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# School Participatory Budgeting

## 40 FAQs

By: Tara Bartlett, Madison Rock, Kristi Tate, KaRa Lyn Thompson, and Daniel Schugurensky



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# 1. Introduction

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## **Q1: What is School Participatory Budgeting (SPB)?**

School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) is an innovative civic learning process designed to build student agency, collaboration, and critical thinking skills while creating equitable opportunities for students to authentically contribute to their communities and civic life. SPB is, at the same time, a tool for citizenship education, a tool for civic engagement, and a tool for school democracy. The school process stems from the widely adopted municipal Participatory Budgeting (PB) model.

## **Q2: What is the municipal Participatory Budgeting (PB) model?**

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process through which community members directly decide how to spend a portion of a public budget. Municipal PB originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989 and has since expanded to over 11,000 cities and towns across the globe. The municipal model of PB has been applied to other settings, including public housing units, cooperatives, community centers, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions (SPB).

## **Q3: Where is SPB being implemented?**

SPB is being implemented in many countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, France, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Zambia (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2021). In Portugal, SPB is implemented in every school within the country with federal funds. South Korea implements SPB in hundreds of schools in several cities. In the United States, SPB is implemented in several states, including California, New York, Illinois, and Arizona. Although SPB is most often practiced in high schools, the process has also been implemented in elementary and middle schools. In some countries, like Argentina and the United States, it even takes place in colleges and universities.

## **Q4: When and where did SPB start in the US?**

In 2013, Bioscience High School in Phoenix Union High School District (PXU) in Arizona launched the first SPB process in the United States as a pilot project (Scarp, 2021). By 2016, in partnership with the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA), and Arizona State University Participatory Governance Initiative (PGI), PXU adopted the first school district-wide SPB model in the United States with five schools and 3,500 students. By 2019, PXU expanded the process to all its schools.

## **Q5: How many schools are implementing SPB in Arizona?**

As of Spring 2023, SPB in Arizona involves approximately 60 schools across seven districts, engaging upwards of 70,000 students annually.

## **Q6: How long is the process?**

The process typically spans almost a full academic year, with the launch occurring in August/September and culminating with the final vote and project implementation in March/April. The voting usually takes place in early Spring to allow sufficient project implementation time before the school year's end. Depending on the school size and depth of engagement, the process can be implemented successfully on a shorter timeline.

## **Q7: Who can participate in SPB?**

The SPB process centers student voice and choice in the decision-making process. To this end, students typically lead and participate in all phases of the SPB process. In some schools and school districts, educators, non-teaching staff, families, and the surrounding community participate by helping develop proposals and sometimes even voting on the final ideas.

## **Q8: Where can SPB be implemented?**

The SPB process can be implemented in different educational settings, spanning from one classroom or a department within a school, one school or multiple schools within a district, or all schools and several districts within a county, a state, or even a country.

## **Q9: What is needed to start SPB?**

To start an SPB process, all that is needed is a budget and a willingness to promote a participatory approach to allocate that budget. The process could be launched by school district leaders, a school principal, a group of teachers, or even by one teacher who is eager to start a pilot project at a classroom level. The budget amount varies according to the resources available and the age of the students. In any case, in SPB, the process is more important than the budget. Buy-in from folks with decision-making power over a budget is essential to launching a successful SPB process. The budget could come from different sources (district funds, school funds, the principal's discretionary budget, parent-teacher association, fundraising, grants, donations, etc.). Once a budget is secured, a student steering committee is formed to design and coordinate the process, beginning with idea collection and culminating with the vote.

## **Q10: How much money is usually allocated to SPB?**

From a pedagogical perspective, the amount of money is not as significant as designing and implementing a good process. Budgets for each SPB process vary by the school district and school size. Some school communities have allocated US \$1000 per school while others have allocated \$20,000. Schools can always start small and build their SPB budgets over time. In some districts, large schools receive more funding than smaller schools. In 2020, the Phoenix Union High School District, after years of successful SPB implementation with relatively modest amounts (\$4,000 for small schools and \$7,000 for large schools), expanded its SPB process to engage educators, students, and families in re-imagining school safety with a budget allocation of \$1.2 million. As the scope of the process continues to expand, schools and school districts invest in the time and effort of administrators, staff, educators, and school staff charged with implementing the SPB model. In district-level SPB processes, some school communities allocate a portion of the budget to support teacher sponsor stipends.

