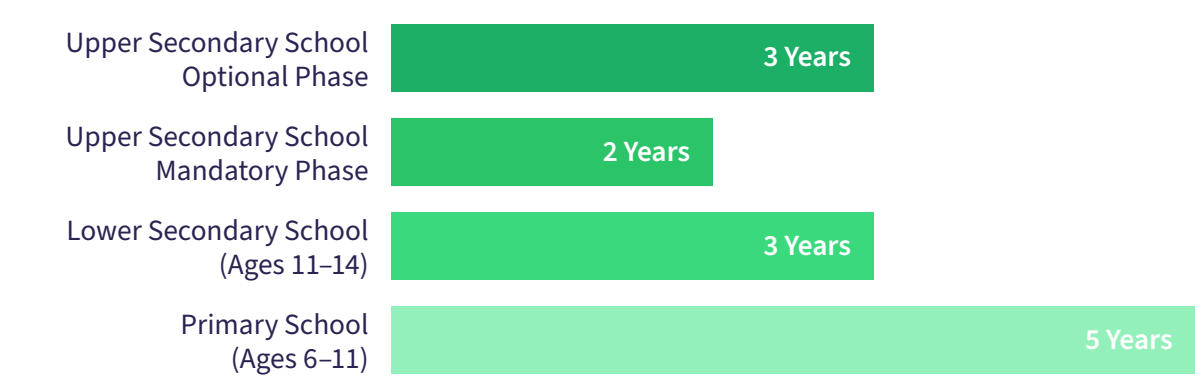


Fig.1 Main stages of education in Italy, Bipart, 2024.

At the upper secondary education stage students can choose three different educational paths: **high schools**, **technical institutes**, and **vocational institutes**, each with specific objectives and curricula. This division still dates back to the Gentile Reform. Only high schools focus on theoretical and cultural preparation, designed as a transitional phase toward university. Approximately 55% of students attend a high school, which provides a curriculum focused on cultural and scientific enrichment. Technical institutes, chosen by 31% of students, offer technical-scientific training aimed at both entering the workforce and pursuing university studies. Vocational institutes, attended by 12% of students, focus on highly specialised training designed for direct entry into the job market. In technical and vocational institutes, this exam can be taken earlier if compulsory schooling is completed.

Upper schools are certainly the most important part of the education system when it comes to democratic issues and the transition of students into adulthood and the educational paths play a significant role. There are relatively low **dropout rates** that

20 Eurydice Italy. (n.d.). Organisation and Structure of the Education System. Available at: eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/it/national-education-systems/italy/organizzazione-e-struttura-del-sistema-educativo [accessed 20 November 2024].

vary by school type. High schools have one of the lowest dropout rates, at around 2%; technical institutes report a slightly higher rate, at 4%, whereas vocational institutes have the highest dropout rate, reaching approximately 7%. After the three-year phase, some programs offer specialisations for further study (university or higher education). In order to transition from upper schools to the university, a national exam, the final diploma exam or *maturità*, is required. The percentage of **students who continue to the university level** also differs significantly across school types. About 70% of high school graduates enrol in a university, although their immediate employment rate is relatively low compared to graduates of other schools; however, they achieve higher employment rates after graduation. Among technical institute graduates, 30–40% pursue university studies, while 57% find employment within a few years of graduation. Vocational institutes prioritise job placement, achieving an employment rate similar to that of technical institutes (55–60%) but with greater challenges in ensuring job stability. Only a minority of vocational institute graduates choose to continue to the university.

School orientation between middle schools and high schools is regulated by the Decreto Legislativo n.59, February 19th 2004 and the Piano Nazionale di Orientamento. However, **Transitions and specialisations** between middle schools and high schools are primarily addressed informally by individual schools and teachers. They are required to meet minimum standards by organising activities such as career fairs, informational sessions, and personal interviews. These events often include participation from local universities and institutions to provide students with information for career orientation and support them in choosing their next educational path. The main tool of the Ministry of Education and Merit for student guidance between high schools and universities is the previously mentioned PCTO – Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e per l’Orientamento, which replaced the ASL – Alternanza Scuola Lavoro programme in 2015, aiming for a more standardised approach to student guidance. While derived from ASL (experiential learning in professional settings), PCTOs vary in terms of objectives and implementation. By reducing the minimum number of hours of work, they focus on the development of transversal skills and career orientation.

In Italy, **early school dropout** remains a significant concern, despite a recent decline to a national average of 12.7% without a diploma. Southern regions like Sicily, Campania, and Sardinia still experience rates as high as 24% in disadvantaged areas. Although the law establishes 16 as the age limit for compulsory education, there are a number of social barriers that impede compliance with the requirements set by law regarding mandatory schooling. Furthermore, *implicit dropout* affects nearly 20% of lower

secondary graduates with below-standard skills, increasing their risk of dropping out later. To address this, the education system grants schools and teachers autonomy to tailor their approach, employing diverse teaching methods from traditional lectures to innovative techniques like flipped classrooms and laboratory work, to promote active student engagement²¹.

School autonomy and freedom of teaching in Italy are constrained by rather strict parameters. These parameters are defined by Law 59/1997, with the most impactful being the requirement to complete the extensive curricula set by the Ministry of Education and Merit. *La Buona Scuola* reform, one of the reforms most contested by students and others, introduced significant changes to strengthen school autonomy.

The reform introduced the **Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa (PTOF)**, a three-year educational offer plan aimed at tailoring educational offerings to local needs and students. The creation of the *autonomous workforce* allowed schools to deploy teachers in innovative projects and supplementary activities, increasing financial management autonomy and strengthening the principal's role in coordinating teaching and recognising merit. While these measures enhanced organisational flexibility, they also initiated a privatisation trend, exacerbating inequalities between schools and raising concerns about internal democratic participation due to the centralisation of power in the hands of the principal. Before this reform, decision-making power was primarily in the hands of the teachers' council and collegial bodies in general. Therefore, a detailed description of school governance is necessary to understand the key decision-making actors within the Italian school system.

Governance and representativeness in Italian upper secondary schools

School governance refers to the set of structures, processes, and relationships through which educational institutions are directed and managed. It involves various actors, both **internal** (such as school principals, teachers, and collegiate bodies) and **external** (such as government entities, local communities, and third-sector organisations).

21 INDIRE. (n.d.). Educational Avant-Garde: Ten Years of Ideas that Change the School. Available at: pheegaro.indire.it/uploads/media/avanguardia_educative/ae_24-pp.-con-aggiunta-picoka-2019%20it-web.pdf [accessed 20 November 2024].

These actors collaborate to define educational policies, manage resources, and ensure an effective and inclusive learning environment.

Italian school governance is a complex system that balances central regulations, established by the **Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM)**, with significant autonomy for local institutions. The Ministry sets nationwide objectives, minimum standards, and curricula, while individual schools progressively gain more decision-making authority as students advance through the educational system.

In **elementary schools**, governance remains highly centralised, with uniform programmes ensuring educational equality across the country. Middle schools experience a shift toward greater organisational and teaching autonomy, allowing them to better address students' diverse needs. High schools enjoy the highest level of autonomy, fostering strong connections with local communities through initiatives like work-study programs that bridge education and the labour market²².

In **lower secondary schools**, the primary objectives are completing students' basic education and preparing them for further study or entry into the workforce. Responsibility for teaching and curriculum lies with the school principal, the teachers' council, and the class council. The school board, on the other hand, oversees all administrative and organisational aspects of the school.

Governance of upper secondary schools involves internal actors (principals, school board, teachers' council) responsible for daily management, PTOF (Three-Year Plan for the Educational Offer) development, and compliance with guidelines, and external actors. The Ministry sets national standards, while regional (USR) and provincial (USP) offices monitor the implementation and address infrastructure and staffing. Third-sector organisations and companies contribute through PCTO (Pathways for Transversal Skills and Career Orientation, ex ASL–Work-Based Learning Program), extracurricular activities, and inclusion projects, fostering community interaction. Student Councils, though advisory, promote student participation, with representation at provincial (CPS), regional, and national (CNPC) levels, facilitating inter-school dialogue and proposals to the Ministry.

22 Ministry of Education and Merit. (2024). Political-Institutional Guidance Act for the Year 2024. Available at: mim.gov.it/documents/20182/7754825/atto+di+indirizzo+2024.pdf/07f711a3-f9b7-267b-0cb0-22104ff3bf79?t=1708344524410 [accessed 20 November 2024].

Among the **external governance bodies**, particular attention should be given to the **INVALSI** Institute (Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione), a public institution that evaluates the effectiveness of the education. INVALSI tests are administered by an external body employed by educational institutions to evaluate the education system. The goal is to conduct periodic and comparative monitoring of students' performance nationwide to identify weaknesses and strengths in the education system²³. While the reliability of INVALSI tests is a widely debated topic²⁴, this analysis highlights critical data, such as the educational disparities between northern and southern Italy and, more broadly, between urban centres and peripheral areas. The 2023 INVALSI test results show that students in the North perform significantly better, with a low percentage failing to meet minimum standards in Italian and mathematics, approximately around 25%. In the South, however, up to 63% of high school students and 71.9% of middle school students fail to reach adequate levels in Italian and mathematics, underscoring issues primarily linked to structural and organisational deficiencies rather than students' abilities²⁵.

Outside of individual schools, Student Councils promote student participation, though with a consultative role. At the provincial level, elected representatives from the Provincial Student Council (CPS), fostering inter-school dialogue and collaboration with local institutions. CPS presidents then form Regional Coordinating Committees and, at the national level, the National Council of Student Council Presidents (CNPC), where they discuss common issues and present proposals to the Ministry.

The **governance of the upper secondary schools follows a hierarchical structure**: the principal coordinates all activities; the DSGA (administrative director) manages administrative staff; the school board (with student, parent, DSGA, ATA, and principal representation) makes general organisational decisions, implemented by its elected executive committee; the teachers' council handles academic planning; and class

23 Single Guarantee Committee (CUG) of INVALSI. (2023). CUG INVALSI Annual Report 2023. Available at: INVALSI.it/cug/docs/relazione_annuale_cug_invalsi_2023.pdf [accessed 20 November 2024].

24 Pro\Versi. (2015). INVALSI Tests: Arguments For and Against. Available at: proversi.it/discussioni/pro-contro/61-prove-invalsi [accessed 20 November 2024].

25 National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI). (2023). Presentation of the Results of the INVALSI Tests 2023. Available at: tecnicadellascuola.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/presentazione-risultati-prove-invalsi-2023_compressed-1.pdf [accessed 20 November 2024].

councils, composed of teachers, oversee teaching and projects at the class level²⁶. The parents' assembly and the student council – comprising class, school, and council representatives – function as advisory bodies.

The number of **student representatives** varies, depending on the student population: three representatives for schools with fewer than 500 students and four for schools with more than 500 students. However, they do not hold a majority within the decision-making body. **Class and school assemblies** serve as venues for student participation and discussion but are not formally recognised as decision-making or advisory bodies, rather as venues for student participation and discussion. School assemblies can be requested by a majority of the student committee or at the request of 10% of the school's student body. The request must be submitted to the school principal, who authorises the assembly based on the organisational and educational needs of the school²⁷. The Unified Text on Public Education allows for assemblies with external guests, subject to approval by the School Board, or assemblies organised by parallel classes. School assemblies can be requested up to once a month, lasting a full school day. However, in many schools, a lack of space necessitates reducing the hours allocated for assemblies.

Finally, the **school principal leads the institution**, holding the highest managerial and responsible authority. A key challenge concerns the balance between management, representation, and grassroots involvement of the school community. Recent studies on Italian school governance highlight a tendency towards centralisation of the principal's role, reinforced by legal frameworks and operational conditions that position them as leaders, especially following the *La Buona Scuola* reform²⁸. Some studies show that the managerial skills of principals in Italian high schools are often lower than those of their counterparts in other European countries²⁹. In Italy, however,

26 Eurydice, *Organisation and Governance: Italy*, 2023, available at: eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/italy/organisation-and-governance [accessed 20 November 2024].

27 Legislative Decree of 16 April 1994, No. 297, Article 13. Official Gazette, General Series, No. 115, 19 May 1994, Ordinary Supplement No. 79; gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1994/05/19/094G0291/sg [accessed 20 November 2024].

28 Coccozza, A. (2016). The New Role of School Leadership and the "Good School" Reform: Critical Issues and Perspectives. [online] Available at: amministrazioneincammino.luiss.it/2016/02/22/nuovo-ruolo-della-dirigenza-scolastica-e-riforma-della-buona-scuola-criticita-e-prospettive [accessed 20 November 2024].

29 Di Liberto, A., Sideri, M., Sulis, G., & Schivardi, F. (2013, July 24). The Managerial Skills of Italian School Principals. Giovanni Agnelli Foundation. Available at: fondazioneagnelli.it/2013/07/24/wp-48-le-competenze-manageriali-dei-dirigenti-scolastici-italiani-liberto-m-sideri-g-sulis-f-schivardi [accessed 20 November 2024].

recent years have seen a trend toward granting increasing power to school principals rather than redistributing authority within schools. Moreover, principals are often not selected based on their managerial skills, which exacerbates Italy's position compared to the international context³⁰. The need to directly control school resources and staff becomes a key reason why many principals adopt a highly centralised leadership style. These dynamics of centralised leadership affect not only school management but also daily interactions with school staff, sometimes creating an environment where individual initiatives are constrained by centralised decision-making processes. Principals can exert control through tools such as performance evaluations, resource allocation, and organisational decisions that directly impact the daily operations and professional opportunities of the teaching staff.³¹

Among the entire education system, **upper secondary schools are the most profitable** in terms of democratic and participation issues. Firstly, because these institutions hold a unique position within the Italian education system, playing a pivotal role in shaping students' academic and personal development as they transition into adulthood. Secondly, upper secondary schools serve adolescents who possess growing cognitive maturity and are better equipped to engage in complex deliberative and participatory processes compared to younger students. Lastly, empirical evidence shows that SPB initiatives in Italy have been exclusively implemented in upper secondary schools—as it will be presented later in this report—making them the most relevant and practical context for this research. This focus allows for an in-depth examination of governance structures and representativeness within these educational settings, providing valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing SPB.

Overall, **Italian school governance is a complex system** involving various internal and external actors, each with specific roles and responsibilities, aimed at ensuring quality education through the collaboration of all components of the educational community. It is crucial to emphasise the close link between governance and fund management within individual schools, as power dynamics and economic decisions are intrinsically connected.

30 *ibidem*

31 Colombo, M., & Desideri, A. (2019). The Italian education system and school autonomy. In S. Da Cruz Martins et al. (Eds.), *School autonomy, organization and performance in Europe*. Lisbon: CIES-IUL.

Technical Glossary on Italian Education System

Italian terms and acronyms	English translation	Description
Decision-making bodies within the school		
Assemblea di classe	Class Assembly / Class Meeting	The Class Assembly is a meeting of the students of a single class to discuss specific topics, propose initiatives, and address any issues related to the group's school life.
Collegio docenti	Teachers' Council / Faculty Council	The Teachers' Council is a school body composed of all the teachers in an institution, meeting to discuss and decide on educational, organisational, and disciplinary matters.
Consiglio d'Istituto	School Council/ School Board	It refers to the representative body of all members of the school community, including representatives of students, parents, teachers, and staff.
Consiglio di Classe	Class Council / Class Board	The Class Council is a school body composed of teachers, student representatives, and parent representatives, responsible for the educational and disciplinary management of a specific class.
Assemblea di Istituto	School Assembly / Student Assembly	The School Assembly is a periodic meeting of a school's students, where they can discuss topics of common interest, propose initiatives, and actively participate in school life.
Decision-making bodies outside the school		
MIM – Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito	Ministry of Education and Merit	The Ministry of Education and Merit is the Italian government body responsible for developing educational policies, ensuring the right to education, and promoting merit in schools.
MIUR – Ministero dell'Istruzione Pubblica	Ex Ministry of Education and Merit	

Ufficio Scolastico Regionale	Regional School Office / Regional Education Office	The Regional School Office is a branch of the Italian Ministry of Education that coordinates and supervises the educational and administrative activities of schools within a specific region.
Ufficio Scolastico Territoriale	Local Education Office / Territorial School Office	The Local Education Office is a subdivision of the Regional School Office, responsible for supervising and coordinating schools within a specific geographical area, such as a province.
CPS – Consulta Provinciale degli Studenti	Provincial Student Council	The Provincial Student Council is a representative body composed of high school students from a province, promoting dialogue between students and educational institutions and making proposals on school-related topics.
CNPC – Coordinamento Nazionale dei Presidenti di Consulta	National Coordination of Provincial Council Presidents	The CNPC is the body that coordinates the presidents of the Provincial Student Councils at the national level, fostering dialogue among provinces and promoting student participation in educational policies.

Particular stakeholders within the school

Personale ATA	Administrative, Technical, and Auxiliary Staff	ATA staff includes non-teaching school personnel, such as administrative, technical, and auxiliary staff, responsible for management, technical support, and general services.
Dirigente scolastico	Head of the School / School Principal	The School Principal is the administrative and educational leader of a school, responsible for coordinating staff, managing resources, and ensuring the proper implementation of educational activities.
DSGA – Direttore dei Servizi Generali e Amministrativi	Administrative and General Services Director	This role, typical of the Italian school system, is responsible for the administrative, financial, and organisational management of schools. In international contexts, an exact equivalent does not always exist, while it can be associated with the School Business Manager (UK) or the Administrative Manager (USA).

Programs and other institutions

INVALSI – Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione	INVALSI	INVALSI is an Italian public institution that evaluates the effectiveness of the education system through standardised tests on linguistic, mathematical, and scientific skills.
ASL – Alternanza Scuola-Lavoro	Work-Based Learning Program	The Work-Based Learning Programme (ASL) is an educational programme that combines school education with work experiences, aiming to bring students closer to the world of work.
PTOF – Piano Triennale per l’Offerta Formativa	Three-Year Plan for the Educational Offer	The PTOF is a document that defines the mission, objectives, and educational offer of an Italian school over a three-year period, aligned with the needs of the local area and available resources.
PCTO – Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e l’Orientamento	Pathways for Transversal Skills and Career Orientation	PCTO programs are educational pathways that combine practical work experiences in companies with school learning, aimed at developing transversal skills and providing career orientation.
PON – Programma Operativo Nazionale	National Operational Program	The PON is a programme funded by the European Union that supports Italian schools in developing innovative projects, improving infrastructures, skills, and social inclusion.
Scuola paritaria	Private school recognised by the state	The ‘scuola paritaria’ is a private school in Italy recognized by the state, following the national curriculum while maintaining management autonomy.

Fig.2 Technical Glossary on Italian Education System, Bipart, 2024.

Source of funding in Italian upper secondary schools

In Italy, public education is primarily funded by the State through the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM), supplemented by regional and local authorities for services like cafeterias, transport, and building maintenance. European programmes and funds, including the **National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR)**, provide additional project-based resources. Schools can also pursue funding via national and European calls, such as the **PON For Schools – Skills and Learning Environments**, focusing on digital innovation, social inclusion, and STEM skills. Private foundations and third-sector organisations offer further support for dropout prevention and social inclusion projects.

Public funding for upper secondary schools varies based on demographic parameters (e.g. student population, and contextual needs, such as larger schools and those in disadvantaged areas receive more funding) and regional regulation. The INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System), governed by national and local policies, aims to address the specific educational needs of individual schools and their local contexts. Each year, certain secondary schools' classes are called to sit for a state exam, which serves as a statistical and monitoring tool for the Minister of Education as well as a tool for allocating funds to those regions which perform the best. In fact, INVALSI scores also influence access to certain resources, potentially creating inter-school competition and impacting result reliability.

In Italy, there are various types of schools – **public, private, and paritarian** – each with a different method of state funding allocation. Paritarian schools (which supplement and compensate the public schools) have access to public funds, as do public schools, which are mainly funded by state resources, covering staff, maintenance, infrastructure, and equipment. While local authorities may supplement this funding, regional laws – lacking national regulation – determine the proportion of public resources allocated to both paritarian and state schools, representing a key tool for regional influence on the school system. In many regions, the funds allocated to paritarian schools are high in proportion to those directed to public schools. This dynamic often weakens and diverts funding from public education, which then struggles to meet the minimum educational requirements.

Costs for families differ significantly between private and public schools. Private schools have high tuition fees, often unaffordable. Public schools, while more affordable, still incur costs for materials, trips, and activities, potentially exceeding €1,300

annually, a significant burden given Italy's average net monthly income of around €1,800. In Italy, various forms of subsidies exist for disadvantaged families. Regional subsidies are available to support the purchase of school supplies and to reduce transportation costs. Additionally, tax deductions are provided for extracurricular activities.

External actors, both private and public, can establish partnerships with schools to implement educational projects, extracurricular activities, or improve infrastructure. These collaborations are often governed by agreements and protocols involving a wide range of stakeholders, including companies, universities, and third-sector organisations. Their goal is to address the specific needs and requirements of individual schools.³²

As regards the **third sector's engagement** with educational institutions, a range of instruments facilitates this crucial interaction. Preeminent among these is Service Learning, a pedagogical approach explicitly designed to cultivate civic engagement and volunteerism among students. This methodology enjoys the support of the Ministry of Education and is frequently integrated within the framework of **PCTO** (pathways for transversal skills and orientation). In recent years, the Ministry, in partnership with organisations of the third sector, has also inaugurated a series of impactful awareness campaigns addressing critical societal issues such as environmental sustainability, combating organised crime, and fostering social inclusion.

The **financial architecture** of individual schools is delineated into distinct budgetary categories. The most substantial allocation is invariably dedicated to remunerating both teaching and non-teaching personnel. A further portion is earmarked for the essential upkeep and maintenance of school facilities. The residual funds are then apportioned to the acquisition of instructional resources and the funding of extra-curricular activities that enrich the educational experience. The Annual Program, a fundamental financial document, meticulously outlines a school's projected income and anticipated expenditures for the forthcoming fiscal year. The responsibility for its meticulous drafting resides with the School Principal, who works in concert with the Director of General and Administrative Services (DSGA). By the stipulated deadline of

32 Official Gazette of the Italian Republic. Legislative Decree of 13 April 2017, No. 62 – Rules on the Assessment and Certification of Competences in the First Cycle of Education and State Examinations., 16 May 2017, General Series No. 112. Available at: gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/vedimenuhtml?atto_datapubblicazione=gazzetta=2017-05-16&atto_codiceredazionale=17g00073&tiposerie=serie_generale&tipovigenza=originario (Accessed: 20 November 2024).

November 30th, the Executive Committee formally presents the completed Programme to the School Board. The Board then undertakes a rigorous review process, culminating in formal approval no later than December 31st. While the ultimate authority for approval rests with the School Board, the School Principal exerts considerable influence in shaping budgetary priorities and allocating resources strategically. Upon formal ratification, the Annual Programme is mandated to be published within 15 days in the *Transparent Administration* section of the school's official website. This measure is designed to ensure transparency and facilitate public access to essential financial information for both the school community and the wider public.

The availability of robust financial resources exerts a demonstrably significant influence on the capacity of Italian educational institutions to effectively implement participatory programmes. The three-year educational offer plan (PTOF), which articulates the educational and programmatic objectives of each school, necessitates meticulous financial planning to ensure the successful realisation of the planned activities. Financial management, enacted through the Annual Program, must therefore judiciously balance available resources with proposed initiatives. This often necessitates strategic decision-making, potentially involving the modification or even the curtailment of projects based on carefully assessed priorities and the existing budgetary constraints. Furthermore, securing access to external funding streams, encompassing both national and European grants, is of paramount importance in **underwriting innovative participatory projects**. However, the inherent bureaucratic complexities associated with navigating these funding avenues, coupled with the requisite specialised expertise needed for their effective management, can pose formidable challenges for schools. Consequently, the availability and the effective management of financial resources constitutes a key factor in the successful implementation of participatory programmes that meaningfully engage students, families, and the broader local communities they serve.

Citizenship education in Italian upper secondary schools

Citizenship Education in Italian Upper Secondary School

The European Council Recommendation of May 22, 2018, and the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life require Member States to introduce measures for education on participation and financial literacy. However, the implementation of **citizenship education** and participation programmes often faces challenges due to the economic difficulties affecting Italian schools, as analysed in the previous chapter. In recent years, a key reform has been introduced in this regard: the integration of citizenship education into the curriculum. To better examine the various forms of citizenship education in our country, a brief analysis will be conducted on the cultural context surrounding youth participation.

Citizenship education is manifested within educational institutions both **formally and informally**.

Informal citizenship education goes beyond the curricular teaching. In high schools, informal citizenship education is implemented through class assemblies, school assemblies, extracurricular activities, and peer education initiatives. All these activities contribute to fostering civic awareness through discussions on citizenship topics in a collaborative and participatory environment. These spaces, although not very

widespread, encourage bottom-up dynamics, empowering students and allowing them to engage with social and community-related issues in the context in which they live³³.

High schools play a crucial role in the social contexts of local communities, not only as educational institutions but also as centres for **participation and social and intercultural exchange**, and through collaboration with local associations. Through informal citizenship education practices, students are encouraged to actively engage in the community life of the school. However, a decline in student representation and decision-making power can be observed, despite an increase in participation. Students often have a consultative rather than a decision-making role³⁴.

Formal citizenship education, recently established with Law No. 92/2019 and integrated by Ministerial Decree No. 183 of September 7, 2024, aligns with the eight European key competencies in both methods and content. These include cultural awareness, social and civic competence, environmental awareness, and digital competence. The Italian curriculum, therefore, promotes objectives such as critical thinking, problem-solving skills, social engagement, and ethical reasoning, in line with European recommendations³⁵.

Moreover, there **are no public agencies promoting this practice** at either the local or national level. Currently, only third-sector organisations have the capacity to initiate civic participation and engagement. For instance, Save the Children, through its programme *Fuoriclasse in Movimento*, and UNICEF, with its *Scuola Amica* initiative, have created pathways for active participation. Another approach is offered by the Erasmus Plus Programme, which acts as a driver and funder of such projects, though it does not directly initiate them. Currently, no entity in Italy has established itself as a leader capable of forming a collaborative network.

Schools, thanks to the flexibility they enjoy with respect to the curriculum, can adapt citizenship education pathways to the needs of the community and local area. On the one hand, this allows the inclusion of many topics in the school curriculum, but on

33 Petroccia, S. (2023). *Participation and Citizenship: From International Migrations to Digitalization*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

34 Delors, J., et al. (1996). *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

35 Ministry of Education. *Guidelines for the Teaching of Civic Education*. Ministerial Decree No. 35, 22 June 2020. Available at: istruzione.it/educazione_civica/allegati/linee_guida_educazione_civica_dopocspi.pdf. [Accessed: 24 November 2024].

the other hand, it makes citizenship education an excessively broad subject, open to interpretation by individual class councils. A study by the University of Bologna³⁶ highlighted that the implementation of curricular objectives varies significantly from one school to another, due to disparities in resources and the differing levels of priority given to citizenship education in school programmes.

Each subject must include a portion of its teachings as **part of citizenship education modules**. For example, during biology classes, some teachers integrate modules on the prevention of substance abuse. While this system is interesting from an interdisciplinary perspective, it often makes citizenship education programmes fragmented and unclear. Furthermore, the number of hours allocated to citizenship education within each subject is too limited to thoroughly address fundamental topics, totalling only 33 hours per year. To address this issue, many schools supplement the citizenship education curriculum with non-formal activities, as discussed above.

Among **the non-formal citizenship** education activities in high schools, there are examples of collaboration with third-sector organisations, often initiated through proposals followed by lobbying efforts within the schools. These organisations offer alternative activities aimed at increasing participation and civic responsibility, thereby enriching the formal educational offering.

Extracurricular activities, both inside and outside school, are not particularly encouraged. The only recognition tool available is the *Formative Credits* system. Formative credits are used to evaluate students' educational pathways, certifying competencies and extracurricular activities such as sport activities deemed valid for completing a cycle of studies. They are required for admission to final state exams and to accumulate points useful for academic and professional pathways. However, the weight of formative credits remains extremely low compared to those earned through the evaluation of traditional academic activities during the high school years.

In the Italian school system, apart from citizenship education and class and school assemblies, there are **no structurally implemented tools** aimed at developing civic competences. Some experimental initiatives, such as school participatory budgeting, which are emerging on the European scene, do not find fertile ground in Italy.

36 Pasolini, E. (2021). Civic and citizenship education: Proposals from international organizations. *Scuola Democratica*, 12(special issue), 15–28.

Active citizenship of Italian young students

Uncertainties related to citizenship education are accompanied by contrasting insights regarding the political participation of students in Italy. According to the Youth Observatory, only 25% of Italian students, between 14 and 24 years old, express an active interest in politics, while a significant majority show moderate interest, gravitating more toward forms of digital participation. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have highlighted an increase in civic activism among young people, with growing interest in politics and participation, as well as greater involvement in volunteer work and community support activities³⁷.

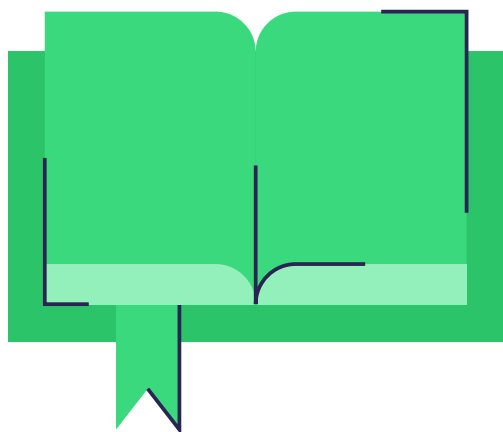
Over the past decade, the student movement has exhibited a fluctuating trajectory, oscillating between periods of fervent engagement and relative quiescence. Notable among its more vigorous phases were the widespread demonstrations opposing *La Buona Scuola* reform (between 2014 and 2016) and the ascendant climate change protests, which culminated between 2019 and 2020, mobilising hundreds of thousands of students in public demonstrations.

The discourse surrounding youth participation beyond the confines of the school environment encompasses forms of engagement that have only recently gained prominence. Of particular significance is the burgeoning field of **digital democracy**, which furnishes novel avenues for civic participation, empowering young people to articulate their views on socio-political issues through online platforms and social media. Contemporary research suggests that for a substantial cohort of young individuals, this digital sphere represents their primary, and sometimes sole, mode of active participation, perceived as both more accessible and immediate than conventional forms of political involvement. Consequently, digitalisation emerges as a crucial instrument for fostering youth inclusion in active citizenship, inaugurating innovative perspectives within the domain of civic and political education.

Consequently, **Law No. 92/2019**, together with European directives such as the **Council Recommendation of May 22, 2018**, represent a step forward in integrating citizenship education into school curricula, aligning them with the key European competencies. **However, the lack of a dedicated national public agency, the absence of uniform**

37 Openpolis. (n.d.). How youth participation is changing in Italy. [online] Available at: openpolis.it/come-sta-cambiando-la-partecipazione-giovanile-in-italia [accessed 20 November 2024].

structures, and disparities among schools undermine the effectiveness and consistency of its implementation. The growing reliance on external organisations to promote active citizenship further highlights the need for more structured and institutional tools. In this context, the need for innovative approaches to fostering conscious and active participation becomes evident. A particularly promising tool, among the participatory and deliberative practices, is represented by **school participatory budgeting**, an experimental model that encourages bottom-up dynamics and empowers students in the shared management of school resources. The next chapter will explore how participatory budgeting can serve as a bridge between training for active citizenship and the practical application of participatory democracy in schools' governance.



School Participatory Budgeting in Italian upper secondary schools

The development of participatory budgeting in Italian schools

Participatory Budgeting (PB) can be generally described as a process in which a community of citizens decides on allocating a part of the municipal budget. From a more democratic and sociological perspective it can also be more broadly defined as *a cyclical institutionalised deliberative process, in which citizens – individually and through their organisation – enter into a relationship with one another, to share needs and problems in their living conditions, propose solutions, and decide together how to manage resources and common goods democratically*. PB was invented in the late 80s in the city of Porto Alegre, gaining immediate appreciation worldwide. In 2019, around 11.000 processes in 71 countries were reported³⁸. In Italy, the journey of PB began in 1994 with its initial adoption by a few municipalities. Characterised by alternating periods of significant progress and enthusiasm with times of stagnation and decline, PB approaches have evolved significantly over the past thirty years. The trajectory of PB has not been without challenges. Its association with specific political ideologies, absence of national strategies, and diminishing public and private sector interest have seen

38 Dias, N., Enriquez, S., & Julio, S. (2019). Participatory Budgeting World Atlas 2019. Oficina.

its momentum wane, especially as traditional governmental approaches still dominate. By 2019, participatory budgeting had expanded across various regions, achieving a total of 63 PB processes³⁹.

School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) originated as an extension of urban participatory budgeting. There are little differences between the two initiatives in terms of process and rules. However, in the field of education, this process evolves into a *learning-by-doing process on how democracy works, how it can be improved*⁴⁰ involving the school community – students, teachers, and other school staff – often together with parents, in proposing ideas, developing projects, and selecting the ones they consider most attractive and needed within the school community.

While the first PB in schools began to be experimented with in the USA in 2013 as a pilot project at the Bioscience High School in Phoenix Union High School District (PXU) in Arizona⁴¹, in Italy, **School Participatory Budgeting (SPB)** was only introduced in 2017 as an on-the-spot initiative, with the first experiment taking place in a high school in Milan, the Liceo Scientifico Cremona and ITE Zappa. It was initiated by the social enterprise BiPart⁴² thanks to a European contribution and with a significant collaboration of the international NGO ActionAid. The process showed promising results, fostering a **model** considered suitable for replication in other schools. So, in the following years, the two NGOs expanded SPB experimentation across various Italian regions in diverse ways, growing to 5 initiatives by 2019 and reaching 12 by 2024. Most of these initiatives were prompted by resources owned by the two NGOs

39 Among these, 56 were managed by local governments, one was a unique collaboration between Airbnb and the city council of Palermo, and one was facilitated by an NGO in a prison. For more details, see Dias N., Enriquez S., and Julio S., *Participatory Budgeting World Atlas 2019* (Oficina, 2019). In addition to these experiences, hundreds of PBs have been carried in Sicily since the Region has mandated in 2014 that its municipalities allocate at least 2% of their budgets to projects proposed and voted by citizens – an unicum in Italy, although not all cases can be categorised as PBs, rather ‘participatory democracy processes’ See Il report sulla democrazia partecipata in Sicilia nel 2023 – Spendiamoli Insieme.

40 The definitions reported cannot be cited from specific written sources, but are an integral part of the methodological model used by BIPART in conducting Participatory Budgeting (PB) and School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) processes. These definitions have been developed and applied in practical research and implementation contexts, as part of the work conducted within the projects managed by BiPart.

41 Bartlett, T., Rock, M., Schugurensky, D., & Tate, K. (2020). School participatory budgeting: A toolkit for inclusive practice. Center for the Future of Arizona & Participatory Governance Initiative at Arizona State University. Available at: spa.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2020-12/spb_toolkit_2020_11_25.pdf. [Accessed: 24 November 2024].

42 The project has been formally managed by a civic association – Center for the Study of Participatory Democracy which then evolved into the BiPart social enterprise.

or by external public funding⁴³. Surprisingly, there is only one single case of SPB that was autonomously initiated by a school, inspired by the Cremona-Zappa experience. Today we find one SPB in the city of Jesi, implemented by a local non-profit organisation previously involved in another SPB.

It is interesting to note how the most recent school reforms have leveraged the implementation of SPBs. Three of the first five SPB initiatives that immediately followed the Cremona-Zappa have been integrated into the ASL program, as a work-related training, while the inclusion of the most recent SPB initiatives in the school curriculum was justified by framing them as part of the citizenship education curriculum, which was recently formalised within the national education system. We will explore these cases in the next Chapters.

The fact that almost all the processes were promoted and led by the same NGO had profound implications on the methodologies adopted. However, each experience adopted a different approach, depending on their community context and capabilities. Despite varying levels of engagement and financial backing, these initiatives underscored SPB's potential as a tool for citizenship education to develop students' transversal skills, such as conflict management, leadership, and negotiation⁴⁴.

43 Five of the initiatives were part of a three year nationwide project RIPARTIRE carried by ActionAid and several CSOs, including BiPart. It aimed to strengthen the role of youth, schools, and the educational community by promoting civic and social competencies and experimenting with active citizenship methodologies in schools and local areas. It marked a modest scaling-up considering that the pandemic urged adaptability and necessitated a pivot to digital engagement strategies. For more information visit: RIPARTIRE Project.

44 A first analysis of Italian School PB experiences has been comprehensively conducted by Stortone, S. and Biacca, E., in their work, 'Chapter 13: Different Designs, Different Outcomes: Lessons from School Participatory Budgeting in Italy', published in *Educating for Democracy: The Case for Participatory Budgeting in Schools* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024). Available at: elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781035302178/book-part-9781035302178-21.xml. This study marks the first academic investigation of Italian School PB, providing a foundational contribution to the literature and paving the way for further exploration in this field.

The Italian model of School PB: structure, process, actors and implementation

Methodology

Almost all the SPB initiatives carried out in Italy were promoted and coordinated by the same civil society organisations (CSOs) highlighting recurring elements which can suggest the existence of an **Italian model**. Yet, this model has been implemented in many ways and contexts, resulting in a number of differences. Stortone and Biacca (2024, p. 5) offer a comprehensive perspective, emphasising that the core aim of the proposed model is to foster aggregation, collaboration, deliberation, self-determination, and self-organisation within the school community. This approach seeks to empower students and transform traditional governance practices.

This perspective brings forward an important distinction between **activation** and **empowerment**. Hammond⁴⁵, furthermore, highlights that activation often represents a top-down approach where participation is orchestrated by elites to maintain existing power dynamics, creating the appearance of inclusion without real influence. In the SPB microcosm, this elite is generally represented by adults, embodied in the figure of the head of the school. This study builds upon foundational works like Arnstein⁴⁶, which underscore the progression from tokenistic involvement to genuine empowerment, and Blühdorn's critique of *simulative democracy*⁴⁷, where participation merely stabilises the existing structures. Empowerment, on the other hand, is a bottom-up process that enables participants – students in this case – to gain genuine agency and challenge power structures, aligning with concepts of empowered participatory governance as proposed by Fung and Wright⁴⁸. In this study, the term 'participation' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'activation,' and the term 'empowerment' with 'engagement', as both are assumed to carry

45 Hammond, M. (2020). Democratic innovations after the post-democratic turn: between activation and empowerment. *Critical Policy Studies*, 15(2), 174–191. doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2020.1733629.

46 Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225.

47 Blühdorn I. Post-Ecologist Governmentality: Post-Democracy, Post- Politics and the Politics of Unsustainability. In: Swyngedouw E, Wilson J, eds. *The Post-Political and Its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*. Edinburgh University Press; 2014:146-166.

48 Fung, Archon and Erik Olin Wright. „Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance.” *Politics and Society* 29.1 (March 2001): 5-42.

similar connotative meaning. This study critically reflects upon this difference, emphasising how School PB should aim for empowerment by fostering authentic student agency rather than mere activation.

Stortone and Biacca highlight the structured, multi-phase process adapted from traditional municipal participatory budgeting to fit the educational environment of schools. As previously highlighted, a unique characteristic of School PB is its connection to **citizenship education**, offering an opportunity to experiment with alternative pathways for democracy and governance. In particular, the RIPARTIRE project marked a turning point in Italy by integrating School PB activities into the citizenship education curriculum, reinforcing learning objectives and embedding civic engagement deeply within the educational experience. This integration also structured the SPB process within regular ‘office hours’ rather than relegating it to an extracurricular activity. In this context, a key element of the methodology implemented by Bipart is the establishment of a *public statute* (also referred to as *Charter of Participation*) which outlines the rules governing the process and ensures that all activities are conducted fairly and democratically, similar to a Constitutional Chart. This statute, which is initially discussed and approved by the School Council, also guides the structure and operation of governing bodies—the *Steering Committee* (SC) and the *Technical Committee* (TC), which play central roles in managing and overseeing the SPB process to ensure it runs smoothly.

The **Steering Committee** (SC) in the School PB process serves as an executive body that operates by the specified statute. Comprising students and members of the educational community such as the school principal, teachers, school staff, and parents (who are invited, appointed or elected by the School Council) the SC is intended to not directly engage in proposal formulation, assessment, or design, nor does it play a direct role in decision-making. It is the body established to organise and coordinate the participatory process. It is responsible for promoting assemblies and public meetings, defining the schedule, and preparing all the tools aimed at its implementation. It provides suitable discussion instruments and promotes all activities resulting from the aggregation and collaboration among students.

Conversely, the **Technical Committee** (TC) plays a pivotal role in the School PB process, with the authority to reject, approve, or co-design project proposals. This committee, which is elected by the School Council on the basis of voluntary candidacies, interacts with proposers to help shape the final projects, adhering to technical, economic, and legal criteria that are typically made public at the beginning. Having

such a discretionary power it ought to maintain neutrality in its judgement. It is composed of members representing school authorities, parents, and other skilled individuals invited by the school who do not have the right to vote on final decisions. As Stortone and Biacca emphasise, the TC is encouraged to adopt a supportive and inclusive approach, often approving less feasible proposals for two key reasons: first, to provide inexperienced proposers with the opportunity to develop technical skills and transform their ideas into viable projects; second, because proposals are initially filtered through a preliminary consensus process, akin to a political assessment, rejecting them would risk excluding a significant portion of the community from the co-design phase of the deliberative process.⁴⁹

The **Charter of Participation** also outlines and details the structure of the process, which reflects the phases of urban PB and follows the well-established and tested **Italian model of PB**, a methodology implemented and executed by BiPart. The core framework of SPB typically consists of three main phases: *idea collection and preliminary voting*, *first evaluation and co-design*, and *final voting*.

1 **Phase One:** *Idea collection and preliminary vote*

In this initial stage, the entire school community is engaged in generating and discussing project proposals. This phase aims to stimulate a broad range of ideas from all participants, allowing them to suggest multiple proposals, which are then presented through e.g. fairs or online promotion as proof-of-concept, subjected to a preliminary vote. This pre-vote helps to narrow down the pool of proposals to those that have wider appeal and benefit beyond personal gain, setting the school's priorities for intervention and the stage for the next phases by highlighting the most popular and impactful ideas.

2 **Phase Two:** *Evaluation, and co-design*

The proposals that receive the highest level of support during the first phase progress to a more comprehensive stage of evaluation and co-design. In this phase, each proposal undergoes a thorough feasibility assessment conducted by a team of technical experts in collaboration

49 Stortone, S., & Biacca, E. (2024). Different designs, different outcomes: lessons from school participatory budgeting in Italy. In *Educating for Democracy* (pp. 230-249). Edward Elgar Publishing. doi.org/10.4337/9781035302178.00021

with the original proposers. This collaborative process aims to refine the proposals, addressing potential challenges and optimising their design to ensure they are practical and achievable.

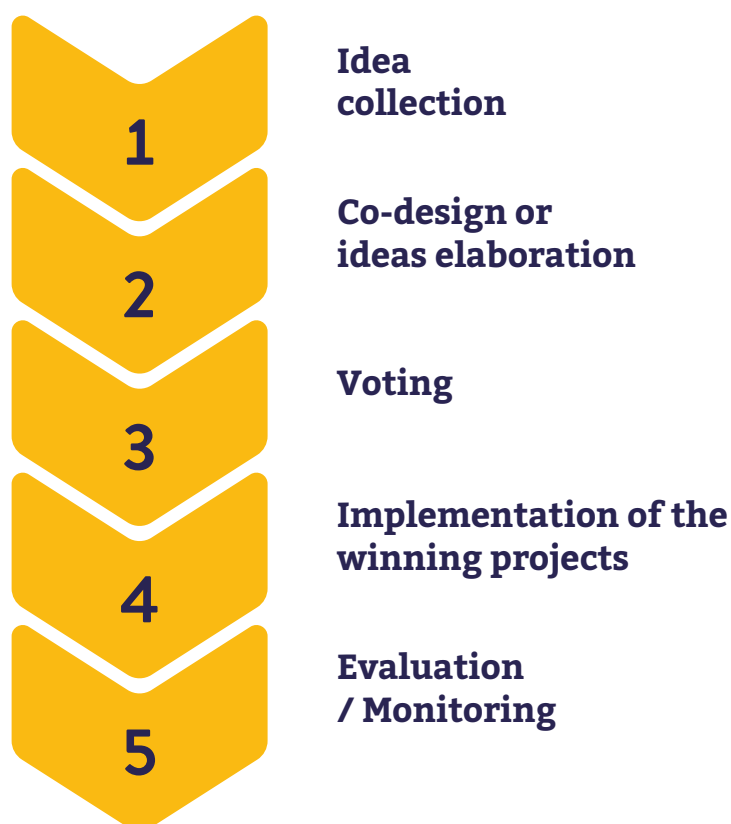
3 Phase Three: *Voting*

In the final phase, the community votes on the co-designed proposals. In order to guarantee representative legitimacy to the most voted proposals, the suggested voting system is the approval voting, where each member can vote for as many projects as they like. This democratic process determines which projects will be implemented based on the highest number of votes, adhering to the available budget.

The final phase involves the **implementation of the winning projects** and **follow-up activities to disseminate and promote the outcomes of the entire process**. An essential but often overlooked phase in the SPB process is the follow-up, which includes **evaluation and feedback**.

This phase helps assess the effectiveness of the process, identify challenges, and gather insights for improvement. By incorporating continuous evaluation and feedback from all stakeholders, SPB can ensure its **cyclical nature**, refining the process for future iterations. This mechanism not only improves the immediate outcomes but also contributes to the long-term success and sustainability of SPB, fostering ongoing democratic engagement and participation within schools. On this note, a lively debate surrounds the **institutionalisation** of participatory and deliberative processes such as SPB, focusing on whether embedding these processes into formal structures enhances their effectiveness or risks undermining their authenticity. While formalising the process could ensure consistency and sustainability over time with top-down support, others argue that the driving force for future cycles should remain the bottom-up pressure from the school community itself, as seen in the SPB context.

Fig.3 The structure of SPB process, Bipart, 2024.



To facilitate these phases, the SPB methodology often employs a hybrid model of participation, combining **online platforms** for broader accessibility and transparency with **in-person assemblies** and events that foster community engagement and deliberative quality through, for example, assemblies and paper ballot boxes.

Key Actors

Within Italian SPBs, diverse stakeholders within the educational community fulfil crucial roles. For its role in the school system, the **school principal** *de iure* and *de facto* the most influential figure in the school—leads the implementation of SPB, encouraging participation from all. **Students** are the main protagonists, as they propose ideas and vote on projects, actively exercising their right to democratic participation. Furthermore, the effectiveness of SPB may rely also on a strong partnership between home and school. **Parents and guardians** provide external support and advice and may have a prominent engagement or voting rights. **Teachers**, in turn, facilitate and support student

activities, acting as key implementers of PBs strategies and, in some cases, coordinating initiatives to ensure the smooth and effective execution of the overall process. **School staff**, having their voting representatives in the School Board, are directly involved in decisions and in the management of administrative, technical and auxiliary aspects of SPB. The **Administrative and General Services Director** (DSGA) provides logistical and operational assistance, managing the practical aspects of organisation. Additionally, **external partners** such as NGOs, local associations, foundations, social enterprises and other community members may enrich the SPB by bringing additional resources and connecting the school to the broader societal context.

Preliminary Training and External Support

Before initiating the process, schools may conduct **workshops and training sessions** to build the deliberative and decision-making capacities, enhancing their ability to effectively and autonomously participate in the process. In this preliminary phase, schools are supported by external organisations which provide the methodological know-how and expertise, guiding the school community throughout the process, whose operators act as *SPB practitioners* who cooperate with all actors, and work closely with the *SPB coordinator*, usually a teacher appointed by the school principal or the School Board.

An **SPB practitioner** is a person who deals with the implementation of school participatory budgeting.⁵⁰ The Italian experience demonstrates that School PB processes are typically initiated and conducted by **civil society organisations (CSOs)**, which partner with schools and local associations, often through grant programs or European projects aimed at promoting civic engagement among students. Although CSOs have a foundational role in promoting participatory practices, dependency on third-sector organisations poses a challenge to spearheading this practice beyond **individual ‘champions’** (initiators that dedicate strong individual effort in advocating for and driving the initiative) who are already constrained by budgetary limitations, shortages of resources, and capabilities. Cooperation between third-sector actors varies greatly and, although it cannot be generalised, often results in competitive hardships among the larger organisations in the category, leaving smaller organisations in a quest to win grants to develop practices such as School PB.

50 An SPB practitioner can be, for example, a teacher or another school employee, a student, an employee of a non-governmental organisation, or an official.

As part of this methodological approach, BiPart provides an innovative tool for introducing students and educators to the SPB process through **Empaville**, a role-playing game that simulates a hybrid participatory process (online and offline). In the game, players take on the roles of citizens in an imaginary city and collaborate to develop ideas for community improvement. This approach encourages empathy, collaboration, and familiarity with participatory tools, offering a practical way to experience decision-making and planning.⁵¹

Types of Proposed Projects

A wide range of projects can be submitted by students and other members of the school community. Among the project proposals submitted in past Italian SPB practices, typical examples include:

- **Infrastructural Improvements:** Proposals aimed at enhancing the physical environment of the school. This could involve upgrading classroom equipment, improving sports facilities, renovating common areas like libraries or cafeterias, the realisation of a relax zone, or enhancing accessibility features for students with disabilities.
- **Educational Initiatives:** Projects that enrich the learning experience. Examples include introducing new extracurricular activities, such as sports' training and English courses, organising workshops or seminars on specific subjects, implementing tutoring programs, or acquiring new educational technology and resources.
- **Social or Cultural Programs:** Initiatives that promote social cohesion and cultural awareness within the school community. This might encompass organising student-led cultural festivals, art exhibitions, music concerts, or events that celebrate diversity and inclusion.
- **Sustainability Efforts:** Projects focused on environmental sustainability, regeneration of common spaces and promoting eco-friendly practices. Suggestions could include starting a school garden, implementing recycling programs, installing energy-efficient lighting, or launching campaigns to raise environmental awareness.

All proposals should align with the **school's needs and meet feasibility criteria**, taking into account factors such as **budget constraints**, **resource availability**, and **compliance with school policies**. The goal is to encourage innovative ideas that benefit the educational environment and address the interests and well-being of the entire school community.

51 For more information, visit [Empaville](#)

School Participatory Budgeting and Youth Civic Engagement

The implementation of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) in Italy primarily focuses on secondary schools. This aligns with the curriculum and learning objectives at this level, providing students with valuable opportunities to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic engagement skills through real-world experiences in democratic decision-making. Research findings demonstrate that students who engage in school governance during their formative years exhibit a greater propensity for political activism and trust in democratic institutions as adults⁵². Secondary schools thus offer a unique setting for participatory governance, providing opportunities for civic and political socialisation⁵³. Despite this potential, young people often face **exclusion from meaningful decision-making processes**, contributing to disengagement from civic life⁵⁴. Declining youth participation in conventional politics raises concerns about representative democracies. This **disengagement** often stems from social exclusion, with vulnerable youth encountering barriers in education, employment, and democratic participation.⁵⁵

In today's democracies, young people navigate a complex societal context marked by financial instability, social fragmentation, and rising populist sentiments.⁵⁶ These challenges call for a democratic renewal, starting with authentic participatory decision-making in schools. Bartlett and Schugurensky⁵⁷ highlight that schools often operate under three restrictive scenarios: **top-down decision-making, tokenistic**

52 See Menezes, I., 'Participation Experiences and Civic Concepts, Attitudes and Engagement: Implications for Civic Education Projects', *European Educational Research Journal*, 2.3 (2003), 430–445.

53 See Keating, A., Benton, T., and Kerr, D., 'Perceived School Characteristics Fostering Civic Engagement Among Adolescents: A Multilevel Analysis', *Frontiers in Political Science* (2021) doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.611824; and Damiani, V., Caponera, E., Losito, B., Palmerio, L., and Agrusti, G., 'Young People's Civic Engagement in Italy: Evidence on Grade 8 Students from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2016', *Large-scale Assessments in Education*, 12 (2024), 36 doi.org/10.1186/s40536-024-00229-4.

54 See Wall, J., *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

55 Ayllón, S., & Nollenberger, N., *Multiple Exclusions: Civic and Political Disengagement of Vulnerable Youth in the European Union*, *Academia.edu*. Available at: academia.edu/41078295/Multiple_Exclusions_Civic_and_Political_Disengagement_of_Vulnerable_Youth_in_the_European_Union (Accessed 20 November 2024).

56 Nicolaidis, K., 'The Third Democratic Transformation: From European to Planetary Politics', *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2024). kalypsonicolaidis.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/J-of-Common-Market-Studies-2024-Nicolaidis-The-Third-Democratic-Transformation-From-European-to-Planetary-Politics.pdf [accessed 19 November 2024].

57 Bartlett, T., & Schugurensky, D. (2024). Introduction: school participatory budgeting and citizenship education—where are we at?. In *Educating for Democracy* (pp. 1–22). Edward Elgar Publishing., p. 2. doi.org/10.4337/9781035302178.00008.

consultations, or limited participation of ‘the champions’, a small group of student leaders. SPB seeks to address these issues by creating inclusive, democratic decision-making processes that amplify student voices and extend civic engagement to all. Participatory budgeting empowers students, challenging the notion of youth political immaturity and fostering their active participation in school governance. This hands-on approach not only prepares students to be engaged citizens but also shapes their civic attitudes and behaviours, laying the foundation for lifelong democratic participation. Future research and case studies are vital to assessing SPB’s broader impact on youth engagement and its potential to drive democratic renewal.

Glossary of terms and concepts on School Participatory Budgeting

Concept	Definition
Participatory Budgeting (PB)	A cyclical, institutionalized deliberative process where citizens collaboratively identify community needs, propose solutions, and decide how to allocate public resources to manage common goods democratically. (BiPart)
School Participatory Budgeting (SPB)	A participatory process where school communities (students, teachers, parents, and staff) decide how to allocate a portion of the school budget by proposing, developing, and voting on projects that address school needs and priorities.
Participatory Democracy (PD) and Deliberative Democracy (DD)	Participatory democracy promotes citizens’ direct involvement in decision-making, allowing them to influence policies through tools like referendums and participatory budgeting. As Dahl explains, it ensures government responsiveness to the needs of the population. Conversely, deliberative democracy focuses on rational dialogue and the exchange of views to reach informed, collective decisions. Habermas defines it as a communicative process where free and equal individuals discuss common issues to make shared decisions.
Activation – Participation	A top-down process where participants are mobilised to engage in activities without real influence over decisions, often orchestrated by those in power to create an appearance of inclusivity without genuine participation. In SPB, it refers to the involvement of students and school communities in proposing and selecting projects without a strong and genuine emancipatory power.

Empowerment – Engagement	A bottom-up process enabling participants to gain genuine agency and decision-making power, challenging existing hierarchies and fostering self-determination. In SPB contexts, active and meaningful involvement of the grassroots in the process that allows participants to influence outcomes and the process to be self-sustained with cyclical SPB experiences.
Cyclicity	Cyclicity in the context of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) refers to the ongoing, iterative nature of the process, where each cycle of participation builds on previous experience, feedback, and outcomes. This cyclical approach ensures that the process is not a one-time event but rather a continuous and evolving practice that adapts over time to better meet the needs of the school community.
Institutionalisation	In the case of SPB, institutionalisation could involve embedding participatory practices within the formal governance structures of schools, thereby ensuring that these processes are sustained over time and integrated into the school's educational culture. By institutionalising SPB, schools can create a formal framework for student, teacher, and parent involvement in decision-making, fostering consistency and long-term impact. However, it is also essential to consider the balance between formal institutionalisation and the grassroots-driven nature of SPB, as the empowerment and emancipation of the school community remains crucial to maintaining the authenticity and vibrancy of the process.
SPB Practitioner	An individual responsible for implementing the SPB process, often from civil society organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who collaborates with the school community to manage the process, providing resources, expertise, and training for successful implementation.
Champion	SPB initiator that dedicates strong individual effort in advocating for and driving the initiative.
Charter of Participation	A public statute that establishes the rules, structures, procedures and bodies governing the SPB process, ensuring fairness, transparency, and adherence to democratic principles. It serves as a guideline that all members of the school community are expected to follow throughout the process.
Steering Committee (SC)	An executive body within the SPB process, consisting of representatives of students, teachers, staff, parents and possibly the school principal, tasked with organising and coordinating the participatory process. The Steering Committee does not directly assess proposals or make decisions but ensures the smooth operation of the process. Its composition and specific responsibilities are defined by the Charter of Participation.

Technical Committee (TC)	A group of technical experts, school staff, and community members tasked with evaluating, approving, or co-designing project proposals based on feasibility, legal, and economic criteria. Its composition and specific responsibilities are defined by the Charter of Participation.
Approval Voting	A voting system where participants can vote for as many proposals as they like, with the proposals receiving the highest number of votes being selected for implementation.

Fig. 4 Glossary of terms and concepts on School Participatory Budgeting, Bipart, 2024.

In conclusion, the desk research carried out in the first chapters provided an overview of the key concepts and characteristics of the Italian educational context, while setting the stage for understanding how SPB can be integrated into the Italian context and its potential to enhance democratic practices in schools.

The next section will delve into the methodology and case studies, applying these theoretical insights to examine how SPB is being implemented in Italian schools and its impact.

Methodology

Methodological framework and research questions

To investigate the specific dimensions of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) addressed in this paper, a methodological framework has been developed that draws upon existing scholarship.

In particular, most of these research premises build upon the foundational work conducted by Stortone, S., and Biacca, E., as presented in their chapter, *Different Designs, Different Outcomes: Lessons from School Participatory Budgeting in Italy*, included in *Educating for Democracy: The Case for Participatory Budgeting in Schools*⁵⁸. Their study represents the first comprehensive academic investigation into Italian School PB, offering valuable insights and a solid groundwork for understanding this innovative practice.

By integrating their findings, this research complements and expands upon their analysis, allowing this paper to focus on specific dimensions and aspects that warrant further exploration, without reiterating discussions already addressed in detail in their work.

This study adopts an investigative research paradigm to explore the intricate dynamics, inherent challenges, and latent potential of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) initiatives within the Italian educational landscape. The methodological framework is designed to cultivate a **qualitative understanding** of the selected five case studies, employing a multifaceted approach that triangulates **semi-structured interviews** with comprehensive **desk research**, integrating a transversal investigation of the case studies through the **SWOT analysis**.