## **Q11: What types of projects are funded through SPB?**

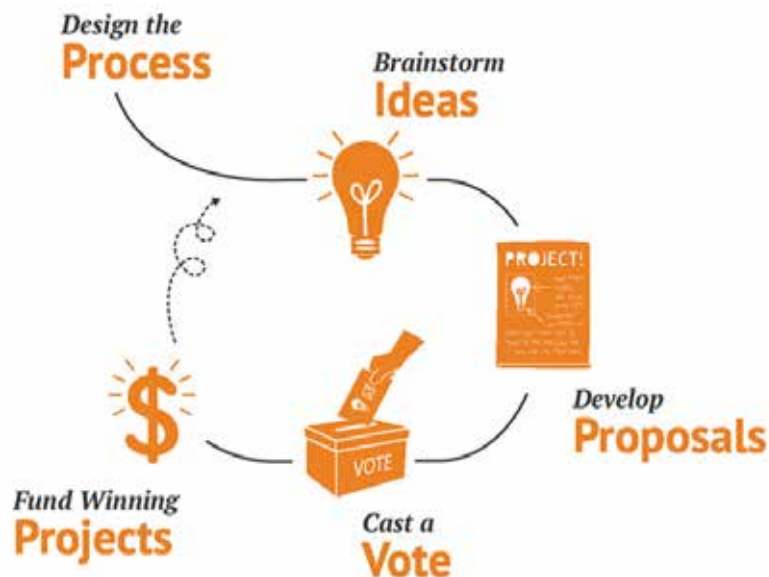
To date, SPB projects have primarily focused on campus improvement projects (capital investments). This includes water filtration systems, water bottle refill stations, shade structures, additional seating, cafeteria and library upgrades, bathroom renovations, lab equipment, printers, community gardens, school spirit and beautification projects, industrial washers and dryers, and social-emotional learning projects like a campus therapy dog and meditation or game rooms. In some schools, SPB projects included programs and activities like driving lessons and field trips (e.g., visits to college campuses). Depending on the overall program objectives and budget capacity, the SPB process can be used to decide on school programming, curriculum, services, and policies. A case in point is the Phoenix Union High School District (see Q11).

## 2. Process Implementation

### Q12: How does SPB work?

The SPB process is typically organized into five phases:

1. Students propose ideas to improve the school community
2. Students transform ideas into proposals by researching cost, implementation timeline, sustainability, feasibility, and impact
3. Students deliberate on viable proposals and discuss the pros and cons
4. Students vote on proposals to select winning projects
5. Winning school improvement projects are funded and implemented



Before the process begins, a steering committee of students designs the process, including process parameters, and communicates them to the rest of the school community. After the process ends, students, teachers, and school stakeholders conduct an evaluation and make recommendations for improvements for the next SPB cycle. All phases of the process are led by the students, with the support of their teachers and the community.

### Q13: Once a district decides to implement an SPB process, who are the different stakeholders and what roles do they play?

Successful coordination usually involves the active participation of different stakeholders:

- **District Leaders:** District staff who work with SPB advisors to develop resources, plan workshops, guide implementation, and serve as the liaison between steering committees and district leadership. In addition, district administrators and staff play a key role in guiding students through the proposal development phase. Their expertise and partnership are invaluable to creating feasible proposals that comply with district, state, and federal guidelines. This group may include the superintendent, assistant superintendent, governing board members, and maintenance and procurement/purchasing personnel.



- **School Leaders:** Campus administrators who support the process and assist the steering committee by offering feedback on ideas and guiding students as they develop project proposals.
- **SPB Sponsors:** One or two teachers or educators who support the students on the steering committee by securing space and resources for meetings and acting as a liaison between the students and school and district administration as needed.
- **Steering Committee:** The group of students who guide the process among their peers, starting with the idea collection phase through project implementation and evaluation.
- **SPB Advisors:** Implementation experts who help to develop resources, plan workshops, and provide mentorship and guidance through the SPB process. Advisors include the Center for the Future of Arizona, the Participatory Governance Initiative, the Participatory Budgeting Project, and People Powered. As the districts and the schools build internal capacity, advisors become less needed.