58 Stortone, S., & Biacca, E. (2024). Different designs, different outcomes: lessons from school participatory budgeting in Italy. In *Educating for Democracy* (pp. 230–249). Edward Elgar Publishing. doi.org/10.4337/9781035302178.00021.

The overarching objective is to discern salient variables and recurring patterns that transcend diverse contextual realities and governance structures, while simultaneously acknowledging the specific constraints and unique opportunities presented by each individual case. This will enable a **cross-cutting analysis**, grounded in the criteria used for selecting the case studies and complemented by newly gathered data, which will ultimately either refute or confirm the initial assumptions made.

This investigation is guided by five principal **research questions**, each designed to illuminate a critical facet of SPB implementation:

- 1 What are the intrinsic **strengths** and **weaknesses** that characterise SPB processes in Italy?
- 2 What **external opportunities** exist that could foster the further development and enhance the scalability of these initiatives?
- 3 Conversely, what **challenges** and **potential threats** impede their long-term sustainability and efficacy?
- 4 To what extent do these initiatives embody **democratic principles** and promote inclusive governance practices within the school environment?
- 5 Finally, what **best practices** and invaluable **lessons** can be gleaned from the diverse array of school contexts in which SPB has been implemented, offering insights for future endeavours?

The desk research phase involved collecting and analysing secondary data from official SPB documentation, public records on budget allocations and participation rates, and media or online sources like articles and videos. This approach focused on key metrics such as normative frameworks, participation rates, budget sizes, deliberative methods, and partnerships, providing essential context for case selection and framing the research questions.

The interviews encompassed diverse participants, including five student representatives from different schools, a school principal, a local association, a foundation, and facilitators from organisations taking part in SPBs implementations, like BiPart, ensuring a broader range of stakeholder perspectives on SPB processes. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for exploring themes, with transcripts coded for governance, inclusiveness, challenges, and innovation. This data was systematically analysed using a SWOT framework to enable comparative insights across cases.

All necessary legal procedures regarding authorisations and releases for interviews with adults were followed: all participants were required to sign an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without penalties. The consent form assured confidentiality, with all data anonymised, securely stored, and designated for destruction after five years. Quotations or insights were processed to prevent identification, and participants granted explicit permission for audio recordings and the use of anonymised data in research findings. Contact information for project leaders was provided to address any participant inquiries, ensuring transparency and adherence to ethical research standards. No compensation was provided in exchange for the interviews.

This study encountered certain limitations, including difficulties in securing responses from teachers and parents owing to bureaucratic impediments and challenges in obtaining informed consent. While five student representatives secured their interviews, all of them happened to be male. This outcome reflects the absence of female students who were available or willing to participate in the interviews at the time of the study. While the selection process prioritised gender balance, active roles, and unique insights, this limitation introduces a bias and an imbalance that must be acknowledged.

Furthermore, the geographically circumscribed sample of five case studies restricts the generalisability of findings to the national context. Pandemic-related exigencies also exerted an influence, impacting participation dynamics and project execution in two of the examined cases.

Key Dimensions of School Participatory Budgeting in Italy

In the context of this research on SPB in Italian upper secondary schools, various dimensions have been explored and categorised within an analytical framework **to identify, interpret and analyse the SPB practices** from multiple perspectives. These dimensions also highlight key aspects of SPB process implementation, such as the mode of deliberative processes, innovation, student engagement and empowerment, funding, external partnerships, and dissemination:

- **The type of deliberative processes** (in-person, online, or hybrid) is a central criterion to understand how students interact and participate. In Italy, where schools are strongly influenced by traditional educational models, the introduction of online

or hybrid methods can present both challenges and opportunities for renewal. The chosen modality also reflects governance dynamics, as it can shape the accessibility and inclusiveness of the deliberative process, adapting to students' needs and the availability of technological resources.

- **Bottom-up and top-down processes** distinguish the degree of autonomy granted to students and the centrality of their involvement. Bottom-up models, where students play a leading role in initiating the process, setting priorities and managing the budget, align with principles of participatory democracy and empowerment, as previously defined. Conversely, top-down processes, though less common, may reflect greater control by school institutions or external entities. Understanding this distinction is crucial to evaluating the SPB's effectiveness as a tool for democratic engagement.
- **The incorporation of innovative methods**, such as interactive simulations (e.g., Empaville) or dedicated digital platforms, is essential to enrich the educational experience and align it with modern forms of interaction. By utilising technologies with which students are familiar, these innovative tools modernise the participatory budgeting process, fostering creativity and active student engagement in decision-making.
- **Student activation and empowerment levels** are measured through participation rates and the degree of involvement in decision-making. Student mobilisation and a heightened awareness of their role in the democratic process are crucial for successful SPB implementation. Schools with high levels of student participation and empowerment tend to develop a more cohesive school community where students not only understand budgeting concepts but also feel responsible for resource management.
- **The budget size and its provenance** are equally significant. Differentiating between **high** (above five thousand euros) and **low** (below five thousand euros), budgets offers insights into the financial resources available to schools. Additionally, the budget's origin – whether internal (from the school) or external (e.g., EU-funded projects) – influences the project's long-term sustainability and replicability. External funding may come with specific objectives and limitations, while internal budgets might allow greater spending flexibility.
- **Partnerships with external organisations**, such as NGOs, international bodies, or local actors, are another crucial aspect. These collaborations enable schools to expand their resources and expertise, strengthening the community dimension of SPB and creating opportunities for more ambitious and synergistic projects.
- **The type of school**, that can be high school, technical institute, or vocational school, reflects structural and pedagogical differences that impact the SPB experience and outcomes. Schools with a more theoretical tradition, like high schools, may face different challenges in the designing phase compared to those with a practical approach.

- **The geographical context** (North vs. South Italy) plays a significant role in the analysis, as different Italian regions present diverse socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural conditions. These factors can influence resource availability, student participation, and collaboration with external partners.
- **Dissemination and promotion of the process**, encompassing media use, editorial planning, seminars, and conferences, are essential to ensure that the SPB experience reaches not only participating students but also the wider school community and society at large. Increased visibility of the project helps raise awareness and fosters cultural change towards greater civic participation.
- Finally, whether the SPB is a **one-off initiative or a repeated experience** directly impacts its sustainability and its potential to transform school culture. Repeated experiences offer continuous improvement opportunities, fostering a tradition of participation and collective resource management that can become deeply rooted within schools and the broader educational community.

The case studies selected for this analysis were examined through the lens of these dimensions, offering a structured framework for observation. Notably, these case studies are primarily concentrated in northern Italy, reflecting a geographical trend in the adoption of such initiatives. In most instances, they represent pilot experiments that have been implemented only once, highlighting their exploratory nature. Despite this, the case studies exhibit diverse characteristics, varying in terms of the type of school involved, the design and execution of the process, the methods employed, the allocation and management of budgets, and the overall typology of the initiatives. This diversity provides a rich basis for understanding the potential and limitations of such approaches within the educational context.

Below is a summary of the principal characteristics of the case studies, categorised according to the dimensions previously outlined. These characteristics serve as an overview and will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

Type of deliberative processes (in-person, online, or hybrid)	Hybrid: Cremona, Vittorio Emanuele II, Crespi Zanussi, Filangieri In-person only: N/A Online only: N/A
Bottom-up or top-down processes	Top-down: Vittorio Emanuele II, Zanussi, Filangieri Bottom-up: Crespi Hybrid: Cremona

Innovative methods (e.g. Empaville, digital platforms, social media, business model)	Digital platforms: Cremona, Crespi, Zanussi, Filangieri Social Media: Cremona, Crespi, Zanussi Social Business Model: Crespi Empaville: Cremona, Zanussi Unique methodology: Vittorio Emanuele II
Levels of activation and empowerment	High activation: Cremona, Crespi, Zanussi Medium activation: Vittorio Emanuele II Low activation: Filangieri High empowerment: Cremona, Crespi, Zanussi Medium empowerment: Vittorio Emanuele II, Filangieri Low empowerment: N/A
Budget size and provenance	High budget (>5.000€): Cremona, Vittorio Emanuele II Medium budget (=5.000€): Crespi, Filangieri Low budget (<5.000€): Zanussi Internal school budget: Vittorio Emanuele II External budget: Crespi, Zanussi, Filangieri Both internal and external: Cremona
Partnerships with external organisations	With partnerships: Cremona, Zanussi, Filangieri Without partnerships: Vittorio Emanuele II, Crespi
School types	High Schools: Cremona, Crespi Technical Institutes: Cremona (Zappa), Vittorio Emanuele II, Filangieri Professional Institutes: Zanussi
Geographical context	North: Cremona (Milan) Vittorio Emanuele II (Bergamo) Crespi (Busto Arsizio) Zanussi (Pordenone) South: Filangieri (Treviso)
Dissemination and promotion	Well promoted and structured communication: Cremona, Zanussi, Filangieri Basic communication: Vittorio Emanuele II, Crespi Low dissemination and poorly structured communication: N/A
One-off or repeated	One-off: Cremona, Crespi, Zanussi, Filangieri Repeated: Vittorio Emanuele II

Fig.5 Principal characteristics of the case studies, Bipart, 2024.

SPB case-studies analysis

The five selected cases exemplify pivotal approaches to exploring the dynamics, potentialities, and challenges inherent in applying participatory budgeting within educational settings.

These experiences, selected through the criteria as previously outlined, are drawn from Stortone and Biacca's findings (2024) and will be further illustrated through interviews that offer a more nuanced and profound insight into the obstacles and opportunities these initiatives present.

Case-studies

- **Case-study 1: "Cremona"**
(Milan) – Decide 4 your School 2017
- **Case-study 2: "Vittorio Emanuele II"**
(Bergamo) – 2018
- **Case-study 3: "Crespi"**
(Busto Arsizio) – Sbilanciamoci 2019
- **Case-study 4: "Zanussi"**
(Pordenone) – Ripartire Project 2020
- **Case-study 5: "Filangieri"**
(Trebisacce) – Ripartire Project 2021

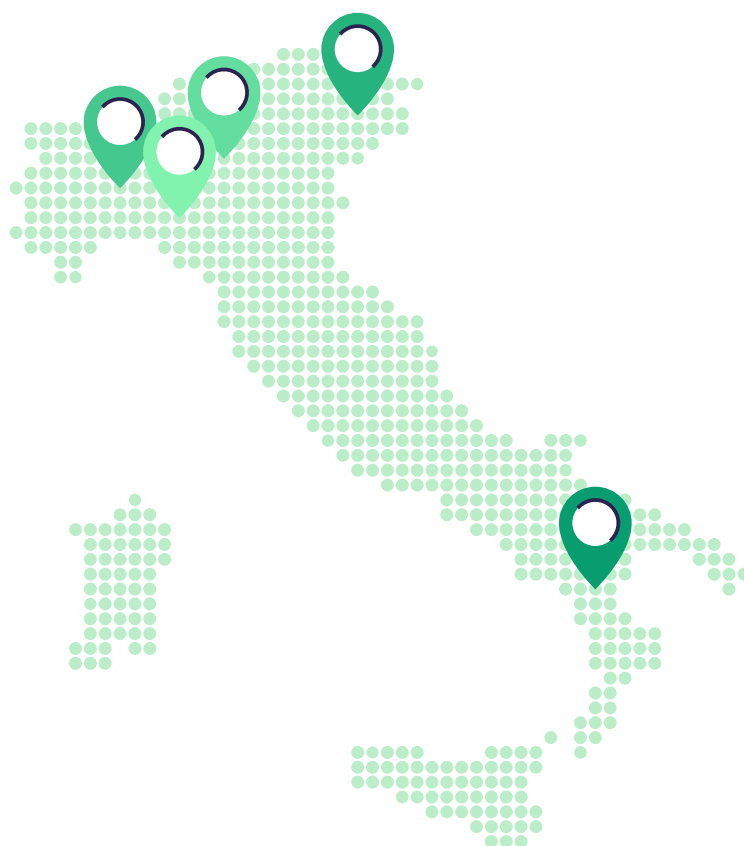


Fig.6 Five School Participatory Budgeting case studies in Italy, Bipart, 2024.



Case-study 1: Cremona

The SPB at the *Cremona* Scientific High School and the *Zappa* Technical Economic Institute (hereinafter *Cremona*) in Milan in 2017 stands out as the first SPB case in Italy and for the near-complete adoption of the methodology proposed by BiPart. This case has been selected for its **hybrid, partially bottom-up participatory process**, combining **in-person and digital tools** like Empaville and social media. It features **high student activation and empowerment**, a **high budget** sourced from both internal and external funds, **strong external partnerships**, and **effective dissemination strategies**.

The SPB initiative originated from a former student of Cremona, who, during an internship at BiPart, proposed the idea to the principal, who promptly endorsed it.

The initial phase featured a hybrid approach, combining in-person training sessions with the use of a digital platform, a requirement for accessing European funds. The process, launched on the 16th of March, 2017, and concluded on the 4th of June of the same year, can be divided into three main phases:

- **Training and preparation:** Sixty teachers and 138 class representatives participated in training activities, including the role-playing game Empaville, designed to simulate a participatory budgeting process in a fictional context.
- **Proposal and deliberation:** During class assemblies facilitated by the representatives, students developed up to two proposals per class, which were then published online for discussion and evaluation. Assemblies and an Open Day served as crucial moments for dialogue and idea promotion.
- **Voting and implementation:** The final vote took place in a hybrid format (paper and online), with 91% student participation. Winning projects included the refurbishment of internal courtyards and the creation of a recording studio. Thanks to the intervention of the principal, the initial budget of €10,000 was increased to €50,000 to fund additional projects.

The final outcome of the process, celebrated with an official ceremony, contributed to strengthening the participants' sense of belonging within the school community.

Despite the apparent success of the initiative, during the interviews it was revealed that the process presented some critical issues, such as the **controversial management of certain proposals** and the **dependence on the principal's leadership for long-term sustainability**.

For this case, interviews were conducted with the former principal and a former student representative. The following observations reflect their memories seven years after the SPB experience.

The **principal played a pivotal role** in the implementation of the SPB initiative at Cremona, providing clear and proactive leadership that effectively mobilised the school community. Her approach reflected a strategic use of the latitude afforded to school leadership, allowing her to align stakeholders around common objectives and guide the process with purpose. The school principal regarded students' educational paths not as challenges but as vital assets, underscoring the intrinsic value of investing in their development. This perspective emphasised the far-reaching benefits that such investments could bring, not only to the students themselves but to the broader school community.

The former student representative described the experience as 'transformative', highlighting how it introduced them to concepts such as participatory budgeting and co-design, which left a lasting impression. According to him, The initiative fostered **stronger relationships among students, teachers, and administrative staff**, enhancing trust and collaboration within the school community. The Open Day was a key moment where students presented and promoted their proposals, developing skills in **public speaking, promotion, and entrepreneurial thinking** by effectively advocating for their ideas to garner consensus. The representative perceived SPB as more democratic and impactful than traditional student protests such as school occupations, which had occurred at the institute in the past.

Despite its initial success, the SPB initiative in Cremona encountered significant challenges that undermined its effectiveness and long-term sustainability. The process, launched as a **top-down effort** by the principal, was viewed by the former student representative as being excessively focused on the principal herself, lacking the grass-roots engagement necessary for broader student empowerment. For example, in an effort to expedite implementation, the principal streamlined bureaucratic procedures and sought informal approval from representative bodies, **bypassing a formal vote in the school council**. While this pragmatic approach was effective in the short term due to its adaptability in driving the project forward, it could also result in further centralisation of decision-making power in the hands of the school principal.

Furthermore, the **lack of a cyclicity** hindered the initiative's ability to generate lasting impacts. SPB in Cremona remained a singular event, discontinued in subsequent

years due to a combination of external circumstances, including the pandemic, the retirement of the principal, and the lack of interest from the new administration. The process's dependence on the principal's leadership further exposed its fragility, as **it might have failed to cultivate a sense of ownership** among students or establish an autonomous structure capable of ensuring continuity. Consequently, the initiative highlighted the critical need for mechanisms that both empower participants and safeguard the sustainability of participatory practices in educational contexts.

The budget management also raised concerns: the initial budget allocated of €10,000 was increased to €50,000 to fund additional projects deemed relevant by the school principal, even though they were not the winners of the voting phase. This intervention reinforced the centrality of leadership, thus reducing the power of collective deliberation and the significance of the selection process. Finally, **parental involvement was minimal**, as acknowledged by the principal, which further reduced the broader school community's engagement in the process.

Conclusions

The SPB at Cremona exemplifies both the **potential** and the **fragility** of participatory initiatives in educational settings. Its success relied on the **visionary leadership** of the principal, who secured necessary funding, and fostered a collaborative atmosphere. **The process empowered students**, fostering skills in public speaking, entrepreneurship, and co-design, and strengthened trust within the school community. Nevertheless, this **top-down approach** revealed inherent limitations: **it failed to embed participatory practices as a lasting, cyclical component of the school's governance**. This lack of structural continuity underscores the necessity of institutionalising participatory processes beyond the leadership of individual 'champions'.

The case also highlights the challenges of ensuring inclusivity and equity in participatory practices. While the principal's decision to expand the budget made it possible to fund additional projects, it inadvertently undermined the democratic selection process, raising questions about the **balance between leadership initiative and collective decision-making**. Moreover, minimal involvement of parents limited the broader impact and sustainability of the initiative. To ensure the longevity and efficacy of participatory budgeting in schools, future efforts must focus on embedding cyclical frameworks, fostering grassroots engagement, and promoting a shared sense of ownership among all members of the school community.



Case-study 2: Vittorio Emanuele II

The SPB implemented at the Vittorio Emanuele II Institute in Bergamo, has been selected for its **top-down approach** with a **unique methodology**, **medium levels of student activation and empowerment**, a **high internal budget**, and the **repeated implementation** of the SPB process despite having only **basic communication strategies** and **no external partnerships**.

It represents a **complex case study**, characterised by **autonomous implementation** and **layered internal dynamics** that jeopardised its effectiveness and sustainability. Unlike other examples, such as the Cremona case, the SPB at Vittorio Emanuele II displayed distinctive features and a unique longevity in the Italian context but also revealed some critical issues emerging from the information-gathering process and interviews with two former school representatives.

Launched in 2017, the SPB aimed to involve **students** and **parents** in the transparent management of **voluntary contributions** collected by the school. Although initially promoted as an innovative and transparent feature during Open Days, the project underwent four editions marked by suspensions and resumptions.

From 2017 to 2024, the budget allocated to the SPB varied from €15,000 in the early editions to €10,000 in the latest one, with a progressive reduction in family contributions over the years. The project was suspended during the 2019/20 and 2021/22 school years due to the pandemic. In 2024/25, it faced its final suspension, being deemed inconclusive, with no further explanation from the school. Attempts to obtain clarification from the administration and SPB coordinators have been unsuccessful.

The process included the following features:

- **No Preliminary Voting:** All proposals submitted went directly to the final vote without a preliminary filtering phase (a distinctive characteristic compared to other models).
- **Steering Committee:** Composed of six students, four parents, two teachers, the School Principal (with voting power), the Chair of the School Council, and the Administrative Director (DSGA) in a consultative capacity.
- **Parent Involvement:** Parents were included both in the organisation and voting processes, broadening participation (a distinctive feature compared to other cases).
- **Primarily Online Participation:** Google Forms were used for proposal submission and voting.

The introduction of the SPB at Vittorio Emanuele II was met with considerable enthusiasm, serving as an opportunity to actively involve **both students and parents** in the management of shared resources.

Among the most notable initiatives were the renovation of the Yellow Room and recurring courses in self-defence and English, which continued in subsequent years. The formation of a Steering Committee played a key role in ensuring a degree of transparency and representation throughout the process. Additionally, the use of digital tools, such as Google Forms, proved essential in facilitating participation, making the process accessible to the school community of over 1,200 students. The initiative was initially characterised by high participation by students and parents, with the early projects benefiting from budgets of €15,000, **all funded by family contributions**.

The SPB initiative at Vittorio Emanuele II, despite its early promise, faced **significant limitations** due to its **top-down implementation and a lack of organic participation**. The principal, in an effort to kick-start the process, personally intervened by encouraging students to run for the committee and submit proposals, after no candidates had come forward. This decision reflected the broader centralisation of the project, which led to a **break in communication between the leadership and the broader student body**. The repeated presentation of the same proposals year after year further underscored the absence of innovation, prompting the principal to amend the regulations.

The principal's management style, characterised by a structured and directive approach, was perceived by some as **leaving limited room for open discussion**, which may have contributed to the challenges in fostering broader engagement. While the project initially sparked enthusiasm, sustaining the momentum proved difficult, and **student participation gradually declined in subsequent years**.

Despite these challenges, the SPB initiative holds potential as a valuable tool for fostering active democratic engagement and shared resource management among students and parents. To revitalise the process and increase its impact, it would be beneficial to engage **external experts to offer methodological support**. Additionally, enhancing the role of class representatives and more using communication tools (e.g. bulletin boards, social media, and WhatsApp groups) more effectively could expand participation and improve the overall effectiveness of the SPB initiative.

The **absence of an integrated participatory culture** presents a considerable challenge. Limited student engagement, combined with the prominent role of the principal and a **decision-making environment that lacks collaboration**, could hinder the long-term sustainability of the SPB. Additionally, the organisational process has been described as demanding and difficult to manage without the active involvement and empowerment of all school stakeholders, further adding to these challenges.

Challenges in information sharing and a **perceived lack of transparency** suggested room for improvement in fostering a collaborative management style. Strained relationships between the principal, teachers, and students, often addressed through informal channels, made it difficult to establish consistent and constructive dialogue. Limited opportunities for idea expression and a focus on formal participation, which some viewed as insufficiently inclusive, risked reducing the SPB to a **symbolic exercise**, potentially contributing to **feelings of distrust and disengagement among students and their parents**.

Conclusions

The case of Vittorio Emanuele II illustrates how a participatory process, even when designed with **forward-thinking intentions**, can struggle without a foundation of inclusivity and leadership committed to open dialogue. Although the SPB initially sparked enthusiasm, its impact was constrained by a **top-down leadership style** that limited opportunities for innovation and student involvement. **Over time, the process fell short of establishing a sustainable participatory culture**, with declining family contributions in the post-pandemic period further challenging its long-term viability.

Despite its potential as an educational tool, the SPB's impact was diminished by **internal challenges, lack of continuity, and interruptions**.

For future initiatives, it is essential to establish a more inclusive, dialogue-driven culture that ensures continuous participation from all, allowing the project to evolve into a lasting and meaningful practice within the school community.



5.3 Case study3: Crespi

The SPB experience at the Crespi Institute, launched in 2019 in Busto Arsizio, was included in the analysis due to its **fully bottom-up process, high activation and empowerment levels, use of digital platforms and social media, a medium external budget**, and the integration of an **innovative social business model**, although it also faced some vulnerabilities, such as a **limited communication effort** and **no external partnerships**.

It stands out for **student self-organisation** and **technical innovation**. Integrated into the Alternanza Scuola-Lavoro (ASL, see the glossary at par.1.2), the project aimed to create a social enterprise capable of generating value for the schools involved, promoting **innovation, sustainability, and the enhancement of the common good**. The initial phase involved third-year classes in proposing ideas, while the entire school participated in the voting. Training, managed by BiPart, included 12 hours in the classroom and 28 hours dedicated to project implementation. A group of ten volunteer students managed the project autonomously, developing a **high-performance voting platform** and promoting the projects through **dedicated social media channels**. However, despite the enthusiasm and creativity demonstrated, the project revealed significant **shortcomings in the implementation and monitoring phases**.

According to a former student from the organising committee, the school's structural challenges **hindered the realisation of the voted projects**, which **seem to have remained unfinished**. Despite these difficulties, which could not have been confirmed or refuted by the school, the experience showcased SPB's potential to foster active participation and student creativity, while highlighting the need for greater support to ensure the success of such initiatives. The considerations derived from the interview are detailed below.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the SPB at Crespi consisted in the enthusiasm and the autonomy displayed by the students, who took **full ownership of the entire process**. A group of ten motivated and creative students adopted a **horizontal management model**, collectively assigning themselves distinct roles and responsibilities. This self-managed working group demonstrated a sense of **proactivity and coordination**, with each member contributing according to their strengths. Notably, the technical project became the standout feature of the experience. It was conceived and executed by a self-taught student who developed a secure and anonymous digital voting platform from scratch. The student regarded this accomplishment as a significant milestone, referring to it as a defining *masterpiece* that played a decisive

role in shaping his future career choices. This project epitomised the **potential for student-driven innovation** within participatory processes, offering valuable insights into the intersection of creativity, technology, and democratic engagement.

The platform incentivised participation by publishing real-time voting statistics on the high school's social media, promoting **healthy competition among classes** and achieving a **remarkable participation rate**. The initiative also involved students in defining school priorities, generating practical and relevant proposals such as purchasing a printer, perceived as an essential need. This process strengthened the sense of belonging through a collective endeavour.

Despite the initial enthusiasm and organisational success, the SPB at Crespi encountered significant shortcomings in the post-voting phase, which compromised the overall effectiveness of the project. Although the process itself exceeded expectations in terms of participation and planning, **none of the selected projects were ultimately implemented**, according to the student interviewed. This limitation to follow through on the initiatives selected in a vote highlighted a critical gap between the planning and the realisation stages, underscoring the importance of ensuring that decisions made during participatory processes are effectively carried out.

This was partly attributed to **limited support during the implementation phase**, highlighting an opportunity to enhance accountability within the school leadership. While the school principal played an active role in the technical committee early on, certain proposals were deprioritised or deemed less relevant, which may have unintentionally diminished the students' sense of empowerment and led to some tensions within the committee. Moreover, the **distribution of workload presented challenges**, as the student tasked with developing the digital platform worked largely independently for an extended period, underscoring the need for more balanced collaboration to support the project's success.

The Crespi experience highlighted SPB's potential as an educational and participatory tool capable of promoting **practical skills** and a **democratic approach to resource management**. The student emphasised that, **with an organisational structure and greater institutional support, the SPB could become sustainable and replicable in other schools**, emphasising the importance of having adequate support systems in place.

The participatory approach has the potential to educate students on shared resource management, providing them with transferable skills useful for their future. The

possibility of replicating the initiative could also be strengthened by **using existing digital resources** and **involving external experts**, reducing the workload on individual students and facilitating the process.

The main threat to the SPB at Crespi was the **absence of a structured system** to ensure the implementation of the selected projects and the sustainability of the process. Another significant challenge may have been the hesitation toward innovation on the part of the school principal, whose cautious approach to the changes introduced by the SPB, described by the interviewees, may have constrained its transformational potential. **This reluctance hindered the integration of the process** as a recurring and sustainable practice within the school environment.

Conclusions

The SPB experience at Crespi stands out as a unique **example of student self-management and creativity**, highlighting the potential of young people to independently manage meaningful projects. However, the initiative also underscored the importance of **responsible leadership** and a **structured support system** to ensure **long-term success** in such endeavours. Despite the challenges encountered, the SPB left a **positive legacy**, demonstrating that, with proper support, students can significantly contribute to school governance. The ability of students to take the initiative and propose innovative solutions confirmed the effectiveness of an approach that values active participation. Yet, it became clear that without adequate monitoring and accountability, such initiatives risk becoming isolated events, lacking sustainable impact.

The Crespi experience reveals the **necessity of balancing student autonomy with institutional support to allow projects to evolve sustainably**. A system that fosters genuine and informed participation must include shared responsibility structures that **monitor progress** and **ensure that objectives are met**.



Case study 4: Zanussi

The SPB experience at the Zanussi Institute in Pordenone was selected for its **hybrid, top-down process** using **digital tools** like Empaville and social media, with **high student activation and empowerment** despite operating with a **low external budget**. The school also established **strong partnerships** and **effectively promoted** the SPB process.

The process, coordinated by the local partner RagazzInGioco Foundation⁵⁹, represents an excellent example of **educational innovation** and **participatory management**. Zanussi was the first school to experiment with the SPB cycle within the **RIPARTIRE project**, from January to April 2021. The process proceeded smoothly without major delays, thanks to collaboration with the local partner and the fact that most activities were conducted in person, as the region was less affected by COVID-19 compared to other areas in Italy at the time. During the voting phase, participation slightly increased, with 229 students, about 35% of the total, casting 275 votes for the five finalist projects. The winning project, Il Paninaro, involved creating a food service for students and won 135 votes, from nearly 60% of participants. Below are the observations collected from interviews with two operators from RagazzInGioco Foundation, representing the **SPB practitioners** who coordinated the entire process.

The initial phase of the RIPARTIRE project was marked by the creation of the **Charter of Participation**, a reference document serving as a school constitution for participatory governance, developed in collaboration with BiPart. This charter established shared rules to ensure transparency and inclusiveness, addressing organisational issues that arose during the process.

Participation was actively encouraged through a **comprehensive, multichannel communication strategy** that effectively utilised various platforms, including social media, posters placed in school bathrooms, word of mouth, and WhatsApp group chats. This inclusive approach facilitated a remarkable level of engagement, resulting in the collection of **22 proposals** within a few weeks. **Teachers played a crucial role** not only in the initial ideation phase but also throughout the implementation of

⁵⁹ Founded in 2013 in Pordenone, Italy, the RagazzinGioco Foundation focuses on educational projects for pre-adolescents and adolescents aged 10 to 16, particularly those facing challenges in their educational and developmental paths. Operating primarily in the Province of Pordenone and the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, the foundation offers after-school programs, educational workshops, and summer activities to support students' growth and integration.

the projects. Their involvement was particularly significant, as they recognised the need to reignite student participation, especially after the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, which had significantly limited personal freedoms and interaction within the school community.

Collaboration between students and teachers was particularly evident during the **intensive training** integrated into the **citizenship education curriculum**. Each third-year class received 12 hours of theoretical training, simulating an SPB process through the Empaville game, and an additional 28 hours for proposal development, fostering a strong sense of responsibility and creativity among students. Additionally, the Foundation's Scientific Committee developed a set of criteria for evaluating project participants, **assigning a final grade for the citizenship education discipline**.

The winning project, *Il Paninaro*, was an emblematic example of the process's adaptability. This project, which aimed to introduce a school food service, faced numerous challenges related to hygiene regulations and permissions. However, thanks to the determination of the SPB practitioners and the coordinating teacher, the project was carried out at no financial cost, allocating resources to fund the second-place project, the construction of school lockers.

The **creative management of resources** and **flexibility in adapting to unforeseen circumstances** demonstrated the educational and practical value of SPB as a tool for shared resource management. The final phase of the process strengthened **students' sense of belonging**, with a positive impact reflected in subsequent years through increased number of candidates for class and school representative positions.

Despite its achievements, the Zanussi experience highlighted some **structural challenges**. The complex bureaucratic management, especially during the implementation of the *Il Paninaro project*, required significant organisational commitment and effort from all stakeholders.

The initial decision to limit the SPB to third-year classes excluded part of the school community, creating partial engagement that was only overcome by extending activities to other classes in extracurricular settings and by broadening voting eligibility to include all classes. Additionally, the **principal's presence on the technical committee sparked debate**, although her role ultimately proved positive.

Tight **timelines posed another problem**, with only five weeks available for the final phases of the process. This **organisational pressure**, amplified by the **pandemic context** and the consequent need for **in-progress adjustments**, risked compromising the experience's quality, demanding **extraordinary commitment from all stakeholders**.

The experience demonstrated that SPB could become a powerful educational tool, capable of teaching students about democracy, shared management, and active citizenship, despite challenges posed by a **context of educational poverty** and **global pandemic restrictions**. The model developed at Zanussi touched on fundamental pedagogical aspects such as school governance, democracy, participation, and transparency.

The project also strengthened students' sense of belonging to the school, transforming it into a place perceived as inclusive and participatory. This experience created a replicable model, provided that continuous structural support is available to ensure sustainability and autonomy, making it **independent of third-party organisations or external projects** by integrating the SPB process into the school governance structure.

Conclusions

The SPB at Zanussi illustrates the significant impact participatory governance can have on a school's culture **through strong partnerships**. By actively engaging students, staff, and the external partners, the initiative has fostered a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration. The RagazzInGioco Foundation has played a crucial role in supporting this process, serving as a **strategic partner in introducing innovation** into the educational system. **By offering expertise and resources, the Foundation has facilitated the implementation and replication of participatory models, helping to disseminate these practices to other schools.** Also the teachers' role was crucial to the initiative's success.



Case study 5: Filangeri

The SPB at Filangeri Institute in Trebisacce was chosen for its **top-down, in-person process** with **medium empowerment but low activation**. It used **digital platforms** and **external partnerships** to support a **medium external budget** and demonstrated **well-structured promotion** despite being located in a **less resourced southern context**.

Conducted as part of the RIPARTIRE project by the local partner Passaggi Association⁶⁰ the SPB took place in a context marked by **social challenges** and **difficulties in school dynamics**. Students involved in the Steering Committee showed great enthusiasm, organising a general online assembly, presenting the process, and creating an explanatory video to engage the school community. However, these efforts did not lead to significant participation: only 68 students voted in the first round, choosing from ten proposals, while only 48 students participated in the final vote, less than 12% of the total. One factor that may have contributed to the low engagement was a conflict that emerged during the second phase of the process. The **school principal**, despite not being part of the Technical Committee, **imposed the removal of the most-voted proposal** in the first round, the *Relax Zone*, which involved transforming an empty classroom into a space for socialising and relaxation, deeming it trivial and unsuitable. Eventually, despite all, the winning project was the *Green Tower*, a green artistic installation designed to raise awareness about sustainability, which received only 29 votes out of 48 in the final round.

Despite the **low level of participation**, this experience was appreciated for the **intense participation dynamics** it generated among students, both positive and negative. The initiative also attracted the attention of a major Italian newspaper, which reported on the story, highlighting its educational value and impact. Below are the observations collected from interviews with an operator from the Passaggi Association, an **SPB practitioner** who coordinated the process, and a former student representative.

The pandemic required a complete reorganisation of the planned activities, demonstrating the association's adaptability. In particular, tools like Empaville, initially designed for in-person use, were replaced with **video tutorials and online assemblies**

⁶⁰ The Passaggi APS Association, active in Trebisacce, works to combat educational poverty and promote social inclusion through free informal education activities, creative workshops, cultural animation, environmental projects, and gender equality initiatives, collaborating with schools, local institutions, and national networks.

to explain how SPB works. At the same time, the **Charter of Participation**, drafted and shared with all school stakeholders, provided a clear set of rules, though these were not always respected during the process.

Despite the **tense school climate**, students actively participated in the ideation phase, presenting **ten original proposals**. Among these, the **Relax Zone** project, which received the highest number of votes in the first phase, represented a strong desire among students to create communal spaces for school well-being.

The power dynamics between students, teachers, and the principal significantly influenced the progression of the SPB process. The **principal's discretionary decision** to exclude the Relax Zone project and the **absence of negotiation** led students to a **growing sense of disengagement**.

Teachers' support for the process was not consistent. While some were less involved or even uncooperative, others played a key role in motivating students and guiding them through the various stages of the project. These teachers were particularly instrumental in helping students implement their ideas, with those most actively engaged in the process also taking on significant roles in coordinating the final stages of the projects. **Their involvement was essential** for maintaining the momentum and ensuring that the students' contributions were effectively realised.

Despite the challenges and the exclusion of the Relax Zone, the winning project, *Green Tower*, inspired by Milan's Bosco Verticale (Vertical Forest), was a success. *The proposal revitalised a neglected area of the school*, raising awareness within the school community about environmental sustainability and regeneration of common spaces. **The project was implemented and completed a year** later thanks to collaboration among students, teachers, and the principal. This outcome demonstrated how, despite tensions, SPB could lead to concrete and positive changes.

The SPB had a **significant and lasting impact on the students who were most actively involved** in the process. The school representative, deeply influenced by the experience, was inspired to pursue a career in the third sector, engaging in awareness campaigns and youth leadership projects in collaboration with Passaggi. The opportunity to directly participate in decision-making processes, particularly in allocating funds, was a transformative experience that shaped the representative's future career path, highlighting the profound effect that participatory governance

can have on students' personal and professional development. The **Passaggi Association played a crucial role as SPB practitioner and facilitator**, demonstrating management and adaptability skills.

The project highlighted the difficulty of broadly engaging with the school community. The **poor user-friendliness of the digital platform limited access to voting**, with participation dropping from 113 voters in the first phase to 48 in the final round. **The pandemic exacerbated these difficulties**, reducing opportunities for direct interactions and effective promotional activities. However, SPB demonstrated its potential as an educational tool, capable of developing leadership and civic awareness among students. The experience of Green Tower and its long-term impact underscored the value of the process as an example of social and educational innovation.

Conclusions

The SPB at the Filangieri Institute in Trebisacce underscores both the **challenges** and the **potential** inherent in implementing participatory processes within **complex educational settings**. Despite facing significant obstacles, notably educational poverty and an adversarial relational climate, **the initiative demonstrated the transformative power of SPB in enhancing student engagement and fostering awareness on critical issues**, such as environmental concerns through the repurposing of common spaces.

The success of this process can largely be attributed to the **adaptive and professional approach** of the local partner, Passaggi Association, which managed to design and execute a process that left substantial impact on both individual participants and the broader school community.

Thus, the Trebisacce case stands as a testament to **resilience** and **innovation**, offering a valuable example for the replication of similar initiatives in contexts marked by complexity.

Cross-case summary of SPB outcomes

Framework for cross-case analysis

Having examined the implementation of 5 significant SPB in Italian schools on a case-by-case basis, this chapter shifts focus to a cross-case analysis that explores the complexities and opportunities of SPB more broadly. It analyses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified across the five case studies, focusing on seven macro-areas that have shaped the success or failure of these processes: the role of the school principal, student leadership capabilities, participation and communication, organisational and structural support, use of digital tools, financial sustainability, and social and cultural context. The objective is to provide a critical, transversal and synthetic perspective on these experiences. Through this analysis, the chapter seeks to offer insights for developing a more sustainable and replicable SPB model – one that can adapt to diverse school governance systems and territorial contexts in Italy and beyond.

While these criteria initially served as an analytical framework for identification and selection of the key features of SPB processes, evidence from each case study reveals new patterns and connections that were not immediately apparent. Certain aspects emerge as more influential than others, while some prove less significant than expected or appear overly emphasised.

In a snapshot, each case highlighted some distinctive elements:

- **Cremona** demonstrated the **multifaceted power of school principal leadership**, but revealed challenges related to the **lack of financial sustainability** and **process cyclicity**.
- **Vittorio Emanuele II** emphasised the importance of **authentic and cyclical engagement** but also the **limitations of overly centralised management**.

- **Crespi** underscored the critical role of **student empowerment** and **accountability** during the project implementation phase.
- **Zanussi** illustrated how **strategic communication** and the **integration of digital tools** can enhance participation and the success of the process.
- **Filangieri**, despite **relational difficulties**, provided an example of how SPB can **raise awareness** of sensible themes, such as environmental concerns.

Key findings from individual cases

Role of the School Principal

The role of the school principal emerges as a key variable for the success or failure of SPB processes. This figure acts as a community manager within a structurally ambivalent school hierarchy, with significant de jure and de facto responsibilities and authority. When principals empower students by providing support, guidance, and resources and act as facilitators rather than controllers, the process tends to become more inclusive and effective. This empowerment approach can foster more genuine student engagement and encourages active participation. Conversely, hierarchical attitudes, lack of commitment, or overly controlling behaviour by school leadership can stifle participation and discourage students, undermining the SPB's effectiveness. The cases analysed revealed these nuances in principals' behaviour but also highlighted their human dimension. The accounts portray principals as sometimes austere and distant but also as individuals driven by passion and willingness to experiment with new spaces for school democracy, albeit with varying intensity. In the cases of Cremona and Zanussi, the leadership served as catalysts for the initiative, yielding tangible short-term results. However, this centralistic approach proved to be a double-edged sword, particularly in Cremona, where unsustainable budget management rendered the SPB an episodic experience tied to the incumbent principal's will and lacking long-term vision. In other contexts, such as Vittorio Emanuele II and Filangieri, such a concentration of power in the principal's hands created tensions and limited student autonomy, hindering project implementation. Conversely, the Crespi case highlights the potential of student leadership in reducing dependence on the principal and promoting autonomy and continuity. However, this approach requires a structural system to monitor and support the process, including the implementation of winning projects, which was lacking in this case.

Student Leadership Capacity

The creativity and autonomy demonstrated by students in all the cases under analysis, particularly in Crespi and Cremona, highlight the transformative potential of SPB as an educational tool with strong emancipatory power. In these contexts, students developed governance, design, and mobilisation skills, demonstrating proactive leadership aimed at improving their school environment. In contrast, the cases of *Vittorio Emanuele II* and *Filangieri* revealed how limited student empowerment and low levels of involvement hindered the overall effectiveness of the SPB process. These experiences highlight the need to move beyond solely educating students about participation by fostering an environment where their voices are genuinely heard, their ideas are valued, and they are gradually entrusted with meaningful responsibilities. This approach requires shifting away from paternalistic attitudes in favour of collaborative and supportive engagement, which can better nurture student agency and ownership in participatory initiatives. The students interviewed (mainly school representatives, *the usual subjects*) emphasised how the SPB experience positively influenced their personal growth, allowing them to pursue their passions and make informed choices. This experience was described with vivid intensity even years later, suggesting that a structured SPB cycle could have a lasting transformative impact on future generations.

Participation, Communication, and Use of Digital Tools

In all cases a hybrid approach to participation was adopted. Even before the pandemic, online platforms had been used to collect proposals and gather votes. In Crespi, the development of an easy-to-use voting tool seems to have improved both mobilisation and engagement. However, technical issues with digital tools and non-intuitive platforms hindered participation in the contexts such as Filangieri and Vittorio Emanuele II. Adopting consolidated digital tools could enhance accessibility and process management. Multichannel communication strategies, as in the cases of Cremona and Zanussi, expanded school community involvement and amplified the SPB experiences' impact with a spill-over effect, facilitating widespread participation and the transfer of the initiative to other schools, such as Vittorio Emanuele II, which appears to have emulated Cremona's experience. In contrast, limited communication in Filangieri and Vittorio Emanuele II hindered both visibility as well as student and family engagement. Improved communication, combined with digital tools and planned promotional campaigns, could maximise involvement, as showcased in Zanussi.

Organisational and Structural Support

Collaborations with external organisations – such as in the *Zanussi* and *Filangieri* cases – provided valuable methodological guidance, coordination, and resources, greatly enhancing the quality and sustainability of the SPB process. However, the absence of standardised procedures and internal structural support, as seen in *Crespi* and *Vittorio Emanuele II*, poses a significant challenge to the consistent and effective implementation of SPB. Integrating SPB into formal institutional guidelines and establishing national support networks could help bridge this gap and promote more consistent practices across schools. At the same time, heavy reliance on third-sector organisations raises concerns about schools' ability to independently manage and sustain SPB over time. This dependence may limit their capacity to fully integrate SPB into school governance and operate the process autonomously.

Financial Sustainability

Cremona demonstrated flexibility in securing additional funds. However, allocating large sums to a single process, covering even non-winning proposals, rendered the SPB unsustainable and non-replicable in the short to medium term. Additionally, while voluntary family contributions should be fostered, as observed in *Vittorio Emanuele II*, it may represent a significant threat when it is the only funding source. Engaging local and national entities or exploring other crowdfunding methods (e.g. collective fundraising from local community or online fundraising campaigns) could ensure more stable financial backing.

Social and Cultural Context and Other Variables

The cases analysed are distinguished by multiple variables, including social and cultural context, location (peripheral or urban, North-South), type of school (academic or technical/vocational), and historical period (pre- or post-pandemic). As emphasised by interviewees, the school context serves as a microcosm of society, magnifying the tensions present in communities at large. Although identifying a cause-and-effect relationship for each variable requires further study, this analysis highlights some possible connections. *Filangieri* and *Zanussi* demonstrate how SPB can strengthen the sense of belonging and raise awareness of relevant social issues, even in contexts

characterized by significant educational poverty. Conversely, the tense relational dynamics observed in Vittorio Emanuele II underscore how internal conflicts can hinder the process. Integrating SPB as a tool to address social challenges could promote cohesion and collaboration, provided that a tailored approach is adopted. Avoiding standardised, one-size-fits-all solutions is essential to adapting the SPB experience to each context's specificities.

Externally, the underappreciation of citizenship education constitutes a critical challenge. The heavy reliance on external civil society organisations (such as BiPart, ActionAid, RagazziInGioco Foundation, or Passaggi Association) underscores the lack of institutional prioritisation, hindering the systematic integration of SPB into school governance. Processes initiated by these organisations or schools cannot be defined as bottom-up, as they are inevitably top-down without genuine grassroots student involvement. This limitation reduces the scalability and long-term impact of such initiatives. Furthermore, the absence of lobbying activities and adequate political support exacerbates these issues, leaving SPB initiatives without the backing needed for widespread dissemination despite their demonstrated benefits in promoting civic engagement and participatory governance.

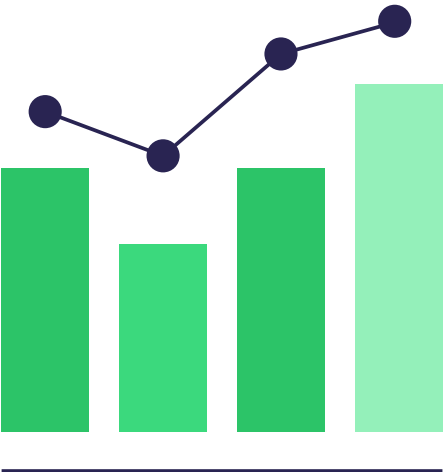
Toward a sustainable model for SPB

The five case studies highlight SPB's potential as a tool for citizenship education and active participation, as well as the challenges associated with its implementation. Shared leadership, student mobilisation and empowerment, effective communication, and structural support are key elements for success. However, SPB's sustainability requires systemic commitment, integrating the process into school governance and providing stronger institutional support. This cross-sectional analysis suggests that SPB has the potential to transform schools into laboratories of active democracy but requires a holistic approach that considers individual contexts' specificities and promotes continuity and scalability of the model.

Below a schematic synthesis of the cross-cutting analysis of the case studies:

Macro-Areas	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Role of the School Principal	Visionary and proactive leadership that ensured a strong start and tangible results (Cremona, Zanussi).	Dependence on the figure of the school principal: when the principal changes, the process is discontinued (Cremona).	Developing shared leadership involving multiple school figures to reduce centralisation and ensure continuity (Crespi, Zanussi).	Centralisation of decisions in the figure of the principal, creating tensions and hindering the project's sustainability (Filangieri, Vittorio Emanuele II).
Student Leadership Capabilities	Creativity, autonomy, and skills demonstrated by students in managing processes and promoting proposals. (Crespi, Cremona).	Low empowerment and limited direct involvement of students. (Vittorio Emanuele II, Filangieri).	Citizenship education and practical training through SPB to develop governance and project design skills. (Crespi, Zanussi, Filangieri).	Low participation and lack of interest from students, (Vittorio Emanuele II, Filangieri).
Participation and Communication	Extensive involvement of the school community through multichannel communication strategies and creative assemblies. (Cremona, Zanussi).	Limited and ineffective communication, with low engagement from parents and school staff. (Filangieri, Vittorio Emanuele II).	Improve internal and external communication by leveraging digital tools and promotional campaigns to maximise engagement. (Zanussi, Cremona).	Low awareness and participation from students and parents in less favourable contexts. (Filangieri, Vittorio Emanuele II).
Organisational and Structural Support	Collaborations with external organisations that provided methodological, coordination, and resource support. (Zanussi, Filangieri, Cremona, Crespi).	Lack of structural support and standardised procedures for implementing and monitoring the process. (Crespi, Vittorio Emanuele II).	Create national support networks among schools and involve external experts to ensure the quality and sustainability of the SPB. (Zanussi, Filangieri).	Lack of institutional guidelines and national standards to integrate SPB into school governance. (all the cases).
Use of Digital Tools	Development of innovative voting platforms that enhanced transparency and engagement (Crespi)	Technical issues with digital platforms that hindered participation. (Cremona, Filangieri, Vittorio Emanuele II).	Use established digital platforms to streamline the process and improve accessibility. (Crespi, Zanussi, Filangieri).	Absence of digital tools. (nobody).

Financial Sustainability	Ability to adapt by securing additional funds to implement more projects than initially planned (Cremona).	Reduction in available resources and reliance on voluntary family contributions, especially in the post-pandemic period. (Vittorio Emanuele II).	Involvement of local and national entities to integrate SPB into school development programs. (Filangieri, Zanussi).	Financial instability and challenges in maintaining SPB with limited budgets or exhaustion of multi-year budgets in a single SPB process. (Vittorio Emanuele II, Cremona).
Social and Cultural Context	Strengthened sense of belonging to the school and increased awareness of relevant social issues, such as environmental sustainability. (Filangieri, Zanussi).	Tense relational climate and antagonistic dynamics among students, teachers, and the school principal. (Vittorio Emanuele II, Filangieri).	Integrating SPB as a tool to enhance social cohesion and address underlying challenges within the school context. (all the cases).	Contexts of educational poverty or conflicting relationships that hinder participation and collaboration. (Filangieri, Vittorio Emanuele II).



Conclusions and recommendations

SPB and the Italian education system: opportunities and limitations

The **Italian education system**, rooted in the post-war democratic reconstruction, has undergone various reforms, including the introduction of school autonomy in the 1990s and the implementation of more work-related programmes in response to the challenges of an evolving socio-economic context. However, critical issues persist, such as regional disparities, high school dropout rates, and weak democratic and inclusive school governance, underscoring the need for greater equity and participation within the school system. In this context, citizenship education plays a crucial role today, both as a recently institutionalised curricular subject and through informal initiatives that promote student participation and social responsibility. Despite these opportunities, the implementation of citizenship education is hindered by inconsistencies among institutions and a lack of structural and financial resources.

In this context, School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) emerges as an innovative and **promising practice** that fosters participatory democracy and civic learning. Originating as an extension of urban participatory budgeting, SPB offers students an opportunity to propose, design, vote on, and sometimes implement projects funded primarily by school resources. The true potential of SPB lies in its capacity to empower young citizens not just to manage budgets. Structured around phases of idea collection and prioritisation, co-design, and voting, and guided by a set of established principles and a formal framework of rules and regulations, this process functions not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a model for inclusive governance. However, SPB in Italian high schools remains limited in scope and is still a niche experiment across only a few schools. The current scale of the programme, primarily promoted by BiPart and

ActionAid, suggests that SPB is not yet a widespread practice in the broader landscape of Italian education. These initial implementations should be viewed as precursors to broader opportunities and as a blueprint for future initiatives. The empirical analysis of five SPB experiences provided an overview of the variables influencing the success of these processes. Although identifying a cause-and-effect relationship for each variable requires further study, this analysis highlights some possible connections.

Variables shaping the success of SPB in Italian schools

Despite the evidence of structural and methodological challenges, the collected experiences provide compelling evidence of SPB's *transformative potential*. When implemented effectively, SPB can transform schools into vibrant laboratories of active citizenship, offering students genuine opportunities to engage in democratic processes, develop crucial civic competencies, and cultivate a deeper understanding of collective decision-making. These experiences not only prepare students to become responsible and politically conscious citizens but also foster a sense of ownership and agency within their school communities, promoting a more inclusive and participatory educational environment. This, in turn, can contribute to a broader societal shift towards greater civic engagement and democratic participation.

With the notable exception of the Vittorio Emanuele II Institute, all of the analysed cases benefited from the support and coordination of **third-sector organisations**, which provided invaluable contributions in terms of resource allocation, methodological frameworks, expert supervision as well as management and adaptability skills. The SPB at Zanussi also illustrates the significant impact participatory governance can have on a school's culture through strong partnerships. However, while this reliance on external entities was demonstrably beneficial during the initial stages of implementation, it raises important questions about the long-term viability and scalability of SPB initiatives. Indeed, dependence on external organisations and, at times, on singular, highly involved school leaders (the *champions*) can inadvertently impose SPB processes in a **top-down manner**, potentially hindering the development of genuine student ownership and limiting the organic integration of participatory practices into the school's institutional framework. This external player, while often providing the crucial momentum, could paradoxically hinder the bottom-up, student-driven ethos essential for fostering sustainable change. However, the case of the Vittorio Emanuele II Institute revealed another side of the top-down approach, which is more intrinsic to the functioning of the Italian school system. It emerged that the reliance on specific individuals, particularly within school leadership,

creates vulnerabilities to personnel changes, which could disrupt the established processes and weaken institutional memory. Moreover, the process's dependence on the principal's leadership risks further undermining students' sense of ownership and engagement.

Students seem to have suffered as a result of the contradictions arising in many of the analysed cases. These contradictions are linked to the process's strong promise of empowerment – the possibility of truly having their voices heard, from the design of the process to the implementation of their own decisions – and their subordinate, beneficiary role within the educational school system. This role is clearly represented by the governance structure, which is still anchored in a corporate model, with the school principal playing the ambiguous role of the community manager. It is interesting, however, to note how some of the students interviewed were deeply influenced by the experience, to the point of being inspired to pursue a career in similar civic fields.

Another critical and at the same time indicative aspect is related to **sustainability** of the SPB, its impact on the school's time and resources. One of the aspects that emerged from the interviews is the difficulty of managing a very complex and demanding process within a school context already overloaded with mandatory activities and projects. Including SPB within the citizenship education curriculum, as was done in the past with ASL pathways, turned out to be a winning strategy. However the organisational pressure seemed to demand such an extraordinary commitment from all stakeholders that these solutions were not enough to convince schools and students to continue with the process in subsequent years. The lack of sustainability was also due to a limited toolkit – both digital and non-digital – capable of lightening the load related to learning the process and its implementation. The constant use of the **Empaville** game over time demonstrates that it is a useful learning tool, but the pandemic, occurring at the peak of its implementation, prevented testing and potential enhancement, delaying any conclusions about its impact and how it might be improved. Certainly, the use of learning methodologies more oriented toward **management** generated equal interest and learning, paradoxically in a more impactful way in terms of empowering the champions. The same applies to **digital tools**: on the one hand, their existence allowed the execution of processes during COVID and generally responded to the need to facilitate the implementation of SPB processes; on the other hand, usability issues and the cost of implementation and management (see in Crespi) seem to have discouraged participation and replication.

Building a more participatory future: recommendations for SPB in Italy

In light of these key findings from the study of SPB in Italy, several recommendations emerge, both from a structural and methodological perspective.

There are numerous ways to streamline the introduction of SPB within the school system. One broad approach is to expand its scope by including projects that extend beyond the school, engaging the neighbourhood or city in participatory initiatives. Collaboration between educational institutions and municipal Participatory Budgeting (PB) programmes can enrich civic learning by exposing students to real-world participatory governance, effectively bridging educational content with practical application. This synergy also facilitates resource sharing, allowing schools and municipalities to leverage shared tools and platforms for participatory decision-making, resulting in more efficient and sustainable governance. Moreover, joint initiatives strengthen connections between schools and local communities, encouraging students to apply their learning in meaningful ways outside the classroom.

Integrating SPB into formal institutional guidelines and establishing national support networks could also help bridge this gap and promote more consistent practices across schools. From the European perspective, the creation of a European network of shared practices, immersive workshops in different European cities, would offer the opportunity for exchange and learning among students and teachers, while a multilingual platform could gather resources and testimonies, creating a common SPB archive. To involve families, intergenerational civic workshops could be organised, and a podcast could be launched to give voice to the protagonists of the process, strengthening the sense of community. Collaborating with European youth organisations would amplify the message of democratic empowerment, linking SPB to broader movements.

To address the challenge of **monitoring** impact, tools such as a democratic impact map and a participatory dashboard could be employed to collect real-time data on the status of SPB and enable comparisons between schools.

To strengthen the impact of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB), innovative and creative solutions are needed to make this educational tool accessible, effective, and replicable. A first step could be the creation of **dynamic educational materials** that guide students, teachers, and parents through the phases of the process. This could

include a digital toolkit with video tutorials, interactive simulations, and a mobile app to facilitate participation and voting. At the same time, a series of animated stories could be developed to showcase successful SPB experiences, making school democracy more understandable and engaging. The integration of gamification elements, such as role-playing games and simulations, would make the process more engaging, stimulating active student participation. To ensure sustainability, **crowdfunding** could be integrated as a fundraising tool, teaching students to mobilise resources from the community, while a *Democratic School* certification could reward institutions that structurally adopt SPB, attracting further funds and support.

The emerging and rapidly growing field of **digital democracy** is particularly significant as it provides new and innovative ways for individuals to engage in civic participation, such as decision-making processes, voicing opinions, or voting, through digital platforms and technologies. This field also plays a key role in empowering young people to articulate their views on socio-political issues via online platforms and social media. Contemporary research suggests that for a significant cohort of young individuals, the digital sphere represents their primary – and sometimes sole – mode of active participation, as it is perceived to be both more accessible and immediate than conventional forms of political engagement. Consequently, digitalisation stands out as a vital tool for fostering youth inclusion in active citizenship. Leveraging emerging technologies, such as block chain for transparent voting or AI-powered platforms for collaborative idea generation, could further enhance SPB's accessibility, efficiency, and democratic integrity.

Looking ahead, the future of SPB hinges not only on refining its practical implementation but also on reimagining its conceptual underpinnings within the evolving socio-political landscape. Beyond simply allocating budgets, SPB can be envisioned as a catalyst for cultivating a deeper understanding of deliberative democracy and its inherent complexities. This necessitates moving beyond procedural adherence and fostering a critical engagement with the very principles of participation, representation, and collective decision-making. Future iterations of SPB could, for instance, incorporate structured debates on diverse democratic models, simulations of complex political scenarios, and collaborative explorations of ethical dilemmas related to resource allocation.

In conclusion, given the numerous structural challenges that impede the stable implementation of SPB in high schools, it seems futile to focus on improving the process unless one adopts the perspective of empowering students and fostering

interest within the **educational community**. Efforts should shift away from strictly normative aspects that rely on the *goodwill* of individuals and school leaders, whose high turnover often proves disruptive and who ultimately appear overwhelmed by these challenges.

Below a schematic and synthetic recommendations box.

Area of Intervention	Recommendations	Addressees
Institutionalisation of SPB	Integrating the School Participatory Budgeting into national school governance by including it in the Ministry's guidelines as a regular practice and allocating resources and capabilities to initiate the processes. Making SPB an integral part of the Three-Year Educational Offer Plan (PTOF) to ensure its continuity and replicability, even with changes in school leadership. Guidelines should allow greater flexibility in applying the SPB in different contexts, avoiding one-size-fits-all solution	Legislators, school principals, and teachers, parents, students.
Empowerment of Students	Promote enhanced student engagement from the initial phases of the process. Equip them with training in citizenship education and governance competencies using innovative tools such as Empaville to reinforce their autonomy and active participation. Attend to their concerns without paternalistic condescension, cultivating a culture of trust and accountability.	Students, SPB initiators, SPB practitioners, school principals, teachers, parents, CSOs and NGOs,
Shared Leadership	Promote greater student involvement from the early stages of the process. Provide them with citizenship education and governance skills to strengthen their autonomy and active participation. Listen to their concerns without paternalistic attitudes, fostering a culture of trust and empowerment.	Students, school principals, teachers SPB initiators, SPB practitioners, parents, CSOs and NGOs.

Structural and Educational Support	Collaborate with external organisations to provide continuous methodological and training support. Create national and European networks of schools and SPB practitioners to promote the exchange of best practices and the dissemination of the method.	SPB initiators, SPB practitioners, teachers, CSOs and NGOs, school principals, students.
Communication and Promotion	Implement multichannel communication strategies to raise awareness among students, parents, and school staff about the importance of SPB. Use digital platforms, social media, and promotional materials to increase visibility and engagement. Plan targeted educational campaigns.	SPB initiators, CSOs and NGOs, students, parents, teachers.
Use of Digital Tools	Adopt established digital platforms to simplify the collection of proposals and voting. Improve accessibility to digital tools, ensuring adequate technical support to resolve operational issues that could hinder participation.	CSOs and NGOs, SPB initiators, SPB practitioners, school staff.
Monitoring and Accountability	Create clear monitoring systems to ensure the implementation of the voted projects. Involve all school stakeholders, including families, in supervising and evaluating the results, strengthening trust in the transparency of the process.	SPB initiators, SPB practitioners, School principals, teachers, students, parents, school staff.
Financial Sustainability	Diversify the funding sources for the SPB by involving local and regional authorities, crowdfunding, and partnerships with the private sector to ensure stable resources. Sustain voluntary contributions from families and plan the allocation of resources across multiple participatory cycles.	SPB initiators, School principals, teachers, students, parents.
Educational Value and Scalability	Integrate the SPB into the school curriculum as a practical tool for developing transversal skills (design, collaboration, problem-solving). Adapt the model to the specificities of school contexts.	Teachers, SPB initiators, School principals,

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Attachments

Technical Sheets for Case Studies

5.1 Case study 1: Cremona

Location	Milan
Title of project	“Decide 4 your school!”
Estimated cost of the project	10.000€ initial budget + 40.000€ further invested
Start date	Training began on 26 January 2017 Ideation phase in March 2017
End date	Results of voting phase and final ceremony on 5 June 2017 Winning projects realised around the same time the following year Other projects implemented in the next couple of years
One-time or annual	One-time
Project status	Completed
Approximate size of the community participating in the initiative	±800 students
Age range of participants	14–19 years old
Type of school	Scientific Lyceum (Cremona) + Technical and Economic Institute (Zappa)
Way of voting/deciding	Hybrid (i.e. online platform to submit/vote, in-person assemblies and fairs to discuss and promote projects, social media to promote and inform)
External partner and role	BiPart SPB practitonair, methodological & procedural expert

Links for further information	iiscremona.edu.it/progetti/bilancio-partecipativo/ iiscremona.edu.it/milano-liis-cremona-si-dota-del-suo-primo-bilancio-partecipativo/ opin.me/sv/orgs/cdsp/ youtube.com/@stefanostortone4492/videos
Interviews	(2) Former Head of School and Student Representative

5.2 Case study 2: Vittorio Emanuele II

Location	Bergamo
Title of project	Bilancio Partecipativo (Participatory Budgeting)
Estimated cost of the project	15.000€/year (fourth year: 10.000€)
Start date	The <i>Consiglio d'Istituto</i> deliberated SPB Statute on 05 December 2017; 1st year (2017/18) Proposals collection 28 February 2018; 2nd year (2018/2019): Proposals collection 27 January 2019; 2019/2020 SPB suspended (also due to COVID-19) 3rd year (2020/21): Info & engagement activities 29 March 2021; 2021/2022 SPB suspended (also due to COVID-19) 4th year (2022/2023): Info & engagement activities 28 April 2023; Suspended since 2023/2024
End date	1st year: end of the school year (approx. June 2018); 2nd year: end of the school year (approx. June 2019); 3rd year: Voting phase concluded on 19 May 2021, October 2021 – June 2022 implementation of winning projects; 4th year: Voting phase concluded on 6 June 2023, up to February 2024 conclusion of winning projects.⁶¹
One-time or annual	Annual, 4 cycles. Interrupted twice, now suspended.
Project status	Completed

⁶¹ As per schools' website information.

Approximate size of the community participating in the initiative	±1300 students community, around 60 classrooms + parents. Numbers of voters (students+parents) unknown, but high during the first two editions, low during the last two.
Age range of participants	14–19 years old
Type of school	State Technical Institute for Commerce and Tourism
Way of voting/deciding	Hybrid (i.e. online platform to submit/vote, in-person assemblies and fairs to discuss and promote projects, social media to promote and inform)
External partner and role	None. Autonomously structured, organised, and coordinated.
Links for further information	vittorioemanuele.edu.it/cerca?tipo=cerca&cerca=sito=bilancio+partecipativo Regolamento del Bilancio Partecipativo.pdf
Interviews	(2) Two former Student Representatives

5.3 Case study 3: Crespi

Location	Busto Arsizio
Title of project	Sbilanciamoci
Estimated cost of the project	5.000€
Start date	Voting phase on 21 May 2019
End date	Voting phase ended on 28 May 2019
One-time or annual	One-time
Project status	Completed
Approximate size of the community participating in the initiative	1282 voting students. 73.5% participation rate in voting phase & high engagement recorded in proposal making

Age range of participants 14–19 years old

Type of school	Lyceum, Classical – Linguistic – Human Science Studies
Way of voting/deciding	Hybrid: ballot boxes (paper voting) and digital tools (Instagram for communication, custom-developed software for voting – each student with two possible preferences)
External partner and role	BiPart for training, 12h in class; 28h project work. Autonomously organised and managed by students.
Links for further information	Il bilancio partecipato arriva a scuola: „La partecipazione diretta sarà tra i banchi”
Interviews	(1) Former student, member of the organising group and software developer

5.4 Case study 4: Zanussi

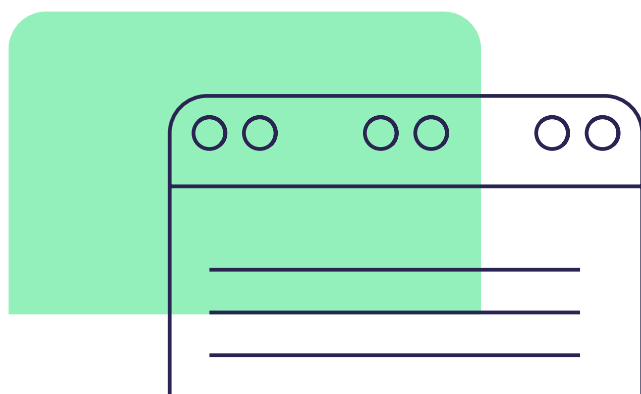
Location	Pordenone
Title of project	RIPARTIRE project – Bilancio Partecipativo
Estimated cost of the project	3.000€ budget for winning project
Start date	Training around October 2020, ideation phase January 2021
End date	Voting phase ended in April 2021, implementation of winning project one year later
One-time or annual	One-time
Project status	Completed
Approximate size of the community participating in the initiative	229 students involved in the ideation phase (35% of total population), through the citizenship education classes, 7 third-year classes. 275 votes casted for five finalist projects. Winning project received 135 votes (60% of voters).
Age range of participants	14–19 years old

Type of school	State Vocational Institute for Industry and Crafts – Maintenance and Technical Assistance Track + Industrial Technical Institute – Fashion System Track
Way of voting/deciding	Hybrid: due to pandemic, digital tools highly used, e.g. social media for communication, online platform for voting
External partner and role	BiPart for training, 4 months together with RIPARTIRE project's partner, in close cooperation with "Fondazione RagazzInGioco", local partner which implemented and coordinated the entire process + ActionAid as leading partner organisation
Links for further information	RIPARTIRE (concluso) – Fondazione RagazzInGioco
Interviews	(2) Operators of Fondazione RagazzInGioco (local partner)

5.5 Case study 5: Filangieri

Location	Trebisacce
Title of project	RIPARTIRE project – Bilancio Partecipativo
Estimated cost of the project	5.000€ budget for winning project
Start date	Training around October 2020, ideation phase January 2021
End date	Voting phase ended in April 2021, implementation of winning project one year later
One-time or annual	One-time
Project status	Completed
Approximate size of the community participating in the initiative	Only 12% students voted for the winning project (48 votes), although high engagement level for those participating.
Age range of participants	14–19 years old

Type of school	State Technical Institute
Way of voting/deciding	Hybrid: due to pandemic, digital tools used but not efficiently
External partner and role	BiPart for training, 4 months together with RIPARTIRE project's partner, in close cooperation with "Associazione Passaggi", local partner which implemented and coordinated the entire process + ActionAid as leading partner organisation
Links for further information	itsfilangieri.it/vecchio_sito/index.php%20%281%29/tuttelenewsmobile/859-bilancio-partecipativo.html
Interviews	(2) Operator of Associazione Passaggi (local partner) and former student representative





School Participatory Budgeting in Spain

Andrés Falck

Ana Galeote Taviel de Andrade

Introduction

The European Projects Office of the Government of Cantabria (OPE), has been part of various projects that promote citizen participation and democracy in different fields. The OPE, as a driving force behind cooperation and innovation projects within the European framework, is committed to helping to transfer innovative models and practices to Cantabria that have proven their worth in other areas in the EU. The case we present in this paper reviews the inclusion of democratic mechanisms in education, with the conviction that training in civic and ethical values from an early age contributes to a more equitable and cohesive society.

Participatory budgeting is one of the most widespread and versatile tools for citizen inclusion in decision-making in Europe. A policy initially implemented in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, which facilitated a structured dialogue between the local administration and the residents, enabling them to elaborate proposals for the improvement of their city, defend them in public spaces and vote for the ones they trusted the most. Among the first European municipalities to incorporate this innovation were several Spanish municipalities, pioneers of what, over time, has become a mainstream good practice in open government. Its application in Europe has grown significantly, and today it is the continent with the greatest number of institutions implementing participatory budgets on the planet (more than 5,000 cases according to the World Atlas of Participatory Budgeting). This growth has led to adaptations that include participatory budgeting in supra-municipal areas, in the private sector and also in educational contexts.

The proliferation, in the last decade, of participatory budgeting processes with smaller populations and in schools is the confirmation of the strength of this tool for fostering civic participation from an early age. It has also been incorporated by numerous institutions as a boost to their efforts to give substance to Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises the right of boys and girls to express their opinions on matters affecting them and to have these opinions taken into account by public administrations.

The extension of these initiatives to educational contexts continues to be both a challenge and an opportunity to transform schools into democratic spaces. A multitude

of studies already support the idea that including students, teachers and families in deliberative processes about the use of school resources not only strengthens the culture of participation, but also improves learning and the sense of belonging to the educational community⁶².

It is within this framework that the present study has been carried out, recording, analysing and describing the experiences of participatory budgeting in school contexts in Spain. The following sections describe what has happened in several hundred schools of 36 municipalities in different autonomous communities.⁶³ This document, therefore, offers a detailed analysis of the current state of this mechanism of school democracy, laying the foundations for the development of effective strategies that encourage greater student involvement in decision-making within their schools. To achieve this objective, the following research questions have been posed:

- To examine in depth the state of school participatory budgeting in Spain, including its prevalence, models of implementation, difficulties and national specificities.
- To understand the educational and political context in Spain relevant to school participatory budgeting.
- To identify the strengths, weaknesses, barriers and opportunities (SWOT analysis) for the future development of school participatory budgeting in Spain.
- To evaluate the level of participation and representation in school participatory budgeting processes in Spain.
- To identify those elements of school participatory budgeting that need special support in Spain.

We trust that this report will contribute to the consolidation of effective and sustainable models of school participation, and we thank all the actors involved in this process for their commitment to the improvement of democratic education in Spain.

62 As an example, see the review by Falck et al. (2021), which compiles research from nine countries that reveal the potential of participatory budgeting to develop participants' civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

63 An autonomous community in Spain is a territorial entity that is part of the state's organisational structure as defined in the Spanish Constitution. Each autonomous community has legislative autonomy and executive competences in various areas, as established in its respective statute of autonomy. Spain is divided into 17 autonomous communities, each with its own government.

Summary

The report covers an exhaustive analysis of the implementation of participatory budgeting in Spanish educational contexts, through the analysis of 36 cases registered since 2019. This report illustrates the particular characteristics of this type of process in the country, closely linked to its growth as a democratic innovation of a local nature, involving students and teachers.

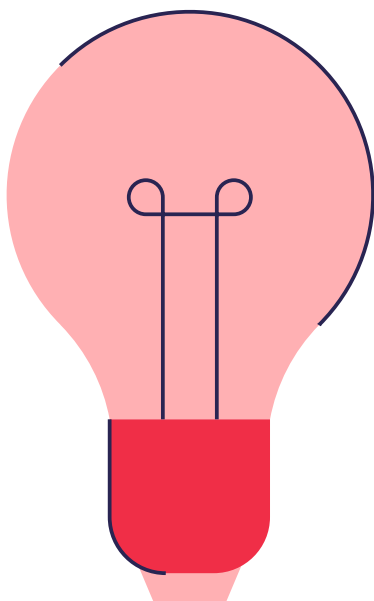
Chapter 1 shows the structure and evolution of the Spanish schooling system, highlighting the frequent reforms and their impact on the democratisation of education, with special emphasis on the different types of education and the current legislation in Spain.

In Chapter 2, the focus is on citizenship education, where an evaluation is made of how Spanish schools integrate training on civic values and competences within the official curriculum and through extracurricular activities, fostering citizen participation from the early stages of education.

Chapter 3 specifically discusses the *School Participatory Budgeting in Spain*, introducing its origin, evolution and the diversity of its applications across municipalities and schools. This chapter presents a division of participatory budgets into three categories: school PBs (SPB), children's PB (CPB) and general PBs (GPB), and explores the geographical distribution of these practices, highlighting how they are integrated into the educational and municipal context. This information is expanded and illustrated in Chapter 4, which delves into the analysis of five detailed cases of participatory budgeting in school contexts (the municipalities of Cartagena, Alcoy, Cedeira and Almáchar and the Domingo Miral school in Zaragoza), showing concrete examples of their implementation and effectiveness, allowing to see the variability and adaptability of these practices in the Spanish educational environment.

Finally, Chapter 5 makes a projection of the future of participatory budgeting in school contexts in Spain, considering current trends and possible directions of evolution, followed by practical recommendations in Chapter 6 on how to improve and expand these initiatives.

Methodologically, Chapter 7 discusses the approaches used for data collection and analysis, closing with a detailed bibliography and list of websites consulted, which support the research.



The Spanish educational system

The Spanish educational system has undergone constant reforms over the last three decades, influenced by socioeconomic and political changes. A key element has been the democratisation of education, with a commitment to guaranteeing universal access to it and consolidating a model with three types of schools: public schools (68% of all Spanish schools), managed and financed entirely by the public administration; private schools (7%) managed and financed entirely by private entities without receiving state funding, which also have their own admission criteria, organise their own curriculum (although they must respect certain a minimum established by educational legislation) and set their own schooling quotas, which must be taken into account by families. And finally, the state-subsidised private schools (25%), that are managed by private entities and combine public funding with possible voluntary contributions from families to cover additional services. They are an intermediate option between public and private education, and their existence generates debate in Spain about equity and access to education.

Since 2021, Spanish education has been regulated by Organic Law 3/2020⁶⁴. In addition, Spain aligns itself with the international recommendations of UNESCO and the OECD to promote inclusive and sustainable learning.

64 Organic Law 3/2020, of December 29, which modifies Organic Law 2/2006, of May 3, on Education (known as LOMLOE).

Structure of the education system

Compulsory education lasts 10 years, from 6 to 16 years of age, although there are non-compulsory stages before and after this period, and it is structured as follows:

- 1 **Early Childhood Education (0–6 years):** non-compulsory. It is divided into the first cycle (0–3 years) and the second cycle (3–6 years), the latter being free in public centres.
- 2 **Primary Education (6–12 years):** compulsory and free. It comprises 6 years organised in three cycles of 2 years each.
- 3 **Secondary Education**
 - **Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO, 12–16 years):** the last compulsory stage. It consists of 4 years divided into two cycles. In the 4th year of ESO students begin to specialise by choosing a pathway (academic for Baccalaureate or applied for Vocational Training).
 - **Post-compulsory secondary education (from the age of 16)**
 - **Baccalaureate (16–18 years old):** aimed at continuing with higher education, it comprises two years in one of the following specialisations: Arts; Science and Technology; General; or Humanities and Social Sciences.
 - **Vocational Training (FP):** its objective is to prepare students for the labour market through specialised training that is close to business reality, combining theory and practice. There are three levels of FP, the first two being part of post-compulsory secondary education: **FP Grado Básico** (Basic Grade Vocational Training) (only 15–17 years old), for those who do not complete ESO. Graduates are awarded the title of Basic Technician and Graduate in ESO; and **FP Grado Medio** (16–18 years of age), which offers more specialised technical training, with graduates being awarded the title of Technician.
- 4 **Higher Education**
 - **University education,** which is divided into three cycles of increasing specialisation: Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees.
 - **Specialised education,** which has its own organisation and includes artistic, sports and language education.
 - **Higher vocational training,** which involves advanced specialisation with a high practical component and awards the title of Higher Technician.

Curriculum and methodologies

The Spanish curriculum has a state framework, but the Autonomous Communities can adapt some of its content. It is based on a **competency approach** that is structured as follows:

- 1 **Key competencies**
(general life skills).
- 2 **Specific competencies**
(related to each subject).
- 3 **Basic knowledge**
(essential content).
- 4 **Evaluation criteria**
(learning indicators).
- 5 **Learning situations**
(active strategies, *learning by doing*).

The education law does not impose a single **model of teaching**, but rather promotes the use of flexible methodologies such as:

- Competency-based learning (transversal at all stages).
- Flipped classroom: students prepare content at home and apply it in class.
- Project-based learning: students research and solve practical problems.
- Cooperative work: group learning with defined roles.

One of the most decisive moments is the **EBAU (High School Evaluation for University Access)**, a test that students must pass at the end of High School if they wish to access university studies or Higher Level Vocational Training. The grade obtained, together with the average grade of the High School, determines access to the different degrees, which makes this evaluation a key point in the academic life of the students. Another decisive moment occurs **in the fourth year of ESO**, when students must choose between different educational pathways that will determine their options in subsequent studies. At this stage, they must decide whether to opt for the Baccalaureate, Intermediate Vocational Training or to enter the world of work. **Within the Baccalaureate** they must also select a specific training modality, which influences the type of education they will be able to access in the future. Finally, another key point comes **at the end of Baccalaureate**, when students must decide whether to go to university or to pursue a Higher Degree in Vocational Training, options that offer different career opportunities. It is worth mentioning that in recent years, Vocational Training has gained prestige and recognition for its high levels of employability, making this decision increasingly relevant.

Key agents in the school environment

In Spanish schools there are several key agents who play a fundamental role in the organisation, management and functioning of the facilities. These agents are present in public, private and state-subsidised private schools, and include teaching and non-teaching staff, families, and students. However, their organisation and functions may vary depending on the type of school, as we will see below.

The **teaching staff (teachers)** are responsible for the teaching as well as the academic and personal development of the students. They form the **teaching staff**, a consultative structure that has a role in decision-making. In public schools, teaching staff are selected and hired by the public administration after passing a public competitive exam, while in private schools they are hired directly by the school's administration. Teachers in semi-private schools can be public or private, depending on the funding of the school. The **management team** leads the school, coordinating the teaching staff and ensuring the efficient use of available resources. It is made up of the **principal**, the **dean of studies**, the **secretary** and, in the case of public schools, the heads of department for each subject. Private schools may include other specific positions in their management team, depending on each school, such as a Private School Council that advises the management. In state-subsidised private schools there is also a School Council, which includes representatives of the public administration, teachers, non-teaching staff, students in higher levels and families, with a role of supervision and decision-making. The management and the head of studies usually have a crucial role in the participatory school budgeting, mainly defining the work plan, the amount to be debated or collaborating with the students in the analysis of the proposals.

The **non-teaching staff** includes secretaries, caretakers, administrators, cleaning staff, counsellors, etc. Their role is fundamental for the administrative and logistical functioning of the facilities. As with teachers, this staff are hired through the public administration (public and some state-subsidised private schools) or directly by the school's management (private and some state-subsidised private schools). Here the **guidance counsellor** plays a key role in providing care and support to students and their families, both academically and personally, as well as advising teachers on pedagogical criteria and developing school plans and programmes. In publicly funded schools the role of counsellors is defined and regulated by state and regional regulations, while in private schools their presence is not necessarily guaranteed, as it depends on the organisation of the school.

The **student body** is the recipient of education and their participation and performance are key to the success of the educational institutions. Public schools are open to all students, which usually leads to greater diversity in the classroom, especially in terms of the socioeconomic status. Students in private schools are usually selected by the school according to its own criteria, which may include admission exams or economic criteria (ability to pay), and the education may be more specialised and geared towards certain student profiles. In semi-private schools the pupils are, to a large extent, middle class. They can access the same educational programs as in public schools, but the level of access to resources and teaching may depend on the conditions of the school. As in private schools, state-subsidised private schools can select their students, although this is more regulated than in private schools. In all types of schools it is common to find the figure of the **class representative**, whose function is to represent the students of a class before the teachers and the management of the school, although they tend to have more power in decision-making in public schools than in state-subsidised private schools and in private schools.

The students' families are a key agent because they influence the education of the students, both by providing support at home and by participating in decision making. In publicly funded schools, they participate in the School Councils and other bodies such as the **Parents-Teacher Associations (or AMPAs in Spanish)** that are involved in the organisation of extracurricular activities. They are also responsible for ensuring that their children attend school and contributing to the academic development of the students. In private schools, families tend to have closer contact with the school's management due to the more personalised nature of the educational service. They often participate in decision-making through committees or parent-teacher associations.

The School Council is a participatory body in all schools responsible for supervision and advice to the management of the school, although with variations in its composition and functions. In all types of school it is made up of representatives of the education administration, teachers, families and students, although its powers may be more limited in state-subsidised schools and, above all, private schools, depending on the internal policy of the school.

Financing of the education system

In Spain, the management of the school budget follows a **decentralised model**, which means that the resources allocated to education are distributed among different levels of administration: the central government, the autonomous communities and the local councils.

- The **central state government** has a fundamental role in the financing of the education system, although its involvement is more indirect in terms of the day-to-day management of schools. Instead of directly administering school budgets, it finances specific programmes (for example, in the areas of educational innovation, teacher training, scholarships, etc.) and allocates general funds to the autonomous communities, which are the main managers of educational resources on a day-to-day basis.
- The **autonomous communities** are primarily responsible for managing education spending in Spain, and have the capacity to determine their educational priorities, which means that some regions can allocate more funds to aspects such as inclusive education, reinforcing the teaching of co-official languages or supporting students at risk of social exclusion. They receive a significant part of the funds transferred by the central government and manage the bulk of the resources allocated to education (salaries, educational infrastructure, educational materials).
- The **town councils**, although they are not the main managers of educational resources, play a key role in the local management of schools. Throughout history, municipal powers in education have diminished significantly due to the numerous legislative reforms that have taken place, leaving the role of local councils limited to aspects such as the maintenance of infant and primary schools, the coordination of extracurricular and complementary activities (workshops, excursions, social support programmes) or cooperation for the construction of new schools (Miguez Macho, 2024). It should be noted that, despite having a limited budget compared to the autonomous communities and the constraints in terms of experience and competencies, many city councils have promoted **initiatives of participatory budgeting in school contexts**, in a bid to encourage student participation and improve the quality of education through innovative projects and the use of local resources.
- The European Union also plays an important role in financing educational projects through its **European funds**, including the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Next Generation funds, which support digitisation and the reduction of early school leaving.

The budget allocated to each facility depends on the number of students, the location, the socioeconomic characteristics and the regional priorities. They may also receive support from foundations, NGOs and private companies.

The **fundamental principles** of this funding are the following: no charge (at compulsory stages), equity (guaranteeing equal opportunities), sustainability (efficient use of resources), adaptability (flexibility to adjust to local needs) and innovation (promotion of methodologies and teacher training).

The Spanish education system has a broad and complex structure, the result of decentralisation and frequent reforms. Although the current model seeks to guarantee universal and equitable access to education, its implementation presents mixed results. The coexistence of public, private and state-subsidised private schools generates differences in the quality of education, access to resources and the level of specialisation. Although the aim is to provide equal opportunities, the diversity of options, together with variations in funding and selection criteria, contributes to a gap that does not always allow equity to be achieved. Families with greater purchasing power tend to have more possibilities of choosing private or semi-private schools which, on occasions, offer more personalised education and better resources, which generates unequal access.

Although the system emphasises the participation of families, teachers and students through School Councils and other bodies, their influence on decision-making remains a challenge, especially in private and state-subsidised private schools. Although the regulations promote such participation, the lack of effective autonomy of these bodies in certain contexts limits their impact. The absence of effective formal channels and the traditional hierarchy in institutions restrict the active participation of students in key aspects of their education. Although the system seeks to adapt through innovative methodologies, economic and social inequalities persist, calling into question full equity without profound reforms that guarantee a fair distribution of resources and greater integration of student voices.

Citizenship education in Spain

Citizenship and values education in Spain is approached both through formal education, by means of specific subjects and activities integrated into the curriculum, and through non-formal education, through extracurricular projects, educational programmes and cooperation with external organisations. This approach seeks to foster social and civic competences that enable students to participate actively, critically and responsibly in the society, in line with the principles established by the Organic Law of Education.

Citizenship education in schools

The Spanish curriculum is based on the development of key competencies, within which civic and social skills play a fundamental role, expressed above all through Competence in Citizenship, seeking to train active citizens who are critical and committed to their environment, and to promote democratic participation, coexistence and respect for human rights. Other competencies that also contribute to the development of these skills are Competence in linguistic communication, personal, social and “learning-to-learn” competence, or competence in cultural awareness and expression.

The education law establishes general **objectives for** each stage of education that reinforce social commitment, coexistence and active citizenship, such as: developing habits of coexistence and mutual respect, fostering teamwork and cooperation or valuing citizens’ rights and duties in Primary Education; analysing the society and its problems, and exercising active and democratic citizenship responsibly in the Secondary Education; or in Baccalaureate, reflecting on civic and ethical values in decision-making or understanding the importance of human rights, justice and equality.

Spanish schools work on these objectives in different ways, depending on the educational level and the resources available in each case. The subject of **Education in Civic and Ethical Values** is the most explicit in dealing with this theme, addressing issues such as human rights, democracy, equality and sustainability. It is taught between the ages of 10 and 14 (from the third cycle of Primary Education to the second year of Secondary Education), with a workload of approximately 1–2 hours per week.

Other subjects that address civic issues in schools are **Geography and History** (dealing with the functioning of democratic institutions, their evolution, citizens' rights and duties and global problems), **Social Sciences** (encouraging critical analysis of society and understanding of global challenges) and **Language and Literature** (promoting the expression of ideas and argumentation in debate contexts). The weekly **tutoring sessions**⁶⁵, aimed at offering students academic, emotional, social and professional support, also often become a perfect space for developing extracurricular programs such as the working sessions of the participatory school budgeting (preparation of proposals, discussion, organisation of driving groups, etc.).

In addition, Spanish schools work with students to foster citizenship education in ways that vary depending on the type of school, available resources, and the commitment of the teaching staff.

In public schools and a large part of the state-subsidised private schools, the implementation of methodologies such as **project-based learning** (where students work on real problems and seek collective solutions), **programs of mediation and conflict resolution** (which foster skills such as empathy and cooperation, allowing minors to have an active and leading role in the mediation process) or **service-learning projects** (initiatives that link academic learning with volunteering and community participation through practical experiences that respond to real problems in their environment), depends to a certain extent on particular regional education programmes and teacher training, as well as the availability of resources which, in some cases, may be limited

65 In Spanish schools, tutorial time is a scheduled period dedicated to monitoring and guiding students, as mandated by national and subnational educational regulations. In primary and middle school (ESO), tutorials are compulsory and included in the school timetable, with at least one session (1 hour) per week per group. In higher education levels such as Baccalaureate and Vocational Training, tutorials are not always mandatory, but many schools include them to enhance the comprehensive education of their students. During tutorial time, the tutor (a teacher responsible for the overall development of students in a specific grade) works with the entire group on personal, social, and academic development, addressing issues such as coexistence, education in values, conflict resolution, and academic and career guidance.

by municipal or regional budgets. In this context, the focus on civic and social values is present as one of the cross-cutting elements of the Organic Law of Education, but its depth and development can vary depending on the commitment of the teaching staff and the school's budget. This variation can affect, for example, the quantity and quality of the material resources that students can access.

For their part, private schools tend to have more flexibility to develop their curriculum and choose which projects to implement, which can result in greater specialisation in areas such as service learning, especially if they have greater financial resources. However, the availability of these projects may also depend on parental demand and the staff's capacity to integrate innovative practices.

The type of activity promoted according to the **socioeconomic reality** of each autonomous community can also influence the way in which mediation and service-learning projects are adapted to local contexts, as in the case of communities with high rates of social exclusion where the mediation programs and conflict resolution can be a priority.

The education law, by reinforcing the idea of the school as a space for democratic participation, establishes certain mechanisms that seek to promote greater involvement of all members of the educational community in decision-making. Among these, **school councils** and **student delegates** play a key role, as they are presented as instruments to foster cooperation between students, families and teachers. However, despite the law's intention to promote more participatory management, in practice, these mechanisms do not always translate into true equitable participation.

- **School councils and student representatives:** As for school councils, although they are given powers of supervision and decision-making over key aspects of school life, the reality is that their functioning is often highly conditioned by the internal dynamics of each institution. In many schools, the weight of teachers and managers in these bodies is considerably greater than that of family or student representatives, which limits the real impact of their contributions. Furthermore, the frequency and relevance of the decisions made in these councils often depend on the will of the management and the resources available. On the other hand, the figure of the student delegate, although they are granted representative functions, rarely has a real capacity to influence substantial decisions, since, in many cases, their participation is limited to aspects of less impact, such as the organisation of extra-curricular activities or presentation of complaints about minor issues.

- **Participatory management of the school:** education law requires schools to implement mechanisms for listening to and deliberating with students, but in many cases the students' room for manoeuvre is limited. In most schools, the most far-reaching decisions, such as those relating to the curriculum or the allocation of resources, are still mainly in the hands of the management teams and the education policy-makers, with little real capacity for influence of the students. Furthermore, student participation is commonly framed within an agenda set by the school staff and management, without them being able to establish their own priorities.

The education law promotes an education that trains students as agents of change, but its implementation still faces significant challenges. The effective participation of school councils and student delegates remains limited, and efforts to empower students are hampered by the lack of resources, curricular integration and hierarchical control. Although the approach is positive, its effectiveness depends on greater cohesion between educational principles, school conditions and the political will to truly integrate student voices.

Non-formal citizenship education

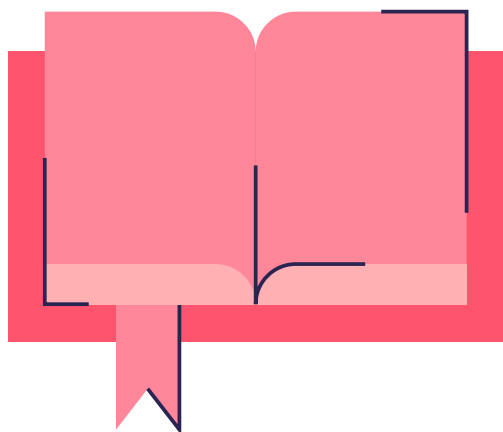
In addition to the curricular approach, many schools collaborate with **NGOs and associations** to expand citizenship education through specific programmes. Organisations such as Save the Children, Educo UNICEF or Ayuda en Acción work with schools on projects to raise awareness about children's rights, gender equality and sustainability. In addition, many schools, especially public ones, maintain a close collaboration with **local councils**, which allows them to access resources and local projects that promote active participation of students in their community. This collaboration, often facilitated by local engagement, gives rise to the implementation of a wide range of initiatives, including participatory school budgeting. In this way, students' civic participation is strengthened not only by awareness-raising projects, but also by their direct involvement in the management of resources and the improvement of their school environment.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, there are other mechanisms that promote citizenship education in schools:

- **Educational innovations:** methods such as cooperative learning or the use of simulation games reinforce participation and teamwork.
- **Gamification:** some schools use game dynamics to encourage participation in democratic activities.

The most innovative schools have implemented models in which students design community projects, manage resources and establish rules for coexistence, all under the supervision of teachers.

As can be seen, civic education is a fundamental pillar of the Spanish education system, combining formal and non-formal approaches to prepare students to be active and responsible citizens. However, its impact still varies depending on the availability of resources at each school and the level of involvement of each educational community. For this reason, it is necessary to continue to support innovative methodologies and participatory processes in schools that ensure that citizenship education becomes a real tool for social transformation.



School participatory budgeting in Spain

Basic information

To trace the origin of participatory budgeting in school contexts in Spain, one must go back to the arrival of the first municipal participatory budgeting processes in the country. This occurred relatively early in the European context, in the year 2000, when such processes began to be implemented in a small number of towns in Catalonia and Andalusia. By the end of that decade, there had already been 50 local governments across the country committed to this initiative, but it was with the change of political actors in local governments in 2015 that the greatest expansion to date occurred, with 350 city councils implementing participatory budgeting, including those of the country's largest cities, such as Madrid and Barcelona. Since then, the numbers have dropped slightly, but remain high.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the first experiments in participatory budgeting involving children were carried out, both in school and non-educational contexts. The first documented experience is the Laboraforo in Seville (Ruiz Morales et al., 2005), which began in 2004 and generated playful spaces for deliberation with young students that linked their proposals with the general (adult) municipal process. Their proposals would compete with those of the rest of the population (and quite successfully). However, for a long time the engagement of children in budgeting was a rare practice, subordinated to processes designed for other population groups and hardly sustainable over time. Only in recent years has there been a gradual increase in the number of cases, reaching the 36 identified in this study, which are listed in Table 1.

Participatory budgeting has always been a municipal policy in Spain, despite a few unsuccessful attempts to scale up the experience to the regional administration, which has more resources and competences. This is an important fact because it is the regional institutions that have the greatest influence on the running of schools, while the municipal authorities have the least powers in the field of education. The result is paradoxical: 35 of the 36 cases of participatory budgeting in schools are promoted and politically directed by local governments, which include a total of more than 200 schools in these processes. The only exception found is the public primary and infant school in Zaragoza, the CEIP Domingo Miral, which, on its own account, decided to co-manage its budget with the students, inspired by the district participatory budgeting promoted at that time by the local government.

Table 1. Frequency of participatory budgeting modalities in school contexts in Spain by the size of the municipality's population.

Municipality	Province	Autonomous Community	PB Category	N. of schools
Alcoy	Alicante	Region of Valencia	Children PB in Schools	12
Almáchar	Málaga	Andalusia	Children PB in Schools	1
Aspe	Alicante	Region of Valencia	Adult PB in Schools	7
Basauri	Vizcaya	Basque Country	Children PB in Schools	n/d
Bellreguard	Valencia	Region of Valencia	Children PB in Schools	1
Betxí	Castellón	Region of Valencia	Children PB in Schools	1
Burjassot	Valencia	Region of Valencia	Children PB in Schools	9
Cádiz	Cádiz	Andalusia	Children PB in Schools	8
Capdepera	Balearic Islands	Balearic Islands	Children PB in Schools	1
Caravaca de la Cruz	Murcia	Region of Murcia	Children PB in Schools	4
Cartagena	Murcia	Region of Murcia	School PB	65
Cedeira	A Coruña	Galicia	Children PB in Schools	1
Cehegín	Murcia	Region of Murcia	Children PB in Schools	n/d

Conil de la Frontera	Cádiz	Andalusia	Adult PB in Schools	3
El Boalo	Madrid	Region of Madrid	Children PB in Schools	2
El Masnou	Barcelona	Catalonia	Adult PB in Schools	n/d
Elda	Alicante	Region of Valencia	School PB	7
Guardamar del Segura	Alicante	Region of Valencia	Adult PB in Schools	3
La Zubia	Granada	Andalusia	Adult PB in Schools	2
Lorquí	Murcia	Region of Murcia	Children PB in Schools	1
Martorell	Barcelona	Catalonia	Children PB in Schools	n/d
Molina de Segura	Murcia	Region of Murcia	Children PB in Schools	9
Ortuella	Vizcaya	Basque Country	Adult PB in Schools	2
Portugalete	Vizcaya	Basque Country	Children PB in Schools	4
Puerto del Rosario	Las Palmas	Canary Islands	Children PB in Schools	17
Rubí	Barcelona	Catalonia	Children PB in Schools	n/d
Sant Cugat del Vallés	Barcelona	Catalonia	Children PB in Schools	n/d
Soria	Soria	Castile and León	Children PB in Schools	7
Torre Pacheco	Murcia	Region of Murcia	Children PB in Schools	5
Torredonjimeno	Jaén	Andalusia	Adult PB in Schools	n/d
Torrelavega	Cantabria	Cantabria	Children PB in Schools	19
Villena	Alicante	Region of Valencia	Children PB in Schools	7
Vitoria-Gasteiz	Álava	Basque Country	Children PB in Schools	n/d
Xàtiva	Valencia	Region of Valencia	Children PB in Schools	n/d
Zalla	Vizcaya	Basque Country	Children PB in Schools	2
CEIP Domingo Miral (Zaragoza)	Zaragoza	Aragon	School PB	1
TOTAL				201

Note. As these are municipal programmes (with the exception of the Domingo Miral School in Zaragoza), the number of infant, primary or secondary schools involved in each case is counted. This is done by taking into account the figure given by the last year of the participatory budgeting with available data. The municipalities where there is no clear information on the number of schools involved are left without data (n/d).

The clear municipal roots of the processes in schools does not mean that they are homogeneous in their design, in their alliances, or in their connection with the educational community. The SPB in Cartagena has given rise to a model that largely conforms to the definition taken as a reference in the present study. Schools in Cartagena design and manage their own processes and the resulting investments are allocated to their facilities, all in accordance with the frameworks established by the local authority. In some other municipalities, students have been allowed to define proposals for their own schools, although not as a general rule. The cases in which the proposals have to target municipal investments and activities are clearly predominant.

In order to facilitate the understanding of the reality of participatory budgeting in school contexts in Spain, we have differentiated three main categories:

- **School participatory budgeting (SPB)**, which is the one that most closely fits the following definition: *a process in which the school community decides on the allocation of a part of the school budget (usually determined by the management or parents). Students, as well as parents, teachers and other school employees, submit ideas, create projects, and then choose those that they think are the most attractive and necessary.* The cases of the Domingo Miral school and the municipalities of Cartagena and Elda fit this definition to some extent.
- **Children's participatory budgeting**, that is developed, at least partially, in schools. They are carried out exclusively with minors, generally with specific age groups. Unlike SPB, the proposals in these processes are not aimed at improving school facilities, but at interventions with a municipal impact, although of particular interest to the age group of those who participate.
- **General participatory budgeting** is an *adult* municipal process that adapts some of its phases to create spaces exclusively for children, at least partially in school contexts. The proposals that emerge from the deliberation in the children's groups will have to compete with those put forward by adults in the same ballot. As in the case of the children's participatory budgeting, these proposals will not be aimed at improvements to their schools.

Of the 36 cases reported, at least 24 are cyclical, with the process being repeated every year. However, as 2024 was the first year of a new municipal term of office, it is difficult to anticipate how many of them will continue in the immediate future. In the other 12 one-off cases, various factors may have influenced the fact that they were discontinued, notably the coincidence with changes in political staff or the impact of lockdowns during the pandemic.

The geography of participatory budgeting in school contexts

Spain being a highly decentralised country, also in the educational sphere, it is not surprising that the penetration of participatory budgeting processes in school contexts is regionally uneven. Most of the 36 cases studied are concentrated in the Mediterranean arc of the peninsula and in the Basque Country, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number of municipalities with participatory budgets in school contexts in Spain by autonomous communities.



As for the distribution by habitat, as can be seen in Table 2, there are more processes in small and medium-sized municipalities (from 2,000 to 100,000 inhabitants). However, in relative terms, it is more likely to find these experiences in cities with between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, integrated in coastal conurbations or metropolitan areas.

Table 2. Frequency of participatory budgeting modalities in school contexts in Spain by population size of the municipality.

Municipalities	School PB	Children PB	General PB	Total PB in Schools	Total municipalities in Spain	% municipalities with PB in Schools
≤ 2,000	0	1	0	1	5871	0.02%
2,001 - 10,000	0	6	1	7	1500	0.47%
10,001 - 20,000	0	2	3	5	346	1.45%
20,001 - 50,000	0	10	3	13	265	4.91%
50,001 - 100,000	1	5	0	6	86	6.98%
100,001 - 500,000	1	2	0	3	57	5.26%
≥ 500,001	0	0	0	0	6	0.00%
TOTAL	2	26	7	35	8,131	0.43%

Note: The SPB of the CEIP Domingo Miral (Zaragoza, 680,000 inhabitants) is not included as it does not have a municipal scale.

Processes in the school context

As already suggested, a common feature of these processes is the leadership of local institutions. Practically in all cases, it will be the local government that takes the initiative and proposes the initiation of the participatory programme to the school management. For this reason, several key decisions in the design of the process will be aligned with strategic or operational priorities of the municipality: age groups

that can participate, the available budget, the type of projects that can be proposed, the technical feasibility of the proposals, the voting formulas or the evaluation tools, among others. An exception to the above is the definition of facilitation priorities, which are not usually considered in municipal documents and seem to be delegated to teachers, in some cases, or to external teams hired on an ad hoc basis.

The age groups targeted by participatory budgeting in school contexts vary from place to place, although those aimed at primary and secondary school pupils predominate, as shown in Table 3. Within these levels, many processes will be aimed at specific classes that will define the age groups. In one out of every four cases, the age range is open, including several educational levels in the same process.

Table 3. School levels involved in participatory budgeting in schools in Spain, by type and total number of processes.

School Levels	School PB	Children PB	General PB	Total processes	% total cases
Infant	1	4	1	6	16.67%
Primary	3	16	3	21	58.33%
Secondary	1	16	6	23	63.89%
Various levels	1	7	1	9	25.00%
Total cases	3	26	7	36	100.00%

School communities are not equally engaged in these different cases, and there are also differences according to the actors to whom we refer. **The students** have some degree of prominence, being the most constant group among the processes. In all the cases recorded, the students participate in activities to identify needs and formulate proposals. There is only one exception, in the case of the municipality of Betxí, where the town council predefines the proposals (playground equipment for public parks) so that schoolchildren aged 3 to 10 can choose the one they prefer. It is also common that students are invited to vote on the final proposals, although in a third of the processes, the final decision is made by a children's body external to the schools, usually a local children's and adolescents' council. In these cases, the body will have previously received all the proposals from the schools to analyse, merge and prioritise them in deliberative sessions.

Teachers and the management staff can play an active role in the coordination of participatory budgeting, especially when the council entrusts them with supervision and facilitation functions. However, the definition of this role is usually not described with clarity by the city councils. It is important to remember that the teaching and management staff of the schools do not have a hierarchical relationship with the local governments, to which they are not accountable. Therefore, a city council cannot make it a rule that school staff must follow its initiatives. The Cartagena City Council managed to overcome this obstacle by creating an open call for each school to present their own SPB project. Municipal funds are assigned to each SPB for improvements in the school facilities, in exchange for a commitment to facilitate these processes with school staff. Even in this case, however, each school will freely choose whether to adhere to the process. In the 2024–25 academic year, 65 schools in Cartagena are developing the SPB.

In some municipalities, the city council will offer training programs to teachers involved in the development of the processes.

There is no documented evidence of any significant engagement of pupils' **parents**. In some municipalities, informative meetings are held with the parents' associations. The **non-teaching staff** is not mentioned at all in the documentation consulted or in the interviews with key informants.

Power relations within the school and the level of democracy of participatory budgeting processes in school contexts

Public schools in Spain are part of a complex system of power in which the three levels of public administration (central, autonomous and local), the school staff and their relationship with the students and their families and caregivers are involved. In state-subsidised private schools, the entities or individuals who own them must also be considered, which in most cases are organisations dependent on the Catholic Church. In chapter 1 we find a more detailed description of these agents.

Schools have authority structures that follow a hierarchical model, although there are mechanisms for participation. In general terms, decision-making is distributed among different levels:

- **School management.** The principal is the highest authority within the educational institution and is responsible for its overall management. Their authority includes decision-making in organisational, disciplinary and administrative matters, as well as representing the institution before the education authorities.
- **Management team.** Composed of the head teacher, the head of studies and the secretary, they are in charge of the strategic planning and internal management of the institution.
- **Teaching staff.** A body for the participation of teaching staff in pedagogical matters, with consultative and decision-making functions. It decides on curricular projects, improvement plans and complementary activities.
- **School Council.** This is a participatory body that includes representatives of teachers, families, students and non-teaching staff. Although it has a voice in important decisions, in many cases its power is more consultative than executive.
- **Educational administration.** At regional and national level, the regional ministries and the central Ministry of Education establish the regulatory framework, the curricula, the funding and the general guidelines. The regional administration has the function of supervising the functioning of the schools, through the Inspectorate of Education, which interprets the regulations on a day-to-day basis, giving it a great influence on the management of the schools.

The trend in recent decades has been to increase the decision-making capacity of management figures to the detriment of participatory bodies. The head teacher has the final say in many key decisions, especially with regard to administrative management, the implementation of the school budget and the organisation of teaching staff. However, this figure is not above the law and frequently consults the Inspectorate of Education before making decisions.

Although students have representation on the School Council, their ability to influence decision-making is often limited. **On the one hand, students have minority representation on the participation body, but equally important is the practical non-existence of student organisations in schools, so the young people who hold a position on the School Council will normally lack the tools and channels that would allow them to convey the will of the students to the other actors.** Something similar happens with the parents' associations, which frequently have a very weak organisational structure. This does not prevent the opinion of the families from carrying a lot of weight in the decisions made in schools, although this opinion is expressed in non-formal settings. Finally, the non-teaching staff (janitors, administrators, cleaning staff, counsellors, etc.) have a token presence in the decision-making bodies.

The general perception among teachers is that the budget of the schools is below their basic operating needs. It is increasingly common for the educational administration to encourage the schools themselves to seek external resources, through agreements with other public administrations or private entities, or through competitions in which they register to finance certain educational activities or resources. It is also not uncommon for schools to ask students and their families to pay for the materials needed for class activities, citing a lack of their own budget and opening small gaps in the principle of free public education. **Underfunding is a considerable limitation to the promotion of SPB on the initiative of the schools themselves.** By way of example, the participatory budgeting process of the Domingo Miral School, the only case of SPB promoted by the school itself, puts up for discussion an annual amount of between 600 and 800 euros, which we can consider more symbolic than effective.

As for the rules and regulations that regulate governance in schools, these are guided by policies that seek to guarantee a balanced representation and an effective participation:

- **Organic Law on Education:** Establishes the principles of democratic participation in schools and defines the role of the School Council and the Teachers' Board. According to the education law, the School Council must be made up of representatives of the educational community, although their capacity for effective decision-making varies, as already mentioned.
- **Regional regulations:** Each autonomous community develops its own educational regulations, which may include rules on the composition of governing bodies, the processes for electing representatives and the competencies of each actor.
- **Internal regulations of schools:** Each school has its own Internal Regulations (IR), which establish the specific mechanisms for participation and the rules for decision-making within the school.

Despite these regulations, the effectiveness of participation depends to a large extent on the organisational culture of each school. In some of them, the participation of students and families is active and relevant; in others, it is more symbolic and limited. It is mainly in public schools where the representation of all parties is more guaranteed, since they are governed by state and regional regulations and are more comprehensively *monitored*. In private schools, families carry more weight (considering that they pay the fees every month and have a closer relationship with the management), but the students are relegated to the background.

In short, although educational regulations establish mechanisms for representation within schools, in practice there are inequalities in the capacity of each actor to influence. Students and non-teaching staff are underrepresented and have less weight in decision-making, while teachers and management concentrate a lot of the power. To ensure more effective participation, it is essential to strengthen the voice of the less represented sectors and ensure that their contributions are taken into account in school governance processes.

In general terms, non-academic activities during school hours require the approval of the school management. Beyond that, the degree of implementation of **participatory budgeting** activities in the classroom will largely depend on the personal involvement of the teacher in charge of the class. This is one of the reasons why some city councils opt for the use of external facilitating teams to develop the processes. If the implementation of a SPB has the approval of the school management and the approval of the education inspectorate, there is no further limitation on who can be involved in the process other than that established by the design of the process.

As explained above, in the cases of participatory budgeting in school contexts in Spain, we find three constant elements:

- The only group that always has an active role is the students.
- In all cases, the school management must have authorised the implementation of the process, even if it is the local council that promotes it.
- There is no mention of non-teaching staff or families in the definition of the processes.

Based on this observation, we find great variations in the degree of involvement and influence that the different agents can have, especially the role and the autonomy of teaching and management staff. In those cases in which this prominence is lower, we will generally find that the facilitation tasks are carried out by external organisations.⁶⁶ At the other extreme, there will be teachers participating in the design, implementation and evaluation of the process. In these cases, the school management will usually assign responsibilities to the teachers who show the greatest interest in assuming them, who may include other teachers and/or students into working groups to support them in certain tasks.

66 The external organisations can be nonprofits, social enterprises or, less frequently, conventional private companies that deliver facilitation services. In some cases the local government will issue a tender for facilitation services and selection is mainly based on the lowest bid.

The normative development of participatory budgeting processes in school contexts tends to be lax. In most cases, there are basic rules that can be found on the websites of local councils, and which are presented more as a list of milestones or phases, delimiting the participating population and the budget. These *regulatory narratives* do not contain clear information on the duties and rights of the agents involved or how conflict resolution is addressed. Nor will you find detailed information on key aspects such as the feasibility assessment of proposals, the evaluation of processes or the elaboration of the regulations themselves. However, there are some cases of more developed and formal regulations, such as those found in the cases of Alcoy and Cartagena.

In practically all the processes registered, it is the younger population that decides which proposals will finally be implemented. This decision is usually made by a vote of all the participants, using ballot boxes set up in the schools. In some cases, a smaller working group of children will make the decision, which may be a children's council or an ad hoc group. In special cases such as Torrelavega, an adult will make the decision. The degree of deliberation by the participants before making the final decisions varies between processes, with moments of deliberation more likely when the number of participants is smaller, either because a limited number of class groups are selected or because this function is assigned to a small working group.

The evaluation of the technical, economic and competence-based feasibility of the proposals falls to the local governments, which are the ones that provide the funds, with the exception already highlighted of the Domingo Miral school. In some cases, student sessions with municipal technical staff are planned to learn about these evaluations in detail, but this is not the most common procedure.

As we have seen in this chapter, participatory budgeting in school contexts in Spain takes various forms, but those promoted by local governments and specifically aimed at the democratic inclusion of children predominate. However, although students are the main group that proposes and decides on initiatives, decisions about the process itself (rules, schedule, facilitation) usually fall to adults, generally municipal teams but also teachers and school administrators. On the other hand, participatory budgeting proposals are not usually aimed at improvements within schools but rather encompass interventions in the municipality, reflecting an integration of school processes into broader municipal dynamics. Throughout the next chapter, five prominent cases will be presented that illustrate how these approaches vary and are successfully implemented, reflecting both the methodological and geographical diversity of school participatory budgeting in the country.

Five cases of participatory budgeting in schools in Spain

In the context of our study on participatory budgeting in schools in Spain, chapter 4 is dedicated to exploring five emblematic cases out of the 36 studied, which not only illustrate the geographical and methodological diversity of these processes, but also their capacity to adapt and endure over time. In selecting these cases, an effort has been made to include all those that fit the model of SPB defined for our study and that have been fully implemented on at least one occasion. Cartagena and the Domingo Miral primary school in Zaragoza meet this criterion. In addition to these two, three cases of participatory budgeting with children have been selected that show a sustained trajectory of implementation in the school environment and that are sufficiently documented to carry out an analysis of their practices and results with the depth required by this report. The selection allows us to observe how different approaches coexist and enrich each other within the Spanish educational panorama.

In the following paragraphs we present three experiences that we have classified as participatory budgeting with children (Alcoy, Almachar and Cedeira) and two cases of participatory budgeting specifically for schools (Cartagena and Zaragoza).



Cartagena: an established experience

Cartagena is a city in the Region of Murcia, in the southeast of Spain. This intermediate city has a little under 220,000 inhabitants and the fourth most important harbour in Spain. Other economic activities are related to energy production, agricultural processing and a military navy base. Cartagena's local government is currently

conservative and the mayor, Noelia Arroyo, is a member of the Popular Party. In office since mid-2023, the current authorities have continued implementing the School Participatory Budgeting programme initiated by the former socialist team in 2018.

The SPB programme promoted by the City Council of Cartagena was kicked off as a pilot experience in only two schools. It has since grown to include up to 63 public preschool, primary and secondary schools in 2025, reaching **more than 6,000 students**.⁶⁷ With a total budget of €220,000 (double the initial €110,000), this initiative allows students to decide on a part of the school budget allocated to school investments, promoting education in democratic values and the responsible management of school resources.

The Cartagena SPB is an annual process, which takes place throughout the school year and culminates in the implementation of the selected proposals. As an innovative element, the process begins each year with an **open call** where schools interested in participating must register, allowing them to join in from the early design phases of the process. This prior registration requires schools to develop their work plan in advance, and in the case of those coming back after the previous year SPB edition, to evaluate the last process and add improvements in the process design.

Children are the central focus of the SPB. Each school appoints a **Steering Group**, made up of students who lead the process in their school. These teams can be formed in different ways: some schools select high-achieving students, others incorporate the SPB into subjects such as Education in Civic and Ethical Values, in certain cases the choice is random to ensure diversity.

The members of the steering group are organised into small working committees with specific roles: **researchers, publicity coordinators, voting organisers**, among others. For example, at the beginning of each SPB cycle they carry out a survey to identify the previous ideas of their peers, which will serve as a starting point for them to adapt the dissemination phase to different ages and expectations. In addition, the previous year's steering groups offer support to the new ones, facilitating the transition and consolidating the continuity of the process.

The SPB follows a clear structure in seven phases where the children are the protagonists, with the support of teachers and municipal technicians:

⁶⁷ 14 secondary schools and 47 infant and primary schools.

- 1 **Information and dissemination:** the steering group is formed and coordination sessions are held between the steering group and the teaching staff, where the rules of the SPB are clarified and the relevant working committees are established. The steering group then visits each classroom in the school to inform their classmates about the process and encourage their participation.
- 2 **Collection of proposals:** during tutorial time and with the support of teachers, students identify the needs of the school and draw up proposals to improve their school environment.
- 3 **Prioritisation and budget analysis:** the steering group makes an initial prioritisation of proposals, analysing their cost and feasibility based on established criteria. The selected initiatives are transferred to the City Council's technical team.
- 4 **Technical evaluation:** municipal technical staff visit the schools and give their opinion on the feasibility of the proposals analysed, resolving any doubts that the students may have and helping them to adjust in order to ensure the continuity in the process.
- 5 **Voting:** a democratic day is held, organised by the steering group, in which the students vote for the shortlisted proposals. Voting is done in person, and the students organise and manage the election day as if it were a general election, which reinforces their learning about democratic mechanisms, participating from the arrangement of the ballot boxes to the counting of votes.
- 6 **Publication of results:** the winning proposals are announced by the City Council and a timetable for their implementation is established.
- 7 **Final evaluation:** an analysis of the process is carried out to introduce improvements in future editions.

At the end of an SPB cycle, each school carries out its own **evaluation process** in which a large part of the educational community (steering group, teachers, management team) participates. This is reflected in a report and sent to the City Council for publication on the [municipal website](#).

The process has been **very well received** by all parties involved. According to the sources interviewed, there are several positive aspects that emerge from its implementation: the high level of involvement of the school community stands out, where children take a leading role in all phases and actively participate in decision-making; through this approach, democratic learning is fostered, allowing young people to understand

the importance of public management, debate and collective decision-making. They also point out that the flexibility of the programme allows each school to adapt the process to its specific needs, thus increasing its effectiveness, and they value the involvement of the local government, which guarantees adequate support and facilitates the development of the SPB.

However, the process faces certain **challenges**, such as the complex coordination between the different agents, since the management of 65 educational centres makes it difficult for the City Council to provide individualised attention, according to the people interviewed. In addition, they consider that the budget increase is not proportional to the growth in the number of participants, which has led to a decrease in the budget allocated to each centre, making it difficult to implement larger-scale proposals. Another key challenge is to find a balance between the autonomy of the schools and the necessary supervision, given that, although independence in the implementation of the SPB is positive, some of them require a higher level of guidance in the initial phases. To address these challenges, improvements have been made in planning, establishing more organised schedules and more efficient coordination mechanisms agreed by both parties.

Despite these challenges, the SPB in Cartagena has proven to be a successful model for education for democracy and a key **tool for promoting the participation of children and young people** in matters that directly affect them. According to the teaching staff interviewed, each year, students arrive at secondary school with a greater understanding of the process, which facilitates their integration in future editions.

Based on the experience gained after 7 years of implementation, the consulted educational agents recommend that other educational communities interested in developing this model facilitate the participation of minors as explorers, allowing them to visit schools where the SPB is already working. In this way, they themselves will be the ones to transmit the knowledge and experience to their peers, favouring a closer and more meaningful learning. Likewise, it is essential to start the programme from an early age, guaranteeing continuity from year to year and, with it, a progressive consolidation and expansion of the scope of the SPB within the local educational community.



Zaragoza: the Participatory Budgeting Domingo Miral

The School Participatory Budgeting programme at the Domingo Miral Primary School, located in the Torrero district of the city of Zaragoza (690,000 inhabitants), is an initiative that encourages the active participation of students in decision-making regarding the allocation of school resources. The idea emerged in 2021, inspired by the municipal participatory budgeting that had been developed in their district, seeking to **empower children and turn them into agents of change within their school community**. Since then, it has been developed annually with a budget of between €600 and €800, depending on the school budget available each academic year.