### Q14: How much time can teacher sponsors expect to spend on SPB?

SPB functions like any other student club or initiative on campus. On average, SPB sponsors can expect to meet with the steering committee weekly. This is an average, and the amount of time certainly varies during different phases of the process. For example, during the idea collection phase, it is recommended that the SPB sponsor meets with the steering committee once every two weeks. However, the proposal development phase may require educators to meet with the steering committee once or twice weekly, depending on the number of proposals to be developed.

The depth of engagement with the broader student body does increase when implementing opportunities for dialogue, deliberation, and shared decision-making around the different project proposals (e.g., pros and cons discussions, primary vote, tabling at lunch, etc.), so educators can expect to likewise increase the amount of time spent on process implementation and meetings with the student steering committee. Additionally, as the scope of the process expands to the district level, SPB sponsors might participate in district-wide workshops and trainings at key points throughout the process, including:

- SPB Kickoff & Idea Collection Workshop
- Proposal Development Workshop
- Campaign & Vote Training
- Evaluation Celebration

### Q15: What does the opening session to launch SPB look like?

There is a significant variation in how schools initiate the SPB process. The opening session is expected to combine information education and motivation, creating an atmosphere of excitement about SPB. In some schools, all students and teachers attend a meeting in the gym or auditorium. In this meeting, educators (teachers, school leaders, and district leaders) could briefly explain budgets (including how schools are funded), democracy (including participatory democracy and citizen initiatives), and the SPB process itself. Some schools invite guest speakers from the recorder's officer or the local city council to speak broadly about civic engagement. Other schools have live-streamed an announcement of the SPB kick-off with students and teachers tuning in from their individual classrooms. Of course, the format and language of the opening session of SPB are dependent upon each school's context and should be appropriate to the age of the students.

## 3. Student Participation

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### Q16: How is the steering committee formed?

There are many ways to form a steering committee. Among them are appointment, self-appointment, election, classroom, randomization, and a combination of these models:

1. **Appointment:** steering committee members are appointed by school community stakeholders (teachers, school administrators, counselors, etc.), sometimes following specific criteria or other times on a discretionary basis.
2. **Self-appointment:** school administrators and teachers make an open call to students inviting them to participate in the steering committee. Students who are interested join the steering committee.
3. **Election:** steering committee members are elected by their peers, sometimes with several representatives per class. A variation of this model is to rely on the student government (an elected body) to perform the functions of the steering committee. In some schools, the steering committee is formed by an equal number of student government members and class representatives.
4. **Classroom:** One class (e.g., 11th-grade government class) acts as the steering committee for the school.
5. **Randomization (lottery):** steering committee members are randomly selected from the totality of the student body without any particular criteria. This model is also known as 'mini-public' and is often used in citizen juries and citizen assemblies.
6. **Representation:** steering committee members are selected to reflect the demographics of the school by considering factors such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, and dis/ability.
7. **Combination:** some schools combine two or more of the above models. For example, a school could combine randomization and self-appointment (through selected invitations) to ensure a balance of buy-in and experience within the steering committee.

Each model has strengths and weaknesses, and it is up to each school or school district to select the one that is most appropriate for their circumstances and goals. Steering committees formed through appointments, self-appointments, and elections tend to be effective and autonomous. Still, these methods tend to attract students with more leadership experiences and thus risk reinforcing the civic engagement gap. The randomized model may require more mentorship and support but, similar to the representation model, provides leadership opportunities for students with little or no leadership experience and can contribute to narrowing the civic engagement gap.

### Q17: How are students not on the steering committee involved throughout the process?

Students not on the steering committee can participate in a myriad of different ways, according to their level of interest and time availability. Most students participate significantly at the beginning of the process (idea collection phase) and the end (voting for projects). To encourage student involvement in between those phases, some steering committees invite students to attend their meetings and engage in proposal development activities related to projects that they feel passionate about. Other opportunities include assisting with the organization of a primary vote to select ideas for the final vote, facilitating classroom discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of the different proposals under consideration, and campaigning for different idea proposals by making posters and tabling.



## 4. Proposal Development

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### **Q18: What happens if different students (or groups of students) submit similar proposals?**

The steering committee may receive several proposals to solve the same problem or address the same need. This is more likely to happen in large schools. If this situation occurs, it would be fruitful to connect these groups so they could combine their ideas into a more robust proposal. If this is not possible, the steering committee could try to integrate the best features of each submission into a single proposal and establish communication with the students who proposed those ideas to find out if additional changes are needed.