The SPB is characterised by giving a central role to the children, who not only propose and vote, but also organise and supervise the development of the process. The teachers act as guides, making sure that the rules are respected and deadlines are met, but without interfering in the decisions. The families, although informed at all times, do not participate actively, as do the other adults in the educational community.

The **Council of Representatives**, made up of two students from each class, plays an essential role in the dynamisation and coordination of the process. This structure encourages continuity, as there is always at least one experienced representative from each class, who mentors the newcomers, and the entire process is channelled through this representative body.

The Domingo Miral Participatory Budgeting reaches almost **200 students aged between 6 and 12 years** (1st to 6th year of Primary Education) every year, and is structured in 6 phases with a clear structure and schedule:

- 1 Presentation of the process:** each new cycle a meeting is held between the school management and the Council of Representatives, where the new students are explained how the process works and the details to be followed in the coming months are defined. In the following weeks, each Council member presents the SPB to their class through informative sessions during tutorial hours.
- 2 Preparation and presentation of proposals:** students individually, in groups or by class, present proposals for the school improvements that can range from infrastructure enhancement to the acquisition of materials or carrying out of educational activities. During this phase, the

students work on identifying the needs of the school during tutorial time and, based on that, they draw up proposals which are then reflected in a document where the children set out their ideas, arguing what a given improvement would mean for the school life and assigning them an estimated budget.

- 3 **Validation of proposals:** once all the proposals have been collected, the Council of Representatives, in collaboration with the head of studies, evaluates each one according to criteria such as the budget limit and the benefit for the whole school community. Similar proposals are discussed among their proponents, thus generating spaces where students work to combine or improve them, also during tutorial sessions.
- 4 **Dissemination of proposals:** students present their ideas to the rest of their classmates, encouraging communication and debate. This phase seeks not only to inform, but also to generate enthusiasm and commitment to the process.
- 5 **Voting:** the final decision on the proposals is made by voting in a ballot box. The members of the Council of each class organise the participation of their classmates so that the process is orderly and transparent, so that, for example, the voting day is carried out in a staggered manner, with one class at a time approaching the ballot box.

The Council of Representatives is in charge of counting the votes and announcing the winning projects. This moment is usually especially significant, as it reflects the prominence of the students in the decisions of the centre.

Every year at the end of the school year, a **qualitative assessment** of the SPB is carried out. On the one hand, each member of the Council of Representatives holds an evaluation session with the rest of their class to gather their impressions and proposals for improvement, and passes this information on to the management team; and on the other hand, the school management and teaching staff make their own assessment in internal meetings. These assessments are taken into account when finalising the details of the next SPB cycle.

This evaluation shows that the SPB has generated **multiple benefits** in the school community. One of the most notable benefits is the increased sense of belonging among students, who feel that their ideas are valued and that they have the ability to bring about real change in their school environment. It has also improved coexistence and social relations by fostering teamwork and respect for the opinions of others.

From an educational point of view, the process has enhanced fundamental skills such as communication, analytical skills, deliberation and decision-making. The students have learned to debate, argue and prioritise proposals, which enriches their teaching-learning process. It has also made it possible to identify and address needs in the school that the adults would not have perceived, showing the importance of including the students' perspective in school management.

As for the **obstacles identified**, the main one has been the limited budget available, which restricts the possibilities of carrying out more ambitious proposals.

According to the school's management, the educational community of Domingo Miral Primary School agrees that the process has consolidated itself as a project of the school that will continue year after year. Its success has aroused the interest of other schools in Aragon, some of which have visited the school to learn about the process in order to replicate it.

To guarantee the success of experiences of this type, the school management recommends always keeping in mind the role of the students and leaving aside the adult-centred perspective, becoming aware of and reflecting on each step to avoid influencing the decisions of the young people.

Among the possible **improvements for the future**, the management team is considering the incorporation of early education students, although they are still not clear how the process could be adapted to these ages. In addition, they plan to introduce new evaluation tools to collect feedback from students and teachers, in order to identify opportunities for improvement. One idea under consideration is the implementation of participatory forms that allow for a more systematic evaluation.

The Domingo Miral Participatory Budgeting is an inspiring example of how educational institutions can encourage the active participation of students, promoting democratic values and fundamental life skills. Its success lies in putting children at the centre of the process, listening to their ideas and respecting their decisions. As the management team points out, *This is here to stay*, and their experience is shaping up to be a model for other schools to follow.



Alcoy: an example of inclusion

Alcoy is a small city with a population of 60,000, located in the region of Valencia and the province of Alicante, eastern Spain. Situated inland at an altitude of 500 meters above sea level, Alcoy has a historical background as an industrial city, known for manufacturing a diverse range of goods. Since 2011, Alcoy has been governed by the Socialist Party (PSOE), during which time participatory budgeting has been implemented in the municipality.

In Alcoy, the Children's Participatory Budgeting (CPB) has become an established initiative that allows children to be protagonists in decision-making about municipal investments and activities. With an annual budget of **€25,000** (€20,000 for investments and €5,000 for current expenditure), the process is managed by the Alcoy City Council in coordination with the schools. It has its own section on the local government's [citizen participation portal](#), and has been running annually since 2017, ensuring continuity and progressive learning for the participants.

The CPB is aimed at **students in the 5th year of Primary (10–11 years old)** from the 13 primary schools in the city⁶⁸ and the Tomás Llácer Special Education Facility, and also involves the participation of the Local Council for Children and Adolescents (LCCA). In total, around **400 students** actively participate in the process. The age of the participants has been adjusted over the years: previously it included the 6th grade primary school students, but it was decided to limit it to the 5th grade so that they can see the results of their proposals while they are still at the same school.

The Children's Participatory Budgeting is carried out in 5 phases, with a methodology adapted to the school context:

- 1 **Planning phase:** the City Council presents the plan to the schools before the start of the year. They decide whether or not to sign up, and if they do, the intervention schedules are finalised.
- 2 **Information, collection of proposals and deliberation:** this takes place over 2 participatory sessions in each school and with the LCCA as well,

68 The primary schools (PS) and infant and primary schools (CEIP) are: El Romeral Primary School, Miguel Hernández Primary School, Horta Major Primary School, Sant Vicent Primary School, Sant Vicent de Paül School, La Salle School, Sant Roc School, Josep Arnauda School, Esclaves S.C.J. School, Salesià Joan XXIII School, La Presentació School, Santa Ana School and Salesià Sant Vicent Ferrer School.

which are developed by a team of experienced facilitators. The first session is an informative workshop, where concepts such as democracy, municipal budget, children's rights or the Sustainable Development Goals are worked on, and where the first proposals emerge. The second session focuses on collecting proposals with the guidance from adult facilitators, especially with regard to feasibility criteria and ensuring that the ideas represent an improvement for the whole city. The proposals are then passed on to the municipal technical team for evaluation.

3 Technical analysis of the proposals: technical staff from the City Hall analyse the proposals received, one by one, to assess their technical, economic and jurisdictional viability. Once the analysis is finished, the reasons for accepting or rejecting the proposals are explained to the students.

4 Prioritisation unfolds in two distinct stages: In the first stage, during the third participatory session, students from each school review the proposals submitted by their peers from other educational centres. This cross-examination allows them to expand their perspectives, spark new ideas, and make enhancements to their own proposals. This comprehensive review is helpful in finalising the proposals that will be advanced to the final voting. In the second stage (the final voting), an in-person vote is conducted using ballot boxes at each school. During this phase, students select five proposals: three investment proposals and two for activities.

5 Presentation in the Municipal Plenary: a group of representatives from the schools defend the winning proposals before the government team, which commits to their implementation.

Students play a leading role in all stages of the Children's Participatory Budgeting. From identifying the needs to defending their proposals in the Municipal Plenary, the children are responsible for analysing problems, debating solutions and making collective decisions. In addition, some schools appoint **student representatives** to facilitate debate among their peers. The **LCCA** is included in the CPB as a representation of all children in Alcoy, beyond those in the class groups that have been picked out to play a first-hand role in their schools.

After each CPB cycle, **evaluation sessions** are held in which both adults and children participate. On the one hand, evaluation meetings are held between the local government and the schools, and between the local government and the team of facilitators

hired to run the process. On the other hand, an evaluation session is held with the LCCA and a satisfaction questionnaire is distributed among the participating students.

The evaluations highlight **positive aspects** such as the high execution rate (92% of proposals executed), which reinforces children's trust in the administration and their participation. The process fosters empowerment, allowing minors to understand how the municipality works and to develop civic, social and communication skills. Its educational and inclusive approach promotes diversity and tolerance, integrating special education and LCCA students. In addition, the continuity of the process has turned this initiative into a consolidated model in constant evolution, according to the informants consulted.

However, they argue, the project faces **challenges** such as the difficulty of coordination with the schools, as some have problems adjusting their time-tables. Teachers' involvement remains limited, and an attempt to modernise digital voting failed due to access problems, forcing a return to face-to-face voting. In addition, only classes that have participated in the proposal phase can vote, although the City Council is working on expanding participation and including the revision of the regulations with the LCCA next year.

To guarantee the success of the process, the Alcoy municipal technical team recommends having a committed government that ensures compliance with agreements and economic support, allowing minors to see the outcome of their participation. They also highlight the importance of good communication between the city council and the school staff, as well as flexibility to adapt to specific needs in each school. Although initially schools need more support from the city council, over time they manage the process more autonomously. This shows that when public administrations are serious about child participation, providing resources and commitment, it can generate transformative experiences for both children and the city as a whole.



Cedeira: teenagers in action

Cedeira is a village with a population of 6,500, located in northwest of Spain, on the coast of Galicia. The main economic activities are related to tourism, fishery and agriculture. Cedeira has had a Mayor from the Socialist Party since 2019, although the government has been shared with the Galician Nationalist Bloc since 2023. A member of the nationalist party is currently in charge of the local Youth Participatory Budgeting.

Over the last five years, the Participatory Budgeting of Cedeira has become an established initiative that allows young people to become actively involved in the management of public resources. Promoted by the local government with an annual investment of €20,000, this process is carried out cyclically throughout the school year.

The project is carried out at the Punta Candieira Secondary School, with the participation of more than 50 students in the 3rd year of Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE; 14–15 years old), and is developed over 5 phases:

- 1 Phase of information and collection of proposals**, through participatory workshops led by municipal technical staff that take place during tutorial or citizenship and social education hours:
 - Informative workshop: where students learn about the functioning of the public administration and the principles of citizen participation.
 - Diagnostic workshop: through techniques chosen by the young people themselves, such as mapping, SWOT analysis or conducting interviews, potentially solvable local needs are identified.
 - Proposal workshop: a space for discussion is created where the students, based on the needs detected, draw up their proposals, prioritising those that are most viable and beneficial for the community. The initiatives can cover different topics, as long as they are beneficial for the whole city. In addition, each year it is the young people who decide in what format they will compile them (online, through a form, through videos, audio clips, etc.).
- 2 Dissemination of proposals and gathering of support:** the working methodology includes a collective approach: the proposals are displayed in the common areas of the school to get the opinion of other students before being prioritised. This dynamic reinforces the sense of community and the involvement of all students in the process.
- 3 The Assembly:** the Assembly is made up of all the 3rd CSE classes, where the proponents present and defend their proposals before the rest of their classmates, who vote for them using a points system (3,2,1) and, in this way, select the ones that will be taken to the Municipal Plenary for consideration.
- 4 Feasibility evaluation:** in the following weeks, a continuous dialogue is maintained with the City Council to adjust the proposals to the established technical and budgetary criteria, thus guaranteeing their feasibility.

- 5 **Final vote in the Municipal Plenary:** finally, the local government approves the proposals to be implemented, within the available budget. Both the government team and all the members of the Assembly attend the Municipal Plenary.

Although the teaching staff act as guides to the process, ensuring that it is carried out in a timely manner, the young people play a fundamental role with various functions: they **research, propose, prioritise and defend their ideas before the Municipal Plenary**. Although the final decision is made by the local government, communication with the students is regular, ensuring that their ideas are viable and can be successfully implemented.

After each round of Participatory Budgeting, the government team and the technical staff linked to the project carry out an evaluation of the process, identifying strengths as well as areas for improvement for each of the subsequent editions. Among the **elements most highly valued** is the growth in student empowerment, as the process gives a voice to an age group that is often not considered in local decision-making. It can also be seen that the students have integrated the process as part of the educational experience, accounting for its consolidation not only at the school level but also at the local level, since many of the proposals implemented involve tangible improvements in the municipality for which the students feel responsible. An example of success for the municipal technical staff interviewed is the **Cedeira Fest**, is a cultural event promoted by the students through the Participatory Budgeting, demonstrating that their initiatives can transform the community life. In addition, they value the close collaboration and continuous dialogue with the local administration, as it allows the proposals to be carried out according to the needs expressed by the young people.

On the other hand, the **main challenges** identified in the course of the 5 editions include the lack of specific funding available to the local government to promote the participation of this sector of young people, given that currently most of the funds are allocated to programs focused on children or young people over 16 years of age. Another challenge is the difficulty in addressing the immense diversity of profiles and interests that characterises the school's student body, which implies an additional effort to guarantee the participation of them all.

Despite these challenges, the Participatory Budgeting of Cedeira has managed to consolidate itself as a benchmark in youth participation within the community, being valued very positively by all the parties involved, according to the municipal

technical team. The **keys to its success**, they say, are maintaining good communication between the local government and the schools, having a committed technical team and a clear but flexible action plan, and making the process as widely known as possible to ensure its maximum reach. All this, together with the willingness of the students, ensures that the Participatory Budgeting continues to evolve as a model of reference in school democracy.

However, with a view to future editions, there is an interest in incorporating improvements such as extending the age range of participants to all secondary school grades, involving families more actively or seeking new ways of financing to increase the available budget.



Almáchar: child participation to transform the community

Almáchar is a small rural village in the province of Málaga (Andalusia, southern Spain) with a population under 2,000. Although it is only 20 km from the coast, it is relatively isolated and it has lost over one third of its population in the last six decades. The main economic activity in Almáchar is agriculture. Participatory budgeting in the local school was implemented during the mandate of the former local government of the United Left and the Socialist Party maintained the initiative after gaining majority in 2019, although the initiative was finally discontinued.

The experience of Children's Participatory Budgeting in the municipality of Almáchar is of special interest because of the local impact it has had in terms of the democratic management of resources and the learning of democratic values in the educational community of La Parra Primary School. Promoted by the local and supra-local government, the process implements the Ágora Infantil methodology to promote the participation of the younger population in the definition of municipal initiatives of interest to them, with contributions from their own perspective and their own needs. The groups of children and adolescents **analyse their territory, contribute ideas, deliberate and collectively build a proposal**, in dialogue with the local government.

The first edition of the process in 2016 led a group of **fifth-year primary school students (aged 10–11)** to design a social club where local children could meet, play and organise their activities. Through 6 classroom working sessions, the participants assessed their needs as children in Almáchar, exchanged ideas and collectively built

the proposal to create the Club de los Guays (Cool Kids Club), which was first prioritised by the group through a vote, and later validated by the municipal technical team and the government team, and launched the following year. The Club was set up in a space in the local library with independent access.

Subsequent editions of the Participatory Budgeting project at La Parra Primary School were aimed at developing, in a participatory manner and according to the evolving needs of the group, the rules of use and coexistence within the club, analysing its strengths and weaknesses and, in short, investing the available municipal budget (around €1,000) into improvements for the social club such as the acquisition of equipment, small renovations or organisation of recreational activities. In this way, much of the club's management was taken on by the participating students and increasingly by other adolescents who joined the initiative: the children themselves were responsible for identifying what resources were lacking, proposing improvements, and communicating these to the local administration to adapt the space to their needs. They set the rules and modified them year after year when necessary, and maintained a harmonious atmosphere in the club. This management model continued to function even after the process ended, benefiting over 100 local boys and girls, which demonstrates the impact generated among the town's younger population.

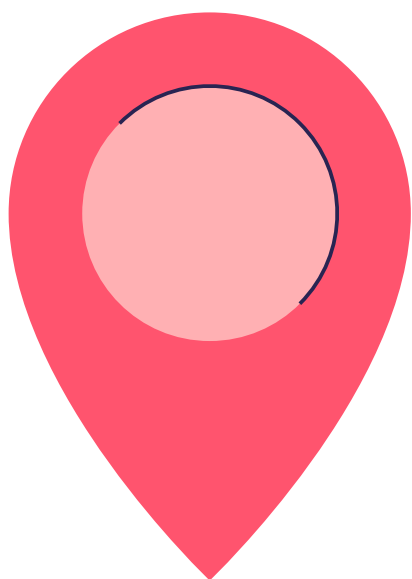
The process was evaluated by means of satisfaction surveys after each work session with the minors, as well as questionnaires aimed at the schools and the local government. Among the **positive aspects** identified, there was an improvement in group cohesion and in the inclusion of initially more withdrawn profiles, achieving a high degree of involvement of a large part of the local children. According to the agents interviewed, the families were also actively involved in the subsequent management of the social club, as was one of the teachers from La Parra Primary School, who accompanied the children at all times. Another observed benefit was an improvement in the mood and motivation of the participants, especially those facing difficult situations at home or experiencing anxiety. They were very positive about the fact that the project not only provided a safe and welcoming space for the children, but also allowed them to get to know their territory better and to establish connections with other children in the community.

However, the project also faced some **challenges**. One of the main obstacles identified by the respondents was the difficulty the young people had in self-managing the space without adult intervention, especially when conflicts or operational problems arose,

making it necessary to involve one of the teachers from the school. Other obstacles identified included the difficulty in actively involving other teachers in the process, as well as the lack of continuity caused by a change of government in the territory.

The Almáchar Children's Participatory Budgeting left **a positive mark on the community**, fostering child participation and civic engagement. Families, initially cautious about incorporating innovative participatory methodologies into the classroom, ended up becoming actively involved in the management of the club. The project also motivated the children to continue to demand space for child and youth participation.

Although there are currently no specific plans to resume the process, the experiences gained have led to similar initiatives within the La Parra Primary School, where children now decide in a participatory manner how to invest the funds raised at the Christmas market. This development demonstrates the value of education in democratic participation and the importance of continuing to promote projects that strengthen civic engagement from an early age.



The future of participatory budgeting in schools in Spain

Participatory budgeting reached schools in Spain only in the last decade, mainly as an extension of municipal PB processes. The first SPB was launched in Cartagena in the school year of 2018–19, remaining the only such process until the Domingo Miral School implemented theirs in 2021 and the City Council of Elda in 2022. The novelty of these practices, combined with many of them not surviving piloting phases or government changes, makes it difficult to foresee what may happen in the future. Although there has been an increasing number of practices over the years, the growth has not been substantial enough to assure a bright future for participatory budgeting in schools in Spain. The electoral changes in Spain in the coming years, along with the success and visibility of current experiences and the advocacy strategies of stakeholders may be crucial in determining their trajectory.

In this chapter, we draw on the key ideas about what the future might look like, based on the analysis of the cases recorded in our report, and on contributions gathered in a SWOT workshop conducted with practitioners and researchers in the field of participatory budgeting with children in different regions of Spain. The workshop provided us with reflection on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of participatory budgeting in school contexts in Spain, identifying both its achievements and the challenges facing its consolidation and expansion.

As for the strengths, participatory budgeting in schools has shown potential for promoting a democratic culture from an early age, strengthening citizen participation in decision-making. It enables students to actively engage in resource management, fostering skills essential for democratic participation such as deliberation,

consensus-building, and co-responsibility. The alignment of these initiatives with current educational models can not only facilitate seamless integration into the curriculum but also allow processes to be closely tailored to the actual needs of schools. In some cases, the resilience of these programmes across political changes underscores their potential for sustainable impact. Collectively, these elements may not only enhance the educational experience but also cultivate a broader culture of participation within the community, influencing other stakeholders, such as families, to engage more actively.

Table 4. Strengths of participatory budgeting in schools.

Strengths	How to maximize
Empowerment of students. It can give students the opportunity to become actively involved in the management of resources, promoting skills of deliberation, consensus and co-responsibility in decision-making. These processes commonly foster autonomy and learning, offering resources that can enable young people to participate in the society more consciously and effectively.	• Involve students in all stages of PB: from design to evaluation. • Foster deliberation, going beyond brainstorming and voting. • Reach out to all students of an age group, increasing inclusion. • Invite students to co-manage the implementation of the selected proposals.
Alignment with new teaching methods and school curricula. The participatory experiences contribute to a comprehensive education aligned with the contemporary school curriculum. SPB connects with the new educational approaches in Spain, such as fostering applied and project based learning, mainstreaming of social values and human rights and the introduction of new subjects such as Citizenship Education and Ethics.	• Develop didactic and methodological units that integrate SPB as part of project-based learning, applicable across a variety of subjects such as Citizenship Education and Ethics, Geography, and Mathematics. This approach will not only diversify learning but also reinforce the connection between participatory budgeting and the broader school curriculum. • Connect SPB process with specific curricula competencies (citizenship, maths, digital tools, etc.) that can be assessed as part of the school's evaluation system. • Capacity building for school staff. Targeted training programmes for school staff to adapt SPB effectively into the curriculum.

Budget decisions closer to children's and schools' needs. By allowing students to participate directly in decisions about municipal and/or school resources, the measures adopted tend to be more in line with their needs. This optimises the investment of public funds, engages schools in participatory processes, and increases students' sense of belonging to a democratic community.

- **Expand budgeting and decision-making scope.** Increase the allocated budget for SPB and broaden the range of decision areas included.
- Develop SPB processes that **benefit not only the students but also other school stakeholders**, similar to the model used in the Cartagena City Council. This approach should aim to create shared values, enhancing the educational environment for all participants.

Resilience of some SPB processes to changes of government. There are cases in which the processes have managed to be continued, even with changes of political teams in the public administration, which may suggest a progressive consolidation of this model.

- **Showcase successful models.** Actively disseminate cases of SPB that have demonstrated resilience through changes in government as exemplary practices.
- **Strengthen stakeholder engagement.** Intensify engagement with both participants and broader school community stakeholders to align the SPB more closely with their demands and interests. By deeply rooting these processes in the needs and priorities of the community, it becomes more challenging for incoming administrations to discontinue them without facing public and institutional pushback.

Catalyst for adult participation. The participation of students can generate a ripple effect on their families and other members of their communities, stimulating their engagement in civic participation.

- **Enhance family engagement.** Regularly inform families about the SPB processes and organise activities that actively involve them. This approach will help deepen their understanding and investment in the initiatives, thereby encouraging more consistent and meaningful participation.
- **Promote intergenerational collaboration.** Facilitate the involvement of community organisations and other relevant stakeholders in the SPB processes. By creating intergenerational alliances, these collaborations can bridge the gap between students and adults, enhancing the community-wide impact and sustainability of the participatory budgeting initiatives.

On the other hand, participatory budgeting within schools is currently hindered by several interlinked **weaknesses** that detract from its educational and democratic value. Key issues include a disconnect of some PB processes from transforming democratic culture, where the focus on immediate output overshadows the cultivation of deeper participatory values. This is compounded by adultism, which often limits the decision-making roles of the students, reflecting a broader underestimation of young people's capacities. Moreover, the challenges of limited funding, insufficient transparency, and problematic coordination among stakeholders further constrain the effectiveness and scalability of some of these initiatives, leaving many programmes fragmented and unable to realise their full potential.

Table 5. Weaknesses of participatory budgeting in schools.

Weaknesses	How to correct
Lack of connection with goals of democratisation. Some PB initiatives in schools focus on the value of the output (the proposals that are selected and implemented), but fail to be ambitious when it comes to creating changes in democratic values and citizenship education in school communities.	• Enhance citizenship education through SPB. Implement awareness-raising and training programmes for policymakers, school staff, and other stakeholders to emphasise how SPB can significantly enhance civic values and democratic skills from an early age. This initiative should include detailed examples of successful SPB implementations that have led to measurable changes in democratic engagement and citizenship education within school communities.
Adulthoodism. Conventional cultural attitudes and institutional practices often prevent children from being fully recognised as citizens, even when adults have decided to reach out to children for PB in schools. Adulthoodism manifests itself in the design of these processes when students are not thoroughly included in all phases, from planning through to evaluation and implementation. Typically, crucial decisions within these processes are predominantly influenced by an adult-centric agenda,	• Establish one or several student committees for SPB. Form working groups consisting exclusively of students from diverse age groups and backgrounds. These groups shall be involved in all stages of the participatory process, from design to evaluation and implementation. • The <i>Student veto</i>. Create rules that prevent decisions in the SPB being made against the will of the student committee. This measure mitigates the power of adult-centric agendas from overriding their contributions and perspectives.
Asymmetry of roles. The authority of the teaching staff in schools can limit the autonomy of the students in participatory processes. Teachers, even unintentionally, may overshadow student contributions and decision-making, thereby restricting students' ability to shape outcomes independently.	• Implement comprehensive facilitator training. Whether utilising external facilitators or relying on teaching staff, it is crucial to ensure that all facilitators are well-trained in democratic facilitation techniques. This training should equip them with the skills necessary to guide the SPB process impartially, enabling them to support student autonomy effectively without imposing their personal biases. Facilitators must learn to facilitate discussions and decision-making in a way that encourages student-led ideas and minimises adult dominance, ensuring that the SPB process remains student-centred. • Evaluate student autonomy. Assess the SPB not only based on the final outcomes but also through indicators of student autonomy, such as the percentage of ideas initiated by students and the level of teacher intervention in the process. This approach ensures that the effectiveness of SPB is measured by both its results and its ability to empower students.

Low representativeness of student steering committees.

In some instances, a small number of students, either by design or due to self-selection bias, make decisions for the entire group. This can lead to disconnection from the process of the majority of students, thereby compromising the impact and legitimacy of SPB. Most notably, it reduces the extent of individual changes experienced by the broader group of participants.

- **Implement a mandatory rotation system.** Establish rotation systems within the SPB committees to prevent the same group of students from continuously leading the decision-making process. This approach ensures that more students have the opportunity to participate, bringing fresh perspectives and ideas and reducing self-selection bias.
- **Adopt an inclusive quota model.** Implement a quota system to ensure diverse representation on the committees, including students of different ages, academic levels, genders, and diversity groups (such as students with disabilities and cultural minorities). This model will help to reflect the broader student body within the decision-making process, enhancing the legitimacy and impact of the SPB by making it more inclusive and representative.

Insufficient Funding. The limited availability of funds in school budgets not only reduces the impact of SPB but also limits the scope of proposals that can be implemented. This financial constraint leads to low motivation among school administrators, who often face the dilemma of initiating participatory processes while struggling to cover basic educational needs. Furthermore, once an SPB is established, students may become demotivated upon realising their limited capacity to make impactful decisions due to the constrained budget.

- **Advocate for increased public funding through demonstrated outcomes.** Persuade local and regional administrations to augment their funding by presenting the extensive benefits of SPB beyond mere budget distribution. Highlight how SPB enhances civic and democratic values among students, including improved civic engagement and decision-making skills.
- **Enhance funding through community and government support.** Forge partnerships with local governments to secure additional resources, promoting SPB as a valuable educational and social initiative. Additionally, implement a shared budgeting model where families and the broader community can contribute through donations or sponsor specific projects. This collaborative approach not only diversifies funding sources but also fosters a sense of community ownership and involvement in the educational process, enhancing the scope and impact of SPB projects.

Limited information and transparency.

Access to information about participatory budgeting in schools is often confined to basic summaries of activities, lacking comprehensive details. Key aspects such as the design of the process, its governing rules, oversight mechanisms, and the handling of outcomes are seldom disclosed. Furthermore, the information that is available is rarely tailored to accommodate the understanding of children across different age groups, which hampers their ability to engage meaningfully in the process.

- **Develop unified databases and dissemination tools.**

Establish unified databases or shared platforms that systematically evaluate and disseminate results of the SPB processes. This will make the information more accessible and easier to replicate across different schools and districts.

- **Launch a dedicated website.**

Design a specific website that publishes comprehensive data about the SPB, including submitted proposals, selection criteria, and project tracking. This platform should serve as a central hub for all stakeholders to access up-to-date information.

- **Use accessible and visual formats.**

Adopt user-friendly and visual communication methods, such as infographics and explanatory videos, tailored to different comprehension levels—from elementary to high school students. This approach will enhance understanding and engagement among students of various ages.

- **Implement accountability mechanisms.**

Include a transparent accountability mechanism that provides a final report accessible to all students, detailing how the budget was spent and the impact of the decisions made. This will help foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among the participants.

Coordination Challenges Among Stakeholders.

In municipalities with numerous schools, coordinating participatory budgeting processes between administrations, management teams, and teachers can be particularly complex. Variability in resource availability and organisational structures across schools often results in disparities that impact the effectiveness and continuity of these initiatives. Moreover, insufficient communication among these stakeholders may lead to fragmented processes, where initiatives fail to achieve their full potential.

- **Establish local networks for SPB.** Create networks where schools can share best practices and coordinate efforts with local authorities and other stakeholders. Such a structure will facilitate more effective collaboration and ensure that all parties are aligned, helping to overcome disparities and improve the consistency of SPB initiatives across schools.

Participatory budgeting in schools stands at a promising juncture, bolstered by an array of **opportunities** that enhance its potential for broader adoption and success. Growing endorsement from policymakers, coupled with evolving educational laws, fosters a conducive environment for these initiatives. Legislative advancements and targeted funding opportunities further empower schools to adopt and sustain participatory practices. Moreover, the availability of participatory democracy professionals

and the strategic alignment with municipal budgeting efforts not only strengthen the framework for these programs but also ensure their integration into larger civic participation strategies, enhancing their legitimacy and impact.

Table 6. Opportunities for the development of participatory budgets in school contexts.

Opportunities	How to exploit
Support from policy makers. In addition to a longstanding interest in open governance and children's rights, there has lately been a growing concern of policy makers about polarisation and authoritarian trends among the younger generations. Participatory decision making in school contexts is seen as a way to reinforce democratic values and counteract these disruptive behaviours in children and youth.	• Create and distribute implementation guides based on best practices. Develop and share comprehensive implementation guides that distil best practices from successful SPB projects. These guides can assist policymakers and school administrators in understanding the key steps for effective SPB implementation, reducing barriers to adoption and enhancing the likelihood of successful outcomes. • Present reports demonstrating how SPB strengthens democracy in classrooms. Compile and disseminate reports that showcase evidence of SPB's role in enhancing democratic values and addressing concerns about youth polarisation. Aligning SPB outcomes with current political concerns can bolster support from policymakers.
Legislative possibilities. Regional or local regulations can be developed that encourage the implementation of SPB.	• Encourage enabling legislation. Advocate for legislation at the municipal and regional parliamentary levels that enables schools and public institutions to implement SPB. This approach ensures that while the framework supports SPB initiatives, it remains flexible and allows schools to opt in voluntarily, tailoring processes to their specific needs and reality.
Access to experts in participation with children. While there is no formal network, a growing number of organisations and specialists in participatory democracy provides valuable support for the development and consolidation of these practices in schools. Collaborations with universities and research centres in citizen participation can offer a robust theoretical and methodological framework. This engagement with researchers and practitioners can significantly enhance the quality and impact of participatory budgeting in schools.	• Establish partnerships with universities and research centres. Sign agreements with public administrations, schools, universities and research centres specialising in participatory democracy. Such collaboration can support the implementation and evaluation of SPB, bringing rigorous academic insights to enhance the processes. • Develop a network of practitioners and researchers. Experts can provide technical support to government bodies and schools implementing SPB, offering guidance tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of engaging students in participatory budgeting.

Convergence with other forms of

Participatory Budgeting. Linking school processes with municipal participatory budgeting makes it possible to increase the legitimacy and sustainability of both initiatives over time.

- **Allocate municipal budget for student projects.** In municipalities with existing municipal participatory budgeting, the local government can set aside funds specifically for student-led projects related to schools.

Participatory budgeting in schools faces significant threats that could impede its effectiveness and widespread adoption. The lack of specific legislation and formal support undermines its institutionalisation and leaves it vulnerable to political shifts, risking discontinuity with changes in government. Furthermore, the limited visibility and scope of these initiatives, particularly in smaller municipalities, hampers their ability to influence and scale up effectively, leaving many successful projects in isolation without a platform for broader dissemination and impact.

Table 7. Threats to the development of participatory budgeting in school contexts.

Threats	How to mitigate
Lack of specific legislation. The absence of an enabling regulatory framework for SPB in most municipalities and autonomous communities hinders its institutionalisation and expansion.	• Advocate for SPB inclusion in regional child participation legislation. Propose that SPB be integrated into autonomous community legislation concerning child participation, linking it with children's rights as recognised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Organic Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (LOPVI). This would provide a strong legislative framework that supports the institutionalisation and expansion of SPB.
Policymakers checking the boxes. There is a risk that policymakers and other adult stakeholders might engage in manipulative, decorative, or tokenistic practices when promoting participatory budgeting in schools. In such scenarios, participatory processes could be initiated merely as a symbolic gesture, without students having significant influence on decision making.	• Conduct advocacy activities. Develop an advocacy strategy that includes disseminating case studies and examples of SPB where children participation has had a clear and positive impact. Show policymakers how genuine contributions from students not only enrich the educational process but also strengthen community cohesion and local governance. • Launch awareness campaigns on children's right to participation targeted at policymakers and schools. Organise informational sessions and workshops highlighting the importance of respecting and promoting children's rights in all decision-making processes.

Curricular overload in schools.

The heavy teaching load in many schools may lead to the perception that additional initiatives, such as participatory budgeting, are burdensome and expendable. The pressure to meet academic requirements and the constraints of tight school schedules can significantly impede the development and integration of such programs. This often results in reluctance to adopt practices that, while beneficial, are seen as secondary to the core educational objectives.

- **Integrate SPB as a Project-Based Learning tool in various subjects.** Incorporate SPB as a method of project-based learning in disciplines such as Mathematics (budget management), Language Arts (proposal writing), Social Studies (democracy and participation), and Values Education. This alignment with the curriculum turns SPB into an educational tool that directly contributes to academic goals, rather than being seen as an additional burden.
- **Establish partnerships with external organisations.** Form alliances with NGOs, universities, and municipal technicians who can share some of the organisational responsibilities. This collaboration can significantly lighten the workload for teachers and facilitate the smoother integration of SPB into school activities.

Risk of political discontinuity.

Changes of political landscapes, due to elections or instability, frequently cause SPB initiatives to disappear. When discontinued, policymakers rarely face significant opposition or social demands for the restoration of the processes.

- **Secure SPB with institutional commitments and multi-year funding.** Advocate for the establishment of institutional agreements with regional governments to ensure that SPB initiatives are not solely dependent on the current administration. This approach helps protect SPB from the volatility of political changes.
- **Link SPB to broader strategic frameworks.** Integrate SPB into wider initiatives such as Municipal Plans for Children and Adolescents, the Sustainable Development Goals, or open governance agendas. This integration can elevate the importance of SPB, aligning it with established long-term goals and securing its position within broader policy objectives.

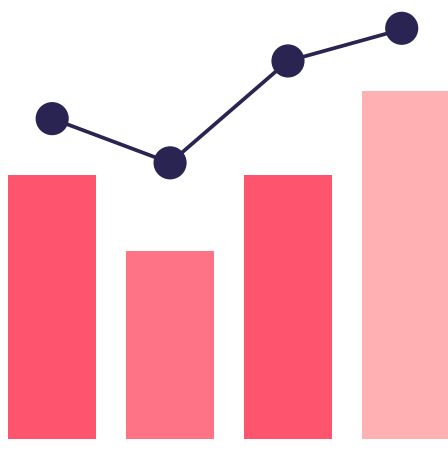
Lack of visibility and interconnectivity.

Participatory budgeting initiatives in schools often operate as isolated experiences, lacking significant media exposure and connections with similar efforts in other schools or municipalities. This isolation hampers their ability to be recognized as replicable good practices and spread to new areas, ultimately reducing their potential for horizontal scalability. Such limitations not only restrict the growth of PB programs but also diminish their impact across broader educational and civic communities.

- **Launch a dedicated website.** Design a specific website that publishes comprehensive data about the SPB, including submitted proposals, selection criteria, and project tracking. This platform should serve as a central hub for all stakeholders to access up-to-date information.
- **Organise an annual conference on participatory budgeting in schools.** Host an annual event where city councils, schools, and participation experts can share their experiences and showcase successful SPB initiatives. This congress would serve as a significant opportunity for networking and learning, helping to raise the profile of SPB practices and encourage their adoption across other regions.

In synthesising the insights from a SWOT analysis, it becomes clear that the potential for participatory budgeting in Spanish schools is marked by both promising opportunities and notable challenges. The empowerment of students and the integration with modern pedagogical approaches highlight its strengths, while support from policy makers, experts and practitioners, underscore the opportunities for growth and sustainability. However, the absence of a strong legislative framework and the variability in implementation point out to critical areas that need attention to ensure these initiatives can thrive.

To establish a long-term success and expansion of participatory budgeting in schools, it is imperative to overcome the barriers of insufficient legal support and disparate adoption rates across municipalities. Strengthening the connection between school-based initiatives and broader municipal budgeting processes could also enhance their impact and visibility, fostering a more cohesive and supported approach to participatory budgeting within Spain's educational landscape.



Recommendations

In recent years, the concept of SPB and other forms of participatory budgeting in schools have garnered attention in Spain, due to their potential to empower students, democratise school environments, and enhance citizenship education. As these initiatives continue to evolve, it becomes imperative to address the systemic and operational challenges that hinder their scaling out to more schools and municipalities, as well as developing their full transformational potential. To this end, this chapter outlines recommendations to boost SPB in Spain, keeping in mind the diversity of stakeholders involved: school staff, practitioners, researchers, local governments, autonomous communities and national government, and, most importantly, children and young adolescents.

The recommendations have been structured into three strategic blocks with their own specific characteristics: the first is related to strengthening of the legal framework, the second one seeks to amplify civil society's advocacy efforts, and the third, to cultivate a robust multi-stakeholder alliance. Finally, it is crucial to emphasise the importance of involving children and young adolescents in each of the recommended steps to enhance SPB practices. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines the right of children and adolescents to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. Given that SPB initiatives directly impact their educational environments and future civic engagement, excluding them from the decision-making processes would not only undermine their rights but also contradict the spirit of participatory democracy. This approach may not only enhance the legitimacy of SPB initiatives but also empower the students as key actors in the transformation of their own educational experiences.

- 1 Block 1: Legal Improvements.** Inspired mainly by Portugal's exemplary implementation of SPB, which is supported by government funding and fully integrated into the school curriculum, we believe that institutions in Spain should consider similar enhancements. Enacting legislation on SPB in schools can ensure uniform participation and significantly reinforce the educational impact of the initiative. By adopting a flexible

framework and ensuring dedicated funding and curricular integration, autonomous communities in Spain could foster a robust environment where democratic values and practical project management skills are core components of the educational system. Specific recommendations are listed below.

- **Establish a comprehensive legal framework:** Advocate for autonomous communities in Spain to enact legislation that mandates the implementation of SPB across the compulsory educational levels. This legislation should detail the minimum percentage of school budgets to be directed towards SPB and define flexible guidelines for participation and implementation.
- **Secure Sustainable Funding:** Engage with regional governments to allocate specific funds for SPB, ensuring these are included as line items within educational budgets. This could involve setting up national and regional funds that schools can apply to for additional financial support specifically for SPB projects.
- **Curricular Integration:** Mandate the incorporation of SPB into the school curriculum by working with educational authorities to outline how it can be integrated into existing subjects or as part of new civic and financial literacy programs. This would formalise SPB's role in education, ensuring it receives the necessary emphasis within school programs.

2 Block 2: Actions of Civil Society for Advocacy. As societies face rising authoritarian trends, particularly among younger populations, it is imperative that civil society organisations take proactive steps to safeguard and promote democratic values and practices within educational settings. Practitioners and advocates in the field of participatory democracy can organise and act decisively, not just supporting schools but demanding and facilitating democratic changes that include the integration of SPB. The actions outlined in this section aim to expand awareness campaigns, develop comprehensive training and resources, and foster community engagement to ensure that SPB becomes a transformative tool for democratic education.

- **Expand Awareness Campaigns:** Launch comprehensive awareness campaigns that include testimonials from students, case studies of successful projects, and clear evidence of the benefits of SPB, such as improved school facilities and enhanced student engagement in community issues. These campaigns should utilise various media platforms to reach a broad audience.

- **Training and Resource Development:** Create detailed training modules and resources for all SPB stakeholders, including online courses, workshops, and printed materials that cover the essentials of participatory budgeting, project management, and democratic engagement. Additionally, establish a certification programme for teachers and facilitators to ensure high-quality implementation.
- **Community Engagement Initiatives:** Develop programs that facilitate greater community involvement in SPB, such as open forums, SPB fairs, and interactive online platforms where community members can propose and discuss initiatives. These programs should also encourage active participation from families and community organisations, enhancing the communal impact of SPB.

3 **Block 3: An Agenda for a Multi-Stakeholder Alliance to Promote SPB.**

Recognising the rich and diverse ecosystem of stakeholders already championing participatory budgeting in schools in Spain, there exists a significant opportunity to harness this collective energy through enhanced networking and collaboration. From government bodies and educational institutions to practitioners, researchers, and the very children and adolescents engaged in these processes, each bring valuable resources, research, knowledge, methodologies, and best practices to the table. By fostering a robust network that leverages these contributions, a synergistic environment can be created that not only promotes the growth of SPB but also enriches its implementation across various educational settings. This approach underscores the potential of a united multi-stakeholder alliance to transform SPB into a more dynamic and impactful educational tool, aligning efforts and resources towards a common goal of nurturing democratic participation and civic responsibility among young learners.

- **Formalise Partnerships:** Establish formal agreements between educational institutions, local governments, and CSOs to collaboratively promote and support SPB. These agreements should outline the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder, ensuring a coordinated approach to funding, training, and implementing SPB.
- **Digital Resource Hub for SPB Enhancement:** Create a comprehensive website that will serve as a central repository for SPB tools, resources, research, guidelines, and opportunities, designed to support a wide range of stakeholders including policymakers, teaching staff, practitioners, SPB coordinators, facilitators, and importantly, children

and students. This hub aims to provide essential tools to enhance the implementation and management of SPB activities, ensuring that it is also engaging and accessible for young participants. The proposed website should be user-friendly and equipped with features that facilitate the downloading and sharing of materials, along with forums or sections for collaborative discussions, feedback submission, and updates on best practices and successful case studies.

- **Ongoing Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement a structured evaluation framework that includes regular assessments by an independent body to measure the effectiveness of SPB projects. Feedback from these evaluations should be openly published and used to continually adapt and improve SPB processes.

The strategic blocks outlined above provide a roadmap for advancing SPB in Spain, addressing key areas such as legal infrastructure, civil society involvement, and stakeholder collaboration. By systematically enhancing these areas, SPB can become a cornerstone of citizenship education, equipping students with the skills and knowledge to actively participate in their communities. The collective effort of government bodies, educational institutions, and civil society is essential in this endeavour, ensuring that SPB not only thrives as a practice but also serves as a model for democratic engagement and civic responsibility across Spain. These efforts will ensure that the transformative potential of SPB is fully realised, benefiting not just students but the broader community as well.

Methodology

Research questions

The methodology used in the present study has been designed to address the following research questions:

- To examine in depth the state of school participatory budgeting in Spain, including its prevalence, models of implementation, difficulties and national specificities.
- To understand the educational and political context in Spain relevant to school participatory budgeting.
- To identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) for the future development of participatory school budgeting in Spain.
- To evaluate the level of participation and representation in participatory school budgeting processes in Spain.
- To identify those elements of participatory school budgeting that need special support in Spain.

To carry out the study, we worked with both secondary and primary data. The adopted methodology is described below in accordance with the time sequence of the study, indicating at each step the sample, the analysis instruments used and the procedure followed.

Creation of a case database

To create a database of participatory budgeting cases in a school context, we consulted various available sources, which are listed below.

- Systematic online search for local governments promoting participatory school budgeting. The websites of the 414 municipalities out of more than 20,000, most likely to have programmes of democratic innovation and child participation, have been individually reviewed. The search has directly reviewed the information pages on policies for children, youth, education, and citizen participation.

- Consultation of the database of the Inventory of Participatory Budgeting in Spain 2019, prepared by Coglobal with the scientific coordination of Francisco Francés, Andrés Falck and Marta Barros (2022).
- Review of eight scientific publications from the period 2019–2024 that incorporate case studies of participatory budgeting in Spanish schools (see details in table 4). When circumstances allowed, personal contacts were made with these authors to fill in information gaps related to the case studies.
- An online open search using the term *participatory budgeting* in combination with *childhood, youth, school, college, high school, primary school, secondary school* and *lower secondary school*. This inquiry allowed us to expand the search for information to initiatives of local governments of smaller municipalities and participatory budgeting initiatives that started from the schools themselves.

Table 8. Scientific publications consulted to create the database of cases of participatory budgeting in Spanish schools.

Authorship	Publication	Cases included
Abellán López, M. Á., & Pardo Beneyto, G. (2024)	Public space and child and adolescent participation in the Valencian Community.	Study of 25 municipalities in the Autonomous Community of Valencia
Abellán-López, M. A., Pardo Beneyto, G., Beltrán, J. (2022)	Participatory budgeting with children and adolescents.	39 municipalities and 1 association of municipalities and 1 province in Spain
Falck, A. (2023)	Andalusian minors making political decisions. An analysis of innovations in child and youth participation in Andalusia.	18 municipalities and 1 association of municipalities and 1 province in Andalusia
Falck, A. & Barros, M. (2023)	Characterisation of alliances between local authorities and teachers to bring municipal participatory budgeting to schools in Spain.	16 municipalities in Spain
Mayor Balsas, J.M. & Ros Medina, J.L. (2022)	An analysis of participatory budgeting in the Region of Murcia during the period 2015-2020.	2 municipalities in the Region of Murcia (7 identified; 2 analysed)

Mayor Balsas, J. M., & González Salcedo, A. (2019)	Participatory budgeting in education in the Region of Murcia.	18 municipalities in the Region of Murcia
Pardo Beneyto, G., & Abellán López, M. Á. (2023)	Participatory experiences of children and young people. Perspectives on processes of democratisation and governance.	39 municipalities and 1 association of municipalities and 1 province in Spain
Pineda Nebot, C., Abellán-López, M. A. & Pardo Beneyto, G. (2020)	Children's participatory budgeting as a methodology for civic learning. An exploratory study on the Spanish experience.	8 municipalities in Spain

In-depth interviews with key informants

Thirteen people were interviewed as part of this study between January 31 and February 7 (see Table 5). The selection of interviewees was based on the following criteria:

- **Prioritisation of people who could provide information on the processes that most closely match the definition of school participatory budgeting.** Seven of the 13 informants are involved in the participatory budgeting in Cartagena, Elda and the Domingo Miral school in Zaragoza.
- **Territorial diversity.** The interviewees come from six autonomous communities: Andalusia (2), Aragon (1), Cantabria (1), Valencia (3), Galicia (2) and Murcia (4).
- **Diversity of profiles,** to include different visions of the management of participatory budgeting. Of the people interviewed, 6 are school staff, 4 are technical or political teams from local administrations and another 3 are consultants and/or facilitators. For logistical and permission reasons, we were not able to interview students, which would have positively contributed to the diversity of voices included in the study. The majority of the people interviewed are women (10), reflecting the high level of feminisation of the education and social intervention sectors.

The meetings were held online, via Meet or Zoom, and were recorded with the consent of the interviewees for the sole purpose of allowing the study team to review the conversation again. With the recordings of the interviews, the authors have carried out a **content analysis with a system of categories and coding with two judges. In cases of disagreement between the judges, a debate has taken place between the coders until an agreement has been reached.** The categories derived from the research questions on which this work is based have been taken as a reference.

Table 9. List of key informants selected for interviews.

Date	Initials	Entity	Type of entity	Autonomous Community	Position
2/5	DF (woman)	La Parra, Almáchar Primary School	School	Andalusia	Head of Studies at La Parra Primary School
2/6	JM (man)	Domingo Miral, Zaragoza Primary School	School	Aragon	School Principal and promoter of the participatory school budgeting
2/6	NN (woman)	Pintor Sorolla, Elda Primary School	School	Region of Valencia	Head of Studies at Pintor Sorolla Primary School
2/5	AM (woman)	San Isidoro, Cartagena Secondary School	School	Region of Murcia	Teacher and promoter of the participatory budgeting in her school
2/5	MA (woman)	Virgen del Carmen, Cartagena Primary School	School	Region of Murcia	Teacher and promoter of the participatory budgeting in her school
2/5	PI (woman)	Virginia Pérez, Cartagena Primary School	School	Region of Murcia	Teacher and promoter of the participatory budgeting in her school
2/3	RP (woman)	Aldea del Talento	Consultant	Cantabria	External consultant and facilitator in Torrelavega
2/7	PM (man)	Innove Social	Consultant	Region of Valencia	Consultant and external facilitator for the children's participatory budgeting in Elda
2/3	MR (woman)	Independent Consultant	Consultant	Galicia	Consultant and external facilitator for the participatory budgeting in Cedeira
1/31	AP (woman)	Almáchar City Hall	Local government	Andalusia	Former Deputy Mayor of Almáchar
2/5	EL (woman)	Alcoy City Hall	Local government	Region of Valencia	Municipal Childcare Officer
2/3	NL (man)	Cedeira City Hall	Local government	Galicia	Councillor-Delegate for Education and Youth
2/5	MA (woman)	Cartagena City Hall	Local government	Region of Murcia	Municipal Participatory Budgeting Officer

SWOT workshop with experts

On February 7th a SWOT workshop was held with people with proven knowledge in the field of research, evaluation and/or implementation of participatory budgeting with children. The selection of the people invited to the workshop also reflected the territorial diversity of the experiences of participatory school budgeting in Spain. However, the invited experts from Catalonia, the Region of Murcia and the Basque Country were unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts. The workshop was attended by the participants listed in Table 6, in addition to the two researchers who authored the study.

Table 10. List of experts who participated in the SWOT workshop.

Name	Entity	Autonomous Community	Profile
Maica Rodríguez	Independent Consultant	Galicia	Consultant and facilitator of participatory budgeting processes
Patricia García Leiva	University of Malaga	Andalusia	Lecturer in Social Psychology and researcher into child participation
Francisco Francés	University of Alicante	Region of Valencia	Lecturer in Sociology and researcher into participatory budgeting processes
María Ángeles Abellán López	University of Valencia	Region of Valencia	Lecturer in Sociology and researcher into child participation

The SWOT analysis was carried out online on Zoom and was divided into three blocks:

- Presentation of the workshop and the framework in which it is taking place. Presentation of the main provisional findings of the study.
- SWOT analysis in small groups of 3 people through brainstorming with cards for each of the dimensions (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), followed by a plenary sharing.
- Generation of recommendations to expand the scope of participatory budgeting in schools in 4 categories:
 - Institutional and legislative support (regulations, incentives for schools).
 - Funding and resources (grants, partnerships with public and private organisations).

- Awareness-raising strategies (teacher training, educational materials, networks for the exchange of good practices).
- Methodologies and tools (digital platforms, scalable pilot experiences).

The contributions of the SWOT workshop have been taken into account in the writing of chapters 5 and 6 of the study.

Case studies

The following criteria were taken into account when selecting the case studies for chapter 4:

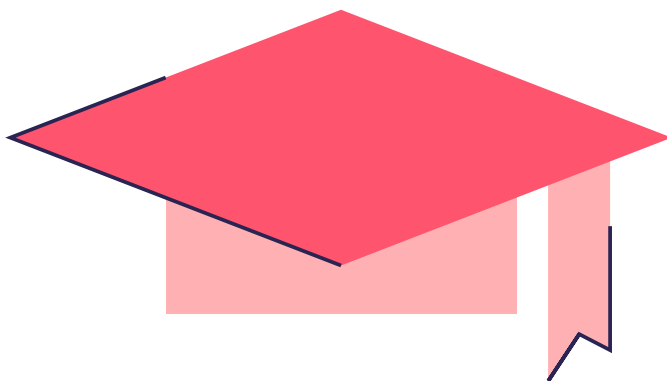
- To give priority to cases that conform to the school participatory budgeting model defined for the study.
- To include only cases that have been able to continue for several years in a row and exclude those that have been negligent in the basic fulfilment of the commitments to implement participatory budgeting.
- Prioritise the processes that have been documented in reports and evaluations that provide sufficient information about the process.
- Have the option of conducting an interview with people involved in the management of participatory budgeting processes.
- Allow for geographical diversity (territory and habitat) and methodological diversity in the design of the processes.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

In light of the cases observed, it is possible that the specific model of PB defined for the study is not adequately reflected in the institutional, educational and cultural context of Spain. Participatory budgeting has reached schools in Spain by different routes to those described in other countries, such as the United States or Portugal, but this does not make them any less valuable for inclusion in comparative studies of participatory school democracy practices. The cases studied show experiences with great potential for change, comparable to the transformation sought from other experiences of participatory democracy at school. The definition of the study based on a predefined model and not on the processes actually taking place may have limited the full exploitation of the lessons learned from the Spanish processes.

On the other hand, we believe that the study could have benefited from a greater number and range of profiles participating in the SWOT Workshop, as well as in the interviewees.

For future research, we understand that it would be advisable to include the voice of the students who participate in the processes. In this way, a more complete reflection of the perceptions of the most prominent agents in participatory budgets in school contexts can be grasped.



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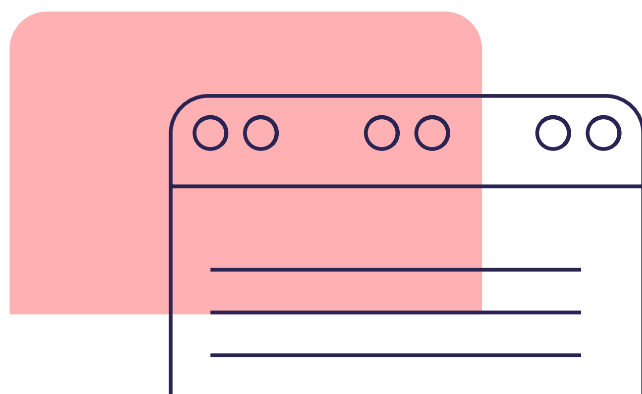
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School Participatory Budgeting in Poland

Katarzyna Sztop-Rutkowska
In collaboration with Anna Pruszyńska

Introduction

Democracy is not only a political system, based on specific legislation and procedures, but it is also a type of political culture, based on a set of values and norms. A stable democratic system must, if it is based on voluntary choice rather than coercion and force, develop pro-democratic attitudes among citizens. The foundation of the democratic approach are people's everyday attitudes reflected in their emotions, actions and mindsets. And this approach must not be applied exclusively on special occasions, such as regularly held political elections, but should permeate the ordinary daily activities of people and institutions. This is the 'everyday democracy'.⁶⁹ In the context of building such attitudes and democratic culture in Poland, as well as in other countries, various mechanisms of civic participation are being implemented to encourage co-decision-making on important local and supra-local issues. In Poland, one such mechanism, first introduced in 2011 in Sopot, was the civic budgeting (CB). Initiated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and transferred in a modified version to Poland, it initially developed very dynamically in Polish cities. Since the beginning, school civic budgeting (SPB)⁷⁰ has been inspired by such municipal processes. Although at the same time, and this is an interesting observation, school participatory budgeting appears to be growing in strength at a time of a currently observable crisis in municipal civic budgeting. Criticism of municipal CB is related to the shrinking number of participants, rules that favour, for example, school investments without giving equal opportunity to neighbourhood and local community projects, the difficulty to implement an investment project within an annual cycle, the lack of deliberation and the strong shift of the main emphasis to voting (the referendum model). At the same time, more and more schools and municipalities are opting to introduce the SPB mechanism into schools. And just as with municipal budgeting, where it was described as a tool for democratising the decision-making process at the city level, in schools, the theme of democracy and citizenship education is also coming to the foreground.

69 K. Sztop-Rutkowska, *Demokracja codzienna*, The Batory Foundation, 2024.

70 In Poland, various names are in use, which also appear in this report. In the following sections of the report, we interchangeably use such names as school participatory budgeting (SPB) and school civic budgeting (SPB).

This is precisely the perspective of our report. We try to look at SPB as one of the mechanisms that support democratic culture. In Poland, the first SPB appeared in 2015 as an initiative of the parents' council and the student self-government in one of the schools.⁷¹ To a large extent, from the outset, it was an attempt to transfer municipal civic budgeting to the school reality. The concept of SPB, then, is for a certain pool of money from various sources to be put at the disposal of the school community, understood either broadly as students, teachers, parents and others working at the school, or narrowly, including only students. The decision to spend the money is public, made through discussion or voting, implemented on the basis of clear rules, usually contained in separate rules and regulations. The process is democratic and based on a set of values such as cooperation, creativity, equality, empowerment, learning, transparency, inclusiveness, commitment.⁷² The realisation of these values is crucial and indicates the extent to which the process is democratic. This constitutes an important part of this report.

From the Polish perspective, we are dealing with a relatively new phenomenon, but one that is increasingly implemented in schools both in a bottom-up way (initiated, for example, by parents' councils or NGOs) and in a systematic manner (introduced by municipalities). It is certainly worth looking at these practices also from the point of view of building a democratic culture in Poland. This report can be seen as a prelude to further in-depth research, which we hope is forthcoming.

71 M. Wojcieszak, D. Schugurensky, *School participatory budget in Poland: towards a common experience for students*, in: *Educating for Democracy: The Case for Participatory Budgeting in Schools*, ed. D. Schugurensky, T. Bartlett, Edward Elgar Publishing 2024, p. 250.

72 More about the values in SPB in: *Czas na młodych! Przewodnik po budżetach partycypacyjnych dla młodzieży*, ed. By A. Maszkowska, M. Wojcieszak, Fundacja SocLab, 2022, p. 46; soclab.org.pl/wydawnictwa/czas-na-młodych-przewodnik-po-budżetach-partycypacyjnych-dla-młodzieży One more value was added in this report, namely: recognition.

Summary

The report 'School Participatory Budget – a tool to foster school democracy' analyses the implementation of the SPB mechanism in Polish schools. Here are the key findings of the report.