### **Q19: What happens if a project proposed by students is already in the school's plans?**

This scenario is not uncommon, especially during the first year of SPB. Indeed, it is possible that a particular need identified by the students (bathroom renovations, water fountains, shade structures, lounge improvements, internet access, etc.) has already been recognized by the school administration or the district leadership and is already accounted for in the budget for the following year. Hence, it is essential that during the proposal development phase, the steering committee communicates with both school and district administration to make sure that any of the proposed projects do not duplicate a planned investment. If this information is unavailable in the early stages of the process, students could waste valuable time refining a project that does not need to be on the ballot. On the positive side, a situation like this indicates that the school leadership and the students are on the same page in identifying needs and allows students to focus on other proposals for improving the school. It all boils down to good communication between the steering committee, the school leadership, and the district.



## **Q20: If students vote on a project already in the district plans, what can be done?**

This situation is rare, but it has occurred occasionally. For instance, in one school, students proposed to install shaded tables and benches outdoors, and the principal said there was no need to use SPB funds for that purpose because the school was already planning to do that anyway. This was good news for the students for two reasons. First, they were happy to realize that their ideas for improving the school environment aligned with the school leadership's views. Second, they could devote SPB funds to other projects. However, there is a risk that those plans fall through the sideway for various reasons, such as a change in leadership, a shift in priorities, or simply limited memory. To avoid this situation, it is advisable to have a) an estimated timeline for completion of the project, b) a point person for the project (e.g., facilities manager), c) an opportunity for students to engage in the design of the project (location and size of the tables and benches, colors, etc.) and d) a small committee of students to steward the process until the end. Through this process, students will learn about the role of transparency and accountability in democracy on the one hand and about technical and financial issues related to project implementation on the other.

## **Q21: What happens if some proposals require less money than the allocated budget?**

Students often come up with good proposals that require less money than the total allocated budget. When this happens, the school community could fund more than one project. For instance, if the final ballot has three projects of different costs, students may consider funding one large project or two smaller ones. Some schools prefer to have projects of similar budgets in the final ballot. In those cases, a typical strategy is to combine two or three small projects into a larger one.

## **Q22: What about proposals that go beyond the budget?**

Sometimes, during the SPB process, students come up with good ideas to address critical problems or exciting, creative, and impactful projects, but the ideas require more funds than the allocated budget. The students could elevate those proposals to the school administration and the district leadership for consideration in these cases. These proposals may call attention to issues not known to the school leadership because they are not part of their daily experience. Once the school or district leadership becomes aware of the problem, the solution is one step closer.

## **Q23: Are there any examples of schools or districts addressing these needs raised by students?**

Yes, there are many examples. For instance, in one of the first SPB processes organized by a large school district, the superintendent's office noticed that many proposals dealt with issues related to bathrooms in disrepair. As a result, the superintendent's office decided to fix all the school bathrooms that were in bad shape using the district's own capital improvement funding, not the funds allocated to the SPB process. A similar situation occurred in another city, where the city council passed a policy to ensure that all school bathrooms were in good condition. These measures then allowed students to focus on other problems to solve via the SPB process.

## **Q24: What about proposals that do not require funds to be implemented?**

Some ideas can be implemented without any costs. Examples abound. For instance, one high school cafeteria became too small for the growing student population. This generated long lines at lunchtime, and many students could not eat before returning to the classroom or were late for class. During the SPB process, a group of students proposed to solve the problem by organizing different shifts for lunch. In a middle school, students advocated changing the music used by the school to announce the end of each recess or class change, from one chosen by the school authorities to songs familiar to the students. In short, SPB goes beyond allocating resources. SPB is about opening new spaces and processes to collectively identify school needs and find creative solutions to address them. By doing so, SPB establishes better and more accessible communication channels and collaborations between students and the school leadership.

## **5. Voting**

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### **Q25: When should the voting take place?**

The voting should take place after the final list of projects that are going to be on the ballot has been agreed upon, and ideally at least two months before the last week of classes, to ensure that the winning project is implemented during the school year, and students can see the result of their efforts. Additionally, when scheduling the voting day, it is important to consider that it will not coincide with other school activities like testing schedules, sporting events, field trips, professional development activities, etc.