- 1 **The scale of SPB implementation:** School Participatory Budgeting appeared in Poland in 2015. Initially, it was treated as analogous to municipal civic budgeting. Based on our research on a representative sample of schools, we can estimate that the process has been implemented in 2.3% of schools nationwide (approximately 500 schools).
- 2 **The SPB size** varies considerably: from 1,000–2,000 PLN through 10,000 PLN (e.g. schools in Piaseczno and Opole).
- 3 An important element in the implementation of the SPB is the reliance on **values** such as collaboration, equality, empowerment, learning, transparency, inclusiveness, commitment and recognition. The level of adherence to these values determines the extent to which the process is democratic. The values should be visible at all stages of implementation.
- 4 **The bottom-up character of the initiatives:** SPB processes are often initiated by NGOs, parents' councils or local governments. Their sustainability depends on the external technical and financial support.
- 5 **SPB model:** The recommended School Participatory Budgeting process consists of several key stages:
 - **Forming a working team:** Coordinating teams play a key role in the implementation of the SPB, although their composition and method of appointment vary. In some cases, parents and administrative staff participate in the process, but it is mainly the students and the school SPB coordinators (teachers) who are involved. It is important that students constitute a majority of the team.
 - **Need analysis and generating ideas:** identifying the most important needs in the school.
 - **Drafting of proposals:** this is a major challenge for students. Despite the high number of ideas generated, the actual number of submitted project proposals remains low, demonstrating the need to strengthen the support for students in this area.
 - **Reviewing proposals:** Projects are assessed with regard to formal requirements and compliance with the school's regulations. A clear explanation is important when rejecting applications.

- **Promotion of projects:** The applicants promote their ideas involving the entire school community.
- **Voting and project implementation:** The school community decides which projects will be implemented.
- **Process evaluation:** Analysis of the outcomes and lessons from the project implementation.

6 Diversity of funding: The main sources of funds include local government budgets, parents' councils' funds and grants from NGOs. Some schools use a mixed model that requires additional mobilisation of the school community (e.g. raising own funds during school fairs).

7 Students role: The SPB model highlights the active role of school children and young people in decision-making, which is key to building their sense of empowerment and responsibility.

8 Implementation challenges: The main difficulties include bureaucratic constraints (especially with project implementation), encouraging students to submit project proposals, maintaining the continuity of the processes in the school.

The report emphasises that SPB has the potential to strengthen civic competences and build the democratic culture in schools, while at the same time pointing to the need for further support for schools to enable them to carry out these initiatives. The prevailing undemocratic culture in Polish schools limits their effectiveness. The key challenges involve integrating SPBs into the citizenship education curriculum, strengthening students' sense of empowerment and developing deliberation. Despite these difficulties, SPB can play an important role in building the democratic culture in Polish schools and in the society. It presents a great opportunity for developing that culture.

Methodology

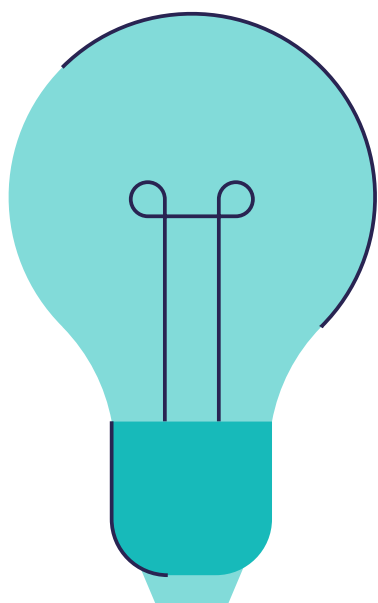
The study was of an exploratory nature. We set ourselves the goal of estimating the number of schools in Poland that had conducted school participatory budgeting at least once in the last 5 years. The data on the subject is not collected by any central institution such as the Ministry of National Education or voivodeship school boards. Thus, the data on SPB is scattered and local in nature. Therefore, we decided to conduct the survey on a representative random sample of 2050 primary and secondary schools in Poland to assess the scale of the studied issue.

In addition, we conducted in-depth individual interviews with 10 people who were involved, in various roles, in organising SPB in schools across the country. They were two people from municipal offices who had introduced school budgeting in their municipalities in a systematic way, three teachers who had been coordinators of SPB in their schools, one school principal, two national experts and a representative of the parents' council who had introduced participatory budgeting to their school for the first time.

An additional element was a desktop analysis of existing reports on SPB in Poland. Ten case studies were also described, providing an insight into the specific nature of the different ways in which SPB has been implemented in Polish schools.

During the 2024 Participation Practitioners' Forum in Krakow, a thematic session was held on the Polish experience with school participatory budgeting. The group discussion was moderated on the basis of questions prepared in advance.

Considering the international scope of the research, we decided to add a short section presenting the characteristics of the school education system in Poland, with a special focus on citizenship education.



Education system in Poland

The education system in Poland has undergone many changes and reforms since the political system transformation in 1989, both in terms of the core curriculum, management, administration and structure. The main legal act governing the way education operates in Poland is the Law on School Education⁷³ and the regulations issued by the Ministry of National Education.⁷⁴ The main goals of education include the intellectual, emotional and social development of students and preparing them for life in the society. The following section outlines the details of the education structure, stages of schooling, the role of stakeholders, as well as school funding mechanisms.

School starting age

Compulsory education in Poland starts at the age of 6. Children at this age attend a pre-school (zero) grade, which is a compulsory year of pre-school preparation. Then, from the age of 7, they start primary school. The zero grade classes can be held either in a kindergarten or in a primary school, depending on the availability of facilities in the municipality.

⁷³ The full document, including the amendments, is available at: isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20240000737

⁷⁴ The website of the Ministry of National Education: gov.pl/web/edukacja/podstawowe-informacje-mein

Stages of schooling and their length

Education in Poland is divided into several stages. The first is the pre-school education, for children aged 3 to 6 years. According to Statistics Poland, in the school year 2023/24, there were 22,500 pre-school education establishments in Poland, attended by 1,512,000 children.⁷⁵

After completing pre-school preparation, pupils start primary school, which lasts 8 years. It consists of two cycles: grades 1–3 (early childhood education) and grades 4–8 (subject-specific learning). In the school year 2023/24, there were 14,000 primary schools in Poland, of which 5,900 were operating in urban areas and 8,100 in rural areas. Schools run by local government bodies constituted the largest group (84.0%).⁷⁶

After completing the primary school, students continue their education in secondary schools, which are divided into:

- General secondary schools (4 years),
- Technical secondary schools (5 years),
- Stage I sectoral vocational school (3 years), with an option to continue education in stage II sectoral vocational school (2 years).

In the school year 2023/24, there operated 6,263 secondary schools (excl. special schools and art schools). In the same year, 1,791,800 young people attended those schools.⁷⁷ For the majority of secondary schools, their administering body was the local government – 73.8%.⁷⁸

The educational pathway can be continued at the tertiary level. The higher education system in Poland is based on two types of higher education institutions (HEIs): university type HEIs and non-university type HEIs. University type HEIs provide first-, second- and third-cycle (doctoral) degree programmes. They focus on both theoretical education and research. Non-university type HEIs focus on practical education, preparing graduates for immediate entry into the labour market.

⁷⁵ Statistics Poland Report 'Edukacja w roku szkolnym 2023/2024 (wyniki wstępne)' stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5488/21/2/1/edukacja_w_roku_szkolnym_2023_24_wyniki_wstepne.pdf.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

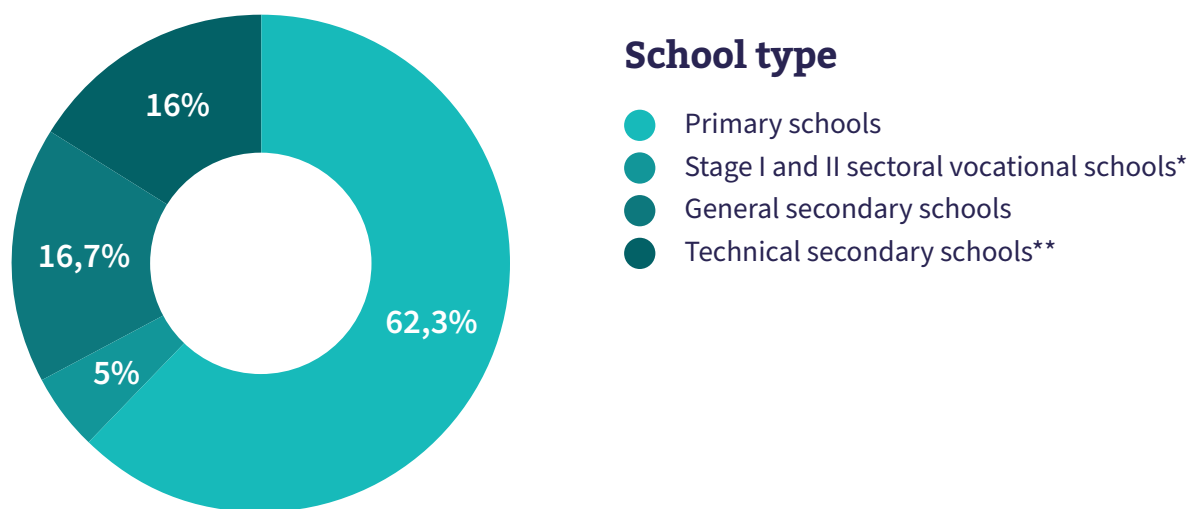
⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

The duration of a first cycle programme is 3 years (bachelor's) or 4 years (engineering). Completion of this stage allows the student to enrol in a second cycle programme, which lasts between 1.5 and 2 years. In selected fields of study (e.g. law or psychology), long-cycle master's degree programmes are offered, lasting 5 years.

The studies conclude with a diploma examination, after which the graduate is awarded the title of Bachelor, Engineer or Master [magister in PL]. The master's degree enables the graduate to pursue professions requiring higher education and to pursue third-cycle studies that last 3–4 years and are concluded with the defence of a doctoral thesis.

Art education in Poland is a separate category (approximately 162 schools at the primary and secondary level). Art education is supervised by the minister responsible for culture and national heritage protection and forms a separate education system from the general education system.



* Including special schools preparing for employment.

** Including general art schools providing professional qualifications.

Source: Statistics Poland data in "Informacje statystyczne GUS, Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2023/2024", Gdańsk 2024, p.17.

Special education in Poland also constitutes a separate system. It is organised at the level of early childhood education and care (pre-school) and at the level of school education. Pupils using this option are people with disabilities who hold a statement of special educational needs. In the 2023/2024 school year, there were 340 special

kindergartens (2.5% of all kindergartens), attended by 7692 children (0.6% of children in pre-school education). As for primary schools, during the same period there were 1973 special schools (9% of all schools), attended by 79,280 (1.5%) pupils.

Length of the compulsory school attendance

Compulsory education in Poland lasts nine years and includes the last year of pre-school education and eight years of primary school. In the Polish education system, a distinction is made between full-time compulsory education and part-time compulsory education:

- Full-time compulsory education (i.e. compulsory attendance at an 8-year primary school) applies to children and young people aged 7–15.
- Part-time compulsory education applies to young people from 15 to 18 years of age and can be provided in school or out-of-school form (e.g. through vocational training at an employer's establishment).⁷⁹

Features of the curriculum

In Poland, the curriculum is based on the core curriculum, which is the official document that regulates the educational content and teaching objectives at each stage of education. The core curriculum sets out the detailed requirements for all subjects and the competences that students should acquire. It is developed by the Ministry of Education and the current version can be found on the Ministry's official website.

The core curriculum allows teachers some freedom in the choice of teaching methods and formats, such as lectures, interdisciplinary teaching, the flipped classroom method or practical activities. In secondary schools, students can choose subjects to be taught at an extended level, which allows them to profile their education according to their interests and plans for the future.

⁷⁹ eurydice.org.pl/system-edukacji-w-polsce/krotka-informacja-o-polskim-systemie-edukacji

Specialisation and education profile selection

Specialisation in education starts mainly at the secondary school level. Secondary school students choose extended level subjects that enable them to be better prepared for the matriculation exam and their further educational path. In technical secondary schools and sectoral vocational schools, education profile selection takes place through the teaching of vocational subjects that are linked to the chosen career path. Specialisation in the Polish education system is implemented through the so-called extensions, which apply at the secondary school stage. Each student chooses from two to four extended level subjects in line with the class profile, e.g. biology and chemistry in the biological-chemical profile or Polish and history in the humanities profile. Some primary schools introduce early education profiles, thus allowing children to pursue their interests and passions, although these do not determine their future educational choices. Profiled education grades are rare and most students learn in general education grades. Education profile selection is primarily intended to give students more opportunities to develop their interests.

Key milestones in the education process

The following examinations are the key points in the education system:

- Eighth grader examination that concludes primary school and is relevant for recruitment to secondary schools.
- Matura (matriculation examination), which is the secondary school leaving examination and is required for entry into higher education.
- Vocational examinations, conducted at technical secondary schools and sectoral vocational schools, they allow students to acquire vocational qualifications.

Share of non-public schools in the system of education

Non-public education in Poland started to develop dynamically after 1989. They include private and community establishments. Non-public schools accounted for 13.4% of all schools in the school year 2022/ 2023. There were 254,604 children and young people enrolled in such schools, which accounted for 6.2 per cent of the total number of students (more than 4 million – (4,099,060) in these schools.⁸⁰

80 Ministry of National Education data, after: ciekaweliczby.pl/szkoly_publiczne_niepubliczne_2022.

They follow the mandatory core curriculum, employ teachers with the appropriate qualifications, but may charge tuition fees and determine their own admissions policies in their charters. These schools frequently offer more flexible curricula and an individual approach to students. The possibility to operate non-public schools is guaranteed by the Polish Constitution (Article 70(3)). Both public and non-public schools are subject to pedagogical supervision by the state, although this supervision is more limited in non-public schools. The learning outcomes of both types of schools are mutually recognised, allowing students to transfer seamlessly between schools.

Main stakeholders of SPB inside and outside the school

The key stakeholders in the context of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) include the following:

- The Parents' Council, which represents the parents of the students and jointly decides on the organisation of events and the allocation of funds raised by parents. It is an important entity from the perspective of the SPB, as it can initiate the school participatory budgeting process as well as provide the funding for it.
- Representative bodies of the student self-government⁸¹, whose role is to represent the interests of students, organise team-building and cultural activities and, in the context of the SPB, can play a key role in the development and promotion of projects. It is often the students' self-government that implements the SPB in practice in the school.
- The school management, which is responsible for the overall organisation of the participatory budgeting and the review of the project proposals for compliance with the regulations.
- The school's administering body (public schools are most often administered by municipalities), which can provide funding for the SPB from their own additional financial resources.
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which support the development of civic and democratic education and often initiate the introduction of SPB into schools.
- The School Council: it is a voluntary body in the school, independent of the school principal and the teaching staff, which represents all teachers, parents and students. Forming of such councils is not mandatory and they are quite rarely appointed.

81 Further down in the text, a shorter term 'students self-government' is used, although legally this includes all students of the school.

School budget

The budget of public schools relies mainly on the educational subsidy, which is allocated by the state and passed on to the schools' administering authorities (e.g. the local authority). The amount of the subsidy depends on the number of students, the type of school and specific needs (e.g. integrated schools receive higher funding). Additional funding can come from government programmes, EU projects and donations from sponsors.

The Parents' Council can manage funds that are used for school events or SPB projects. The Council has the right to collect fees in public schools from parents for the so-called Parents' Committee. However, these are of a non-obligatory nature.



Citizenship education in Poland

Citizenship education in Poland includes both formal education activities, implemented within the school system, as well as non-formal ones, resulting from cooperation between schools and non-governmental organisations or local communities. Its aim is to develop civic and social competences and to prepare students for informed participation in public life. Despite evident assumptions in the curricula, the implementation of these goals is sometimes patchy, due to systemic constraints and differences in approach between schools. The subject contents are taught in different ways and depend largely on the competence of the teacher as well as the school system conducive to innovative teaching methods.

Citizenship education learning objectives in the curriculum

The core curriculum, developed by the Ministry of National Education, defines educational objectives related to the development of civic and social competences. The core curriculum is the key document governing education in Poland, produced by the Ministry of National Education (formerly known as the Ministry of Education and Science). It specifies the objectives, the educational content and the competences that students should acquire at each stage of education. For each subject, it provides framework guidelines on what teachers should teach and what students should learn.⁸²

⁸² Core curriculum binding in Polish schools: podstawaprogramowa.pl [accessed on 15.12.2024].

The core curriculum emphasises the development of students' civic and social competences (obviously in relation to the educational level and the age of children and young people). The general guidelines in the core curriculum address issues such as:

- Understanding democratic mechanisms: students learn about the functioning of a democratic state, public institutions and decision-making processes.
- Being aware of citizens' rights and responsibilities: the curriculum includes contents related to human rights, children's rights and the responsibilities that stem from being a citizen.
- Social engagement: shaping pro-social attitudes such as empathy, sense of responsibility for the community and active participation in the community life.
- Critical thinking and argumentative skills: developing the ability to analyse information, form one's own opinions and participate in public debates.
- The core curriculum places particular emphasis on developing a sense of responsibility for the local community and encourages students to take an active role in civic life.

Achievement of citizenship education objectives

Despite the ambitious goals set out in the core curriculum, the implementation of citizenship education in Polish schools faces numerous challenges. In practice, citizenship education is often treated marginally and is limited to the transfer of theoretical knowledge, without developing practical skills or actively involving students. A lot of schools focus mainly on preparing students for final examinations, which results in citizenship education being provided in a piecemeal and schematic way. Too little attention is paid to engaging students in practical activities, such as organising community projects or working with local institutions.

School subjects related to citizenship education

Citizenship education in Polish schools is mainly provided as part of the following subjects:

- **Civics:** this subject familiarises students with the issues related to the functioning of society, the state, the law and democratic institutions. It is taught at the primary school level in grade 8 (2 hours) and in secondary schools.
- **History:** the subject provides a historical context for the development of democratic institutions and the formation of civil societies. It is taught at all stages of education, with varying hourly intensity depending on the grade.
- **Safety and security education:** it covers content related to state security, organisation of rescue operations and defence education, which is indirectly related to preparing citizens to operate responsibly in the society. It is implemented in the 8th grade of primary school and in secondary schools, usually for one hour per week.

The Civics course is most closely linked to citizenship education. At the primary school level, it is usually taught for two hours a week. In secondary schools, the subject is taught as a compulsory subject at the basic level and can also be taught as an extended subject in general and technical secondary schools.

The content of the core curriculum provides a theoretical framework for practice. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to what these classes actually look like in Polish schools. The ICCS 2022 international survey of civic competences shows that civics classes in Poland are taught with the use of a variety of teaching methods. Teachers use both traditional methods, such as working with a textbook or taking notes from lectures, as well as activity-based methods, such as discussions about current events, analysing information from various sources and working in small groups, sometimes using digital technologies. In practice, discussing current issues is the most frequently used method, which is confirmed by both teachers' declarations and students' feedback. Discussing current events is a characteristic element of the Polish approach to teaching civics, distinguishing Polish schools from other countries where such practices are less common. However, despite this diversity, the traditional didactic model predominates in Polish schools. Activity-based methods are used in a simplified form, which limits their potential to develop students' more advanced skills. Grading in civics classes focuses primarily on the level of theoretical knowledge acquisition and takes into account practical skills or the degree of pupils' involvement in classes less frequently.⁸³

83 Młodzi w demokracji. Wyniki Międzynarodowego Badania Kompetencji Obywatelskich ICCS 2022,

In 2024, a working draft of the core curriculum for the citizenship education subject,⁸⁴ was prepared and submitted for public consultation.⁸⁵ It is intended to replace the subject The History and the Present (HIT), which raised numerous controversies. It was introduced by the conservative Law and Justice government and the textbooks for this subject contained content that, according to some members of the public, undermined the principle of protecting human dignity, stigmatised children born thanks to IVF, harmed minorities and aggravated the problem of lack of tolerance and exclusion.⁸⁶ The proposed new subject is based on three pillars. 'The first comprises the specific requirements – this is where the subject-related knowledge and skills are to be found, the second pillar is the actual civic activities, and the third – the educational projects.'⁸⁷ And it is especially this latter element that is innovative and directly linked to the school participatory budgeting. It has been explicitly mentioned as one of the possible projects to be implemented during citizenship education classes.

During the discussions on the new school subject, attention was drawn, among other things, to the fact that the institution of a school itself in Poland is not very democratic. School participation, most visible in the case of students' self-government, is often just a façade. As the authors of the already mentioned international study of civic competences ICCS write, 'The widespread participation in school elections does not necessarily translate in Polish students into a sense of inclusion in decision-making processes and a sense of impact on school affairs. Polish students are, on average, less likely than their peers in other countries to believe that students' interests are taken into account in decision-making processes at school, and that the school supports them and encourages them to get involved in such decision-making processes.'⁸⁸

ed. O. Wasilewska, Educational Research Institute 2023, p. 16.

84 gov.pl/web/edukacja/prezentacja-roboczego-projektu-podstaw-programowych-przedmiot-edyfikacja-obywatelska

85 On 20 June 2024 a public hearing was held about this draft. During the hearing representatives of non-governmental organisations expressed their views.

86 bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/rpo-mein-historia-i-terazniejszosc-kontrowersje-odpowiedz

87 publicystyka.ngo.pl/edukacja-obywatelska-ma-pokazywac-mlodym-ludziom-ze-jako-obywatele-jestesmy-czescia-wiekszej-wspolnoty-wywiad

88 Młodzi w demokracji. op.cit, p. 16.

Elements of the curriculum corresponding to the idea of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB)

The idea of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) fits in with the objectives of citizenship education implemented as part of formal education, developing competences related to planning, decision-making and cooperation. The curriculum encourages action for the benefit of the school and the local community, which is in line with the SPB concept. In the civics classes or as part of educational projects, students can learn how to prepare project budgets, work as a team and provide arguments to support their ideas, which is crucial in the participatory budgeting process. It all depends, of course, on the quality of the classes, the knowledge and skills of teachers who can teach effectively focusing on practical aspects.

Opportunities for non-formal citizenship education

Non-formal citizenship education plays an increasingly important role in shaping civic attitudes. It is typically noted that educational activities are the primary area of activity for 15% of Polish civil society organisations.⁸⁹ Children and young people are often the recipients of NGO activities, but research shows that cooperation between schools and NGOs poses a major challenge for both parties.⁹⁰ When analysing the barriers to this cooperation, attention is particularly drawn to: constraints in communication between institutions, overloading of the education system and its actors and limited trust.⁹¹ The ICCS survey of primary school teachers indicates that ‘civil society organisations play an important role in supporting civics teachers in undertaking citizenship education activities, and the use of their support (participation in educational programmes and training, inviting them to teach classes) is quite widespread.’⁹²

89 publicystyka.ngo.pl/coraz-wiecej-ngo-zajmuje-sie-edukacja

90 The Klon/Jawor survey shows that 73% of civil society organisations indicate children and young people as their main target group, but only 13% indicate that they are active in the field of education, B. Charycka, M. Gumkowska, *Kondycja organizacji pozarządowych 2018*, Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor; Polish-American Freedom Foundation; The Batory Foundation, Warszawa 2019.

91 P. Zalewski, W. Wilk, M. Gałek, *Włącz szkołę! Raport z badania eksploracyjnego. W stronę współpracy. Organizacje społeczne i szkoły*, Field of Dialogue Foundation, The Center for Citizenship Education Foundation, Warszawa 2021.

92 *Młodzi o demokracji...* op.cit, s. 178.

It is worth mentioning here that the Polish education system has been facing numerous problems such as chronic underfunding, overloading of the core curriculum and persistent social inequalities in access to education. In addition, the implementation of educational reforms is often linked to the political goals of those in power, rather than to a carefully considered vision for the long-term development of the education system, which leads to uncertainty and organisational chaos. For years the list has also included issues such as overloading of the core curriculum, overcrowding of schools as a consequence of reforms (e.g. the abolition of lower secondary school⁹³), the bureaucratisation of school management, which also means that teachers feel they lack the time to run innovative classes or extra-curricular activities. In addition, the pressure on results, especially examination scores, the focus on a competitive model, both among students and among schools, all that means that there is too little space and time for experimenting with new forms of activities, establishing contacts with the school environment, including NGOs. However, as can be seen from the ICCS research, such cooperation does exist and brings positive results.

An example of a programme that has been successfully implemented in Polish schools is the ‘Youth in Action’ programme implemented by the Center for Citizenship Education, which promotes the involvement of students in activities for local communities. Youth in Action+ is a nationwide programme that aims to encourage students to take action for the benefit of their nearest environment through the implementation of social projects. During the programme, student teams choose a thematic path in line with which they develop their own project.⁹⁴ Another example are the activities of local authorities supporting educational projects such as workshops on democracy or youth initiatives within the framework of civic budgeting.⁹⁵

93 Lower secondary schools in Poland (1999–2019) were schools for pupils aged 13–16, corresponding to the lower level of secondary education. Introduced in 1999 as part of a three-tier education system, they were abolished in 2017, with the return of an 8-year primary school and 4-year secondary school.

94 mlodziwakcji.ceo.org.pl/opis-programu

95 Examples of this type of activities can be found at: soclab.org.pl/blog/inicjatywy-mlodziezowe-czym-sa.

Other ways of implementing citizenship education in schools

Citizenship education is also pursued through the activities of student self-government, which teaches students to share responsibility for the school life. Students can get involved in organising events, running projects or representing the school in local initiatives.

Innovative teaching methods such as simulated democratic processes (e.g. organising debates, school elections) are rolled out in some schools, helping students to gain a better understanding of how democracy works.

Summary

Citizenship education in Poland has some clearly defined objectives and a solid core curriculum, but its practical implementation in schools remains a challenge. Both formal education and informal activities, such as cooperation with NGOs or engaging students in participatory budgeting, can significantly contribute to building active citizenship. It remains crucial to increase the involvement of schools in the practical aspects of this education and to integrate its objectives with other areas of school life.

SPB in Poland

The scale of SPB

To date, there have been no nationwide studies on the SPB in Poland. There is no reliable information as to how popular this tool is. As part of this project, we have attempted to estimate the number of schools where the school participatory budgeting mechanism has been introduced. To this end, we used an automated dispatch of public information requests to a randomly selected representative sample of primary and secondary schools, including special schools. We sampled both public and private establishments, but excluded schools for adults. Due to the anticipated low response rate from schools (less than 50%), we opted for a larger sample: 2050 schools.⁹⁶ The sampling frame, which contained 20,224 units, was the school database from the official government website called the Register of Schools and Educational Institutions.⁹⁷ It is a database containing basic data on every public and private school in Poland, together with contact information.

A pre-drafted email addressed to the schools was sent out via the Watchdog Poland's platform called, 'Civic Data Mining'.⁹⁸ This platform supports the analysis and structuring of information from public institutions. With the support of AI, it transforms the data into a form that is easy to analyse, which facilitates research. The structure of the platform is based on monitoring, grouping thematic requests and exchanges of correspondence with authorities. In an email – a public information request, we asked for a set of simple data:

96 In this sample the estimated [statistical] error amounts to 3%.

97 rspo.gov.pl

98 fedrowanie.siecobywatelska.pl

- Is there or has there been a School Participatory Budgeting or School Civic Budgeting project implemented at the school over the last five years i.e. from 2020/21 to 2024/25?
- If the answer was yes, we asked about the specific school year from the aforementioned interval in which the SPB or SPB was implemented and the source of its funding (e.g. local government unit, Parents' Council, NGO, other).
- We also requested to receive the current or most recently used School Participatory/Civic Budgeting Rules and Regulations.

According to the law, schools had two weeks to respond. After this time, we renewed the request with a further week for response. As a result, we received 786 responses (38% of the schools in the sample), 63 of which indicated that they had completed an SPB or SPB at least once in the last five years. After a detailed analysis, we excluded from this list the 8 schools that erroneously indicated SPB/ SPB, usually confusing this mechanism with the school's participation in the municipal civic budgeting. There were also 2 schools in the pool that were in the process of preparing rules and regulations for the current school year. As a result of this detailed review (analysis of the rules and regulations), 53 schools from all over the country were surveyed (6.7% of responses received, this constituted only 2.3% of the schools in the original sample). Among them, there were 26 primary schools, 26 secondary schools (of all types) and 3 special schools (1 primary and 2 secondary schools). It is interesting to note that among the positive responses to our request, there was also a School and Kindergarten Complex, where a school participatory budgeting process had also been implemented in the kindergarten division. In that case, it was the parents who made decisions by participating in the process, including voting. For that reason, it is difficult to call this an SPB or SPB process (it was excluded from the analysis).

Among the verified schools that provided data on years of SPB implementation:

- 15 schools have performed the school participatory budgeting once, with 6 of them having already started to do so in the current school year. Thus, there is a chance for continuity of the implementation in the following years. Of these, at least half of the cases have been funded by NGOs or parents councils
- 14 schools have completed the SPB twice, these are mainly schools with support funding from the local government
- 12 schools have implemented SPB 3–5 times, which indicates that this is a mechanism permanently implemented in the school. Almost all of them receive funding from the local government. Although there was an exception in that group: a primary school in Kozienice, which for the last five years has had a school participatory budgeting funded by the parents' council.

Thus, it can be argued that SPB is often initiated by NGOs or parents' councils, which introduce this innovative solution in the school, but the continuity of the process is ensured by funding from local government bodies.

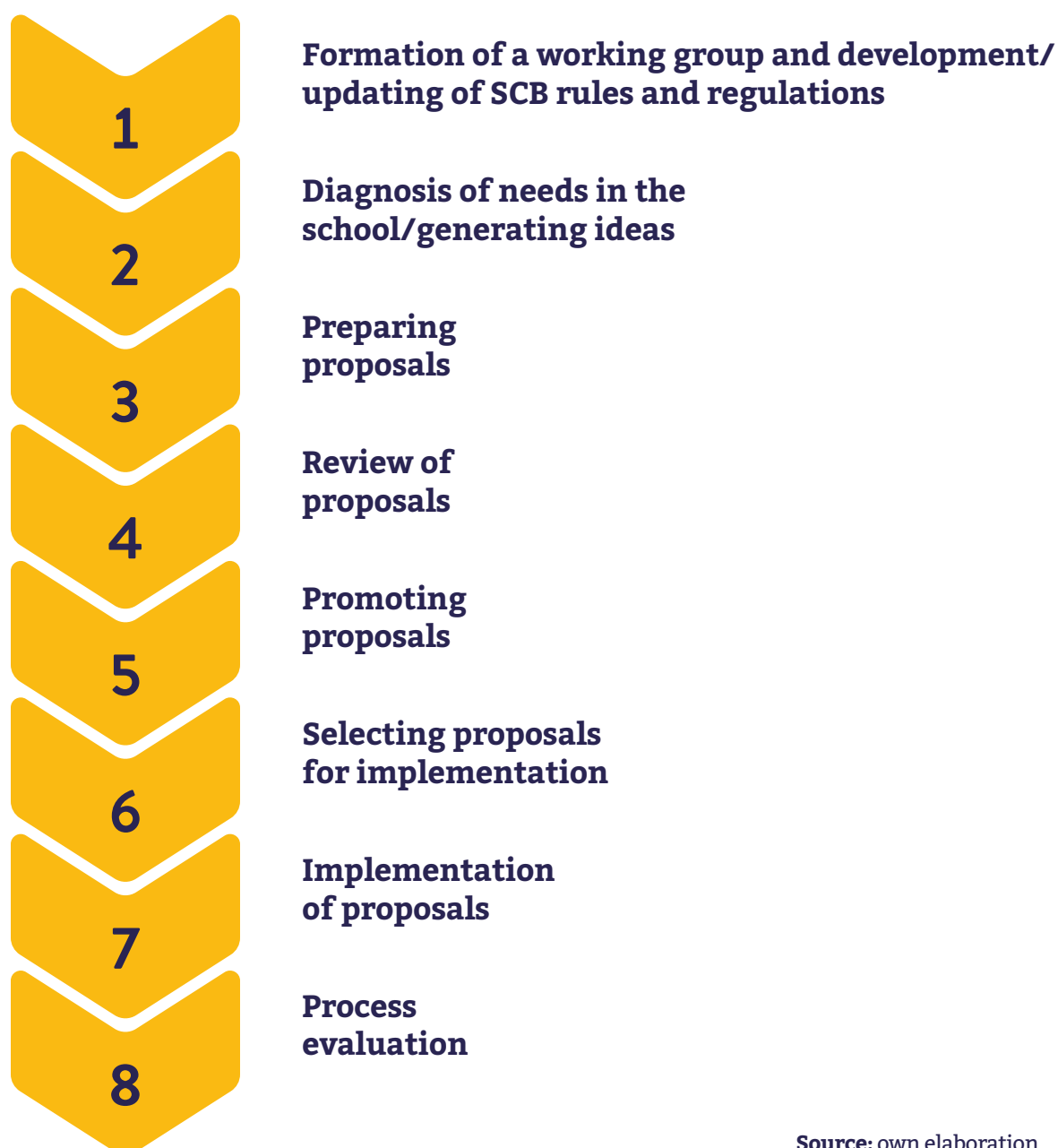
The sources of funding for school civic budgeting vary. Among the schools that reported having SPBs in our study, 32 received funding from the local government, 10 from the parents' council. The others received grants from NGOs or used mixed sources of funding. There is an interesting practice in the city of Gdynia, for example, which offers know-how and technical support as well as a small amount of money, while inviting schools to raise a larger amount through their own activities, e.g. fairs organised by the student self-government or contributions from the parents' council. This is certainly a more demanding model for schools, but one that teaches them independence and mobilises the entire school community.⁹⁹

Managing SPB in the school

In Poland, school civic budgeting is an innovation introduced in a decentralised, local manner, without any legal mandate. This leads to the process itself taking different shapes and even different names. Of the 53 cases analysed in Poland, the most commonly used names were School Civic Budgeting (29), School Participatory Budgeting (9), School Student Budgeting (4), and Student Civic Budgeting (3). In the course of the desktop analysis beyond the quantitative research, other locally used names also appeared, such as Youth Civic Budgeting (in Szczecin this is the mechanism developed by the Youth City Council described on the Youth PB Accelerator website), School Educational Budgeting or School Deliberative Budgeting (Łódź).

99 gdynia.pl/mieszkaniec/nauka-2,7718/uczniowski-budzet-obywatelski-mozna-sie-zglaszac,576457

The course of school budgeting process itself also varies, although quite a lot of common elements can be observed. This is probably due to the fact that only a few publications – SPB manuals – have been published in Poland so far. Certainly, the mechanism of mutual learning is also at play, as is building on solutions that exist in other schools. In Poland, SPB is the focus of several NGOs that disseminate a similar model.¹⁰⁰ The key elements of this model are:



Source: own elaboration

¹⁰⁰ The fundamental publications of the Shipyard Foundation, Field of Dialogue and SocLab are worth noting here. In this order: A. Chabiera, W. Chodacz, M. Jagaciak, K. Pliszczynska i M. Wojcieszak, *Szkolny budżet partycypacyjny – wskazówki dla początkujących*, Warszawa 2019; P. Zalewski, M. Wojcieszak, *Szkolny Budżet Obywatelski – o szansie na deliberację w szkole*, Warszawa 2022; *Czas na młodych! Przewodnik po budżetach partycypacyjnych dla młodzieży*, ed. A. Maszkowska, M. Wojcieszak, Białystok 2022.

An analysis of the SPB rules and regulations obtained in schools has been conducted from the perspective of the above-mentioned stages of the SPB.

1

Coordinating team or school working group (both names appear in the documents) – it does not exist in 17 of the analysed schools and it does exist in 35, in the remaining two there was no information about it.

How is the team formed: is there an open call for candidates or are they designated by the school principal? This question is not usually answered in the rules and regulations. Only 4 documents stated that it is a team appointed by the school principal. The fact that this issue is not regulated may indicate that we are not dealing with open recruitment, but with designation by the school management. The teams consist of:

- **Students** – always. How many of the students are not members of the student self-government (SG) structures? Here, we generally did not have the data in the rules and regulations. The following we were able to deduce from the documents: 16 documents explicitly listed people involved in the work of the student self-government, while 18 allowed the involvement of people who were not members of the SG. On the other hand, from our experience and from the interviews, it can be concluded that the mechanism of including the students who were already active in the community is a fairly common practice. Especially since it is often the SG mentor who acts as the SPB coordinator in the schools, as the most active teacher who has daily contact with young people.
- **Teachers** (they are not mentioned in the regulations in only 3 cases)
- In 27 cases the **person representing the school principal** is mentioned (and in 8 it does not appear in the composition of the team)
- **Parents** appear as members of 18 teams, and in 17 they are not mentioned.
- **Other school personnel** are mentioned the least often – only in 12 cases. In 26 rules and regulations they are not involved in the work of the coordinating teams. Whereas in the 12 of them they are explicitly mentioned as members. They are usually the secretarial staff and the school accountant. This latter role appears to be important in the process of implementing school civic budgeting activities. In the interviews, the most frequently mentioned challenge is the implementation of the winning projects. This is where the bureaucratic aspect of the school operation comes into play, with the need to complete purchases in a formally correct manner. Therefore, involving

the school accountant from the very beginning of the process can make it easier for all stakeholders to carry out the budgeting efficiently until the very end. We also heard that in the interviews, and the kind of key things that emerged in this evaluation right at the start, was that you must involve the accounts. Now we do separate training for the accounts, because there had been such conflicts there. It was just that the accountant would find out at the last moment and they would get very upset.' (W1).

The teams are usually responsible for the drafting of the **rules and regulations, an information campaign** on the SPB. Such campaigns are very important, especially for new grades, but not only. SPB can become a regular part of school life, but it takes time and consistency. The SocLab Foundation has introduced **peer-to-peer classes** in its model, whereby it is the students who provide information about the SPB and share their knowledge about it.¹⁰¹ This is a good way to involve students in processes based on a peer-to-peer learning model.

Based on the interviews, it is possible to identify some good practices regarding the functioning of the team:

- **Two SPB coordinators in the school.** This is important for practical reasons. In the words of one interviewee, 'Every school has to have a coordinator and a deputy. That's what we have in the proposal. But they are on an equal footing. (...) And it works out because they can even take turns coming to meetings, and when they can, they come together, of course. Even recently we got an email because one coordinator wrote that she was on maternity leave, and so she was sending the information that the coordinator was the other person. And that other person had been on the list all along, so she'd been involved in the process from the beginning as well, not that she was suddenly drawn into it. And that was important, too' (W1).
- **Involving pupils from different grades, not only the oldest grade, in the team activities.** This is important so that with future editions there is also a transfer of knowledge and experience between students. As one of the interviewees told us, 'Let me tell you how it has been over the years. [During] the first edition, we worked with students from the eighth grade. I invited young people from the 8th grade, but it was, as it turned out later, not very good, because they left [the school] and there were no new people. And later when we started the next editions [of the SPB], well there were also younger ones from the fifth grade. I mixed the fifth grades and the seventh grades. And so the younger ones work together with the older ones' (W6).

101 youthpb.eu/pl/resource/narzedzie-6-lekcja-o-szkolnym-budzenie-partycypacyjnym

- **An adequately large coordinating team**, especially in large schools. As one of the process coordinators told us, ‘In our case, the team consists of seven people. This is because the more people, the better. I also wanted to get the younger grades involved so that they could help me later when the older ones leave. This year, when we’re doing the project, it’s a preliminary assumption that I’ll take most of the older eighth-graders, but I’ll also include some of the younger ones, about four people, so that the older ones can really teach them something. (...) Why so many? Because we have a fairly large school, we have 900 students. If we were to conduct these peer-to-peer classes in grades 1 to 8, then four people is too few. We had to divide ourselves in such a way that we wouldn’t overburden our coordinating team too much, so that they could simply help us in such a way that all the classes could be conducted in the same way afterwards, with promotion or if someone has an idea, they can come up and ask. Even if a student is absent, there is always someone else who is at school at that moment and can finish what the other person there has started’ (W 9).
- **Training provided to teams**, especially those involved in SPB for the first time, on the specifics of the process, the different stages. If there are possibilities, it is also worth organising competency-based training, e.g. in public speaking or communication.
- **Student representatives constitute the majority in the teams**. This offers students a greater chance of having impact and agency. Although it probably does not guarantee that their voice, especially when confronted with the management or teachers, will be stronger. Strengthening the role of students in the team and in the process as a whole has been emphasised in our interviews. One respondent from an NGO that organises training for teams pointed out that, ‘we assume that this school budgeting will be carried out by the young people and that the coordinating team that we set up in the school will usually consist of about 7–8 people, mostly students of course. Now, we always expect there to be two teachers, not one, because that also works well. When there are two adults in charge rather than one, it’s easier and it’s like the teachers can swap. So that is also very good. Well, there are five students, let’s say six. And then we say, we always get it into the teachers’ heads that it is the students who have to do as much as possible and take as much responsibility for the process as possible’ (W2).

2

The next stage, **the diagnosis of the school needs or the generation of ideas**, does not appear often. In the rules and regulations, it is identified as an SPB stage only 11 times. It is a weakness of school budgeting because this is the best moment for deliberation, discussing the various needs in the school, seeing the differences and similarities. When this stage is identified, it is usually in the form of brainstorming in the classrooms or even throughout the school. The ideas thus generated are sometimes displayed on posters or an ideas board, e.g. in the school hall, for everyone to see.

What sometimes happens at this stage is that there are ideas and then proposals that are mutually exclusive. During one of the interviews (W6), we heard from one coordinator about a situation where two proposals were received: one for a radio station to play music during breaks, and the other for a quiet zone that could be offered during breaks for the students who needed such quiet time. There was no extra room in which such a quiet zone could be created. Besides, students could not stay in a separate room without the teacher's supervision. This need for quiet time came from, among others, students on the autism spectrum (but such a need was also observed by the teacher among other students). What happened in this situation? The principal, as the last instance to review the project, pointed out that there was no computer equipment for the radio station, so the project could not be implemented at the time. 'The fact that they [the students] hadn't mentioned in their proposal, for instance, that they had to have some kind of computer to play music, and that computer would not fit in the budget of 2,000 PLN, well we picked that up as a formal error, that it's kind of not possible within that budget. And they didn't even ask if there was any additional equipment they could use. (...) Well then I met with the team that had submitted the project and in my project team [the coordinating team] that issue was raised, that there was such a response from the principal' (W6). Wasn't this a great opportunity to talk about the different needs (silence vs. music) and better understand the different perspectives?

Interestingly, this stage can be a way for, e.g. the school management, to learn about the real needs of the student community. One of our interviewees – school principals, despite being aware of some limitations of this method, stressed this very much, saying, 'Their submissions are often a bit unrealistic or very down-to-earth, like, e.g. those shabby doors or the lack of a mirror in the bathroom. I like this information because I know in which direction something needs to change. Even if these needs are sometimes more substantial, such as the renovation of a classroom. It's obvious that you can't do it for 3,000 PLN, but for me it's also information that they see that something is wrong.' (W5).

3

Preparation of proposals is a great challenge. What is striking in the interviews is how difficult it is to get from generating ideas to writing down proposals. We heard that there are usually far more ideas than proposals, despite the fact that the submission forms are simple and that the school (e.g. the coordinating team) usually offers support with the proposal drafting. As one of our interviewees says, 'And then there's also the procedural stage of submitting these proposals. The local government usually announces that there is such an opportunity in the library, for example, for two days, where you can come and they will help. The older students who have already taken part in it will help you fill in the application form, so you can ask additional questions. And to be honest, there are different situations. For example, there are three proposals, which is not enough. Then there is also this kind of pressure in the sense that maybe you should submit something because you came and said that you have a cool idea. So often, there is a block here that they are doing great in coming up with ideas, but that it is really a struggle to translate those few sentences into formal proposal, which is very simple, it becomes a bit of coaxing' (W5). Two ways to solve this difficulty emerged: drafting the proposals together [during] the so-called 'marathons', and peer-to-peer lessons combined with support in drafting the proposals. As one of our interviewees notes, 'It is very difficult to mobilise students to do extra work outside classes, and many people have told me this. And I decided to suggest, as far as possible of course, that these [proposal drafting] marathons would take place during classes. Then the students will be more willing to come, write it during the lesson and will not have to take it home. And the same goes for peer-to-peer classes or other activities – they take place during classes' (W2).

It is worth noting that there is usually a proposal template attached to the rules and regulations, which includes categories such as name, brief description, estimated budget (sometimes precisely itemised cost categories with links to the proposed products are required). Quite often, following the model of municipal participatory budgeting, it is necessary to collect supporting signatures from other students. In several rules and regulations documents, adult project supervisors have also been mentioned.

Who can submit proposals? Students, obviously, as this is the process designed for them. The SPBs where other groups from the school community may submit proposals are definitely a minority. Teachers could submit proposals in 18 cases, other school staff in 10, and parents in 11 of the analysed SPBs. In one case, the school management could also submit proposals, which, however, seems to be a rather risky approach that confuses the roles and the rules.

4

As in the case of municipal participatory budgeting, the proposals are **reviewed** for formal compliance. The review committee is usually also the coordinating team. That was the case in 35 rules and regulations. Usually, the committee's role is to review the submitted projects for compliance with the SPB rules and regulations and the school's bylaws. It also checks the financial accuracy of the project budget, although purchasing items for the winning projects can be a big challenge anyway, due to price changes or the inability to obtain a relevant invoice. It may be a good idea to include a person from the school's accounting department on the review committee (as is sometimes the case).

It is worth noting that in most cases, the committee **gives applicants 2–7 days** to amend their projects. In situations **where the submitted projects are very similar, many rules and regulations allow the applicants to meet and submit a joint project.**

During the group discussion at the Forum of Participation Practitioners, the risk of influence exerted by school managers was discussed. This topic came up in the context of proposals review. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether the management sometimes makes a selection according to their own preferences and assessments and influence the choice of projects accepted for voting. From the accounts presented during this interview, it can be concluded that such situations do occur. The most frequently mentioned argument for rejecting an SPB proposal was safety concerns, which were sometimes exaggerated. Hence the importance of **the appeal mechanisms** included in the regulations. In 16 cases, an appeal procedure was outlined, but it would usually lead back to the review committee or the school management. It is therefore difficult to assume that it has a high potential for impartiality and effectiveness. **An interesting solution is the appeal process applied in Krakow, where all rejected applications are automatically sent for reconsideration by the City Council (Department of Social Policy and Health) and checked there to see whether the rejection is justified.** There are also a few days for negotiations, e.g. to reduce the scope, change the location, etc. If it is possible to introduce such changes with the consent of the authors, the proposal can be accepted after the second review and put to a vote. This appeal mechanism was adopted in response to the large number of rejected projects in the second call for proposals for participatory budgeting in Krakow. One of our interviewees emphasises that when implementing school civic budgeting, it is important to talk to the school principal first and emphasise the importance of young people's autonomy and the transparency in decision-making during the review of projects.

5

The promotion of the accepted proposals is usually described in general terms in the regulations and is similar in nature to, for instance, the elections to the student self-government structures. It usually involves the use of posters and classroom campaigns to showcase the projects. Sometimes a ‘**school fair**’ type of event is organised, where people can learn more about the individual projects. During such events, students will prepare stands with their projects. It is also an opportunity to talk about the project and learn about the details. There may be no public debate here, but it is still an interesting form of sharing opinions and ideas. Sometimes special school assemblies are held where students present their projects. Social media are also used to publicise proposals. Another good practice is for applicants to make **short promotional videos**, which provide an additional opportunity to acquire new skills, such as video editing or speaking in front of the camera.

6

The projects are selected by voting. In one of the rules and regulations, we came across a more complicated selection mechanism that involved ranking. But it was still a voting system. According to our interviewees, there is neither enough time nor enough ideas for a different way of selecting the winning projects. In one of the interviews, the idea of deliberation emerged, which is supposed to lead to a consensual selection of the project. A pilot for this solution is to be implemented in one of the schools in Lublin. And it is a very interesting direction, because voting is not the only democratic way of making choices. **Deliberation and discussion** could also precede the moment of voting. If it is excluded, voting can become ‘an effect of randomness, hastiness, excessive emotionality. Debate becomes an opportunity for a broader perspective on a specific problem, for building more conciliatory solutions.’¹⁰² **Deliberation certainly offers an opportunity to reflect, to try to develop other solutions and to build a culture of seeing different perspectives and looking for common solutions, rather than relying on an individualised competition in**

102 Radosław Nawrocki, ‘Kultura demokratyczna w szkole’, op.cit, p. 110.

which we solicit votes. Of course, choosing to vote is not a value-based decision, but a pragmatic one, the simplest solution in a community that sometimes has over 1,000 students.

In the comments about voting, there is a noticeable **tension between voluntary participation and effectiveness**. Officially, everyone has the right not to vote for SPB projects, but it is often the case that the whole class goes to cast their vote, which makes it more difficult to exercise this right, 'For example, at one of the schools, they said that they had noticed that it was better if the ballot box was placed in one spot because they wanted everyone to see it. The students feel that it is so important and that they go as if it were an election, that they go to the ballot box to cast their vote, that they have to make an effort to go there. But at the same time, the teachers motivate them. So that every class just goes to [vote] during the lesson, it's not that it's up to you, that you just go there during the break. Everyone goes together. They have all found their own way of doing it effectively' (W1). Another interviewee also pointed out that traditional voting has its advantages, 'They vote using the traditional method: pieces of paper. (...) This ballot paper and the ballot box are something special. It is more tangible for them than voting online. So, if only to give weight to the vote, because they only really vote using a paper ballot twice a year, when they elect the chair of the student self-government and when there is an SPB vote. And they really enjoy it' (WP 5). However, there are a few schools that decide to vote online, which is particularly practical in large schools with 1,000 or more students. The risk here is a lower turnout. One of the schools wanted to avoid this and found a creative solution by automating the counting process using a virtual ballot form, but also ensured a high turnout (although the question regarding voluntary participation is relevant here) by using tablets for voting. In this school, one of the students prepared an online voting form, and members of the working group went around with tablets during classes to collect votes. **In addition, the needs of younger students were taken into account, and next to the project description there was also an icon symbolising the project.**

Who is usually allowed to vote? Students are obviously the most involved. After all, participatory budgeting at school is designed for them. Teachers were not allowed to vote in 33 of the analysed cases, parents were occasionally included in the voting process in 6 rules and regulations, and other school staff – in 12 cases. The vote is therefore definitely dedicated to the student community. They are the ones who are to decide and feel they have influence. This means that, on the one hand, the element of building bonds within the entire school community is lost, but, on the other hand, the role of students is strengthened and emphasised.

7

The implementation of the proposed projects is somewhat challenging. This is usually the responsibility of the coordinators, i.e. the designated teachers or other adults who are part of the coordinating team. This is due to the need to complete the formalities related to the purchase. However, here too, there is room for cooperation. In one interview, a teacher emphasised that she would leave the choice of items to be purchased to the students and only approve the purchases. The challenge is that sometimes the budget specified in the proposal is out of date, e.g. the students have entered a non-regular or promotional price.

8

The last element that appears in all the recommended theoretical SPB models, namely **evaluation**, is absent from the rules and regulations documents and from the school practice, just like deliberation. In the rules and regulations, evaluation is only mentioned twice, understood as a process of reflection and summarising the experience so that it can be done better next time. This is a weakness of SPB in schools, as they thus miss a unique opportunity to consciously learn the process and to improve it.

An important element that is not listed here is **deliberation**, i.e. a structured discussion (conducted according to specific rules known to all) on a topic such as needs at school or the selection of proposals. This is potentially a very important and valuable element of school community participation, creating a safe and daring space for expression, exchange of opinions and different points of view. The Field of Dialogue Foundation has already published a paper on the deliberative model in school budgeting.¹⁰³ Regrettably, this element is the Achilles heel of the processes, just like it is with municipal participatory budgeting, and it is often simply not seen in practice. Some aspects of deliberation can be seen at the stage of generating ideas, which, for example, have to be discussed within a class in order to choose the one that will be developed into a budgeting proposal. However, this rarely happens in schools.

103 poledialogu.org.pl/szkolny-budzet-obywatelski-o-szansie-na-deliberacje-w-szkole

Perhaps they lack experience in creating such safe spaces for dialogue. Definitely, modelling such situations and developing good practices will be very helpful and will facilitate their implementation. Yet another reason may be the immanent features of the non-democratic school culture, where there is no tradition of free debate, while the principle of individual choice and obedience prevails. As the authors of the publication '*Czas na młodych! A guide to participatory budgeting for young people*' state, 'enabling deliberation is a way to bridge differences, build trust and minimise misunderstandings.'¹⁰⁴ This is an extremely important mechanism that could permeate the entire process, appearing at various stages.

Democratic nature of SPB processes in schools

The link between democracy and education in the context of school participatory budgeting is a key issue, because it leads us to the question of why we should conduct school participatory budgeting in schools. Citizenship education is essential in a democratic system because it is a system that requires effort, including intellectual effort, and the ability to make decisions in situations of choice based on critical reflection and knowledge. The school participation budgeting is one of the elements that support democratic or citizenship education thus understood.

In the literature on the subject, school and democracy are usually discussed in two important contexts: (1) school as a place where young people are taught democracy, providing them with knowledge and skills and creating a space in which to practise democracy, (2) education as a domain that influences social stratification in a socially stratified society.¹⁰⁵

This first aspect is crucial for our analysis. As Radosław Nawrocki writes, education is in a difficult situation because 'it is either a victim of the neoliberal bite and unbearably narrowed to market needs, focused on skills in which such functionality is sought, or affected by archaism, overloaded with encyclopaedism, focused on the reproduction of the system.'¹⁰⁶ Thus, it is a challenge to successfully create learning situations at school that have a positive impact on democratic attitudes.

104 *Czas na młodych! Przewodnik po budżetach partycypacyjnych dla młodzieży*, red. A. Maszkowska, M. Wojcieszak, SocLab Foundation, 2022, p. 46; soclab.org.pl/wydawnictwa/czas-na-mlodych-przewodnik-po-budzetach-partycypacyjnych-dla-mlodziezy.

105 Radosław Nawrocki, *Kultura demokracji w szkole*, Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2021.

106 Ibid, p. 49.

The basis underlying this understanding of education for democracy is values. Not so much those that are formally proclaimed somewhere, but rather those that are actually acted upon. Therefore, it is worth looking at the school participatory budgeting as a tool that offers a chance to apply democratic values: the sense of influence and the ability to make decisions, the freedom of choice, respect, the empowerment of the student, but also self-restraint in the context of the common good, listening and being heard. Unfortunately, this is a huge challenge, because the Polish school system is based on a hierarchical, if not authoritarian model. How can a democratic approach be developed in such an environment through the implementation of the SPB?

Roland Meighan, a British educational sociologist, lists four forms of democracy in schools:

- 1 **agreed rules:** we appeal to previously existing rules, the teacher controls the rules, but is able to modify them. What is important here is the respect for rules and principles.
- 2 **representative:** students have their spokespersons who can influence decisions based on the established rules.
- 3 **committee (majority):** in this case, the student representatives meet and make a decision, they have influence through negotiation.
- 4 **forum:** open discussion about all individual issues.¹⁰⁷

Where can we situate the mechanism of school participatory budgeting in this typology? It seems that the form most similar to SPB is committee democracy, with elements of the representative type (in the case of coordinating teams). If various forms of deliberation were to appear in the SPB, including in the context of project selection, there would be a shift towards the forum type. However, it is worth remembering that all these forms can have a facade character, resulting in pseudo-democratic solutions. That is why analysing the democratic nature of SPB is such a challenge. In this study, we mainly looked at the rules and regulations rather than at the actual processes. The interviews gave us an insight into certain situations, but in order to see this in a broader perspective, we need more in-depth qualitative research.

¹⁰⁷ R. Meighan, *Socjologia edukacji [Sociology of educating]*, Toruń 1993, s. 218, after: R. Nawrocki, *Kultura demokracji w szkole*, op.cit, p. 61–62.

Democratic values in action

Cooperation

It certainly takes place within the coordinating teams. Some schools provide training for these teams, for example, in the Białystok, Warsaw or Lublin model, 'We have a number of hours that can be used for school working teams. There has also been feedback that it is not so easy to work in a team in the school community. So they have to learn how to do it. So, thanks to the cooperation with an NGO, we are able to provide them with non-formal education to help their teams divide the work better, share competences or evaluate the work properly, so that it contributes to the development of the team, which is an added value for them as well. And it is extremely important for us that all this does not fall on the shoulders of one or two people' (W1).

Cooperation can also be learnt through the process of generating and describing projects. In the sample of rules and regulations studied, there were only five cases in which individuals, rather than groups, could submit proposals. Preparing projects for the SPB is usually a group effort within a class or among student friends.

The option to 'combine' similar projects submitted at the school also creates a space for cooperation among applicants. However, in the dominant model that is evident in the analysed schools, it can be seen that there is still a lot of competition and rivalry instead of cooperation. **Shifting the focus to the moment of voting, which is also a weakness of municipal civic budgeting, means that from a mechanism that can unite, create the space for self-restraint in the context of the common good, we move to competition and arguing in favour of one's own idea.** Deliberation when diagnosing needs, generating ideas or as a method of selecting projects would give far more scope for sharing, understanding other points of view, empathy or handling difference. After all, these are key skills in a cooperative, democratic and diverse society.

Equality

In the analysed rules and regulations, in 32 cases we identified mechanisms intended to ensure equal opportunities for students compared to adults in the school community. It was usually a majority representation in the coordinating and review teams. The same is true with regard to voting. Children and young people are in the majority among those entitled to select projects.

Throughout the interviews, this was a theme that also emerged whenever coordinating or reviewing teams were discussed, and also in voting. As an institution characterised by an asymmetry in access to power, the school is a difficult setting in which to introduce tools and mechanisms that would change this arrangement. One attempt to address this specific issue is to increase the number of students in teams. Obviously, this does not provide any guarantee that students will have an impact on decisions. Paradoxically, the exclusion of other groups from voting (especially teachers) can be seen as a mechanism for levelling the playing field to the benefit of students. One of the interviewees described it as follows, ‘I noticed a lot of diversity, namely that the projects are developed by students and also voted for by students. And even this year I think (...) something was raised like, why can’t teachers get involved here? Because I see that it varies in different places. (...) But it seems to me that there would be too much of a temptation [to abuse power]. (...) But there were a lot of teachers who also thought that it didn’t make sense, that they didn’t want to vote, because they see that it works well for young people, that it’s only theirs, you know, that they’re the ones who decide, that they’re the ones who have the influence. And yet it’s always a relationship of subordination [between] the student, the teacher right? You know, there are these elements of influence, even non-verbal ones. The teacher sometimes doesn’t need to say anything, but always the student says well, then maybe I’ll vote like this, because my tutor or my teacher of this or that, he submitted it.’ (W4).

Another aspect that has emerged as part of the equality theme is equal access to coordinating or reviewing teams. The most common method is to identify students who are already active in the school, for example within the student self-government. However, some people are starting to point out that it might be worth conducting open recruitment for these bodies. As one of our interviewees who coordinates the SPB in the municipality told us, ‘So we are trying to pay a lot of attention in this edition to talk also about such equal access to everything at the level of school working teams. How can you get on that team? When can you find out if it’s an open recruitment or

rather arbitrary appointment of student self-government members? How do you make sure it's as open as possible and there have been some cool conversations taking place as a result' (W1).

A separate issue is the inclusion of younger pupils at each stage of SPB. One of our interviewees has pointed out that it is a challenge for some teachers to adapt the promotion and proposal stage to children in grades 1–3, 'Some of my schools don't do it because they don't have the time resources to do it. It requires teachers to get involved, and they don't always have the readiness and willingness and knowledge to do it' (W2).

The issue of equality also surfaced in the context of proposal submission. In most cases it is mainly students who have the right to do so, although this arrangement is controversial. On the one hand, this provides us with a mechanism to avoid the influence of adults on what emerges as a proposal in the SPB. As one principal put it during an interview, excluding teachers from the project submission process is a good move, 'I think it is a good thing because I remember in [...] where I was, you could say, the custodian of the school budget. Well, somehow it happened that a student project was a screen for the computer room. The teachers' influence was present there, they were student-teacher projects, so they introduced such rules and regulations. And I even concluded, on the basis of these observations, that it's not worth letting teachers have a say, because they will want to take over this budgeting process. I'm convinced that in our case the projects reflect the needs of students, because students don't submit proposals for projectors or boards of any kind, but only for things that serve their needs, i.e. those beanbags, benches, or those doors in the cloakroom that won't close' (W5).

On the other hand, it is argued that the SPB should be a space for building cooperation within the entire school community and that it is therefore worth including both the young people as well as adults in the school. There is a suggestion that in addition to students, parents, the teaching staff and other school employees should be involved as much as possible. In the schools under analysis, however, it is clear that it is the student population that has the dominant role in the process.

Transparency

This is a very important value in the context of building trust, commitment and democracy throughout the process. This element was usually mentioned in the context of the review of the submitted proposals. It is important that these decisions be made transparently and based on clear criteria. From the point of view of the examined rules and regulations, most (32) of them **contained provisions explaining these criteria, most frequently referring to elements such as compliance with the school bylaws, location within the school grounds or accessibility to a larger group than a single class.** However, in reality, the matter is more complicated. The biggest challenge is to make real decisions and influence the acceptance of proposals for implementation, particularly by the school management. The interviews paint a picture of a sometimes unclear 'grey area' of influence here. As one of our interviewees recalls, 'It's great to tell the students openly why something can't be done. For example, in the new part of the school the students want to have a mural on the wall and the principal says no. Why not? What's the problem? You could explain that the school has a contract with the contractors company, that they have a warranty for a year and if, you know, after a year the paint starts to peel, the school can complain, but if it's painted over with a different paint, the complaint will be rejected. It would be nice to talk to students in such an open way, to explain why something is or isn't allowed. And not because the principal refused to give his permission' (W2).

It is a good practice to publish the proposals review report together with the reasons for rejecting a project. Then the situation is clear and there is less risk of discouragement on the part of applicants.

Learning

By implementing SPB in a school, and even more so by introducing this mechanism as part of the school's regular activities, an interesting learning environment is created for the entire school community. In this context, it is very important **to clearly communicate what SPB is, to implement this process with the participation of various groups in the school, to document it, to post current information on the school website and thus to involve subsequent younger grades or new employees in the school budgeting process.** Deliberate participation in this process provides space for broader self-reflection, more effective school identity building and sensitivity to different needs.

In light of the rules and regulations and in-depth interviews, in the processes under analysis, **peer-to-peer learning** is particularly prominent. It can be seen in the experience of the coordinating teams, in which younger and older grades learn from one another and transfer their experience. The SocLab Foundation has also introduced ‘peer-to-peer lessons’ in its model, which involves the transfer of knowledge and information about SPB to subsequent grades as part of the annual preparation for conducting the process.¹⁰⁸ The emphasis on students’ independence as process coordinators is very important in this context. They are the ones who are supposed to manage the process, not the teachers or the school management.

This process also involves the **sharing of experiences between schools**. This theme is very prominent in the Krakow case study, where it is already a regular part of the process. As those involved in the process say, ‘(...) sometimes even simple, trivial concerns are clarified and something is achieved. Even when it comes to projects, there is one school that can install a microwave and a refrigerator, or I don’t know, a hot and cold water dispenser. And at another school, they turned off the hot water because they were afraid. And they are talking to each other: But how is it at your school? Is it possible and there hasn’t been any disaster? Yes, no problem. Does it work? It works. Sometimes it’s such simple things that cause problems. At the other school, it turns out that it’s not [a problem]’ (W1). Meetings between schools as part of the Civic Education Forum are also very popular in Białystok (in 2024, this event took place for the fourth time¹⁰⁹).

Another interesting aspect is the learning experience for school managers and teaching staff. **Generating ideas and developing projects for SPB at school provides an opportunity to learn about the real needs of young people at school**. Sometimes this is difficult and people find it hard to believe. During a moderated discussion at the Forum of Participation Practitioners in Krakow, it was pointed out several times that during the first school budgeting processes, students sometimes requested trivial things such as mirrors in bathrooms, locks on toilet doors or even toilet paper. At first, some of the staff treat it as a joke, as a flippant approach to the process, but in the end it turns out that from the students’ point of view, these are important and real problems. This topic also came up in our interviews. One of our interviewees commented, ‘The management is surprised when they see, for example, the results

108 youthpb.eu/pl/resource/narzedzie-7-lekcja-warsztat-online-o-budzenie-partycypacyjnym

109 soclab.org.pl/iv-forum-edukacji-obywatelskiej

of this kind of idea generation or the ballot papers. Just to tell you an anecdote about a school principal who was shocked by what was written on the ballot papers and implemented almost all the projects before the voting stage. Because it was difficult for him, like a slap in the face, that the students could see something that he didn't seem to know, starting from the hangers in the locker room, the locks on the toilet doors, to the height of the mirrors, the toilet paper, the rattling doors, and so on' (W7). One of the principals emphasised during the interview that for him, the SPB is an opportunity to learn what is needed at the school. He treats this process as a school diagnosis of the students' needs.

The lack of evaluation in the vast majority of analysed cases represents untapped potential in the context of learning. Reflecting on the process, learning from failures or giving each other constructive feedback, e.g. in the coordinating team, all that can be used in the context of acquiring new knowledge and skills. It is a good practice to engage in such self-reflection with regard to the process. The use of existing educational materials on this topic is recommended.¹¹⁰

Sense of empowerment

Regardless of the adopted SPB model, empowerment is an immanent feature of this mechanism. As one of our interviewees puts it, 'this tool is about empowerment, but it is done by the students and every model requires it, regardless of whether it is more centralised, like in Krakow, or delegating more agency to students, like in Lublin or Warsaw, it always requires students to take responsibility at different stages'. (W7). One of the SPB school coordinators shared an interesting story about empowerment. The budgeting process is also an important signal for school management, and sometimes changes happen even outside of the process, 'They learn that their voice is heard. That the school implements what they need. It's cool because this year there were two projects with a similar number of votes. The winning project and the one that came in second were only two votes apart. The first project was a sports project and the second was a pink box with hygiene products for girls. And it was the girls in the eighth grade who submitted the second proposal. So we went to the school principal to explain the situation. And the principal promised that the pink box would be funded as well. We bought the pink box. And it was thanks to those girls. They have

¹¹⁰ youthpb.eu/pl/resource

left, but they say they are glad that their younger schoolmates benefited from the pink box, that it is (...) something that they have left behind at the school' (W7). **What is important is the cyclical nature of the SPB, not the individual projects**, '(...) if it becomes a systemic tool, used every year with these two dimensions of activity, where someone can submit projects and someone can vote and an increasing number of people vote (...) then I think it has a future when it comes to reaching a large group of students and changing something in their minds' (W7). The feeling of empowerment is the strongest among those who are most involved: in the coordinating groups and those who propose projects. To what extent does the feeling of having an impact accompany young people who vote on projects? It would be worth investigating more closely.

Getting involved

An important theme that has emerged is the involvement of students from outside the student self-government. **Usually, it is from this group that people are selected for the SPB coordinating team, but there are also valid observations that it is worth holding an open recruitment**, '(...) it is not that the active ones are those who are always active, in the student self-government and so on. It's just that [teachers] are surprised when a student who hasn't been getting excellent grades and hasn't been very active, has become active here (...) or that a student who never talks to anyone has talked to everyone in the school working group. She was so shy, and here everyone is surprised that she is talking at all' (W1).

Another issue that surfaced in several interviews was the **involvement of students in submitting proposals**. We have already pointed out that the transition from generating ideas to writing down a proposal is a critical moment. It is important that the submission form is simple and uncomplicated and that the coordinating team provides technical support. As one of our interviewees told us, 'This form was very complicated. It also had four fields to fill in, but the questions were not obvious and a bit difficult for young people to know what to write in there. The students told me that four boxes to fill is really an intimidating amount and that it's a deterrent, in general. So I thought, what can I do to get them involved, so they are not afraid of this form? So I did this: I wrote this: here write how many people, and so on. And I sent it to everyone. They told me it helped them a lot. They used this template to fill the form and it made the whole thing easier for them. Because this is the entry threshold, this is the critical moment for getting involved, where actually if you don't go through it,

it's hard afterwards. And there really aren't a lot of these projects. Sometimes there are 5, for example, for a school of 1,000 students. And these aren't numbers like 20 projects. I've never had that many. The most I think I had was 11 projects. And in secondary schools, the numbers are always worse, so I also tell them reassuringly that there should be more than two, than one, so that there could be a vote at all, but well, if there are 5, that's a good number, and so I reassure them, although I think that in fact 5 projects for a school with 1,000 students is very few' (W2).

Inclusivity

Based on the interviews, there are references to **the inclusion of Ukrainian students**, 'You can also ask this organisation, which provides mentoring, to translate documents into Ukrainian or English. But they say that there are fewer requests like that now. There were more requests after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Anyway, you can see that the schools are also coping with it themselves, but in case of anything, they have our support (...) This year, we had a situation at a school where there are many foreign children, that the ballot papers (...) were in 3 languages. (...) there is a person from Ukraine working there. And that person translated it into Ukrainian and English because he also speaks English very well. That's the way it is. When I asked, I happened to have a meeting about the situation at other schools. So, at secondary schools, as they say, if there is someone for whom Polish is not their first language, at the secondary school level, they already speak Polish rather well. But if someone needs support in filling [the form], then there is such a possibility' (W1).

Another group that appears in comments on inclusivity are **people with disabilities** (e.g. students on the autism spectrum). One of our interviewees had this to say about it, 'For example, I recently attended a training session at one of the primary schools I had been working with for four years, and the teacher said that she also included people with mutism or people with relationship problems in the coordinating team. And that way, they break the ice' (W2).

When it comes to inclusivity, it is worth paying special attention to the **implementation of the SPB in special education**. The interviews also pointed out that these schools are doing well despite their specific nature. As our interviewee, who coordinates the SPB in a large municipality, said, 'It is extremely interesting for us to observe how brilliantly special schools are handling the budgeting process. We had huge concerns at the beginning because a school from the autism centre did indeed contact us.

There are three schools there: a secondary school, a vocational school and a school preparing students for employment, and they have a dozen or so students each. So we were wondering if we had to prepare the tools in a special way or whether we had to adapt the scripted lessons in some way. But you see, something fantastic happened again here, because we found some wonderful teachers and they told us not to worry about it, that they would all take care of it. They would translate it from ours to theirs, i.e. they would simply adapt it. Anyway, it turned out that those young people are super creative and you really didn't need to do much, you just had to give them some opportunities. And you just had to be open to that flexibility' (W 4). It is definitely worth disseminating the adapted tools and the appropriate practice of implementing SPB in special education.

Recognition

It is a key value in democracy that builds commitment and motivation to act. Very often, the rules and regulations state that there are no rewards or grades for participating in an SPB. However, we think it is **worthwhile to appreciate the committed students**. Maybe not necessarily with a mark, but with some other form of recognition. It is also good practice to **celebrate successes**. One of the coordinating teams analysed in the interview always has a certain amount of money set aside for a group outing after the process is over. The interviews show that this is too rarely an important and consciously undertaken element of SPB in schools. It is worth mentioning the exceptions here, e.g. in Białystok, the SocLab foundation has introduced School Budgeting Leaders diplomas, and special acknowledgements are presented to the authors of the projects. The evaluation carried out in these budgeting processes shows that such appreciation is important for the people involved in SPB.

Future of SPB in Poland

SWOT – Analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats

During the interviews, we asked our interviewees to point out the strengths and weaknesses of school participatory budgeting. In addition, we also asked experts what they see as the risks and opportunities in the context of the development of SPB.



The strengths of the SPB in Poland

One of the **definite strengths of SPB** in Poland is the **experience gained so far in implementing this mechanism in schools**. We are no longer at the initial stage of experiments and pilot projects. We have clear examples of good practice throughout the country and at various levels of education. Based on the information about the scale of SPB in other European countries, we can say that we are one of the leaders in terms of the scale of implementation of school participatory budgeting. The diversity of this process and the adjustment of implementation to the needs and local traditions in the school are also important. However, it is crucial **to ensure that the process is truly democratic, for example through informal standards or recommendations**. This is why the toolkit prepared by non-governmental organisations such as the Field of Dialogue Foundation or the SocLab Foundation is so valuable. For several

years now, they have been systematically implementing this mechanism in Polish schools according to a clearly defined model. Their role is to share their experience and disseminate good practices.

It is also evident that school participatory budgeting is increasingly being used by local governments (of various sizes) that can implement SPB in a systematic way. Two centres can be distinguished in this respect: Krakow and Lublin, which introduce their original SPB model in a very thoughtful, systematic and comprehensive way. But an additional review of school participatory budgeting shows that there are more large cities that follow suit: Poznan, Szczecin, Warsaw and Bialystok. On a European scale, Poland stands out in terms of the scale of implementation and popularity of SPB in schools. With all this experience, we already **have a large pool of good practices to draw on, including documents such as rules and regulations, ballot papers, lesson scripts, etc.**

An important element that sets the right direction in the dissemination of SPB is the involvement of parents, especially the parents' council. In the Polish context, the representation and co-decision-making of parents in the life of the school is often only a façade. **The school budgeting process, sometimes even initiated by parents' councils, is an effective tool for real involvement of some parents in the joint shaping of the school.** This also teaches the school to be independent of external sources of funding. Some municipalities (e.g. Gdynia) introduce a mechanism of pooling the SPB funding from the very beginning, providing only part of the funds for the activities from the municipal budget. Schools are able to cope in this situation and encourage the entire school community to get involved (e.g. finances managed by the parents' council or organisation of school fairs). If there are not enough funds for school participatory budgeting in several schools in the municipality, this can be a good solution.

The democratic nature of the process is extremely important. It can be seen in the analysed rules and regulations that in the coordinating or reviewing teams, students usually outnumber other members. **The very introduction of the coordinating teams with a majority of students is a great strength of school budgeting in Poland.** This is one of the mechanisms that can make students' impact on decision-making more real. The extent to which school SPB can influence democratic attitudes (in the long term) needs to be studied in more detail, but it is already apparent that SPB is a potentially effective tool for democratic or citizenship education. It is also clear that the students most involved in the implementation of projects and in submitting proposals gain valuable social skills, such as communication in a group, teamwork skills, and creativity.

Learning from one another is a very important aspect, both at the level of individual schools (peer education and learning by the entire school community) and between schools. Some good practices can already be seen, in which the mechanism of sharing experiences is permanently embedded in the municipality as an element of SPB in the city. A good example of this is Krakow, where school communities clearly have a well-functioning mechanism for learning from one another. Both Krakow and Białystok run groups on social media and hold meetings to summarise the subsequent editions of SPB. This is an important factor in the wise and effective scaling up of this mechanism at the local and perhaps even the national level. In addition, networking among schools implementing school participatory budgeting has already gained momentum on a national scale. In 2024, the 1st School Civic Budgeting Congress was held, initiated by the city of Krakow.



The weaknesses of the Polish school civic budgeting

The interviews often revealed that the implementation of the SPB process in schools would be difficult without the committed teachers who coordinate the process. This is often additional work for which they do not receive any extra payment, but which requires a lot of commitment. When we wrote about the value of recognition and acknowledgement, this can also be applied to this group. It is certainly worthwhile rewarding them for implementing this type of innovation and engaging young people. **Getting students involved is still a challenge, especially when it comes to writing projects for the SPB.** It is clear from the interviews that one of the most difficult moments in the process is the transition from generating ideas to developing them into project proposals. What is needed here is not only technical support, but also encouragement to convince young people that it is worth getting involved. In Poland, 2–6 projects are usually put to a vote. It is less common to have a larger number of proposals submitted and described.

One should consider the value of introducing more open discussions and deliberations into the SPB process. It is clear that in many schools, the key moment is the vote, not the preceding stage, i.e. the discussion or deliberation in which students could share

their needs through dialogue with the adults. **The school participatory budgeting has a great potential to open up such spaces that democratise the school life, but this potential is still only partially utilised.** It is also worth noting that there is still a risk of tokenism, i.e. the instrumental treatment of SPB without the real participation of young people in the decision-making process. Mechanisms to strengthen the impact of young people at school are therefore important, e.g. increasing their participation in teams coordinating or reviewing proposals for SPB.

One important element that schools lack, which would enable them to learn how to improve the implementation of the SPB, is **systematic evaluation and, as a result, institutional learning.** It may be that this is done informally and is therefore not reflected in the rules and regulations, but it still indicates that evaluation is not considered an important stage in the process.

One of the aspects of the SPB's democratic nature is the **genuine possibility to appeal against decisions and thus avoid informal influence exerted by the school's management.** The analyses show that this mechanism is rather weak (an appeal to the same entity that issued the previous decision). In this context, it is important to note that the review of proposals is not based on merit, but is purely formal (compliance with the rules and regulations).

In the case of systemic solutions within a municipality, a major challenge is **to align the SPB schedule with the municipal budget schedule** (this is the case, for example, in Lublin or Białystok), as well as to ensure **financial stability**, i.e. the certainty that the SPB will be continued every year.



Opportunities for the development of SPB in Poland

Democracy is a political system and culture that requires effort from us. There is a constant search for new ways to encourage citizens to participate and to make decisions. This is also reflected at the school level. Therefore, **effective citizenship education within formal education framework** is a very important topic for discussion. Effective,

that is, one that does not only provide theoretical rules, but creates real learning situations where the whole school community can learn democracy. Democratic education implemented in this way is certainly an opportunity for the development of SPB. The school is also a place for building ‘everyday democracy’, which goes far beyond procedures and regulations. **It is also about trust, about values put into practice on a daily basis, about the feeling that it makes sense to get involved because everyone can have an impact on reality.** School participatory budgeting is an opportunity to develop these elements. Clearly, this has been noticed because in the newly designed subject.

There is also increasingly more discussion about **youth policies** implemented at the local level to mobilise young people and strengthen their voice and influence in local communities. SPB can be one of such tools used systematically in schools.

Another opportunity for the development of SPB is the decreasing number of pupils in schools (demographic decline). If the education system evolves towards smaller schools and more paid hours for teachers to spend on extracurricular activities, it may be easier to involve the school community. It is important that when changing the education system, attention is also paid to activities such as SPB, which can have a real impact on the pro-democratic attitudes of students and give them an opportunity to experience the feeling empowerment.

The recent political changes in Poland have brought about greater **openness to cooperation between schools and non-governmental organisations**. This is a positive development for the SPB, as it is often NGOs that bring innovation to schools and support schools in its implementation. Organisations with knowledge and experience can provide ongoing support to schools and assist them in subsequent editions, as well as create opportunities for experience sharing in the municipality in cooperation with the local government.



Threats to the SPB in Poland

These include **negative developments in the education system, which lead to the burnout of teachers** and cause those who are ambitious and innovative to leave the profession. **Changes to the curriculum that favour theory over practical activities also pose a risk.** Just as it was discussed in the context of new ideas for citizenship education, it is important to maintain this balance in order to give students the opportunity to learn democracy through experiencing it in the school environment.

The growing popularity of school participatory budgeting may lead to its **formalisation at the national level** (similar to what happened with municipal participatory budgeting). It is certainly worth promoting the idea of SPB at the central level, but it is most definitely a process whose shape should depend primarily on the school community. What is important here is the **support of, for example, non-governmental organisations or the local government body in terms of maintaining the high quality of the processes and their democratic character.** As one of the experts said in an interview, ‘I have one concern about systemic school budgeting, which is that if it is not organised properly, i.e. without this educational and expert support, it can quickly become distorted or done in a routine way. I observed this at one school where we started three years ago. I recently attended a workshop there for the new team and I could see that they have probably taken the easy way out and started doing things that are not in line with their rules and regulations because, for example, there was no one to submit proposals. The school budgeting coordinator and the librarian wrote a proposal together and submitted it.’ (W4)

Recommendations

The model of school participatory budgeting described above is effective and we recommend its further implementation. We pay particular attention to the good practice of creating coordinating teams composed mostly of students. The various methods of generating ideas and peer-to-peer classes, which serve many additional functions described in the report and are beneficial to students, are also worth implementing. Assistance with writing projects is crucial. It is important to keep the submission forms simple and to ensure that young people receive support from older students and the SPB coordinators at school. In these situations, we recommend the format of project writing marathons or one-on-one support. It is very important to conclude each SPB process with an evaluation. This can take the form of a group self-reflection among the most involved people (e.g. members of the coordinating team, people submitting proposals).



For schools

- 1 **To integrate SPB with citizenship education:**
 - Including SPB in the core curriculum of new school subjects, such as citizenship education.
 - Organising workshops on SPB mechanisms, such as project development, budget management and conducting promotional campaigns in cooperation with NGOs that are experienced in implementing SPB or using existing tools and manuals.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ E.g. as published at the YouthPB website: youthpb.eu/pl/resources-pl

2 To develop democratic culture:

- Introducing into the SPB the stage of ideas generation as the time for discussing the needs of different individuals and groups in the school community.
- Creation of a space for discussing project proposals, e.g. in the form of fairs or debates or various forms of deliberation.
- Implementation of SPB with a focus on the democratic values that this process can strengthen.
- Strengthening students' sense of empowerment, building coordinating teams where students are in the majority, formal rather than merit-based evaluation of proposals, clear grounds for rejecting proposals.

3 To expand stakeholder participation:

- Involving a wider range of stakeholders, such as younger students, school staff and parents, to increase the sense of community. In particular, encouraging the parents' council to get involved. At the same time, taking care that the most important influence is that of young people at the school.
- Creating diverse coordinating teams that include students of different age groups, not just those involved in student self-government activities.

4 To ensure process sustainability:

- Ensuring stable financing mechanisms for SPB in schools.
- Gathering knowledge and experience in school communities, e.g. through good quality evaluation.
- Organising training for teachers and students involved in SPB to improve their process management skills.
- Introduction of peer mentor function (e.g. older students helping younger students with project preparation).
- Recognising and rewarding people in the school community who are involved in the SPB process. Celebrating the annual success of the completed process.
- Selecting two process coordinators from the teaching staff at the school.



For local governments

1 To provide systemic financial and organisational support:

- Allocation of funds for the implementation of the SPB in schools throughout the municipality.
- Cooperation with NGOs to develop and implement the SPB model in educational establishments.
- Supporting schools in sharing their experiences in the implementation and execution of the SPB process, e.g. by organising networking events and training sessions for school coordinating teams or mentors.
- Introducing SPB into youth policies.

2 To promote SPB in the municipality:

- Disseminating knowledge about SPB through existing manuals and tools, and applying good practices from the existing SPB schemes.
- Monitoring the implementation of the SPB process to ensure compliance with democratic principles and promote transparency.



For non-governmental organisations (NGO)

1 Expert support and advice:

- Development of universal educational materials (e.g. manuals, templates for rules and regulations, support with evaluation) tailored to different school levels, attractive and engaging for young people.
- Organising workshops and training courses for teachers, school principals, students and parents' councils to develop skills related to the organisation of the SPB.
- Conducting evaluation research on the national scale as well as in-depth social research on the impact of SPB on pro-democratic attitudes.

2 Promotion of good practices:

- Creating platforms for experience sharing between schools implementing SPB.
- Publication of success stories to inspire other entities to implement SPB.

3 Providing financial support:

- Support in raising funds, especially for the first SPB projects in schools with limited resources.
- Encouraging local governments to systematically support the SPB and demonstrating the benefits of the implementation of this mechanism.
- Promotion of various sources of funding for school projects: cooperation with parents' councils, fundraising events, cooperation with companies.



For decision-makers

1 To initiate systemic reforms:

- To include SPB as an important element of citizenship education in the core curriculum.
- To introduce changes in the education system leading to increased sense of empowerment of all members of the school community, building a culture of trust and cooperation.
- To encourage the implementation of projects such as SPB by rewarding or otherwise expressing appreciation to teachers involved in the activities.
- To prepare nationwide recommendations that will make it easier for schools to implement SPB.

2 To support cooperation among sectors:

- Encouraging cooperation between schools, NGOs and local governments to improve the quality and increase the scale of SPB.
- Organising competitions for grants to develop the SPB as an innovative tool for democratic education (implementation of the SPB, evaluation studies, etc.)

Chapter



School Participatory Budgeting according to experts

Interview with Daniel Schugurensky and Tara Bartlett

(Arizona State University, USA)

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today and for your kindness in participating in this study. This study has two main goals: first, to expand our knowledge of School Participatory Budgeting beyond Europe in a comparative way by incorporating your perspective – in this case, from the United States; and second, to examine SPB from a broader meta-level perspective, focusing on larger patterns, frameworks, and overarching principles rather than individual case studies. Let's start with some context. Could you introduce yourself and explain your connection to this democratic innovation? Also, could you give us an overview of the current state of School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) in the United States?

TB (Tara Bartlett): My name is Tara Bartlett, and I am currently a professor at the Teachers College at Arizona State University. Before that, I was a junior high school teacher here in Arizona, where I had the opportunity to implement School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) in a school setting for three years. That experience sparked my interest in studying the broader impacts of SPB, which led me to pursue it as the focus of my PhD research. Since then, I've been working closely with Daniele, our school partners, and international groups like the People Powered Network to explore how SPB can serve as a tool for civic education and contribute to redesigning schools in a more democratic way. I would say that SPB in the United States – and even within Arizona – is not a monolith or a one-size-fits-all model. Each school approaches SPB differently and has its own focus on what to emphasize. Part of our research focuses on understanding how schools are really taking this process, making it their own, and using it for their own educational and civic goals.

DS (Daniel Schugurensky): Daniel Schugurensky here. I am also a faculty member at Arizona State University, working in the School of Public Affairs at the Participatory Governance Initiative, which serves as a research and capacity-building centre at our

university. I've been involved in participatory democracy in one way or another for over 25 years, starting in Porto Alegre ... in the previous century! Right now, I'm particularly interested in working with young people – not just in schools, but also in K-12 education¹¹² and now at the college level. Actually, next week, a new process is starting at our university with undergraduate students, introducing college participatory budgeting. They're experimenting with combining participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies. There's a spill over effect – these students have been observing what's happening in schools, and now SPB is generating interest not just among university students but also in municipalities. Municipalities are also doing participatory budgeting in Arizona, inspired by the work in the schools. Regarding SPB in the U.S., the first keyword is variation, as Tara mentioned. There is no single model of implementation, but rather a wide variation – similar to Europe. Each school or school district organises SPB in its own way, and sometimes, even within the same district, schools may take different approaches. There is a lot of autonomy when it comes to implementation and design. The second point is that we still don't have a clear picture of what's happening across the U.S. We know a lot about Arizona and can speak to that context, but when it comes to the country as a whole, we can only offer a glimpse. We know that many initiatives are underway, and we're aware of places outside Arizona where PB is being implemented, such as Seattle and Rhode Island. We may also touch on Chicago and New York. But just yesterday, we met someone from Denver who is involved with PB in schools and colleges – and we didn't even know about it!

Thanks for specifying that, Daniel! We are also struggling to get a full picture of School PB at the EU level, given the diversity of policies across countries and the lack of information. So, it must be the same for you in the U.S.! We'll also touch on scalability later on.

DS: Talking about scalability, there is a distinct 'Arizona model' to consider. The first SPB in the U.S. started in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2013. It was a high school. Since then, it has expanded to different cities and schools. Today, after ten years of experimentation, over 70 schools in Arizona have implemented SPB, and the number continues to grow. It began in high schools, then spread to middle schools, and eventually reached

¹¹² K-12 in the U.S. refers to the entire range of primary and secondary education, covering Kindergarten through 12th grade. It involves Elementary school (Kindergarten to 5th grade, ages ~5–11), Middle school (6th to 8th grade, ages ~11–14) and High school (9th to 12th grade, ages ~14–18). After 12th grade, students typically graduate with a high school diploma and may go on to college/university or other post-secondary education.

elementary schools – now encompassing the entire K-12 system. This growth has been organic, rather than a top-down programme promoted by municipalities or the government. Instead, schools and school districts adopt the model, experiment with it, and if they find it valuable, they continue using it.

Can you tell me a little bit more about that first experimentation and period. How did everything start?

DS: Well, most things happen by chance. I was teaching a doctoral course for education leaders, and one of my students was a school principal. I mentioned participatory budgeting in one of the classes, and he took the idea back to his school. He told the students: *I have \$2,500 from a discretionary fund that I can use for anything I want in the school – but I’m going to give it to you.* At the time, the process was very unstructured. He simply told them: *Do something good. Don’t just buy pizza or go to the movies – do something meaningful for the school!* So, the students took ownership of the process and drove it forward. It went very well. Other students helped organise the initiative. Since it was a relatively small high school, a steering committee¹¹³ of 16 students led the SPB process. Eight of them came from student government¹¹⁴, while the other eight were elected representatives specifically for this purpose – two from each grade level (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors). As a result, they came up with some very interesting projects, such as microscopes, 3D printers, different types of gardening, and more. When the school principal left, his successor was so impressed by what the students had accomplished that he continued the process in the following year, 2014–2015. Moreover, the Phoenix Union High School District – the largest district in Arizona, with about 20–22 schools and 30,000 students – wanted to scale it up. They decided to run a pilot programme in five schools to see if it would work before committing to expanding it. In 2016, they conducted the pilot, and after seeing its success, they expanded to 10 schools in 2017. The following year, they grew to 15 schools, with the ultimate goal of implementing SPB in all schools across the district. However, due to specific issues within that particular district – which I can discuss later – they eventually decided to discontinue the program. Nonetheless, because of Phoenix’s success, other school districts became interested in adopting the idea, and SPB began to spread to other areas. That was the genesis of SPB in the United States.

¹¹³ The Steering Committee is a central student group that oversees and helps facilitate the process throughout. It activates the process and has to defend the process, organises the process and leaves the process from beginning to end.

¹¹⁴

Tara, were you involved in this initial period, or did you start observing later? When did you conduct your first SPB experiment? I am also interested in exploring the role of the adults and the other school's actors within the process.

TB: My first direct implementation was in 2016–2017 when I was back in the classroom as a teacher leading the process.

DS: What's fascinating about Tara's work is that she didn't receive any official mandate from the school district or the principal – she took the initiative entirely on her own, which I find fantastic.

In that first experiment, was SPB limited to your class, or did it involve the whole school community?

TB: It involved the entire school community. However, the student Steering Committee, which oversaw and facilitated the process, was primarily made up of students from my class.

DS: Yeah. It is important to distinguish between the steering committee and the rest of the school which also participate in the SPB.

Can we compare the Steering Committee with the School Council, where all the school actors are represented?

DS: We have here two councils now: the student government and the steering committee for participatory budgeting. In some cases, they are the same, but 90% of the cases are different. The SC activates the process, organises and leads it from beginning to end. They have to defend it. There are different ways of selecting the steering committee, which is also another important aspect to talk about.

TB: The first year I implemented SPB on my own, I simply asked my principal if there was any discretionary funding available. That year, we used student council funds, which are typically allocated to school clubs for activities and events. We redirected a portion of that budget to the SPB process. Since it was the first time, I guided my students closely throughout the process. As the Student Steering Committee was made up of my class, I played a significant role in facilitating discussions and ensuring the process moved forward. Ultimately, the students voted for a project to install two water bottle refill stations on campus in two different locations. However, the

funding from the student council could only cover one station. Seeing the impact of the process, the principal decided to use additional funds from his own budget to purchase the second station, as the students' winning project.

Focusing on Arizona specifically – what are the main challenges – whether institutional, legal, or financial – and how did you overcome those challenges? For example, how does SPB integrate into your civic education system, and what role does it play in shaping democratic engagement among students?

DS: That's a good question because our next research project will address one of the biggest challenges we face: integrating SPB into the school curriculum. Right now, one of the main difficulties is that teachers and schools lack time to incorporate participatory budgeting within their existing educational programs.

TB: Our curriculum in Arizona is highly decentralized – every school or district has the freedom to choose its own curriculum – and that may explain why SPB is not used in the same way across all schools and districts. We've noticed that SPB tends to spread through 'champions' – teachers or school leaders who deeply understand the importance of democracy, civic engagement, and student voice in education. It's usually one person who spearheads or adopts this process in their school, which then triggers change in other schools, or sometimes even an entire district, made up of 20, 30, or 40 schools. However, a major challenge arises when these key figures leave their schools or districts. If SPB hasn't been fully institutionalized or taken up by others, it often dies once the champion is gone. That's one of our biggest concerns: How do we move from the 'champion phase' to an institutionalized model, or get other stakeholders of this decision-making power arena to understand the importance of SPB in the same way the champion does? In Arizona, we currently have three to four school districts where SPB has been institutionalized across multiple schools. These districts have taken concrete steps to ensure SPB becomes a permanent part of their system. They have embedded it in student clubs and allocated a dedicated budget for SPB every year. In these cases, SPB is not just a temporary project – it becomes part of the school's culture and infrastructure. However, even though we pass the hurdle of institutionalisation, the challenge of how we align SPB with curriculum objectives emerges: how do we train teachers to link SPB to the curriculum and other learning goals? I think that once we're past the hurdle of institutionalising it, we face a new set of challenges – many of which are a domino effect or part of an ongoing phase.

DS: Another key aspect is introducing democratic innovation in professional development. Last summer, we organised a training for teachers to learn about School Participatory Budgeting and Participatory Policy-Making, and how to combine the two. We partner with another organisation that deals with Participatory policy making and that Tara is also part of, which is Project Citizen.

TB: Yes, Project Citizen follows a similar structure to SPB: students find problems in their community and come up with ideas how to solve those problems. The main difference is that instead of proposing budget projects, students propose policy changes. Interestingly, we've noticed that many SPB projects highlight issues that could also be solved through policy rather than funding. Likewise, in Project Citizen, students often identify problems that could be tackled through budgeting rather than policy. By bringing these two programs together, teachers can help students develop a more comprehensive and powerful understanding of democracy – showing them how budgeting and policymaking intersect in real life, such as at the local level and in higher levels of government. This also helps innovate SPB. Another innovation Daniel has been working on is planting the seeds – no pun intended! – of green school participatory budgeting. He's encouraging schools to think about sustainability and climate issues. In Arizona, many schools are starting projects like installing solar panels over parking lots, which provide shade while generating energy, or greening their campuses with more trees and school gardens. We've noticed that students often propose these kinds of sustainability or climate justice projects. To support this, we've been encouraging our school partners to approach participatory budgeting in a more thematic way – rather than proposing all ideas at once, organising them around key issues that are especially relevant to Arizona in the coming years.

Daniel, you also mentioned the intersection between participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies. Could you expand on that?

DS: Yes, we're currently experimenting with this approach at the college level. Next week, a PB process will begin at Arizona State University, specifically on the Tempe campus, which has around 65,000 students – a significant number. The process is organised by undergraduate students and includes three levels of participation:

- A Steering Committee (10–15 students from student government)
- A Citizens' Assembly (50–100 students representing the broader student population)
- A General Student Vote (open to the entire campus community)

The Steering Committee has invited all students to participate in the assembly, which will serve as a mini-public, reflecting the campus's demographics. It aims at including representation from all four undergraduate years and hopefully ensuring gender balance. The assembly's role is to deliberate on proposals and select the top projects for the final ballot. Then, the entire student body will vote to determine which projects receive funding. We have \$30,000 available, with \$10,000 allocated to each of the top three winning projects. Since this is our first time implementing this model, we're unsure how it will unfold. However, other campuses and even Graduate Student Associations have already expressed interest in adopting similar initiatives. If successful, this approach could have a significant spill over effect.

That's really interesting, it seems like a fairy tale! The spill over effect seems to be happening quickly in your context. In Europe, the scaling-up process tends to be much slower, and there is ongoing debate about how best to achieve it. Could you share your thoughts on how policy transfer and the diffusion of participatory democracy practices take place in your environment, particularly starting at the local level?

DS: I can see why it might sound like a fairy tale, but let me clarify something. Not everything has been a linear success story. For example, we talked earlier about the Phoenix Union High School District, which was once the leading model of SPB in Arizona. However, they no longer run the program. So, the process isn't always about moving forward – sometimes it takes steps backward. However, I would consider this an exception rather than the rule – an issue that Tara analysed in her PhD dissertation. In general, people get excited when they see SPB working elsewhere. If a school principal sees another school successfully implementing the process and trusts that school community, they might think, 'If it works for them, why wouldn't it work for us?' This 'inspiration effect' or 'pedagogy of example', as we might call it, plays a significant role in the spread of SPB. Another factor that contributes to SPB's growth is research and evidence. Tara and I conduct research on the impact of SPB on student learning and change, and school climate. We produce reports that help school leaders see tangible benefits, making them more likely to adopt the program. Finally, an important element is capacity building. In Arizona, we have a non-profit organisation – the Center for the Future of Arizona – that provides training and resources to help schools implement SPB. Usually, schools receive support from this organisation for the first two years. After that, they become self-sufficient and continue running SPB on their own. The spill over effect occurs through a combination of inspiration, research-backed evidence and credibility, and capacity building.

TB: I've worked with the Centre for the Future of Arizona for a long time, and – not to toot my own horn – one additional factor in explaining the spill over effect is having educators with direct experience in both teaching and participatory democracy. Someone within the education system who can 'Edu-speak' – that is, someone who understands how to embed this within schools and navigate how schools operate. For example, in my role at Arizona State University, I teach both pre-service teachers (those training to become teachers) and in-service teachers (those already working in schools). When I highlight different examples of civic learning programmes, SPB be the one, through that kind of lens or their understanding, several teachers become interested and ask, *How can I start this in my school?* From there, I connect them with the Center for the Future of Arizona, which provides materials, a small stipend or funding allocation for the teacher – as they're spending a lot of time learning about the process – and voting equipment (ballots, *I Voted* stickers, etc.). We also promote SPB through conferences. Daniel and I often present at academic conferences, both nationally and globally. Additionally, I am the director of our state's Civic Education Coalition, a group of more than 20 organisations offering civic education programming. Many of these organisations hold their own conferences here in Arizona, and both Daniel and I, along with our partners at the Centre for the Future of Arizona, frequently present at these events where the audience are all teachers. For example, immediately after one of our presentations in August, a teacher signed up to implement SPB at their school. So, the spill over effect happens both through geographical diffusion (schools observing nearby schools) and through direct teacher outreach and professional development.

DS: Moreover, we try not to make teachers feel isolated actors but rather part of a larger community – not only in Arizona, but internationally. We also invite speakers from abroad and foster international exchanges as well.

Let's talk about collaboration – how do the different stakeholders involved in SPB interact? Would you say there's a high level of cooperation among local communities, schools, and supporting organisations?

DS: Arizona's approach is different from some Latin American or European models. In some countries, SPB is implemented top-down – mandated by the Ministry of Education or city government. But in Arizona, we don't have that top-down approach. The state government does not require schools to implement SPB. Instead, it happens in a bottom-up way. The only top-down influence comes from school districts, which sometimes offer financial incentives for schools to participate. For example, a district might say, 'If your

school wants to implement SPB, here's \$3,000 or \$2,500 to run the program.' However, participation is never mandatory – schools always have the choice to do it or not.

OK. How do you see the absence of a top down pressure on this like? Would you say there is a missing political agenda for participatory democracy in schools? How is SPB perceived politically? Is it seen as a neutral civic tool, or is there concern that it could be used in a coercive way?

DS: As of now, to the best of our knowledge, SPB has not yet reached the level of political debate in Arizona. We are aware that some right-wing conservative groups and think tanks in the U.S. are generally attacking what they call 'action civics' – all these experiential learning and civic education programs that aim to promote student empowerment, active engagement, and so on. However, I'm not sure how much of this is influencing the discussions within the Arizona political environment. Maybe in 10 years from now, but not at this moment.

Right now, SPB operates mainly within school communities. But do you see it scaling up to impact higher levels of governance? Or does it remain a localized, bottom-up exercise?

DS: Just to clarify, SPB is expanding in Arizona, but it's still in less than 10% of schools. There are hundreds of schools in the state, and we're only reaching a fraction of them, about 70.

TB: The only concrete example of scalability we've seen so far is in Tucson, where SPB started in a school district and then expanded to the municipal level. A vice mayor, inspired by SPB in schools, decided to launch a municipal participatory budgeting initiative, but limited it to just one district of the city. Now, they've run three cycles of municipal PB and it's becoming a very well-oiled machine. They also involve the high school youth as part of the process. However, interestingly enough, the school district stopped doing it. The Tucson school district's SPB programme was strongly supported by the superintendent at the time. He ensured there was a budget line for SPB every year. However, when the superintendent left, there was no institutional mechanism to sustain the program. One school tried to continue SPB on its own for another year but without district support, it became too difficult, and they had to stop.

DS: This again highlights the pivotal role of the champions: if a strong advocate leaves and SPB hasn't been institutionalized, the programme often collapses.

That brings us back to the importance of institutionalisation. If SPB isn't embedded in policy, it remains vulnerable. What do you think is the best strategy for making SPB sustainable and scalable?

DS: At the school level, one major challenge we face is scaling the participation process across the entire school community. This issue arises in two ways. First, opportunities to engage in the SPB process tend to be concentrated in the steering committee, which typically consists of about 10 to 40 students. These students are involved in every stage of the process, from idea collection to decision-making. The rest of the school community usually participates only at the beginning, during the idea collection phase, and at the end, during the voting stage. In some cases, students are invited to engage in parts of the process in between, particularly when they have specific input or perspectives to offer. Essentially, we see this as a model of concentric circles of participation. At the core of the process is the steering committee. The next level includes students who propose ideas and advocate for them, often attending meetings and debating the pros and cons of different proposals. The third and largest group comprises students who just vote. In fact, voting tends to have high participation rates, usually around 90%, due to the captive audience in the school environment. So, one of the key challenges we are tackling is how to democratise the learning opportunities and involve more students throughout the entire process – not just at the start and the end. We've developed several strategies to address this, though they are not perfect yet. One strategy is the implementation of a primary vote, which allows for two cycles of deliberation and decision-making. Another is to host open sessions for the steering committee, where anyone can attend the meetings. However, the question remains: how do we ensure the process is both inclusive and engaging while still maintaining high-quality deliberation? The reality is that you simply cannot have a steering committee of 3,000 students!, so finding a balance between broad participation and focused, effective decision-making is an ongoing challenge. There is another layer of the scalability challenge within schools – how to balance the involvement of adults with giving students the autonomy they need. Some schools aim to include parents, teachers, and staff at various stages, such as helping with idea collection, supporting proposal development, or even participating in voting. On the other hand, some schools are more focused on giving power exclusively to the students. They argue that young people need a stronger voice in decision-making, while adults already have their say in other areas of life. This divide represents two schools of thought: one advocates for scaling up participation to the entire school community, while the other prioritizes empowering the students alone.

TB: When it comes to designing a participatory process, we've observed that schools often adopt what we call the *accordion model*. This accordion model allows schools to find a balance between broad involvement and maintaining a focused, structured decision-making process. We typically present schools with a basic outline of the key phases of the process and encourage them to think critically about inclusivity and representation – specifically, who will be involved at each phase. They usually do it in different ways. As Daniel mentioned earlier, one way this unfolds is by initially opening up the idea collection to the entire school. This effectively *opens the accordion*, allowing for broad participation. From there, the process often narrows again, with the student steering committee (and sometimes school leadership) reviewing the ideas to assess feasibility. After that, the accordion opens once more for the development of project proposals and the necessary research. Finally, it closes again as the process moves toward finalising those proposals. One of the most interesting implementations of this model occurred last year at a school that introduced a town hall deliberation before the final vote, once the proposals were finalised. Typically, deliberations happen in small groups, like the steering committee or classrooms, but this school took it to a larger scale, bringing the entire student body in a meaningful forum where they could engage with the proposals before final decisions were made. It was a good example of the accordion model, consistently allowing for broader participation at multiple stages by being more open than closed throughout. This was a unique twist that we hadn't seen before.

What about the scalability outside the school?

DS: While we don't yet have a formal strategy to scale our efforts beyond schools, there are some promising developments in the U.S. The first is related to political voting. In particular, voter registration is not mandatory – students must actively register to vote, and many young people don't take that step. To address this, we've introduced a process at the end of the school year where all eligible high school students are given the opportunity to register to vote. So far, this initiative has led to about 8,000 young people being registered, which has had a noticeable impact. In some elections, like the most recent one in Arizona, the margin of victory was less than 10,000 votes. So, registering young voters and engaging them in the electoral process can make a significant difference. Another interesting development is that students who have been part of a SPB process are now thinking about how to democratise other spaces they encounter, including in college settings. In fact, we're seeing the first college-level PB initiative launch in Arizona, which is a direct result of students applying the principles they learned in high school to new contexts. As for scalability, we've seen positive examples of it at the municipal level in Tucson.

In Europe, there is an ongoing debate about institutionalising PB. Do you think the formal embedding of this practice within the school system should be encouraged and advocated for?

DS: That's a good question, and one we haven't fully explored yet. I recall a major debate in Porto Alegre about institutionalisation. Some argued that it was essential for ensuring continuity across different governments and political parties. Others feared that institutionalisation would create excessive bureaucracy, draining SPB of its energy, spontaneity, and grassroots spirit. Again, there are two competing risks: bureaucratisation versus ephemerality, where processes fade away with each change in leadership. The key is to strike a balance between the two.

From your experience, has SPB changed school culture in terms of democratisation?

TB: It's difficult to provide a blanket answer because each school has its own approach. However, our research suggests that SPB increases students' awareness of democracy, public budgets, and school governance. Students also develop essential skills such as public speaking, research, writing, communication, and teamwork. We are currently working on measuring financial literacy. In surveys, we ask students about their future civic intentions – whether they plan to vote, engage in community problem-solving, or even pursue careers in public service. The responses indicate that SPB fosters long-term civic engagement.

DS: Answering questions about changes in school culture is very difficult. We do have a few indicators of school climate that are commonly used here in the U.S., such as tracking bullying, violence, respect, and overall student interactions. So, we have some data on those aspects. We also have anecdotal evidence. For instance, students have shared that, for the first time, they've been able to speak directly with a principal – or that the principal has initiated conversations with them. This suggests a shift toward more open governance, with increased communication between students and school leadership. Two other interesting things we've observed are leadership development and mutual trust. First, participation in the process fosters leadership and agency among teachers. Some teachers, who act as facilitators – what we call *sponsors* – for SPB, become more interested in leadership roles. Some even consider becoming principals or taking on other administrative positions. The second major change is mutual trust. At the beginning of the process, teachers often don't fully trust that students will make responsible decisions, and the children don't trust the adults and the process which is seen as mere tokenism. But by the end, teachers recognise that

students can make thoughtful choices, and students gain confidence that this is an authentic process. Trust grows on both sides, which is a crucial shift in school culture. We need to conduct more research to measure whether the school has become more democratic than before, as we don't yet have strong indicators for that.

Let's talk about implementation of the winning projects: how does bureaucracy affect the execution of winning projects?

DS: Bureaucracy can be a challenge. For example, during the first SPB process in Phoenix in 2013, the winning project was selected in May, but its implementation was delayed until the fall, within the new budget cycle, and the school was ultimately unable to complete it. To avoid such issues, we now advise schools to complete the voting process by February or March so that projects can be implemented within the same school year. Occasionally, projects have been cancelled due to technical or legal issues. In one case, a school planned to install a laundry machine for sports team uniforms, but the chosen location had plumbing issues. The necessary pipes couldn't be installed properly, leading to the project's cancellation. That said, I would consider these problems exceptions rather than the norm today.

Finally, based on your experience, what recommendations would you give to schools looking to implement SPB?

TB: First, schools need a clear budget allocation. Second, they should think through the process design before starting – who will lead the process, who will participate, and what the desired outcomes are. A *backward design* approach, where the goals inform the structure, can be very effective. It's also helpful to have external partners. In Arizona, we work closely with the Center for the Future of Arizona, which provides training, resources, and support for schools. Having a knowledgeable partner to help with that work is important, but it's also crucial to have a partner who understands the local community, the specific school system, and the broader educational landscape. This way, schools don't feel like they have to constantly explain themselves when navigating implementation – it creates a natural understanding. Lastly, results from SPB should be documented. Beyond that, throughout the entire process – which typically runs for an academic year, lasting anywhere from three to six months – we ensure that the work done in partnership also gives something back to the schools. In this case, we often create a final report for them, which Daniel and I can share. We have a few samples that highlight key successes, major achievements, and student feedback on the process. This provides schools with a valuable final product, created specifically for them at no cost,

thanks to the grant funding we have. It could be a detailed report or a one-page flyer, both of which are useful for showing stakeholders how the process was implemented, the results achieved, and for recruiting other partners to participate in the SPB.

DS: I'd add that building a community of practice is crucial. We hold monthly online meetings with teachers, where they discuss their challenges and go through the school calendar together. This helps teachers feel like they're part of a community. It's not about us teaching them how to do school PB, but rather them being part of a community with us, sharing challenges and receiving feedback and advice from one another. We also provide online materials, including frequently asked questions about school PB and both introductory and advanced resources that teachers can download anytime they need them. As for other advice to highlight is the triangle of partnerships between the schools, the school communities, the non-profit, and the university conducting research. These three actors working together is something I might have taken for granted, but it's a combination that really helps with implementation, evaluation, and the overall quality of the process. We hadn't thought about it in terms of a recommendation, but now that I think about it, it definitely makes sense. It helps things move smoothly from design to evaluation. To finish, the way I conceptualise it is that SPB is a tool for three things at once: civic education, civic engagement, and school democracy. Ideally, it should promote all three simultaneously. So, it's about citizenship learning, civic engagement, and school democracy. These three dimensions are what I would call the 'triple tool' or the core components of the process.

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Tara Bartlett is a Clinical Assistant Professor at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. Her work focuses on public policy, democratic innovations, and youth participation in school and community decision-making. With 14 years of experience as a public school educator, she leads and supports civic education initiatives locally and globally. She co-directs the Arizona Civic Coalition and facilitates programs like Project Citizen and Kids Voting. Based in South Phoenix, Tara is passionate about her community, local businesses, and outdoor activities across Arizona.

Interview with Helga Hrabincová

(Decision21, Czechia)

You work at Decision21, which is an online platform for civic participation that, according to your website, *makes group decision-making easier*. What was the original idea behind creating it? Was there a specific experience that inspired its creation?

The company D21 began developing the participation platform to create a practical tool for voting using the multi-vote method, where after assigning two positive votes, the option to give a negative vote becomes available. This method seemed particularly beneficial for participatory projects, as it allowed voters to reach a broader consensus than traditional single-vote systems.

Why do you think it helps to reach a broader consensus when negative voting is also possible?

The negative vote allows for a better identification of potential controversies regarding the options being voted on. This is particularly useful in adult participatory budgets, as it gives the town hall the opportunity to identify which proposal might face more significant challenges during implementation compared to a less controversial one. However, in schools, we disable the negative vote to prevent any potential bullying among classmates.

Why did you decide to include the school participatory budget (SPB) in your online platform/application?

This decision arose from our experience with the “adult” participatory budget. We realized that for the development of a democratic society, it would be highly beneficial if children could engage in democratic participatory processes from an early age. The school participatory budget was seen as a particularly suitable option. It has the advantage of involving real projects with real money, allowing students to directly benefit from the winning projects – seeing the tangible results of their engagement in the democratic process.

How does your application support the school participatory budget? What is the added value of using digital applications in these processes?

The application is designed to guide the coordinator of the participatory budget seamlessly through the entire process from start to finish. It includes all necessary instructions and materials for participants, and each participatory budget has its own dedicated webpage. Through this platform, proposals can be submitted electronically, voting takes place, and results are published. Voting is secured with PIN codes, ensuring that only authorized participants can cast their votes. Another advantage is that all submitted proposals are available in one place, making it easy for everyone to review them and see whether a proposal progresses to voting – along with the reasoning behind the decision.

Is there a standard model of the school participatory budget that you promote through your platform?

Yes, the participatory budget model follows fundamental principles, but individual schools can adjust the rules and timeline according to their needs. The process consists of seven phases. It begins with the **Preparation** phase, where the project is introduced, rules are set, and the timeline and overall budget are defined. Next is **Proposal Submission**, during which participants can submit their ideas and discuss them in meetings. In the **Approval** phase, only projects deemed feasible by the school administration move forward to the voting stage. Following this, the **Campaigning** phase allows students to promote the approved projects. After campaigning, students participate in the **Voting** phase. Once voting concludes, the **Result Announcement** phase takes place, where the coordinator receives the results immediately through the application. Finally, in the **Implementation** phase, the winning projects are carried out as soon as possible.

Are there any phases that schools typically do not use? Why do you think this is the case?

Based on our experience, Czech and Slovak schools generally do not omit any phases. The most popular phases include student-led campaign activities and voting. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when participatory budgets were still conducted thanks to our application, schools often skipped in-person meetings to discuss proposals, replacing them with virtual classroom debates.

Are there differences between school participatory budget models implemented in different countries using your application?

As far as I know, there are no major differences between the Czech and Slovak models. The main variations depend on the school's participatory budget coordinator – how much effort they put into the project and how well they engage students. The level of support and understanding from other teachers also plays a role, as participatory budgeting inevitably impacts school operations and lessons, which some teachers may not fully appreciate.

There are some differences in how proposals are submitted – some schools prefer submission by class, while others allow individuals or small groups (even across different classes) to submit proposals. Discussions about proposals also vary: some schools hold large meetings in the gymnasium with all students, while others involve only the proposers and student council members.

For rejected projects, we always recommend providing a clear explanation. If possible, we also advise coordinators to help students refine their proposals so they can meet the requirements and be approved for voting.

What about the SPB processes outside of Europe, for example in India? Is there anything special about working in a non-European context?

Of course, there are some differences compared to the European schools, but they are mostly organisational. For example, participatory budgeting sometimes takes place more during students' free time rather than during lessons. In other cases, these schools rely on offline proposal submissions and voting, which is naturally more time-consuming and logistically demanding. Additionally, schools in these regions often have significantly more students than ours. However, the core principle of participatory budgeting remains the same, which is why our model has worked in both India and Zambia.

Do you think a fully online school participatory budget process is possible?

Yes, as mentioned earlier, during the COVID-19 pandemic, participatory budgets were successfully conducted despite students being unable to attend school in person. However, a fully online model does have some drawbacks – particularly for younger students, who may find it harder to identify improvement projects if they cannot physically explore the school environment.

Another major drawback is the online campaign phase. In-person school campaigns are much more dynamic and engaging for students compared to campaigns conducted on Facebook, TikTok, or Instagram. On the other hand, an online model offers advantages such as 24/7 accessibility to proposals, allowing students to check whether a project has already been submitted, review voting eligibility, and participate in online voting from their smartphones.

Our application is fully adapted for an online process, and schools can choose the format that suits them best. Some schools, especially those with multiple buildings, use a hybrid model, combining both online and in-person elements.

What tools do you use to ensure the most democratic implementation of the school participatory budget?

We primarily encourage coordinators to involve the student council, which helps introduce students to the project, mobilise participants, and engage voters. We also recommend allowing every student to vote – each student receives a unique PIN code, increasing the likelihood of participation, even if just out of curiosity.

Our application ensures a high level of transparency – submitted proposals, the school's decisions, and final results are all publicly visible and cannot be manipulated.

Do you see ways to make deliberation – not just voting – a key element of the school participatory budget?

In the schools we work with, deliberation is already a core element. Students actively discuss projects within their classes and at larger meetings with teachers or parents. This helps strengthen the school community and improve relationships between students and adults. So, I wouldn't say that voting is the only key element – deliberation plays a crucial role as well.

What are the most common challenges you encounter when implementing the school participatory budget?

The biggest challenge for schools is usually securing the necessary funding. However, recently, school authorities have started to recognise the significant benefits of participatory budgeting and are more willing to allocate funds. They appreciate that, thanks to our application, the money is distributed transparently and in line with students' priorities – those who know best what their schools need.

Have you observed any negative effects during the implementation of the school participatory budget, such as undue influence from adults? How can these be addressed?

Yes, we occasionally encounter teachers who believe that “children will propose nonsense” and that “adults know better.” Some try to steer students toward certain projects. However, coordinators report that participatory budgeting often brings students together, even in classrooms where cooperation is usually difficult.

The key is to educate adults and show them that children can think pragmatically and self-regulate to ensure their ideas benefit the entire school community.

What conditions are essential for the school participatory budget to become part of school culture rather than just a one-time initiative?

The most crucial factors are support from school leadership and funding from school authorities. The role of the coordinator is also essential, as they are the driving force behind the entire participatory budget process.

Do you think implementing the school participatory budget increases students’ confidence in their ability to influence their school environment – and democracy in general?

Yes. By experiencing the entire process first-hand, students develop their skills and realise that active engagement leads to real results. This lesson stays with them throughout life. Currently, local authorities in our country are beginning to implement youth participatory budgets, where children and young people themselves propose projects for the city. So, when students have experience with school-based participatory budgeting, they already know what is expected of them, making it much easier for them to get involved in this type of participatory budgeting, or even in the adult participatory budget. They are often also able to inform and educate their parents about what participatory budgeting is all about.