### **Q26: How many proposals are included in the ballot, and how are they decided?**

The number of proposals to be considered in the final vote can vary, and there is no 'magic number'. Having said that, most schools usually put between three and seven project proposals on the ballot. Normally the steering committee decides which projects go to the ballot, but some schools organize an open primary vote on the 'long list' of projects (e.g. 20 projects) to select the shortlist of projects for the final ballot.

### **Q27: How does the SPB vote take place?**

There are many ways to organize the SPB vote. Some schools hold the vote in person, some hold it online, and others have a hybrid model. Some schools use paper ballots and count by hand, others use voting machines with automatic tabulators lent by county recorders, others use electronic voting onsite, and others accept remote electronic voting. The voting phase of the SPB process could take place in one day, over several days, or even during an entire week. In some schools, only the students vote, but other schools also allow teachers, non-teaching staff, family members, and/or the surrounding community to vote. The voting stations could be located in one central location (e.g. the gym, the library, the cafeteria, or an outdoor space) or students can vote in their own classrooms. On the SPB vote day(s), high schools can partner with the county recorder's office or with nonprofit organizations to register those students who would be eligible to vote in the next municipal, state, or federal election.

## 6. Project Implementation

### **Q28: What are the main challenges regarding the implementation of projects?**

A vital issue to consider during the proposal development phase is the feasibility of the proposed ideas. It is important that participants are familiar with the eligibility criteria at the beginning of the SPB process, so there is a clear understanding of the type of projects that are allowed and not allowed. Some restrictions may be due to the source of the funds. Other restrictions may be due to specific policy or regulations (historical buildings, infrastructure outside the school perimeter, vending machines, etc.). An additional challenge relates to technical difficulties to implement a project within the stipulated budget. For instance, installing water fountains or industrial washer and dryer machines may require plumbing or electrical updates. Finally, some projects may require long-term operational costs (e.g., maintenance, staff supervision, etc.) that may exceed well beyond the original budget. These challenges can be addressed by establishing good communication with school leadership and with the facilities team.

### **Q29: What happens if a voted project must be delayed or canceled due to unexpected circumstances?**

This should be an exceptional situation if all parameters and criteria for approval have been clear to all participants. However, it could occur that an unforeseen situation leads to the delay or outright cancellation of a project. In those cases, it is very important to communicate the rationale for the decision to the steering committee and to the rest of the school community as early as possible. Otherwise, student trust in institutions and school leaders and the SPB process itself may decrease.

### **Q30: How can you engage the students and school community during project implementation?**

Often, the vote day can feel like an exciting culmination of the process for students and teachers; however, the completion of the SPB process relies on the implementation of the winning project. Some projects involve external vendors to deliver and install materials. Other projects might be handled internally by school and district facilities personnel. Regardless, involving students during the implementation phase is encouraged. There are several ways in which students can be engaged throughout implementation of the winning project. First, students can meet or communicate regularly with the external vendors or internal teams responsible for ordering, delivery, and/or installation to stay updated throughout this phase. Students can also be engaged in thinking creatively about how to announce or showcase the project once it is implemented. In some cases, students might be involved in the implementation of the winning project. For example, students at Desert View High School in Tucson, Arizona worked with the their community, including members of the Tohono O'odham nation, to source and install materials for a traditional tribal shade structure as their winning project (pictured above). Students also learned about the history and importance of the



shade structures in Tohono O’odham history. The students were also engaged in planning and hosting a dedication ceremony to share the completion of the winning project with their fellow students and broader community.

## 7. Academic and Civic Connections

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### **Q31: How does SPB connect to the curriculum and support academic standards?**

SPB can certainly connect to the existing curriculum and support the teaching of K12 academic standards across a myriad of subject areas. Examples of curriculum connections include:

- History of voting and voter rights
- Elections and the electoral process
- Government structures, roles, duties, and procedures
- Current events and social justice issues (dependent on the projects or overall process theme)

Examples of Arizona academic standards SPB supports:

- History and Social Science
  - Disciplinary skills and processes
  - Civics
  - Economics
- English Language Arts
  - Informational text (key ideas and details, integration of knowledge and ideas)
  - Writing (argumentative and informative writing, research to build and present knowledge, speaking and listening, language)
- Math
  - Mathematical practices
  - Number systems
  - Statistics and probability
  - Financial literacy
  - Budgeting
- Arts
  - Visual arts (videos, cards, posters, etc., for idea proposals and campaigning)
  - Performance arts (short plays, music, poetry, etc. for campaigning)
- Science
  - (connecting proposals to sustainability principles)
- Social Emotional Learning/Character Education