Returning to your home country, how common is school participatory budgeting in the Czech Republic? Are there any efforts to integrate it into the official curriculum?

The number of school participatory budgets in the Czech Republic is growing. The Ministry of Education recognizes the importance of participation and is currently considering making participatory processes mandatory – particularly in secondary schools.

Is there something that Decision 21 is currently working on regarding the school participatory budget?

We continuously improve the School PB application based on coordinator feedback and strive to introduce participatory budgets in as many schools as possible – both primary and secondary schools, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In addition to providing consultations via email and phone to “our” coordinators and organising basic training for them on participation in schools and participatory budgeting, we also participate in various seminars, workshops, and lectures on this topic. We have prepared a manual for social studies teachers on voting and participation, and last but not least, we also give interviews to the media.

Helga Hrabincová, born in 1973, studied Czech language and Art Education at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague. She began her career as an elementary school teacher before transitioning to exhibition and trade fair organisation. She also contributed editorially to *Včelička*, a magazine for preschool children. For the past seven years, she has been dedicated to fostering participation, particularly among youth, through her work at **Decision21**.

Interview with Jez Hall

(Shared Future CIC, UK)

Jez, thank you for joining us today. Could you start by introducing yourself and outlining your role at Shared Future CIC?

I've been a director of the not for profit organisation Shared Future CIC since 2009. I live in Manchester, in the United Kingdom. The main focus on my work has been on participatory budgeting, but I also get involved in our deliberative democracy work. This includes citizens juries and assemblies. We specialise in climate themed projects, but also work on issues of public health, community safety and local democracy. I also take part in projects that help to build the social economy. Shared Future has a small core team of three directors and a project officer. We also have an associate network spread across the UK. Formally, my job title is director responsible for project development. That means I am often the first point of contact when people ask us to undertake new work.

How did you first become involved in participatory budgeting, and what inspired your continued passion for this approach?

I first became involved in participatory budgeting (or PB) in the year 2000. I was asked, as a community activist, to travel to Brazil to undertake a learning exchange. I visited Porto Alegre, the home of PB and also the city of Recife, which also had strong PB processes. Following that trip, alongside my paid work as a community engagement worker, I began to develop my expertise and experience in participatory budgeting. Being a long-term community activist, I had also been involved in local consultative forums. I had been volunteering to improve my local community for a number of years and especially protect essential community assets, such as my local community centre, (that was under threat of closure). I'd become frustrated at the way that these forums worked. Too often we were being used by our local authority or the officers of different public bodies to justify decisions on cutting local investments that they wanted to undertake. Participatory budgeting with its focus on investing financial

resources and on citizen control seemed very different. Money is power and unless citizens have the ability to understand, influence and use the financial resources that exist in their community, they really don't have significant power. Given that there is a particular issue with young people being outside the normal democratic process, and more unlikely to vote in elections, and low levels of citizenship education within schools, I believe that participatory budgeting could become a sort of 'school of citizen democracy'. Open to and for young people, as well as for adults. For citizens in general. When people see that their participation leads to actual change, particularly in their local community, however small, then they are more likely to participate in other ways. If they participate and see no change... why bother to participate at all. This is the lesson our young people learn too often.

Could you describe how School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) is implemented in the UK?

I don't think that school participatory budgeting is very common in the UK. In some regions of the UK, particularly Scotland, there has been more focus and energy given to engaging with pupils and family members in schools through PB. For example, the Scottish Government has built PB into its strategies for the pupil equity fund. This is a national fund devolved to local schools to help close the attainment gap between more affluent pupils and those with multiple disadvantages. Primarily their economic poverty, low aspirations or some other form of marginalisation. Such as being from a refugee or immigrant background where English isn't therefore their family's first language. It has been identified in guidance supporting pupil equity funding in Scotland that participatory budgeting can help build skills across the school curriculum. Pupils can learn about the needs of other pupils, can research the costs and benefits of different project ideas and become more confident and motivated pupils and citizens in the process. It's a practical way to engage them, through focusing on the topics of their everyday concern.

What challenges have hindered the wider adoption of SPB in the UK?

However, since the global financial crash of 2009, the UK as a whole has been in an extended period of public sector austerity. That has meant there are few free resources in schools that might be applied to a participatory budgeting process. School leaders have become used to saying 'we need more'. This is probably the most significant reason it's not become more common. If a school has continually been taught to say it hasn't enough resource, and to beg for more, how can it logically justify sharing its

resources with pupils? The other key constraining factors on participatory budgeting in schools in the UK is our national curriculum. Under the 'New Labour' government (between 1997 and 2009) its leader Tony Blair had a mantra of education, education, education. In practice that meant the primary focus of schools was to build opportunities for employment after school, or prepare pupils for entering higher education. Schools have to hit performance targets on pupil attainment in examinations, with a primary focus on achievement in STEM subjects. That is Science, Technology, English and Mathematics. This means that topics such as Citizenship Education has become crowded out. The national school curriculum is also overloaded and that means the school timetable cannot allow for innovation. The trend is still towards formal qualifications and exam results rather than a more empowering pupil-led pedagogy. On the other hand, there has been considerably more experiences of youth based participatory budgeting in the community, outside school. This is most marked again in Scotland, where it is common for young people from the age of 11 or even younger to be involved and allowed to vote in 'adult' participatory budgeting processes. It is notable that in Scotland there is also voting from 16 years in democratic elections, whereas across most of the UK, young people have to wait until they are 18. For one recent example, I have just been supporting a £200,000 youth PB process in a deprived community in North Manchester. Projects were bidding to create opportunities to divert young people from crime and gangs, and become involved in out of school activities. Sports, drama, music, literacy programmes, peer mentoring, mental health all featured. Young people could hear which projects had applied and then vote on which should get funding. They had four votes each and they had to spread their votes widely. Following that process there was a separate applicant only vote. All the projects that had come forward met together. They considered each other's projects and then could vote for up to seven of the 21 projects on offer. The youth and the applicant votes were then combined, with a 60% weighting in favour of the youth vote. This is just one example of quite a number of youth-based PB's in the UK. Often, they might work alongside schools at both primary and secondary ages. But not in them. (In the UK primary school runs from 5 to 11 years and secondary school from 11 to 18 years, though some pupils leave school at 16.)

What are the main legal and financial factors that schools must consider before launching an SPB initiative?

Besides the constraints outlined above there are obviously issues around how funding there is primarily designed to produce educational qualifications can be used when there is a perception that PB is an optional addition to the core functions of the school.

Our schools traditionally have a very top-down leadership model with considerable power lying with the head teacher and within a small group of adult external school governors. If a school wants to undertake for a form of participatory budgeting it will need to fit it within an existing crowded timetable. Not least as there are few lessons set aside for citizenship education. The topic of PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) does have some space within the school day, but the amount of time spent on critical thinking skills or learning about democracy is very limited. These constraints mean that much advance planning needs to be undertaken in order to ensure that PB activities occur alongside or as part of existing lessons. Interestingly greater curricula freedoms and flexibilities at the primary school age mean that most PB's in schools in the UK have happened at primary schools, whilst most youth PB's (for 11–18 years) have happened in the community.

Who typically initiates the SPB process in UK schools, and what roles do students, teachers, and external organisations such as NGOs play in shaping these initiatives?

Given what I have said above, I don't think it's very easy to answer these questions. If we're talking about school based PB, then in general, it happens as a result of a partnership of the school, and then generally with a specific teacher, working with the wider community. Generally, for activities that happen outside of the school day such as after school clubs or sports societies. Whilst most schools typically have a school council made up of pupils, this rarely has power over budgets. And therefore, any school based PB is at the discretion of the head teacher and school leadership team. Power remains centralized and there is little or no guidance available to schools on why participation through PB is of benefit to the school. The example I gave above is a good one. When it is seen that certain young people are not succeeding in school, that can lead to external funding from not-for-profit Foundations. These funds are being requested by local NGOs, to fill that gap. Their focus inevitably is then on working outside of the formal school environment. For example, one teacher involved in the process above commented: „we have wonderful facilities within the school ... sports fields, swimming pools, classrooms, digital equipment, theatres. But what I don't have is the day-to-day funding to make those facilities available to the wider community.” Therefore, she bid successfully on behalf of the school to be able to offer more extracurricular activities, available to her own pupils and to the wider community. In this context, and based on the case explained above, most of the projects are for sports, arts and culture and also peer leadership programmes. Such as a youth club working with south Asian girls to tackle islamophobia and discuss their own cultural constraints, such as forced marriage. Climate change projects and

environmental work also featured in terms of ‘growing’ or gardening projects or better access to nature. For example, a successful project related to using bicycles outside of school that included bicycle maintenance classes, riding safety on the roads, but also using bicycles to engage with nature through trips out. Other popular topics include tackling mental ill-health and building cross-cultural links through arts and culture projects, like drama and theatre, written and performed by young people.

Turning to funding and management, could you explain where the money for SPB in UK schools usually comes from? Is it integrated into school budgets or sourced externally?

As described above most funding for school-based or youth based PB comes from outside of the school budget.

Beyond the financial commitment, what other significant resources, such as time and expertise, are essential for successfully implementing SPB?

More significant than the financial commitment is the time commitment. Schools do enjoy funding, particularly for physical facilities such as ICT labs, theatres or sports fields. However, most schools have a legacy of underfunding over the last few years, meaning that any spare resources are often earmarked for building renovation projects. What is lacking is flexibility in non-capital activity budgets. Teachers are already fully committed to delivering the national curriculum. Teacher salaries are also the most significant budget within most schools. There has been considerable resistance to the idea that pupils could influence those budgets. Therefore, rather than say that PB comes ‘from’ the school budget we have to be smarter in thinking about where there are freedoms, flexibilities or opportunities for how money ‘in’ school could be used more imaginatively. Nevertheless, it is time, and the skills in how to do PB that remain the predominant constraint. There are simply too few spaces within the school calendar to undertake different approaches such as PB, and the teaching that teachers receive as part of their training does not include PB. We often use the analogy of the 1% school; that is, could 1% of the school budget be devolved to the school council to propose and decide on projects or investments. Particularly projects that would improve the educational experience for all pupils. One percent of a typical school budget in the UK would be about £50,000 per year. However, putting this sum aside every year, even though it’s only one percent, and it would be spent on improving the school, has felt an unachievable goal.

Reflecting on the overall impact, what do you see as the main strengths of SPB in the UK, and what challenges still need to be overcome?

I don't think school PB has been particularly effective in the UK. The examples that have primarily existed have been in the community setting. Even in Scotland, where schools have been engaged with PB, it's primarily in how they interface with their community, rather than a democratic process within the school environment. What growth there will be is likely to remain organic, based on individual teachers who have come across PB, perhaps in a non-school environment who then understand a little better about how it could be brought inside the school framework. More work needs to be done on understanding the pedagogical value of PB in terms of building critical thinking and youth leadership skills. However, I remain hopeful that with time there will be a shift back to understanding the role of schools as more than vehicles to equal pupils with the exam success. Time will tell.

In your experience, does engaging in SPB help young people become more active in democratic processes and encourage them to take on leadership roles?

I've been seeing young people involved in participatory budgeting in many different communities over many years. I remain frustrated that more could have been achieved or should be achieved, particularly within the school environment. However, I have seen some wonderful experiences over the time I've been involved in this work. Much of that was explored during the youth PB accelerator project. I'd point to some of those examples and videos from that time, particularly in Scotland, to say 'yes' to these questions. Young people overwhelmingly understand the benefits by being involved as citizens, and from being respected as citizens. And they want to be able to support their peers through that participation. I've seen their confidence being built through their active participation in decision making. I've seen young people say that, as a result, they hope to become future leaders in their community. School councils in and of themselves are still relatively powerless within the school environment. But progressive educationalists when exposed to PB as an idea and a concept overwhelmingly support it. As do young people.

Finally, what advice would you offer to schools or organisations that are considering introducing SPB, and where can interested readers learn more about Shared Future CIC and your work?

If a school were to approach me I would say that they need to: 'Put aside more time than they imagine to convince people within the wider school community of the benefits. Not to just jump in and hope that a one off experiment will lead to deep and lasting change.' I would encourage them to review what has happened in other contexts and countries. To perhaps visit the schools where it has happened. And to think through the motivations that led them to consider PB in the first place. What problems are they trying to solve? What problems do others in their school perceive? And how does PB support that shared goal? If people want to find out more about our work, the primary way is through our website: Shared. Future CIC: sharedfuturecic.org.uk. However, I would always be willing to talk directly with anybody who were considering using PB. I'm passionate about this opportunity. And always willing to speak one to one with individuals and share my passion for empowering the citizens of today, and the citizens of the future.

Jez Hall is a director at Shared Future CIC, specialising in participatory budgeting (PB) and deliberative democracy. He leads on business development and partnerships while coordinating a team of PB experts. Jez played a key role in embedding PB in Scotland's community engagement strategies. He has also led youth and child PB initiatives and co-authored PB guides.

Interview with Agnes Molnar

(Alternative Communities Association, Hungary)

As a start, do some brief introduction of yourself. What do you do and how is it related to SPB and civic education?

I am the representative of the Alternative Communities Association. The organisation is founded in 1998 in Debrecen, which is the second biggest city in Hungary. Currently we have three main directions: running a community space, capacity building in the region targeting youth and civic organisations, and building democracy. We have piloted many participative tools. The Association was the first to introduce school PB in Hungary in 2020. I first encountered the method in the US when I was in the Professional Fellows programme of the US State Department learning community organising. An association in New York demonstrated the participatory budgeting tools. I tried to implement PB in our city, but the municipality was not so open for it. So I was exploring an alternative way to do it, and that was the moment when the school PB came to my horizon. I initiated it in a local high school. That was the first time when we piloted SPB in Hungary.

What are the options for civic education now in Hungary, which became famous with its ... specific approach to democracy in the past ten years?

Specific is a good word. The school system in Hungary is pretty centralized. The government has introduced semi-centralisation within the education system several years ago. The country was divided into regions with Regional centres which run the schools. Therefore, all of the schools are linked to the government. For example, schools have no bank account of their own. That means it is not easy to run school PB, because the decisions regarding the budget are taken outside it. Principals do not possess autonomous way to make these decisions.

One of biggest obstacles to implement school PB in Hungary was to receive permission by the Regional centre to implement it in a school. Sometimes when principals are

risking and letting NGOs in, it could happen – like we managed to do several years ago. Nowadays the system and the laws became stricter, so principals are just not risking letting in anyone. Only organisations that have good reputation in front of the government could be an exception.

Another legislative amendment requires civic education about sex education or drug abuse to be delivered only by organisation registered at the government administration. A lot of organisations, which are actually pretty good experts in those areas cannot register because the administration does not let them. It is not easy to do something in the schools.

The overloaded curriculum is another obstacle – teachers do not really have time to work on SPB during classes. That means that they do not have capacity to provide space for civic education.

Is there civic education in Hungary as part of the curriculum?

There is to some extent. For example, a good practice we identify is the “Money Week”. It is related to learning about financing, and a lot of civic education elements, e.g., workshops, trainings, classes, study visits could be implemented during this Week. It is a centralized initiative of the government, some banks and foundations. They strive to organise it countrywide. If certain organisation joins, it could do workshops and thus the kids could receive some civic education. Another opportunity is the “Project Week”, a national initiative as well. Participation is not mandatory and depends on what the school is interested in. If an NGO joins, it could organise workshops about projects and different topics, including civic ones. Those are examples for initiatives in which SPB can be included. In conclusion, civic education or SPB could happen if many institutions are supporting the idea.

Do you manage to overcome all those barriers or it's very, very difficult to get into the system and be recognized by the Central and Regional Managements of the education?

We usually do it by all means possible. Initially we do a pilot, and then we strive to multiply the good practices. We push really hard to disseminate SPB. We deliver workshops; we created a manual, made promotional videos etc. We reached out to a lot of organisations who were interested in it. We supported the most enthusiastic ones to initiate an SPB in their cities. For example, there was one interested organisation in another part of the country. We consulted them and they were able

to implement multiple SPBs. We have observed how different SPB programs have been implemented. We keep track of the good practices, reflecting on what worked in the specific cases and what did not.

We are trying to explore and utilise every possibility. We cooperated with the Slovakian Ministry of Education on their SPB board game and then we translated it into Hungarian. Now we disseminate it to those who already started the SPB processes. Recently we had training in Szentendre municipality that is initiating a youth PB and SPBs. We had another workshop in Szeged for two NGOs. We mainly support and mentor other stakeholders to do SPB.

Currently we just finished three PB pilots in Temporary centres for children from 4 to 8 years old. Now we plan to make PB in a university. We pilot in those fields that have not been approached before. We set up a network of organisations within Hungary who are doing children PBs. We will have a website where we will collect all the good practices in Hungary about children and youth PBs.

You mentioned something very interesting related to the 4 y.o. ones in the Temporary centres, and participatory budgeting with small kids. How does it work with so young children?

It was great and difficult at the same time, because we did not really have such an experience, but we were genuinely keen to try. The challenge was that those children are really not like their peers in the “good families”. We did a shorter process, because we worked with smaller group. It was not as detailed, because they cannot really work on projects, but they can still figure out what they want. We facilitated the process on how they want to do it, and they voted easily. We had to use more creative approaches. It is not the type of work when we sit around tables and using flipcharts. We had to draw, we had to move, we had to shout and play. We piloted a lot of tools, some of them worked, some did not. We worked in parallel in three centres and our teams were constantly sharing experiences on what worked and what did not. With smaller children you have to use more pictograms and pictures and not words. But they were really great.

I was thinking that PB is not possible to be done e.g. in kindergartens.

We made a contact with the Budapest municipality. They piloted PB into kindergartens and it was really great. They wrote a tale – a fairy coming to the kindergarten asking the kids for wishes.

In general, what kind of projects do the children submit, more like soft measures or purchase of equipment?

In high school, and I observe it in every one, it is mainly infrastructural stuff. Students want relax rooms, sanitary box ideas. Other winners were renovating classroom for dancers., microwave to heat their lunches during the break etc. In the Temporary homes children wanted to go to the zoo, to the cinema, to go to McDonald's together etc.

Approximately how many children vote for the projects?

It depends. The first time we did it, half of the students – we were in a school with 1000 students, almost 500 voted. In the Temporary Homes – all of the kids, because it is a small group. In the schools where our partners work, there is 80–90% turnover, though in the specific case the organisation working there was very active and with very strong rapport with the students and the teacher.

Do you involve parents too?

No, we tried in one of the Temporary homes and then we decided not to involve them in the next steps because they were not able to walk in the shoes of their child. The parents were thinking in their own mindsets and were influencing the kids. Children were saying different stuff when the adults were present.

Where do the funds for SPB come from?

Only external resources, donors' funded projects. We had a project in the Temporary Homes that helped to implement the three pilots as well. But some of its directors decided to put their own money in it. It was great because it's real PB then, when the institution allocates amount of its budget for it. When there are different sources of funding, children start to diversify and to think for which idea which of the potential donors to approach – the principal, the municipality, the parents.

What do you see as the main SPB strengths in Hungary, and what challenges do you still face

Key strength is that SPB is a non-political method, neutral to politics in a way that neither the left nor the right side could say: "OK, it's a left/right type of tool or method", it's difficult for a party to "adopt" it. The weakness that the method

must be implemented by skilled facilitators in the schools, and sometimes the school staff has not so democratic mind-set. They could facilitate some process, but unless it is not rooted in democratic values and thinking, it turns out to be not a quality process.

Does SPB influence children towards democratic mind-set and values?

Yes, I think. Maybe they do not directly internalise values like “Voting matters.” But they can very clear feel the difference of what is to be heard, and not to be.

The children in the Temporary homes were not used to be listened to before. Yes, they get many donations every Christmas, and they are asked: “What do you want for Christmas?” And they receive many presents. But they did not value more the present as an object, it was more important to them to connect with us. We had a democratic process, they of course don’t know what is democracy still, but they could feel there was a different approach to them compared to what they experienced before from adults. These kids could really feel it. They were more honest with us, so for example, the director of one of the Temporary Homes said: “Oh, that girl is never talking like she’s always silent and shy”. I said: “Really? This girl was talking a lot of the workshops!” So yeah, they could feel like the difference.

How does external stakeholders react to the concept of SPB? We see that with Budapest is supporting, which is great.

It depends on the leaders of the structures. Principals are very different as well; we come to the personality again. One principal could be very open, because she or he is a democratic type, but other could be “just don’t get it” or “Oh, I’m democratic already. I already do it!” Sometimes, even if you try the hardest, you cannot explain to this type of people: “No, it’s not the same!”, because their approach and mind-set is not democratic.

Are there any other NGOs who do SPB in Hungary?

Yes, now there are organisations, and I should say we were the ones who helped them to start it. There are some municipalities implementing it as well. They learned about it from abroad, from international organisations, like Euro Child or Terre des Hommes.

Is there anything important or specific to the Hungarian context we haven't discussed or to your experience, maybe your future plans related to SPB?

We are organising future labs for experts in children and youth PB in Hungary. We meet online every three months and share experiences. I think it's very important, because in a country where SPB is very fresh tool and method. We develop the website where we collect the good practices with videos, manuals and studies. We plan a lobbying Working group with task to create advocacy materials and reach on the national level to implement the method.

Ágnes Molnár is a community organiser and leader in Hungary's North Plain region, supporting grassroots civic initiatives through the Regional Community Centres Program. A pioneer of school-based participatory budgeting in Hungary, she also coordinates a national civic network on social participatory budgeting with the Alternative Communities Association.

Interview with Pedro Abrantes

(Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Universidade Aberta, Portugal)

By Andrés Falck and Christiane Arrivillaga (Coglobal)

Let's start with a description of how the school participatory budgeting was implemented as a national programme in Portugal and how it has evolved over time.

It was an interesting process. With a new government focused on developing more democratic processes in schools and improving citizenship education, a national strategy for citizenship education was formulated, including clear frameworks and guidelines for schools. However, we were also cautious that such a strategy could remain rhetoric without generating real changes in school organisation. Drawing on previous experiences with local participatory budgeting initiatives in municipalities, we saw an opportunity to give a practical sense to our citizenship education programme by allocating a special budget for schools to be run through a democratic process involving students. Initially, there was debate about whether to start with just a few schools or involve all schools nationwide. The Minister decided that the programme should be rolled out in all schools. There was also discussion on whether primary schools should be involved, because there were some concerns about their abilities to participate. Ultimately, it was decided to focus on secondary education – although, interestingly, lower secondary education levels ended up being more involved. We also wanted to include public vocational schools, because it was very important to us to include a wide array of tracks, not just academic ones. We wanted to give all young people, between the ages of 12 and 18, the opportunity to participate.

Vocational schools often have students over 18. Are these students also invited to participate?

Yes, indeed. All students in secondary education, including those in vocational programs, are invited to participate.

The national school participatory budgeting programme in Portugal isn't compulsory for schools, so the number of participating schools is probably one of the key indicators of success. You have recently published evaluation data from the school years of 2018–19 (93% of Portuguese schools involved in SPB) and 2020–2021 (62,3% of schools) during the pandemic. Could you tell us how these numbers have evolved since then?

I must note that I do not have the most recent analysis yet, as other professional duties have delayed updating the data. However, from what I've observed, some schools have consolidated this practice and now conduct the process annually, while other schools remain hesitant. So, I believe that the situation is not that different from the one I described in 2020–2021. Although the pandemic affected participation, schools that embraced the process have now become comfortable with it and run it every year. Students are involved and they know when and how to participate in their schools. There are many schools with very interesting practices. We also need to consider that there was a lot of attention given to this programme at the beginning, from the media and political figures. In essence, some schools remain consistent while others – perhaps still sceptical from the initial rollout – have not fully engaged.

Could you discuss the main challenges engaging schools that are not currently participating in school participatory budgeting?

Certainly. There appear to be two types of resistance. The first is the traditional mind-set among some school leaders who favour a more hierarchical approach and worry that student participation might disrupt school routines and relationships. This is especially evident in schools from more peripheral or vulnerable contexts, where leadership can also be unstable. The second type of resistance comes from schools that are already involved in many programs; they might opt out of school participatory budgeting because they are committed to other initiatives. When I was at the Ministry, some municipalities even tried to merge their local participatory initiatives with the national programme because they already had ongoing practices. However, it became a matter of debate because it can be challenging to merge two programs coming from different political backgrounds. Nonetheless, despite SPB not being these schools' priority, I don't think it is a matter of concern, since they were already involved in some programs aiming to improve citizenship and democratic values.

On a related note, Portugal is a leading example of the growth of participatory budgeting. There are a large number of experiences at the municipal level, many

of these with specific youth PB; there is a national youth PB program, and the national SPB program. So, there is a coexistence, if not overlapping at certain points.

Exactly. There was significant overlap among initiatives because participatory budgeting emerged as an attractive idea for many politicians. They sought to generate their own projects, which sometimes overlapped with existing programs. While I believe this overlap had positive aspects, it also generated concerns and confusion among citizens due to the proliferation of different initiatives. Balancing these programs is essential. Many municipalities found participatory budgeting an effective way to engage citizens, whereas the national government – particularly the one in power from 2015 to 2019 – took a different approach.

It was a special period: the government at that time was from the Socialist Party, yet it also had support from other left-wing parties. This unusual political alignment led to an unprecedented boost in participatory programs – arguably the first and only time such broad consensus occurred in Portugal. Moreover, at the municipal level, participatory budgeting has been implemented by political actors from various parties, making it primarily a local initiative rather than one strictly driven by a partisan agenda.

When the new government came into power, there was a strong push to improve citizen participation, and participatory budgeting was seen as a good tool to engage citizens. This resulted in partial overlapping with existing initiatives, reinforcing the idea that multiple programs can coexist and complement one another.

You mentioned earlier that the initiative for school participatory budgeting stemmed from a broader discussion on enhancing civic education in Portugal. In your chapter in *Educating for Democracy*, you argue that civic education sometimes risks being narrowed down to a single subject or some isolated activity within the school curriculum. In contrast, school participatory budgeting offers a more comprehensive and engaging approach, encouraging active student involvement and fostering democratic practices within the school community. After these years of SPB, has there been any noticeable impact on civic education in Portuguese schools?

Yes, indeed. That was a major concern for us in the education sector. Our minister at the time was very focused on promoting civic education, but we recognized that in many cases, civic education in schools tends to reinforce order, discipline, and the existing rules instead of fostering genuine democratic participation. For us, that was

a very limited way to approach civic education. We needed more practical, hands-on activities that would truly enhance democratic values and encourage the active participation of young people.

In Portugal, the constitution approved after the revolution, mandates that students should be involved in school management. However, in practice, this involvement is often merely formal; for example, a student might be present on a council without having any real impact on decisions. We saw the participatory budget as a way to clearly demonstrate how students could be actively involved in school organisation and management – in a manner that even parents could easily understand. Despite many guidelines for civic education, when I visit schools and engage in research projects, I still find that civic education is implemented in a very formal, rule-bound way. Teachers often guide discussions toward trivial issues like noisy classrooms or student behaviour, leaving many students feeling that civic education is the worst part of their day. This, in turn, undermines the idea of democracy and genuine engagement.

That is why we felt that the school participatory budget could change these perspectives. It may not transform the entire school organisation, but it provides a meaningful process for engaging students. One of the most interesting aspects is that students are supported to develop projects that are well thought out and viable – not just spontaneous ideas. They have the time – often weeks or even months – to discuss, draft, and refine proposals with the support of their teachers. Of course, this process has not been successfully implemented in every school, but where it works, it shows great promise.

The procedures of the national SPB programme establish that school boards play a fundamental role in the process by preapproving proposals before they reach the ballot. Could you elaborate on the composition of these boards and their function in the process? Are there students on the board? Are boards generally impartial and supporting or are there cases where they try to dominate the process?

Well, that was certainly something we had to consider. Initially, there were concerns that students might propose ideas that were unfeasible or even at odds with school policy. To address this, we established a rule stating that the school board should approve or reject students' proposals. However, they should not outright reject proposals but instead work with students to improve them to meet feasibility and policy requirements.

Typically, the school board is composed exclusively of teachers. Although students have representation in other councils – such as the general assembly or pedagogical council – they do not sit on the school board. The process's success often depends on the principal's openness and leadership. In most cases, the principals that choose to implement the participatory budgeting process will be supportive of student proposals, although challenges still exist when the process is not prioritized. When a principal declares that the school lacks the conditions or resources to implement the process, the participatory budgeting initiative simply doesn't proceed.

The refusals of students' proposals have been monitored in the Ministry's database, and they are relatively few and generally follow specific criteria. In other cases, principals take a more active role in guiding the process – and while their influence on students is somewhat inevitable, my main concern is with schools that do not adopt the process at all. Even when a principal attempts to steer the process by selectively refusing or promoting certain proposals, this can at least generate healthy debate and reflection among students and teachers about what is acceptable. However, the real challenge arises when schools outright say, “We cannot do this,” often due to a lack of resources or because school boards feel overwhelmed by additional programs and projects.

There are also cases in which schools provide additional funds to complement the national budget allocated for school participatory budgeting. Could you provide more details on the nature and sources of these additional funds?

Yes, that is an interesting aspect. When I was with the Ministry, many schools sought clarification on funding rules. The national budget provides a base amount calculated on the number of students, and schools can supplement this if they feel it is necessary to implement the winning proposals fully. These additional funds can come from various sources such as local organisations, parent associations, or even the school's own budget set aside for minor improvements.

During my time at the ministry, schools often approached us with questions like, “Is this possible? Is this legal?” In response, we provided support during those early years to help complement their budgets. This assistance was not only practical – it also helped improve the relationship between schools and their local communities. The idea was that if a school approached local partners for additional funding, success might be limited; however, if they presented a proposal developed and voted on by students, it added credibility and fostered stronger partnerships.

The Ministry of Education has provided a digital platform that serves all schools, allowing them to manage SPB activities (such as student voting) internally. The platform also collects data that can be used at the national level for research.

This platform serves several functions: it allows schools to manage internal processes like student voting, and it gathers data at the national level for research purposes. In the first year, we didn't have the platform yet, so we relied on a large media campaign. But by the second year, we recognized the need for a stable platform to support school operations. Now, students can access information, update and upload proposals, and schools can validate or reject these proposals – all with the election results updated in real time. This transparency benefits not only the schools and the Ministry of Education but also researchers who request the data.

Now, taking a broader perspective, how would you compare the school participatory budgeting process in Portugal with similar experiences in other countries?

The main goals and stages of the process are quite similar internationally. In Portugal, we benefited from the input of experts in participatory budgeting who worked on an international basis, and we even held international conferences that helped shape our approach. However, implementing a national programme introduced both strengths and challenges. On one hand, a national framework can serve as a transformational force across many contexts; on the other, it can sometimes make the programme less adaptable and less disruptive compared to locally driven initiatives. The key was finding a balance between establishing a common framework and allowing schools the flexibility to create their own procedures.

I initially proposed a more flexible approach to the minister – allocating a special budget while allowing schools the freedom to create their own rules and procedures. However, the minister stressed the need for certain common standards across all schools, so we had to find a middle ground. This compromise became one of the most interesting and challenging aspects of our experience in Portugal.

We aimed to implement the programme on a large scale, trying to involve every school. Although we couldn't include all of them, we reached the majority.

Finally, looking to the future, what do you see as the key challenges and opportunities for innovation in enhancing school participatory budgeting – both in Portugal and globally?

Not an easy question, as there are several challenges. However, I think that first of all, it is crucial to enrich the educational process. Students should not only be involved in generating ideas but also be supported to develop those ideas into viable projects. Without sufficient planning time and resources, proposals can remain underdeveloped, leading to frustration. Second, it is important to increase active teacher involvement because sometimes teachers feel that their own ideas or contributions are not fully considered. This points to a broader need for organisational change within schools, rather than treating participatory budgeting as an isolated event. Finally, I believe we need to find a way to make these initiatives more sustainable over time. Often, although the programs start off as interesting, there is a persistent resistance to sustaining them in the long run – a challenge common to many democratic innovations.

Moreover, there's a significant equality issue. While it's beneficial to offer these opportunities to all schools, the reality is that not every school participates, and even within participating schools, not all students are involved. I suspect that immigrant students or those from more vulnerable backgrounds are particularly underrepresented, perhaps because they feel less capable of crafting a compelling proposal or lack the necessary language skills. Therefore, we must ensure that all students are engaged – not just those already familiar with democratic procedures due to having additional support at home.

Pedro Abrantes is a sociologist, a researcher in the Center for Research and Studies in Sociology (Instituto Universitário de Lisboa) and a professor at the Universidade Aberta, Portugal. From 2016 to 2020, he served as an advisor to the Portuguese Minister of Education. During this period, he had an active role in launching the national school participatory budgeting (SPB) program. When he returned to the university, he continued researching SPB in Portugal and its impact.

In 2024, Abrantes published *School participatory budgeting in every school of the country? Lessons from a national initiative to spread citizenship education*, a chapter in Educating for Democracy, edited by Daniel Schugurensky and Tara Bartlett. In this chapter he examines the case of Portugal, the first country in the world to launch a national initiative of SPB. Since 2017, every year, all Portuguese public secondary schools can request government funds for improvement projects to be proposed, discussed, and voted on by students using SPB. This programme has been very successful, engaging 93% of schools in the first edition and 62% of schools during the pandemic, according to the data shared in Abrantes' chapter.

Chapter



School Participatory Budgeting and Democratic Habits

Report on Schools Implementing SPB in Poland under the project
“School Participatory Budget – a Tool to Foster School Democracy”

Katarzyna Sztop-Rutkowska
Agnieszka Morozowska

Introduction

This report presents the results of a study on School Participatory Budgeting (SPB), based on an experiment conducted in three upper secondary schools in the Podlaskie and Mazowieckie regions of Poland.

The aim of the experiment was to provide data and practical insights into the School Participatory Budgeting as a tool for fostering democratic values among young people. The study was carried out using a quantitative research method – an online survey – and the analysis of the results took into account both the theoretical context and the practical aspects of implementing such initiatives in schools.

The findings presented in this report indicate that School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) can effectively support the development of students' civic and democratic competencies. It can also contribute to the cultivation of soft skills such as collaboration, communication, and shared decision-making. However, to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of its impact, more in-depth research in this area would be necessary.

SPB, implemented as part of the project “School Participatory Budget – A Tool to Foster School Democracy”, was carried out in the following three schools:

- 1 1st Charter General Secondary School**
in Białystok,
- 2 CLX Stefan Rowecki “Grot” General Secondary School**
in Warsaw,
- 3 XL Stefan Żeromski General Secondary School**
in Warsaw.

Part of this process was an online survey administered to students from the participating schools both before the implementation of SPB and after its completion. The purpose of the survey was, on one hand, to explore students' views on school democracy and their civic and democratic attitudes. On the other hand, the project team aimed to assess whether the intervention in the form of SPB would have any impact on these views.

However, since SPB was implemented only once in each school, it is not possible to determine definitively whether any observed changes were solely the result of this intervention. At this stage, we can only formulate hypotheses that should be tested in future rounds of measurement.

The survey was hosted on Google Drive, and the link was distributed to students by the schools. The first round of data collection took place just before the start of the SPB process, with 692 students participating. The second round involved 640 students. Students from all grade levels participated in the study.

Figure 1. Respondents' Schools

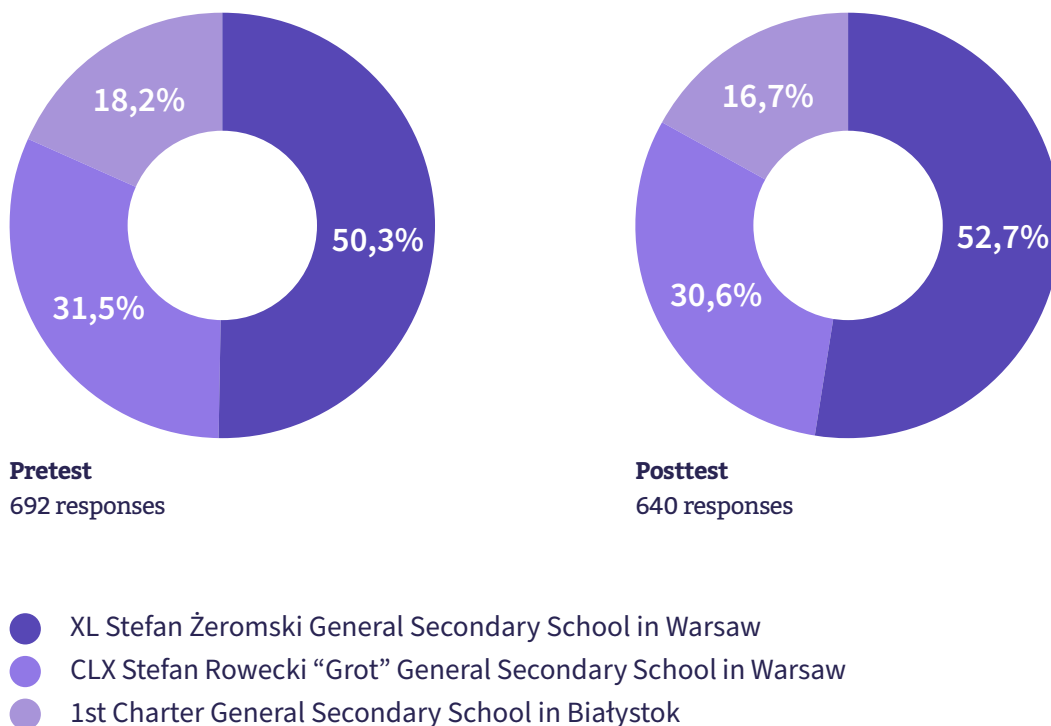
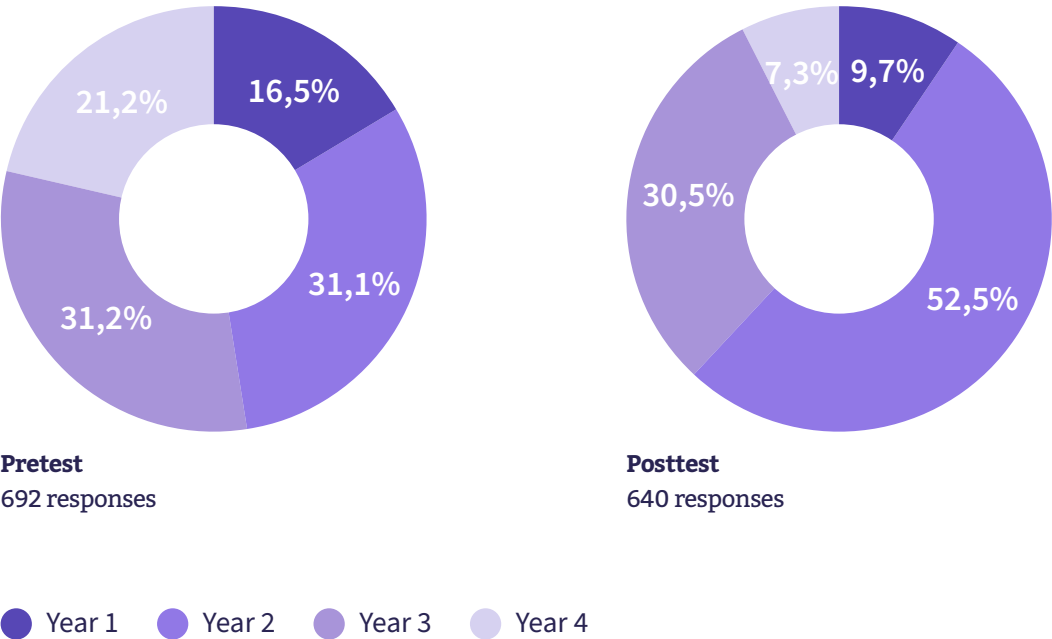
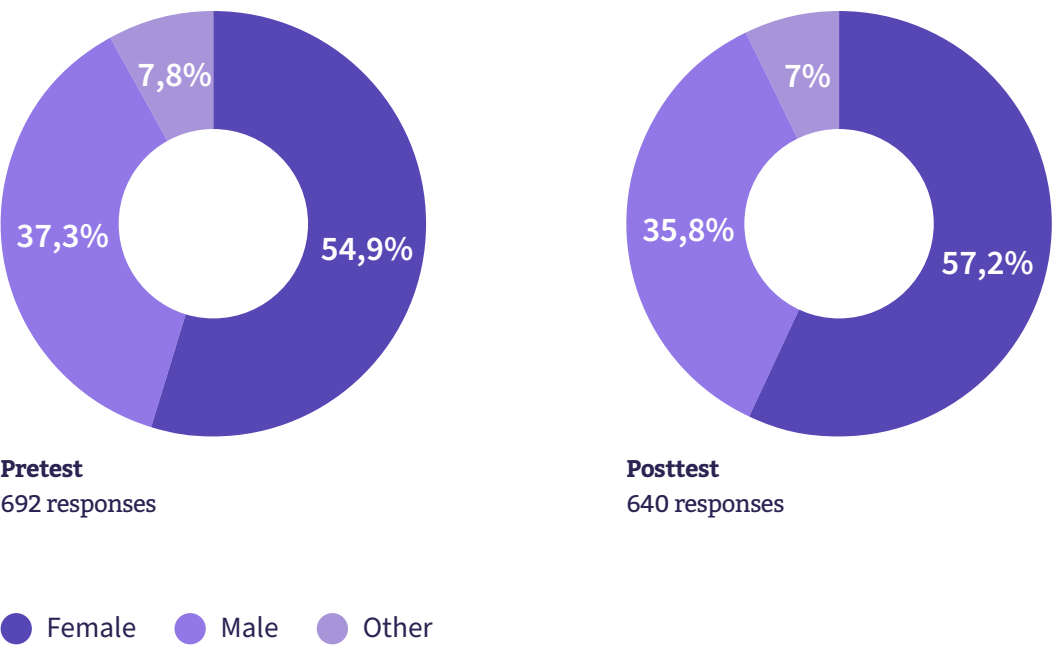


Figure 2. Year



The gender distribution in the study was as follows:

Figure 3. Gender distribution



The second measurement (**posttest**) had a similar structure, both in terms of the number of responses from each school and demographic characteristics such as gender. However, there was a higher response rate among students of Year 2. No significant changes were observed in the answers to individual questions. Therefore, the analysis of attitudes and opinions related to democracy and civic engagement presented here will primarily be based on the pretest results (first measurement). In cases where noticeable changes occurred between measurements, results from both rounds will be shown.

This summary focuses mainly on questions that serve as indicators of democratic habits. Additionally, attention was given to students' self-assessment of their skills related to group work.

Democratic Habits and Capabilities

Contemporary civic education should focus on developing practical competencies that support democratic attitudes and active participation in political and social life. Its primary goal is to broaden social awareness and sensitivity, linked with a sense of social responsibility. The School Participatory Budget can serve as a tool for this kind of experiential learning.

This is particularly important because, as Katarzyna Hamant writes, "Conventional civic education in modern democracy tends to privilege a passive and normative approach to politics. It places special emphasis on the cognitive domain (through the transmission of information and memorisation of facts) without sufficiently addressing the skills and attitudes necessary for active participation in democracy. The teaching methods – focusing on passive transmission mainly involving names and dates – are often employed by teachers who, in delivering the curriculum, rely primarily on textbooks"¹¹⁵.

Consistent implementation of practical civic education in schools would help strengthen the foundations of democracy among young people and future generations, shaping conscious and responsible citizens.

¹¹⁵ K. Hamant, *Edukacja obywatelska w działaniu jako klucz do wzmocnienia aktywności obywatelskiej młodych*, Przegląd Socjologiczny, 2021, 70 (3), p. 100.

The adolescent period plays a key role in forming young people's political knowledge and views on democracy, laying the groundwork for their future civic engagement. Attitudes acquired during this time, strongly influenced by the school environment, have a lasting impact on later political behaviour¹¹⁶. It is also "a time when certain beliefs are formed – both general ones about the role of individuals in society, attitudes toward social norms, and the value of interpersonal cooperation, as well as more specific views on issues such as the functioning of the political system, or more precisely, democracy"¹¹⁷.

For this reason, in the quantitative study we aimed to pay particular attention to specific elements of democratic attitudes among youth during the implementation of SPB in three schools. These included democratic habits, certain skills useful in a democracy, opinions about school democracy, and phenomena outside the school environment measured, for example, by trust in various types of public institutions or preferences regarding the best political system.

John Dewey regarded democracy not only as a political system but, above all, as a way of life based on habits of collective action, openness to others, and critical thinking¹¹⁸. In his view, **democratic habits** are:

- **Citizenship as Shared Fate:** "An inclination to care about all people in our communities, even those who are different from us or who don't adhere to a single unifying ideology"¹¹⁹. In our study, two questions served as indicators of this habit. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a scale with the following statements: "*I am able to listen to another person and withhold judgment of their views*" and "*I am able to empathise with another person's emotions and needs*".
- **Collaboration and Compromise:** "Taking a part in a discussion where we imaginatively enter into the experience of the other requires more than that we meet each other halfway. What we want is a deeper interaction... where members

116 Ibidem, p. 98.

117 P. Sadura i M. Cwalina, *Szkolna autokracja. Raport z badań praktyk edukacji obywatelskiej i demokracji szkolnej w szkołach branżowych pierwszego stopnia w województwie warmińsko-mazurskim*, Warszawa, Fundacja Civis Polonus, 2023, p. 3. civispolonus.org.pl/media/project_block/demokracja-raport-final.pdf (date of access: 6 maja 2025).

118 S. M. Stitzlein, *Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today*, *Education and Culture*, t. 30, nr 2, 2014, s. 62. Own translation.

119 Ibidem, s. 70.

re-examine their values and interests in light of all others”¹²⁰. In our study, this corresponded to the statement: *“I am able to work collaboratively with others”*.

- **Deliberation:** “The habit of deliberation, then, is a bent toward figuring out problems collectively through discussion. It propels citizens to seek input from others, especially people different from themselves, and to truly listen to them”¹²¹. In our study, this ability was measured by the question linked to the statement: *“I am able to listen to another person and withhold judgment of their views”*.
- **Analysis and Critique:** “Habits of analysis and critique form the basis of dissenting action. They shape how we perceive and interpret the world around us, sensitising us to moments of injustice and beckoning us to examine the causes and implications of social and political struggles. They are dispositions to question and challenge, rather than to accept and obey”¹²². In the study, this was reflected in the statement: *“I am able to express opposition to initiatives that I believe are unjust or harmful”*.
- **Hope:** “This includes not being complacent with social living, but striving to improve it by revealing problems, seeking inclusive input on those problems, and envisioning and implementing solutions. In terms of democracy, a habit of hope helps us recognise that democracy is not fixed but constantly changing as the needs and demographics of its citizens change; and that we, therefore, can always make changes to associated living to improve such life for ourselves and others”¹²³. This ability was measured by the statement: *“I believe that through the right actions, people can make the world a better place”*.

Dewey emphasized that these habits must be cultivated through education – not only in the formal sense, but also through social practice and everyday interactions. We assume that school participatory budgets can serve as a form of such education and can contribute to the development of these skills. In our study, we asked students to assess their level of these competencies.

Martha Nussbaum, in turn, develops the idea of democracy in the context of civic and emotional education. For her, the key democratic skills are narrative imagination (empathy), global citizenship (closely related to Dewey’s concept of “Citizenship as Shared Fate”), and critical thinking. As she writes in one of her works on narrative

120 S. M. Stitzlein, *Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today*, *Education and Culture*, t. 30, nr 2, 2014, s. 71.

121 Ibidem, s. 73.

122 Ibidem, s. 75.

123 Ibidem, s. 77.

imagination: “citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone. The third ability of the citizen [...] can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself”¹²⁴. In this context, our study included a statement: *“I am able to empathise with another person’s emotions and needs”*.

Democratic Habits and Capabilities in Respondents’ Self-Assessments

The analysis of young people’s self-assessment regarding their democratic habits and skills provides valuable insights – it allows us to gauge their sense of readiness and motivation to engage with often inaccessible or complex socio-institutional structures. This section of the report presents findings related to students’ subjective sense of agency, their self-evaluation in areas such as cooperation, group participation, the ability to engage in discussion and construct arguments, as well as their willingness to take action for the benefit of the school community.

Below, we present a summary of the key questions used as indicators of democratic habits.

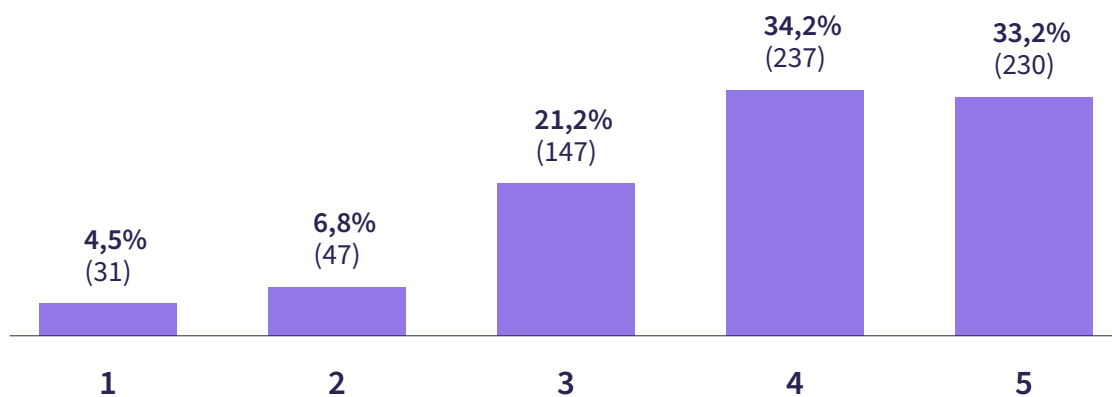
Some of the questions – where students were asked to assess their level of certain skills – were formulated using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates the lowest level and 5 the highest.

124 M. C. Nussbaum, *Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education*, *Journal of Human Development*, t. 7, nr 3, 2006, s. 390.

Citizenship as Shared Fate

This democratic habit was analysed through questions concerning empathy, the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand them, as well as the ability to refrain from expressing one's own opinion.

Figure 4. I am able to empathise with another person's emotions and needs

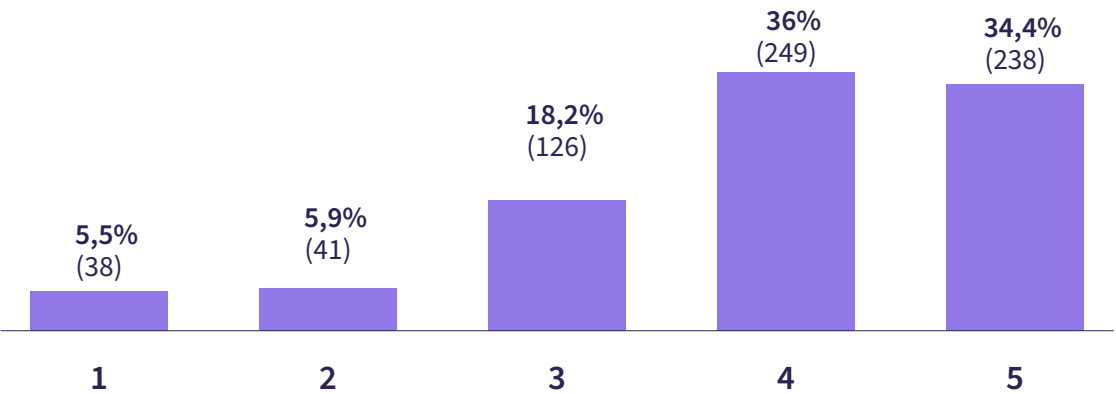


Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

As shown in the figure above, the participants in the study have a very positive perception of their skills in this area. Correlation analysis revealed that women report a higher level of empathy. However, no statistically significant correlation was found between the year number (students' age) and the ability to empathise with the emotions and needs of others.

Figure 5. I am able to listen to another person and withhold judgment of their views

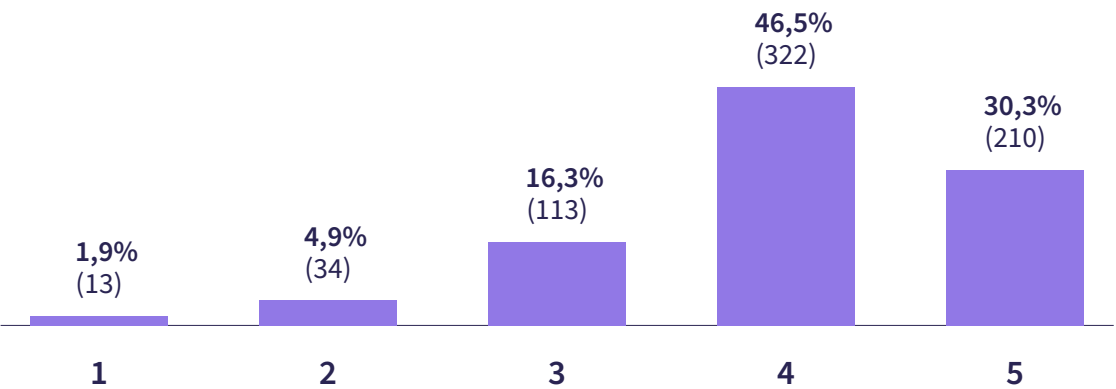


Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

Similar to the previous habit, women more often report the ability to listen without judging than men. This does not change with age.

Collaboration and Compromise

Figure 6. I am able to work collaboratively with others

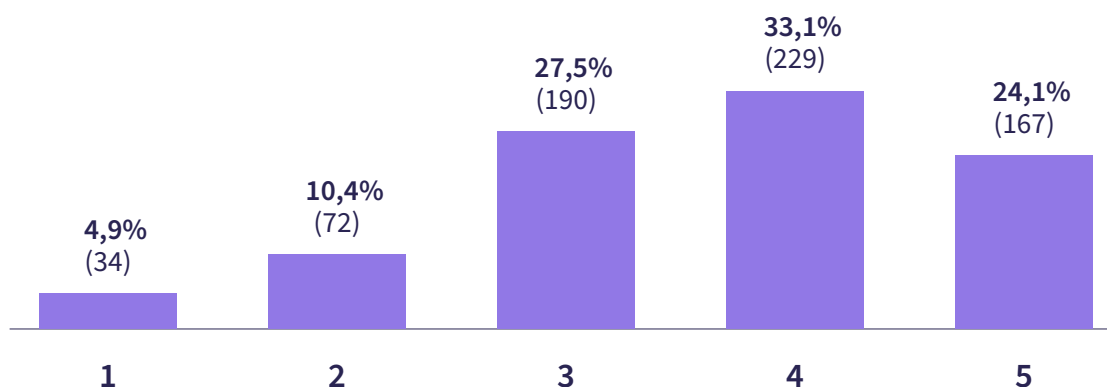


Question: Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

In the case of assessing the ability to cooperate with others, it can be seen that most respondents did not choose the highest value on the scale. This may be due to real experiences of the challenges that come with collaboration, meaning that their self-assessment is based on practice. What remains consistent, however, is the correlation between responses and gender: women more often report a higher ability to cooperate than men. No significant correlation was found between year (students' age) and the ability to work with others. In the post-tests conducted at the 1st Charter General Secondary School in Białystok and CLX Stefan Rowecki "Grot" General Secondary School in Warsaw, positive responses (4 and 5 on the scale) were chosen more frequently. In contrast, at the second Warsaw General Secondary School, responses of 2 and 3 on the scale were chosen slightly more often. However, the differences are not large enough to warrant interpretation.

Analysis and Critique

Figure 7. I am able to express opposition to initiatives that I believe are unjust or harmful



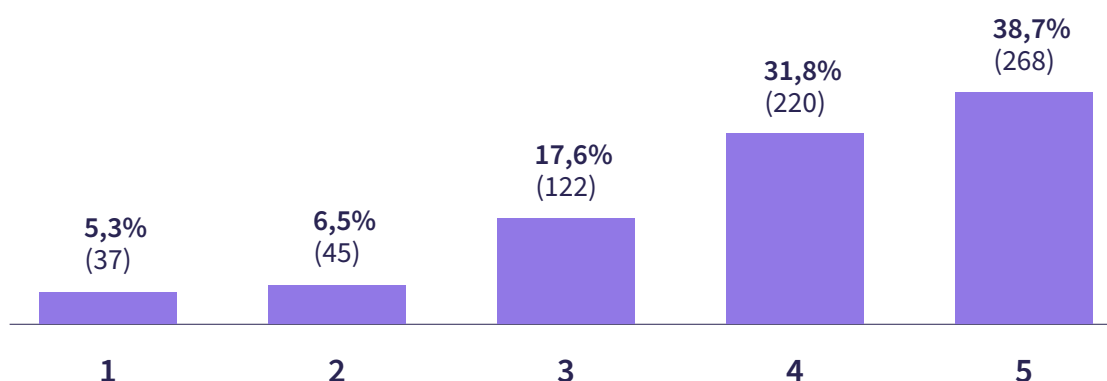
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

Here, the distribution of responses is also spread across the scale, although a high self-assessment of one's abilities still dominates. This time, there is no noticeable correlation between responses and gender. Higher years (2 and 3) more often report a higher level of ability to express dissent. Years 1 and 4 show more varied responses, including a greater number of neutral or negative evaluations.

Hope

Figure 8. I believe that through the right actions, people can make the world a better place



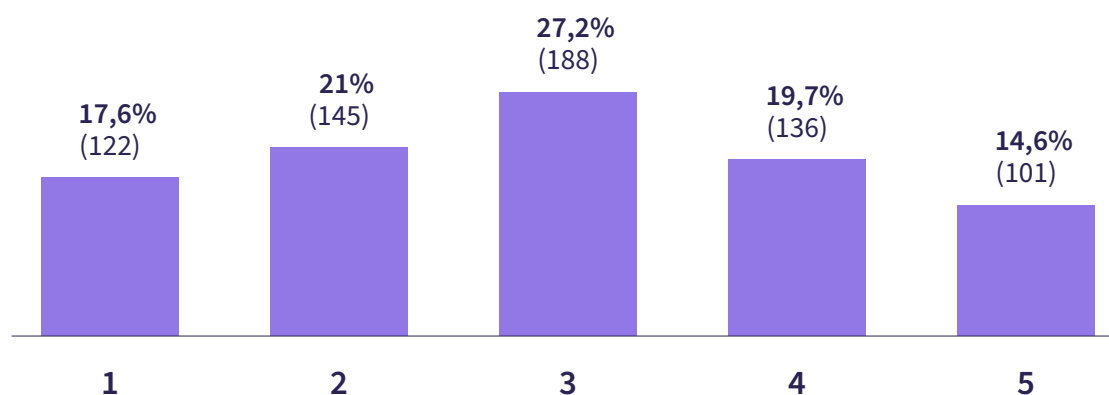
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

The level of hope reported in this question is high, although it is worth noting that among young respondents there are also answers on the more pessimistic end of the scale. It is men who are less likely to believe that people's actions can contribute to making the world a better place. Women showed more optimism in their responses. School year (age) did not have a significant impact on the answers. There were also no clear changes between the pretest and posttest.