### **Q32: What do students learn from SPB?**

Through experiential learning, students acquire a great variety of civic knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices (KASP) as well as other important competencies. Among them are the following:

- Deliberative skills (including public speaking, listening, and taking turns)
- Social-emotional learning
- Leadership and teamwork
- Critical thinking and research skills
- Financial literacy competencies



### **Q33: How does SPB support civic learning?**

SPB complements civic learning and other civic education programs in its authenticity of learning democracy by doing democracy. Through SPB, students learn democracy through research and deliberation around real resources and by making decisions relevant to them and future generations of students in their schools. In SPB, students acquire the building blocks of self-governance and participation, including the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices (KASP) necessary for long-term engagement in civic life.

### **Q34: How does SPB support social-emotional learning (SEL)?**

SPB supports social-emotional learning (SEL) through developing critical consciousness and thinking, social and self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship-building skills -all of which build the necessary competencies for civic engagement (Prothero, 2021). Students who participate in the SPB process are posed to assess opportunities for improvement within their communities and collaborate with others to create solution-oriented ideas. Importantly, students learn how to engage in civic discourse and deliberate for understanding during the SPB process's idea-collection, proposal development, and vote phases. The experiences and skills gained during the SPB process align with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework for developing



social and emotional competencies. Likewise, tenets of SEL embedded within the ethos of SPB foster empathy, effective communication, and identity development.

**Q35: How does SPB improve school climate and civic engagement on campus?**

SPB is designed to engage everyone, not just a selected group of students. It strives to create equity in engaging the diversity of student voices and engage every student through a variety of participation opportunities. Moreover, SPB gives students real power over real money, empowers them to leverage their agency and collective voice, emboldens them in decision-making processes, fortifies youth-adult partnerships, builds critical thinking and communication skills, creates meaningful solutions to everyday problems, mirrors actual voting processes, and prepares young people to be lifelong civic participants. SPB also promotes healthy interactions among participants, a sense of community, mutual trust, school democracy, and a positive school climate



## 8. Research, Publications, and Resources

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### **Q38: What research has been done on SPB, and what are some of the main findings?**

Because SPB is a growing model for civic engagement in schools, there is a dearth of studies on this topic. The incipient research, however, shows promising results. For instance, research on these processes in Spain found that they have a positive impact on the development of knowledge (rights and duties), skills (participatory competence), values (prosocial dispositions), and attitudes (self-esteem, confidence, psychological empowerment (García-Leiva et al., 2021) in children and adolescents. They also found that SPB led students to interact more positively with their peers' sense of well-being, group cohesion, and popularity of previously isolated children among their peers. Moreover, SPB has been shown to develop greater trust in government institutions and increased financial literacy (Cano-Hila et al., 2020; Duncikaite, 2019; García-Leiva et al., 2021; Albornoz-Manyoma et al., 2020, 2021). Research on SPB in the United States reports similar findings, as well as increased political efficacy, civic skills, and self-agency (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2023; Cohen et al., 2015; Crum & Faydash, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2020; Keidan, 2020; Kinzle, 2019). Studies on youth participatory budgeting in different contexts (e.g., Augsberger et al., 2017, 2019; Grillos, 2014; Brennan, 2016) also confirm these results. To evaluate the impact on learning and change, some researchers use an instrument called KASP-SC that explores changes in civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices (KASP) on the one hand, and school climate (SC) on the other. The impact of PB and SPB on learning and education has been summarized in a research brief (Schugurensky et al., 2021).

### **Q39: Are there any videos summarizing the SPB process?**

Yes, there are several videos that summarize the SPB. One is a short video on SPB (under four minutes) that the Participatory Budgeting Project produced highlighting the district-wide expansion of SPB within the Phoenix Union High School District. Another is a slightly longer video (just over seven minutes) that features an inclusive model of SPB that expanded steering committee representation and participation to students with disabilities. There is another short video (also about four minutes) on the broader PB municipal process that can provide more details and broader context.

### **Q40: Where can schools find external assistance for SPB processes?**

External advisors from the Center for the Future of Arizona, the Participatory Governance Initiative, the Participatory Budgeting Project, and People Powered may provide guidance, professional development workshops, and mentorship opportunities.

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