Other skills

In the remaining questions about skills, no correlations between variables were found. However, it is worth looking at the overall results. These indicators no longer directly concern the democratic habits described earlier, but they certainly also influence the quality of participation in public life.

Figure 9. I am confident in public speaking

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

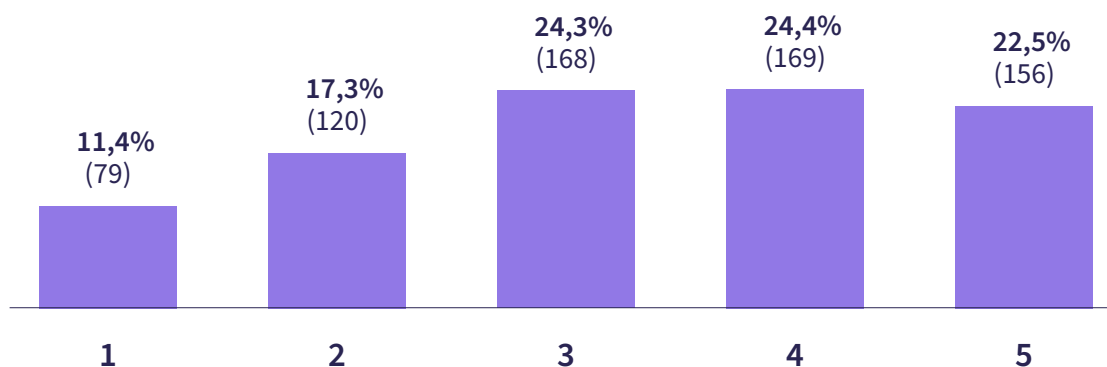
Response scale from 1 (I definitely can't do it) to 5 (I handle it very well). Data from the pretest.

Public speaking is the first skill that respondents did not report at a high level. For the first time, a minority selected responses at the highest points on the scale. It is clear that this is definitely an area for working with youth, where the SPB mechanism can also be utilised.

The next question, which was similar in wording to the previous one but specified the skill in terms of speaking up in a smaller setting (e.g., in the classroom), also confirmed a varied level of responses, without a clear predominance of positive self-assessments. Additionally, it showed a correlation between responses and gender – men more often rated their ability to participate in discussions positively.

Both questions largely relate to skills that enable active participation in democracy. Taking a stand publicly and expressing one's opinions are just as important as listening to others. Therefore, it is worth dedicating more time and attention to developing these skills in cooperation with young people.

Figure 10. I am able to speak up in a public discussion (e.g., in class)

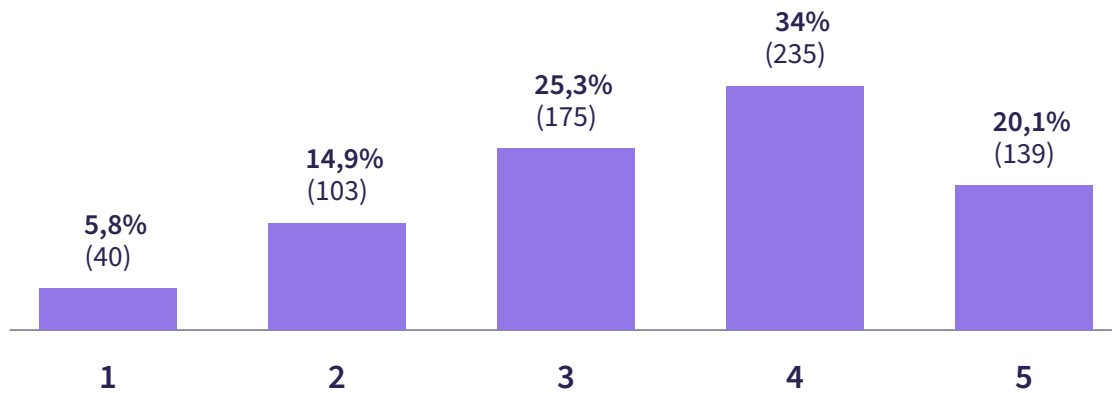


Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (I definitely can't do it) to 5 (I handle it very well). Data from the pretest.

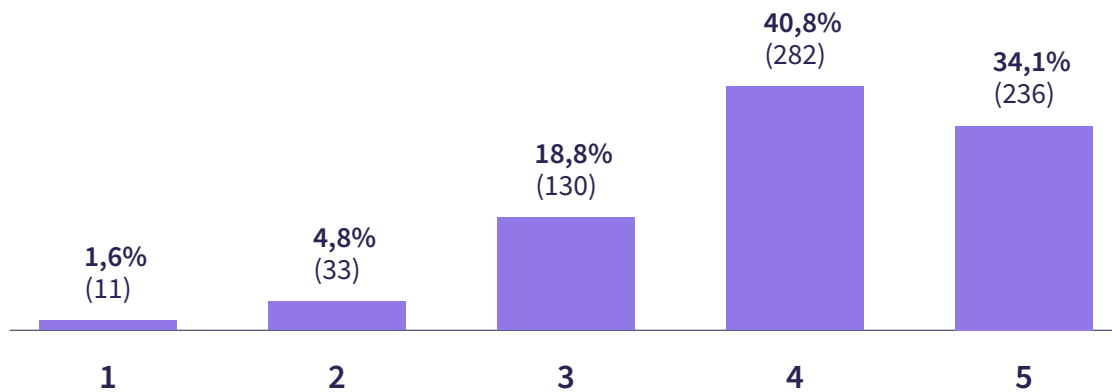
There was a noticeable increase in the number of positive responses (“I can rather do it” and “I handle it very well”) in years 2 and 3, indicating a positive change: as students get older, their confidence and ability to express their opinions publicly increase. In the younger years, neutral responses and those indicating lower self-confidence predominated.

The next statement concerned expressing emotions. Here, average scores dominated – 4 (“I can rather do it”) and 3 (“I can somewhat do it, somewhat not”). Interestingly, students more often expressed positive views about their ability to empathise than about expressing their own emotions.

Figure 11. I can express my emotions

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (I definitely can't do it) to 5 (I handle it very well). Data from the pretest.

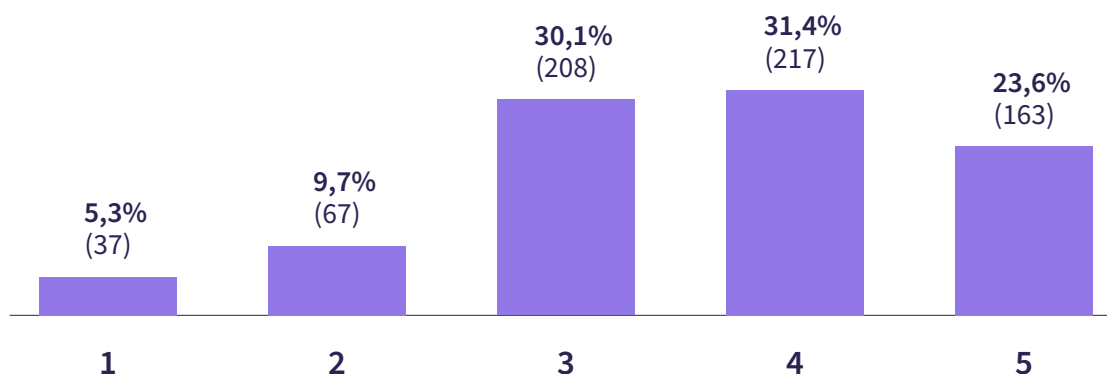
Figure 12. I can be creative

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (I definitely can't do it) to 5 (I handle it very well). Data from the pretest.

In the study, we also asked students about their creativity. Here again, the self-assessments were fairly positive. There were no significant correlations related to gender or age.

In the context of group work skills, an important trait is also the ability to coordinate group tasks and take on the responsibility of a leader.

Figure 13. I am able to coordinate the work of others

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (I definitely can't do it) to 5 (I handle it very well). Data from the pretest.

For this question, the most common responses were 3 (“I can somewhat do it, somewhat not”) and 4 (“I can rather do it”), but over 23% of students responded that they handle it very well.

School life

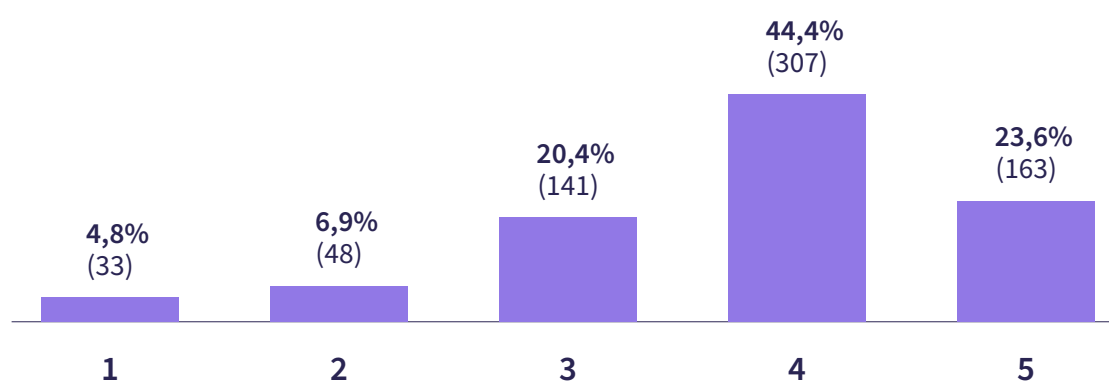
The second part of the questions concerned school life, cooperation within the school community, and the functioning of school democracy on a daily basis. School is one of the most important communities we are part of during our youth. The way we are treated there and the types of relationships we build within this institution shape a crucial stage of socialisation, including political socialisation. Research shows that “developing civic competencies in one’s immediate environment strengthens interest in and willingness to engage with broader issues, including those at the national and international levels”¹²⁵. School life was conceptualised and operationalised by considering aspects such as: subjective opinions about the atmosphere at the institution, student-teacher relationships, observations on how the school operates, everyday practices that enable open discussion and expression of personal opinions, the level of trust in the school, students’ sense of agency, and their willingness to cooperate.

125 P. Sadura i M. Cwalina, *Szkolna autokracja. Raport z badań praktyk edukacji obywatelskiej i demokracji szkolnej w szkołach branżowych pierwszego stopnia w województwie warmińsko-mazurskim*, Warsaw, Fundacja Civis Polonus, 2023, p. 4. civispolonus.org.pl/media/project_block/demokracja-raport-final.pdf (date of access: 6.05.2025).

A sense of safety and freedom at school

The students of the surveyed schools generally feel safe at school. A noticeable correlation between these responses and gender was observed. Women relatively more often report a sense of safety at school compared to men.

Figure 14. School is a place where I feel safe



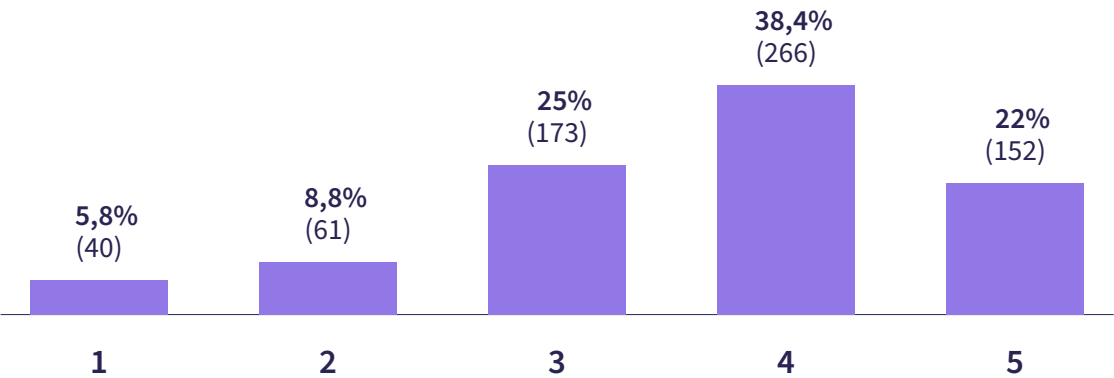
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

Students who agree with the statement “School is a place where I feel safe” are more likely to participate in non-mandatory school activities (categories: “often” and “very often”). Students who do not feel safe at school more frequently indicate that they “do not participate at all” or “rarely” take part in such initiatives.

Slightly worse results were observed for the question about the sense of being accepted at school. One-quarter of respondents selected number 3 on a 5-point scale, indicating a rather low level of perceived acceptance.

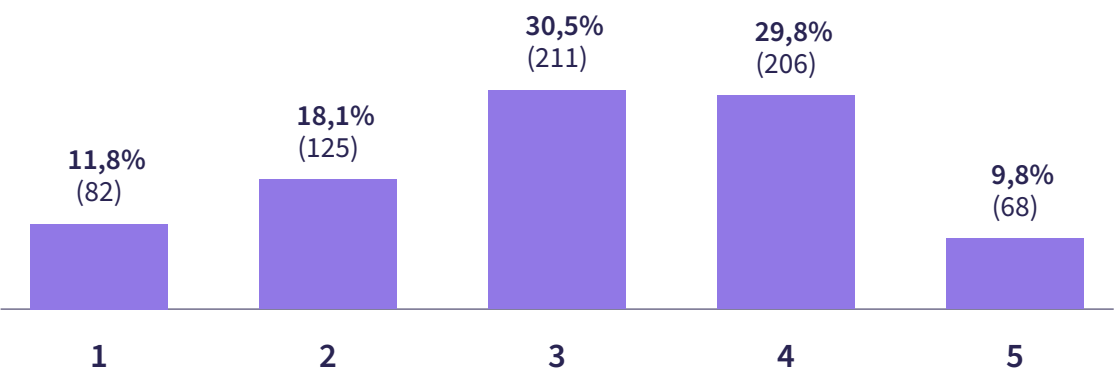
Figure 15. School is a place where I feel accepted



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

The responses were even more scattered for the question about the ability to express one’s opinions at school.

Figure 16. School is a place where I can freely express my opinions



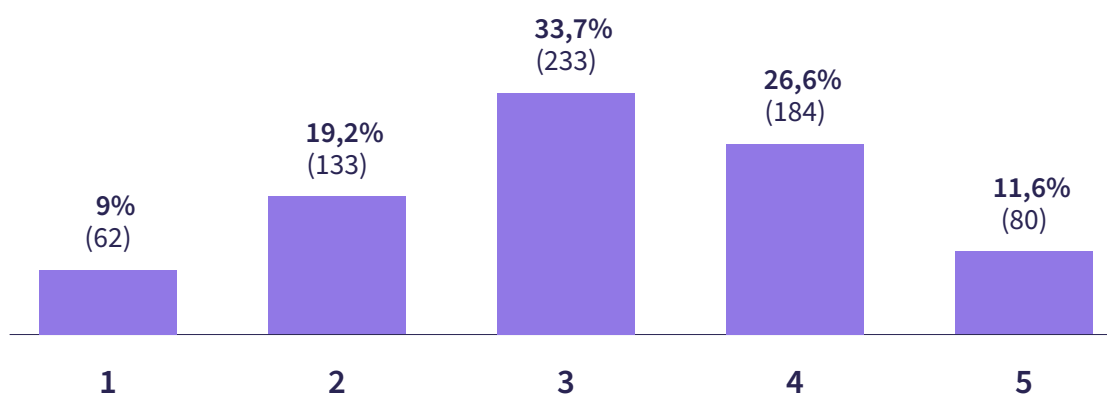
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

Less than half of the students chose positive responses (4 and 5). This indicates that this aspect of school life is rated relatively the lowest.

Support from the school

For the question about support from the teaching staff at school, a similar distribution of responses can be seen.

Figure 17. I can count on support from my teachers



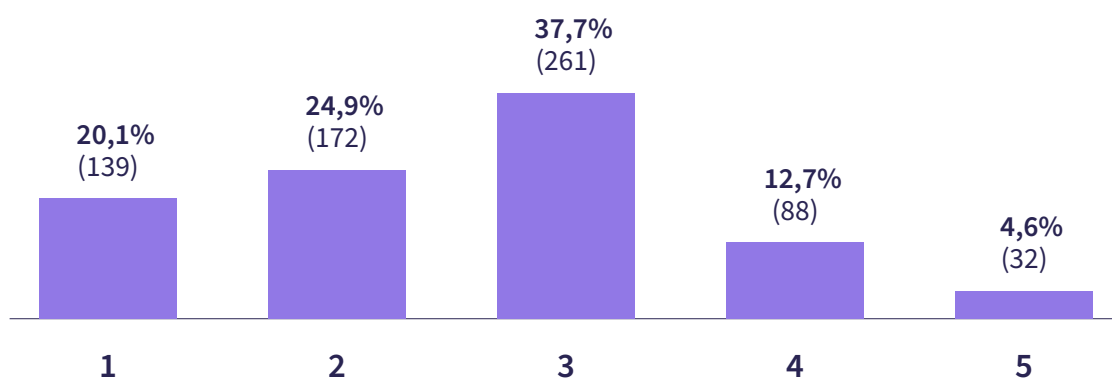
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

A correlation was noticeable: the more students feel they can count on support from their teachers, the more often they declare that they enjoy getting involved in school matters outside of lessons. Respondents who strongly agree that they can count on teacher support more frequently express a positive attitude toward engaging in school activities.

Responses to the question about support for their own initiatives at school are less optimistic. Nearly half of the students responded negatively to the statement, “The school supports me in carrying out my various projects and activities” This clearly shows a lack of a sense of support in developing their own initiatives. In the context of SPB, it is therefore important that students have space to implement their own ideas.

Figure 18. The school supports me in carrying out my various projects and activities



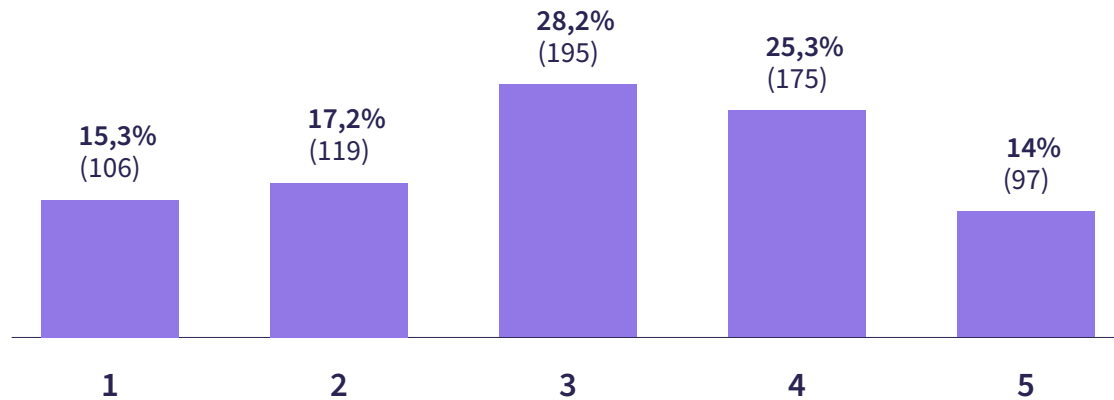
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

School participation

Do students feel sufficiently informed about planned changes at school? This is certainly one of the indicators of how democratic the institution is. The responses are varied; however, as many as 32.5% of respondents chose definitely negative answers. In our qualitative research on SPB, the issue of good communication and transparency of decision-making also emerged. When organising SPB, this is certainly a topic worth paying attention to.

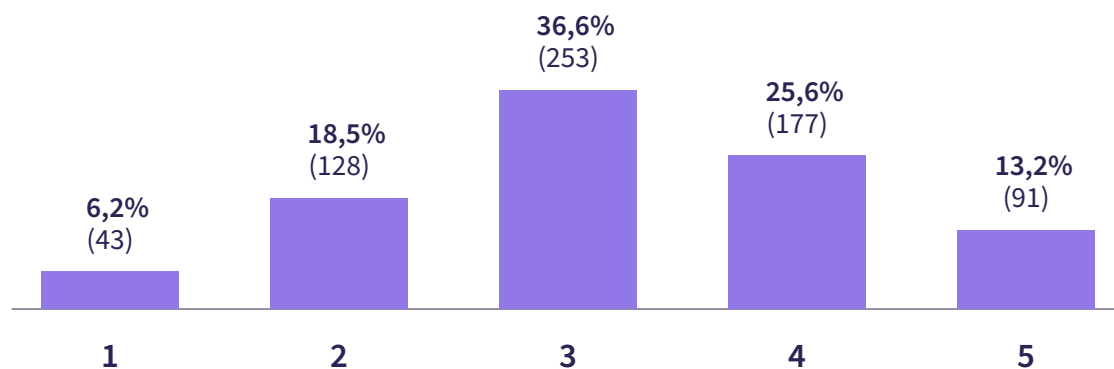
Figure 19. The school authorities effectively inform students about what is going to happen at the school (events, investments, changes)



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

Despite the fact that students do not feel fully informed about the decisions being made at school, many of them believe that they have the knowledge and skills to discuss their school's issues.

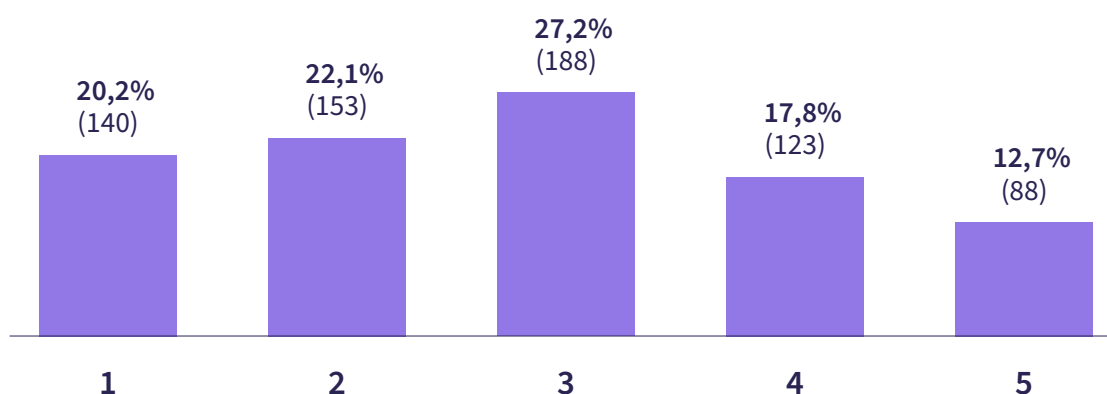
Figure 20. I have the knowledge and skills needed to talk about the problems at my school



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

And what does student involvement in non-class-related activities look like? As seen from the responses below, a minority enjoy such activities and engage in them frequently. We do not have information on the reasons behind this phenomenon. On the one hand, it could be influenced by previous factors mentioned: a lack of adequate support from teachers for student initiatives. On the other hand, it might be related to the heavy workload for both students and teachers – classes often last 8 or even 9 hours a day – leaving little free time outside of lessons (including extracurricular activities outside of school or the widespread use of private tutoring in Poland).

Figure 21. I enjoy getting involved in school matters that are not related to classes

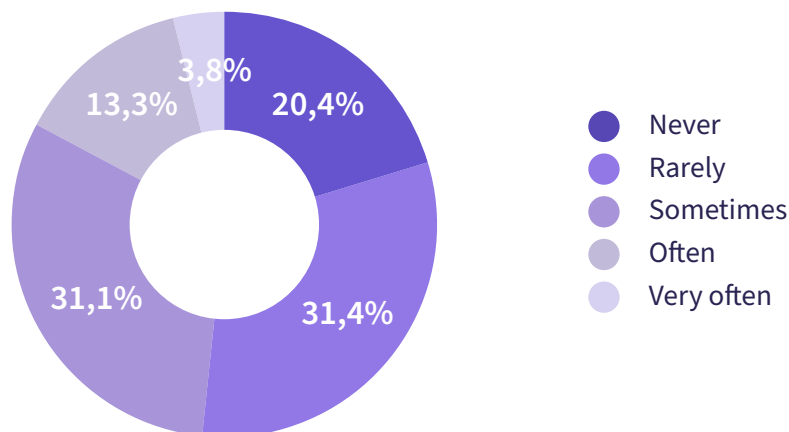


Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

Gender has a moderate impact on involvement in school matters. Male students are less likely to engage in non-class-related school activities than female students. Grade level (age) also affects involvement in such matters – students in higher grades are less inclined to participate in these activities. This can also be explained by the pressure to achieve good exam results (the matura exam), which leads older students to focus primarily on preparing for it.

Figure 22. Participation in voluntary school activities or initiatives



Question: How often do you participate in voluntary school activities or initiatives?
Response scale from 1 (I never participate) to 5 (I participate very often). Data from the pretest.

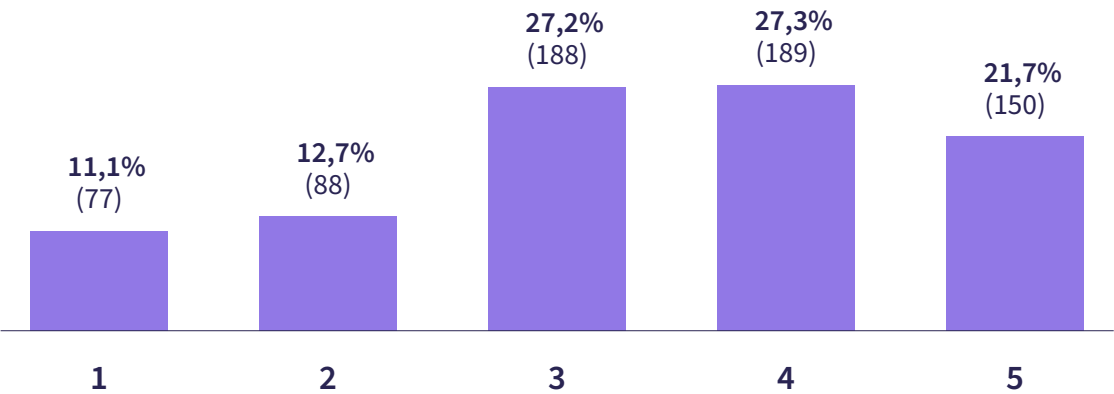
As can be seen, more than half of the respondents indicated that they do not participate in voluntary school activities or do so rarely. Over 17% take part often or very often. Female students are more likely than male students to engage in optional school activities or initiatives.

One of the fundamental participatory and democratic mechanisms in schools is involvement in class or school student councils. According to Polish education law, this form of participation is mandatory in schools. The authors of the international study *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS)* emphasise that “the quality of these experiences influences students’ belief in the value of civic participation and their willingness to engage as citizens in the future. It also helps develop a sense of agency in taking action for the local community (...) and enhances their ability to articulate group interests and their sense of responsibility for the school as a community”¹²⁶.

As seen in Figure 23, students perceive the student council as an important element of the school. Nearly half of the respondents agreed with this statement (answers from 4 to 5).

¹²⁶ J. Witkowski, „Kształcenie obywatelskie w szkole”, w: O. Wasilewska (red.), *Młodzi w demokracji. Wyniki Międzynarodowego Badania Kompetencji Obywatelskich ICCS 2022*, Warszawa, Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych, 2023, s. 197.

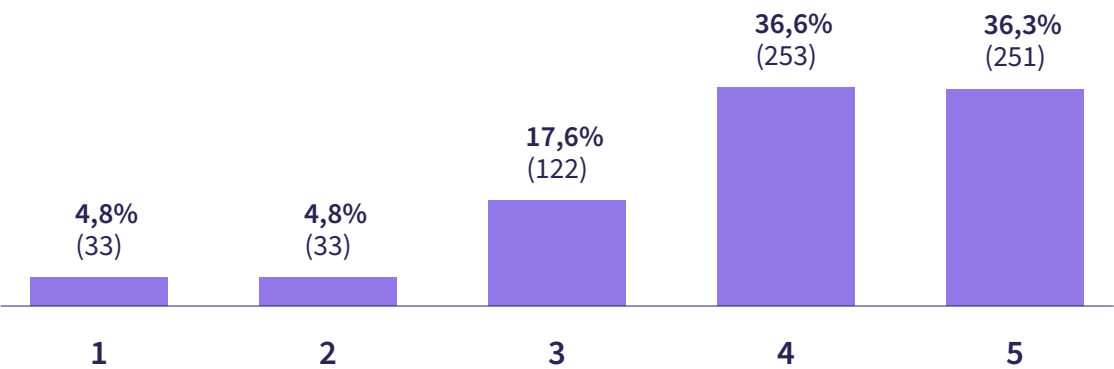
Figure 23. Representatives of the student council are an important part of the school



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

In the next question, the positive perception of the student council’s role as an institution that can have a positive impact on the school was confirmed even more strongly. In the question, we deliberately phrased it as “The actions of student council representatives *can have* a positive impact on the school” so that respondents would not feel that we were asking them to evaluate specific individuals holding that position.

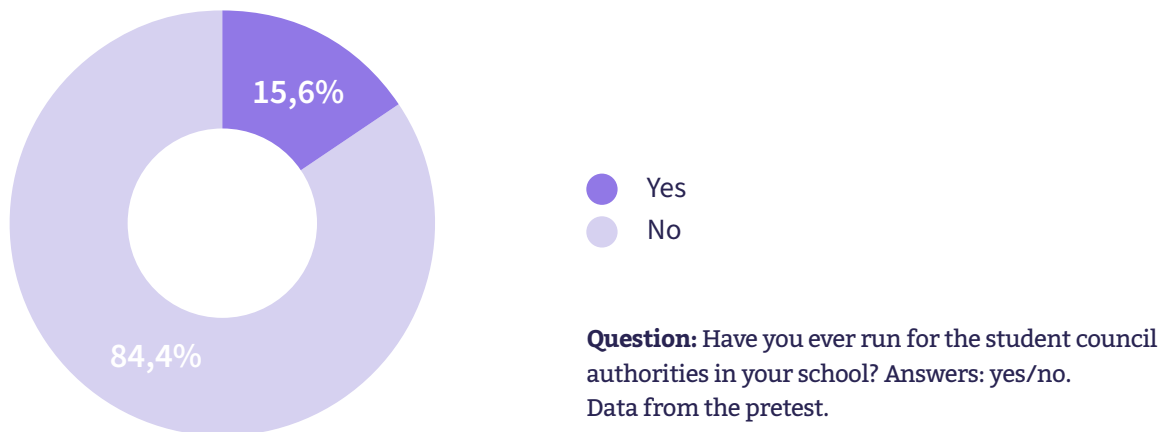
Figure 24. The actions of student council representatives can have a positive impact on the school



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

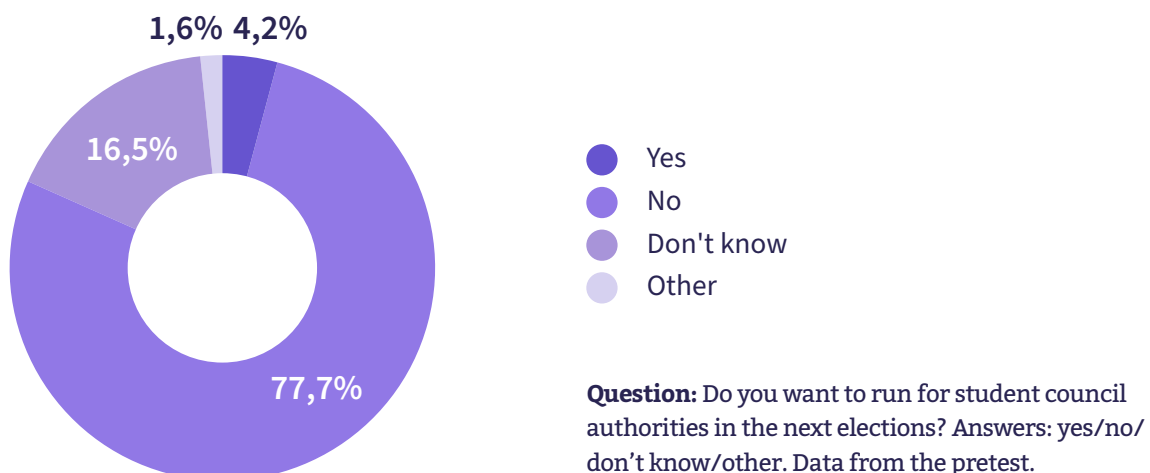
In the surveyed population, over 15% had experience running for student council authorities.

Figure 25. Experience running for student council authorities



Among the people who have not run for positions as student council representatives, there is a clear lack of feeling that their opinions and suggestions are taken into account in decisions made at school (a predominance of negative and neutral responses). In the case of those who have run for positions as student council representatives, the distribution of answers is more balanced, although the size of this group is smaller.

Figure 26. Willingness to run for positions as student council representatives

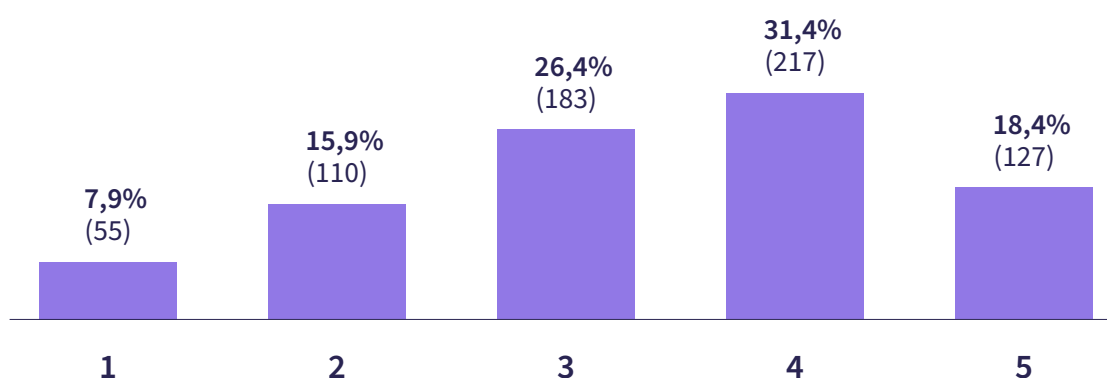


Only 4.2% of respondents were certain that they will run for positions as student council representatives, while 16.5% answered “don’t know,” which could potentially turn into a yes. Female students more often than male students declare a willingness to become student council representatives in the next elections. Students in higher grades less frequently declare running in the elections, which is likely related to the previously mentioned focus on passing the matura exam successfully.

Sense of agency

One of the most important elements in shaping a democratic society is the sense of influence over one’s surroundings. It creates a sense of agency and is certainly the foundation for actions taken for the common good, which in this case is the school. In response to the question about the sense of agency, the dominant answer on a 5-point scale (from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree) was 4, which, combined with the answer 5, accounts for nearly half of the respondents. This is a very positive result.

Figure 27. Students have an influence on what happens in our school

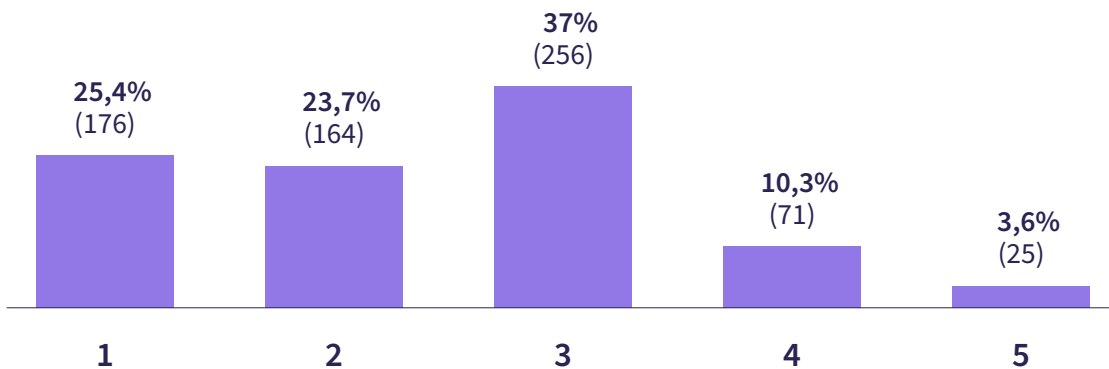


Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

However, optimism may lessen somewhat after examining a more detailed question regarding the consideration of students' opinions and suggestions in school decision-making. When combined with the question about informing students about planned decisions, it presents a picture of a lower sense of influence than might be inferred from the previous question.

Figure 28. My opinions and suggestions are taken into account when decisions are made at school



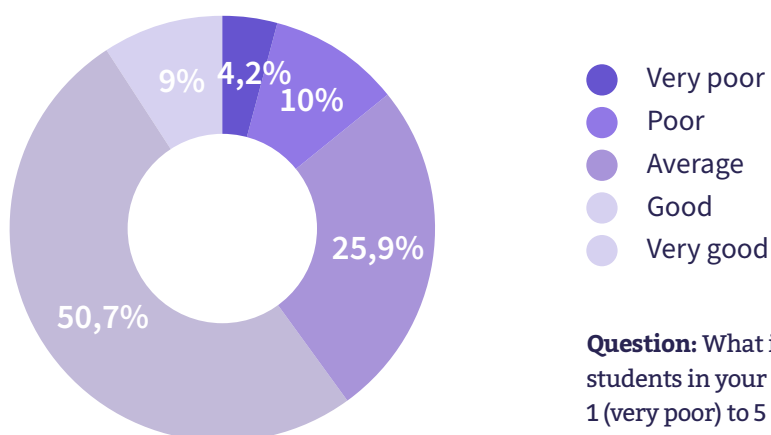
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data from the pretest.

A clear minority responded positively to this statement. Nearly half of respondents chose answers 1–2, which indicates that from the perspective of many students, they are excluded from decision-making processes.

Peer collaboration

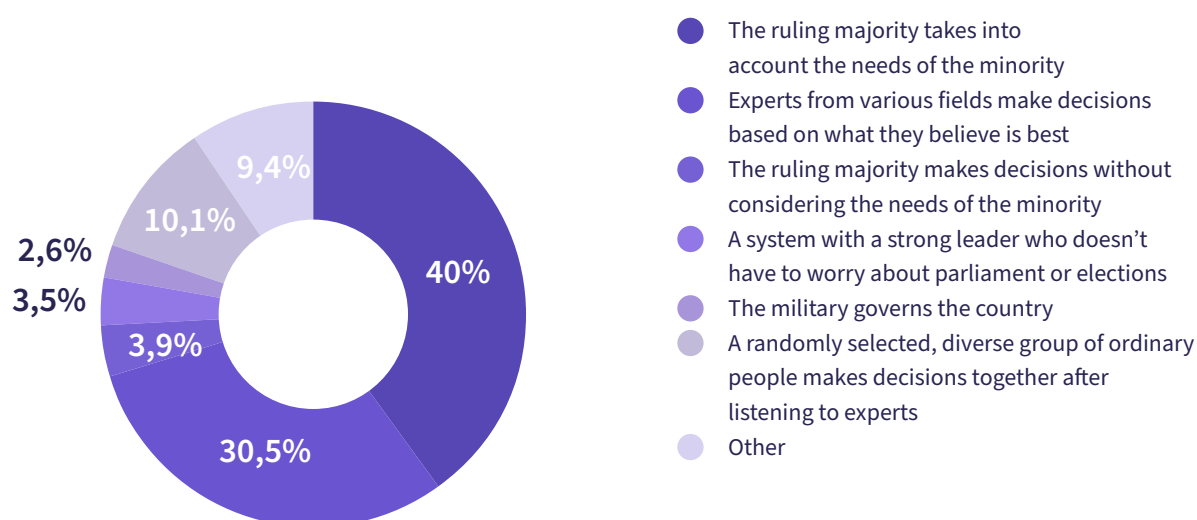
Peer collaboration among students is rated much more positively. Over 60% of the responses are “very good” or “good.” Only 4.2% rate this collaboration as very poor, and 10% as poor.

Figure 29. Peer collaboration

Question: What is the level of collaboration among students in your school? Response scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). Data from the pretest.

Democracy outside of school

It is worth taking a closer look at the following questions, which also did not change significantly between the two rounds of the study and concern issues of democracy in a broader context beyond the school setting.

Figure 30. Preferred political system

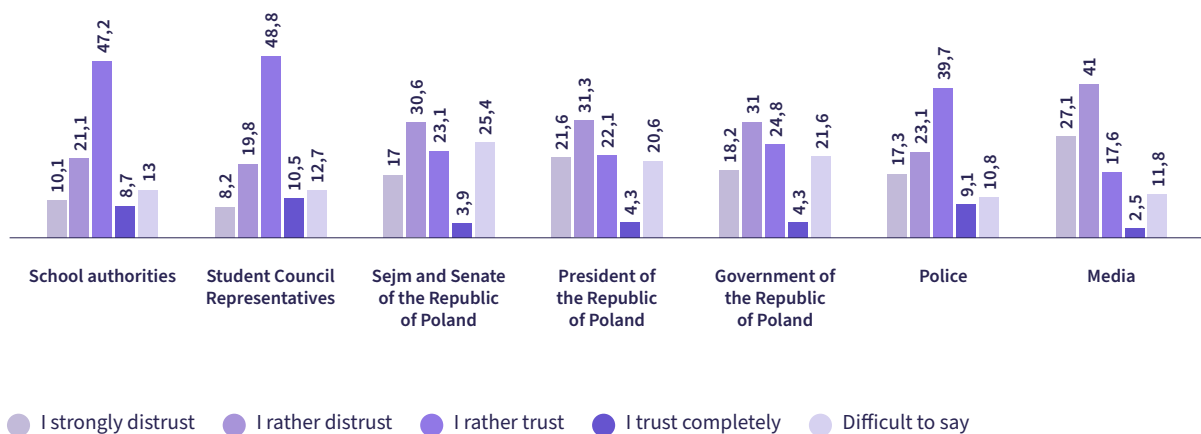
Question: In your opinion, which political system would be the best way to govern Poland? Data from the pretest.

The vast majority of respondents (regardless of gender) prefer a democratic system that takes the needs of minorities into account. Year (and thus age) influences preferences regarding the best political system for Poland. Higher year students show slightly less support for current majority-rule-based systems. The most common choice among female respondents was the system in which the ruling majority considers the needs of minorities. The second most frequently chosen option was a system where experts make decisions based on their knowledge.

Male preferences are more diverse than those of females. The highest number of male respondents also support the system where the ruling majority considers minority needs. However, their choices are more varied, and the system with a strong leader enjoys more support among men than women. There is no clear correlation between gender and responses.

It is also worth noting that this question provoked the most non-standard reactions. The “other” answer, which allowed respondents to provide their own input, was selected by nearly 50 people filling out the survey. Responses included various ideas as well as strong emotions related to the question.

Figure 31. Trust in institutions



Question: How much do you trust the following institutions?

Data from the pretest.

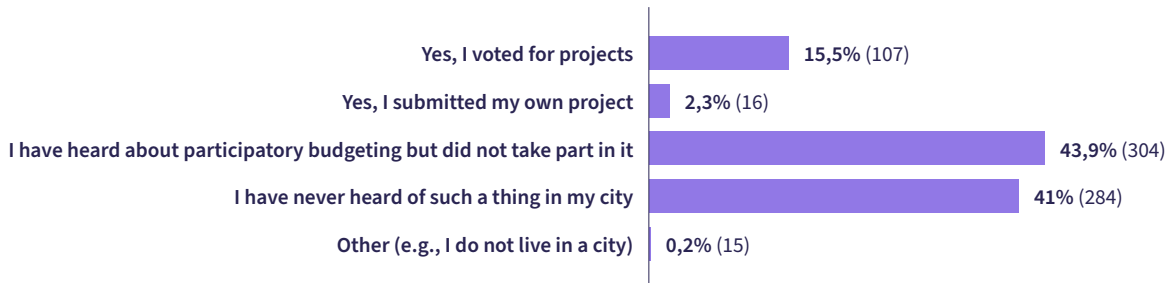
As shown in Figure 31, school institutions enjoy the highest level of trust: student council representatives and the school authorities. The lowest level of trust is directed toward the media – over 68% of students selected responses indicating a lack of trust. This is confirmed by international ICCS studies, in which 8th-grade students from Poland, compared to their peers in other countries, are among the most distrustful of traditional media¹²⁷. In our study, we did not distinguish between traditional and social media, but it can be assumed that the responses to this question refer to traditional media. However, which may be surprising, over 48% of the responses regarding the police are positive (rather trust and trust completely).

Trust in educational institutions (school authorities, student council) is somewhat higher in lower grades and decreases with students' age. Trust in state institutions (government, president, parliament), as well as in the media and police, is highly correlated. It can be observed that students who trust one institution are more likely to trust other state bodies as well. Overall, the level of trust in institutions declines in higher grades, although the differences are generally small.

Women show lower levels of trust in the police and media than men, while simultaneously showing slightly higher trust in the Polish government, the Sejm, and the Senate compared to men. Gender is weakly and negatively correlated with trust in the school authorities, with women showing a slightly higher level of trust than men. In the case of the student council representatives, gender is weakly but significantly negatively correlated with trust; men are more sceptical of this institution compared to women.

We also asked young people from the surveyed schools whether they had participated in the participatory budgeting (PB) in their city. It turns out that young people either have not heard of this mechanism at all or, even if they are aware of PB, they have not participated in it.

127 *Młodzi w demokracji. Wyniki Międzynarodowego Badania Kompetencji Obywatelskich ICCS 2022*, op. cit. p. 15.

Figure 32. Awareness of participatory budgeting in the city

Question: Have you participated in participatory budgeting in your city?
(You can select multiple answers). Data from the pretest.

Summary

The youth from the surveyed schools rated their skills in group cooperation, empathy, expressing emotions, and creativity quite highly. Relatively fewer respondents selected the most positive answers regarding skills in group coordination and assertiveness. Only in public speaking and speaking out publicly (e.g., in class) is there a clear awareness of their weaknesses. Girls more often positively assessed their interpersonal skills, except for public speaking, where they were more self-critical.

From the students' perspective, school is generally a safe place where they feel accepted. However, to a lesser extent, they believe they have the right to express their opinions at school or that they realistically have an influence on decisions made there. The results also show a lack of widespread support for their grassroots initiatives. They rate peer cooperation well but less frequently point to teaching staff who support their initiatives. On the other hand, regarding trust in various social institutions, the school administration ranks high, in second place just after the student council.

Students declare that they are not very interested in extracurricular activities at school and participate relatively rarely. However, the reasons for this situation are unknown. It may be due to the unattractiveness of such activities or the burden of lessons and extracurricular commitments.

The student council is well regarded; young people see it as effective and trust it in their schools, recognising its potential for influence. However, only slightly more than 4% want to run for student council offices.

Regarding preferred political systems, the top two choices are a democratic system that takes minorities into account and expert governance.

Most surveyed youth had not heard of or participated in participatory budgeting processes in their city.

There were no clear changes in observed democratic attitudes among students from the three schools implementing the participatory budgeting project. Pretest and posttest results do not show significant differences in most measured aspects. Although some schools showed increases in certain competencies (e.g., cooperation, public speaking), it is difficult to attribute these changes solely to the participatory budgeting project. Due to the one-time implementation, it is not yet possible to assess its long-term impact on students' civic attitudes. Further measurements will be necessary in the future to verify the actual influence of the participatory budgeting project on youth. We believe however that the survey provided a very valuable snapshot of how upper secondary school students feel at school, and how they perceive and engage with democracy. It is a great starting point for further studies.

Chapter



Final conclusions and recommendations

Anna Pruszyńska

Different contexts, different struggles

Although children's participation takes many different forms in Poland, Bulgaria, Italy and Spain, our study highlighted many similarities between the educational environments of our countries. The one that undeniably stands out is the chronic underfunding of public education. This leads to issues such as a shortage of teaching staff and, understandably, reluctance among current school employees to take on additional (often unpaid) tasks, such as the coordination of school participatory budgeting. Another consequence of inadequate financing is that the burden of supplying schools with necessary materials and tools falls on parents and guardians, which, in turn, exacerbates disparities between more and less affluent regions.

On a more positive note, all current citizen education curricula in the studied countries are value-driven and prioritise – at least in theory – competence over knowledge acquisition. They aim to foster a sense of community responsibility while developing key skills such as critical thinking and teamwork among pupils.

However, the way these ideas and capabilities are taught differs in each country. In Poland, Bulgaria and Spain there exists a separate subject dedicated to citizen education (CE). Additionally some elements of the CE curriculum are also implemented in classes such as History (Poland), Safety and security (Poland), or Social sciences (Spain). In Italy on the other hand CE is taught only as part of other classes. As the authors of the Italian part of this report state: “While this system is interesting from an interdisciplinary perspective, it often makes civic education programs fragmented and unclear”¹²⁸. It may also make it more challenging to integrate SPB into the school curriculum, as it would require persuading not only the civics teachers. While it could be a fruitful long-term solution, the short-term challenges might prove too difficult to overcome.

Apart from the common issue of underfunding, public education systems in our countries struggle with varied issues. In Poland it is the exodus of families toward private education and the overloaded curriculum that makes both students and teachers reluctant to engage in practices that do not directly impact their final exam grades. Bulgarian education system is characterised by an even higher degree of social segregation which results in the socioeconomic background

¹²⁸ See page X.

having a very large impact on student outcomes¹²⁹. Italian schools experience an exodus of a different kind – in the form of high dropout rates among students in southern regions.

Recommendations

Creating universal recommendations for SPB development – or school democratisation in general – is challenging given the diverse educational environments discussed in this report. And this might be the first conclusion from our study – there is no one-size-fits-all solution for establishing and embedding SPB in schools: all attempts at school democratisation should be situated and tailored to the experience and resources of the community in question. A school with no participatory traditions whatsoever will most probably not be able to – unless it receives strong support from an external mentor – implement a model of SPB that involves elements such as peer lessons, appeal procedures or deliberation. External mentorship is a great solution for building high quality participatory processes, but hardly an accessible one. And if the only model known to schools is a very complex and advanced one, they might consider the bar too high and give up on participation before even giving it a try.

We believe that school democracy should be developed one step at a time. Schools should have access to a body of instructions and tools that they can choose from depending on their experience with participatory processes. These educational materials should be divided into separate levels (and possibly – sublevels) such as: beginner, intermediate, advanced. The overarching goal of our work is to both introduce and embed democracy in the school culture. Some of the case studies described in our report¹³⁰ show that it is this latter objective that proves much more challenging. It seems that the more complex and radically democratic the participatory process initiated by an external partner (such as our organisations), the less likely schools are – if left to their own devices – to continue implementing it after the pilot phase is finished. Dividing the materials into different levels would also show that introducing the most basic model of SPB is a great beginning but hardly the end of the journey towards school democracy.

129 op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor/en/country-reports/bulgaria.html

130 See page X (Zanussi)

Almost everyone has encountered one or two – sometimes even more, if they were lucky – teachers who did more and cared more than anyone else, and inspired them to see the world differently. More often than not, teachers are the cornerstone of school participatory budgeting. Without that one dedicated individual willing to introduce the concept to the school, persuade both students and adults of its value, and coordinate the entire process – usually without any additional pay – SPB simply wouldn't happen. That's why it's essential to develop educational materials and training specifically for teachers – resources that empower them and make them feel like the true pioneers they are.

Embedding SPB in a systemic way means also decoupling it in the long term from a very intense support of actors such as municipalities or NGOs. Individual mentorship and external funding – though very welcome – cannot be always counted on. We feel that programs aimed at SPB support should indicate to schools alternative sources of funding and knowledge. From our interviews with Polish municipal clerks we know that many schools with SPB experience do not attempt to implement another edition if not accepted into the municipal program. Even though the financial help granted by Polish municipalities is often very limited, there are few schools that will try to supplement the process with funds provided by parents' associations, collected by student councils or through crowdfunding campaigns. Creative approaches to funding leading to its diversification should be promoted.

This brings us to alternative sources of knowledge. If the number of SPB processes in schools is to grow (as it has in Poland in recent years), it is impossible to support each of them individually. A great way to make sure that SPB practitioners constantly learn and grow is to get them all in one place. There are at least two ways to do it. Lublin, a municipality in Poland, unable to fund individualised mentorship, each year organises a cycle of workshops in which school representatives (this group includes both staff and students) learn about the subsequent phases of SPB and – what is more crucial – exchange experiences and tips for successful implementation. The municipality of Kraków, Poland has also organised a national conference on SPB which attracted practitioners from the whole country.

Another, certainly cheaper, way to encourage knowledge sharing is to create spaces for it online. Every year the municipality of Kraków creates a closed group on one of the social media platforms for the teachers responsible for SPB implementation at schools taking part in the program. That way newly appointed SPB coordinators can consult the more experienced ones without the need to involve participation experts.

Building regional, national and international networks of SPB practitioners is a crucial measure toward emancipating schools from under the enlightened but nonetheless unstable support of municipalities, European institutions, and non-governmental organisations.

Although we promote school participatory budgeting as a tool for democratising educational institutions, it should not be treated as a better solution than initiatives aimed at fostering young people's engagement in general, such as youth participatory budgeting (YPB). We believe that there is no one way to build a strong democratic ecosystem¹³¹ and that sometimes supporting existing instruments of participation is a wiser choice than introducing new ones. This might be the case with Spain, where YPB is much more common than SPB. Instead of giving students an opportunity to take part in three different participatory budgeting programs, we feel that our energy should be directed into finding ways to connect schools with the existing ones. And if there are participatory budgeting processes open to youth in the municipality already, why not focus on developing school democracy by supporting things such as school councils or by making space for students' agency during lessons?

Building bridges between SPB and existing legal frameworks is another important strategy for strengthening the national ecosystems of democracy. As the education systems are constructed differently in each of the analysed countries, there is not one solution for tackling this task. There are however two general ways to go about it. One of them is to look for provisions in curricula that describe the values and competences that SPB is known to develop. Such a legal basis could serve as strong leverage in persuading school management to allow both students and staff to be involved in the process. The second – more complicated – approach would be to try to introduce SPB in the curricula. Why should SPB not be mentioned in the Three-Year Plans for the Educational Offer (Italy) or the Educational and Preventive Programs (Poland)?

One obvious answer to this rhetorical question is – why would anyone believe that SPB contributes to student development in any way? Everyone involved in SPB in any way knows how beneficial it is to young people's sense of agency, creativity and team-working skills. Much of this knowledge is however anecdotal and unstructured. There is a pressing need for thorough research on SPB's impact on the democratic

131 Lernen, Josh. 2024. „From Waves to Ecosystems: The Next Stage of Democratic Innovation”. Biden School of Public Policy and Administration.

habits of young people. As our own experiment¹³² shows one-time initiatives do not – and, frankly, should not – significantly change the way students think about democracy at schools and in the world. We should urgently employ both qualitative and quantitative research methods and begin to conduct longitudinal studies to find comprehensive answers to the question of SPB’s impact on schools. Rigorous monitoring, in turn, will provide significant leverage in negotiations with school management and lawmakers. As our research and practical experience shows – without strong support from the school authorities it is very difficult to conduct SPB in a way that truly emancipates children. Such endorsement is crucial for initiatives like peer lessons, as teachers are often reluctant to excuse students from their classes. It also plays a key role in project evaluations, where headmasters, wielding significant authority, may be tempted to reject proposals based on personal preference rather than merit.

Last but most certainly not least we should remember that SPB’s overarching principle is the democratisation of educational institutions: giving voice and agency to those who usually have no say in the way schools are run. This means building a sense of community (or “Shared Fate” as some scholars call it¹³³) in which the needs and ideas of children are not less important than those of grown-ups, the opinions of cleaners and janitors valued less than those of the teaching staff. No matter how simple the SPB model, we encourage all practitioners to put community at the heart of it.

132 See page X.

133 Stitzlein, Sarah M. 2014. „Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today”. *Education and Culture* 30 (2): 61–86. doi.org/10.1353/eac.2014.0012.

Chapter



Methods, limitations, and future research

Research questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions concerning school participatory budgeting and its legal and cultural context in each of the partner countries:

- How does the education system operate?
- How widespread is school participatory budgeting (SPB)?
- How does SPB function in different countries?
- How democratic are SPB processes?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of SPB?
- What opportunities and challenges affect the development of SPB?
- How does SPB influence students' democratic habits?

Methods

The study followed a methodological framework established by the Field of Dialogue Foundation, which each research team adapted to fit their national context.

The main methods, used by all research teams, included desk research and individual in-depth interviews with SPB practitioners.

Polish and Bulgarian teams were additionally required to implement four SPB processes (two in Warsaw, one in Białystok, one in Sofia) and conduct surveys among students before (pretests) and after (posttests) their implementation.

Polish team additionally performed a quantitative analysis of SPB in Poland with the help of Watchdog Poland's platform called 'Civic Data Mining'¹³⁴. The platform facilitated the process of sending public information requests to a large sample of public schools. The responses – detailing the presence or absence of SPB in a given school, the frequency of its implementation, and the regulations governing it – enabled an estimate of the number of schools adopting SPB. The regulations that we received also showed which elements/phases of SPB are being commonly implemented and which are often omitted.

In Spain an expert workshop to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to SPB development had been hosted.

¹³⁴ fedrowanie.siecobywatelska.pl.

Limitations and further research

The study, thanks to the variety of methods used, managed to answer the most crucial research questions. The biggest limitation of our project was however time. The pretests and posttests conducted as a part of the implementation of SPB in four schools did not indicate any change in the democratic habits (such as “Citizenship as Shared Fate, Collaboration and Compromise, Deliberation, Analysis and Critique, Hope”¹³⁵) among students. This is of course valuable, though perhaps quite obvious, information in itself – that one-time initiatives cannot fundamentally change the way students think about the school or the world.

Future research endeavours should thus focus on longitudinal research of the impact of SPB on school communities (not just students!). But for it to succeed a close collaboration between practitioners and academic institutions is needed. Another line of research should explore the potential downsides of SPB processes, including heightened competitiveness and an increasing divide between teaching staff and other personnel. Only if we properly explore these less favourable effects of SPB will we be able to mitigate them.

135 Stitzlein, Sarah M. 2014. „Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today”. *Education and Culture* 30 (2): 61–86. doi.org/10.1353/eac.2014.0012.

