



Participatory budgeting

A handbook for schools 2021

Participatory budgeting is a tool of participatory democracy whose use gives students the chance to decide how part of the school's budget will be spent. In the longer term, the aims of the mechanism are to boost the level of civic activity among young people, to improve their understanding of democratic processes and thereby to minimise abuse of authority for personal gain i.e. corruption.

During the 2020–2021 academic year, the NGOs Transparency International Estonia (TIE) and the Estonian Cooperation Assembly (ECA) ran a pilot project in four very different schools around the country. This handbook provides an overview of both national (Estonian) and international practices and is designed to support teachers and schools in the implementation of participatory budgeting.

TIE is a non-profit organisation operating in the public interest with the aim of preventing corruption, raising the public's awareness of corruption and promoting transparency and democracy in Estonian society. It is the accredited representative in Estonia of the global anti-corruption organisation Transparency International.

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What is participatory budgeting?

Participatory budgeting emerged in 1989, when a local government in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil gave its residents the chance to decide on how a proportion of its budget should be used. In Estonia, this approach has been adopted by more than 30 local governments, among them those of Tartu, Pärnu, Keila, Viljandi, Elva, Kohila, Hiiumaa and Viimsi. It requires the local government to be willing to set aside part of its annual budget for the spending of which all residents can then suggest ideas. In Estonia, the amount in question varies wildly: from 15,000 euros in Kohila and 45,000 euros in Elva to 200,000 euros in Tartu and as much as 800,000 euros in Tallinn. The aim is often to support more than one idea, counting votes proportionally according to district or establishing district budgets at the outset. This ensures that smaller places (such as those merged with larger units as a result of administrative reforms) get an equal say.

Local governments generally have principles in place that the ideas suggested must be in the public interest, must be able to be used by everyone and should not lead to unreasonable maintenance and repair costs for the local government in the longer term.

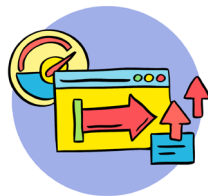
The ideas presented by the public as projects are put to the vote, giving people the chance to have a say in the development of their local area. As such, participatory budgeting qualifies as a tool of democracy and inclusion: through it, residents gain both an inclusive experience and a better understanding of how the city's budget, decision-making and participatory processes work.



**Design
the process**



**Brainstorm
ideas**



**Develop
ideas**



Vote



Implement

Why introduce participatory budgeting in schools?

What young people experience at school has a direct impact on how they perceive the world around them. In order to guarantee an increasing number of active citizens in Estonia in the future, it is important that school experiences foster the democratic skills and values of young people. Participatory budgeting is one tool with which this can be achieved.

The aim of such budgeting in a school is to go beyond what students learn about democracy in theory by giving them the opportunity to have their say and make decisions together.



” Though you might assume otherwise, students have plenty of ideas for improvements, even in brand new schools.

In addition to experiencing real-life democracy, the students get the chance to practise managing projects, negotiating, working together, drawing up budgets and devising campaigns, and gain other transferable skills.

In order to develop participatory budgeting ideas in a school and to offer them up for voting on, students need to:

- work together (dividing up tasks and coming to a compromise where needed);
- be able to ask for and accept support from their school's mentor;
- deal with companies regarding price offers;

- organise campaigns to try to get everyone in the school behind their idea; and
- should it win, implement their idea (if this is foreseen as part of the process) in cooperation with the school.

Experiencing success and seeing tangible results form an important part of the project. Cooperation lays the groundwork for a stronger school community and the development of civil society based on positive relations and cooperative practices.

During the 2020–2021 academic year, TIE and the ECA ran the country's first coordinated project on participatory budgeting in schools. The schools involved were Tartu Annelinna Gymnasium, Rapla Gymnasium, Keeni Basic School and Tallinn Rahumäe School. At least partially, the project was implemented in all of the schools while distance learning measures were in place. The impact of participatory budgeting was assessed in three of the schools, using a survey to gauge students' awareness and their attitude to inclusivity issues before and after the project.

The results indicated that participatory budgeting has a direct impact on how aware students are and how interested they are in contributing to school life. In all three schools where assessment took place, the following was observed:

+15%



The number of students **actively involved in school life** grew by 15% in the wake of the project, which boosted their awareness of **how to get involved in decision-making processes in their school**. Moreover, there was a rise of 19% in the number of those who felt that students are **always or often included** in making decisions that are **important to the school**.

In the course of the project, the number of students who had a sufficient or very good understanding of how the **school's budget** was devised rose by as much as 70%. The students also expressed that having the **chance** to make decisions in regard to the school's budget was now more important to them.

Seven out of 10 students would like to see the participatory budgeting process **repeated** in their schools, with four of those seven preferring it to become a permanent feature. Similarly, seven out of 10 students would **recommend** participatory budgeting to other students.



It can also clearly be seen that the students who got actively involved in the participatory budgeting process now attach more importance to taking part in such processes. Furthermore, students whose ideas made it to the final round of voting said that after the project they had a much better understanding of the school budget, were more active in terms of voting and would recommend their schools and participatory budgeting to their peers more than those who were less involved.

As part of participatory budgeting, the ECA provides an online platform which is free for the use of all schools (<https://kaasavkool.rahvaalgatus.ee/>). A section can be created for each school in which students can upload their ideas and online voting can be conducted using modern e-state resources like the national ID card, Mobile ID or Smart ID. In Estonia it is often assumed that young people have highly developed digital skills, including for taking an active role in the information society and participating in democratic processes. However, social scientists and teachers say that the level of such skills among school students varies greatly. By using the e-platform's digital solutions, young people gain an experience of developing and implementing digital competence in a true-to-life way, and going forward they can put to use the skills they take from it in participatory processes at the local and state levels.

Why foster democratic values in schools in the first place?

In this case, we consider a strong democracy to be one which protects four pillars in society: fair and free elections; strong, independent institutions; political rights (e.g. the right to demonstrate and protest); and civil rights (e.g. access to fair legal proceedings). If any of these pillars is weak, then figuratively speaking, democracy is on shaky ground. It cannot always be said that democratic processes are quick or convenient, but it does mean that should

they wish to do so, all citizens can have their say in decision-making processes and influence decisions.

In order for young people to have the courage to get involved, they need to know how they can do so – but arguably more important than that is experience of every person's vote counting. Although we might instinctively think that Estonian society, business culture and politics are becoming ever more honest, ethical and democratic as younger generations come through, studies have shown that awareness and attitudes among young people are in fact moving in the opposite direction.

22,1% of young people consider corruption tolerable provided there is effective governance.

The global corruption barometer in 2021 revealed that the 15–29 age group in Estonia is more tolerant of corrupt behaviour than older people provided that it leads to more effective governance and good results. At the same time, the age group is more pessimistic than older people that any government takes their voice and opinions into account. A survey conducted by the Estonian Ministry of Justice in 2016 showed that young people are more tolerant of corruption but less likely to recognise it than older age groups. As such, young Estonians cannot always tell the difference between corrupt and legitimate behaviour, view those in governance as removed from them and consider themselves incapable of influencing the actions of people who have a free hand to achieve objectives by any means.

This is important in this particular case because there is a statistical correlation between the strength of democracy and the spread of corruption: in societies where there is a strong democracy, there is less abuse of authority for personal gain, or in other words less corruption. The more robust that personal, social and political freedoms and the rule of law are, and the more active and aware that citizens are, the harder it is for corruption to proliferate unchecked.

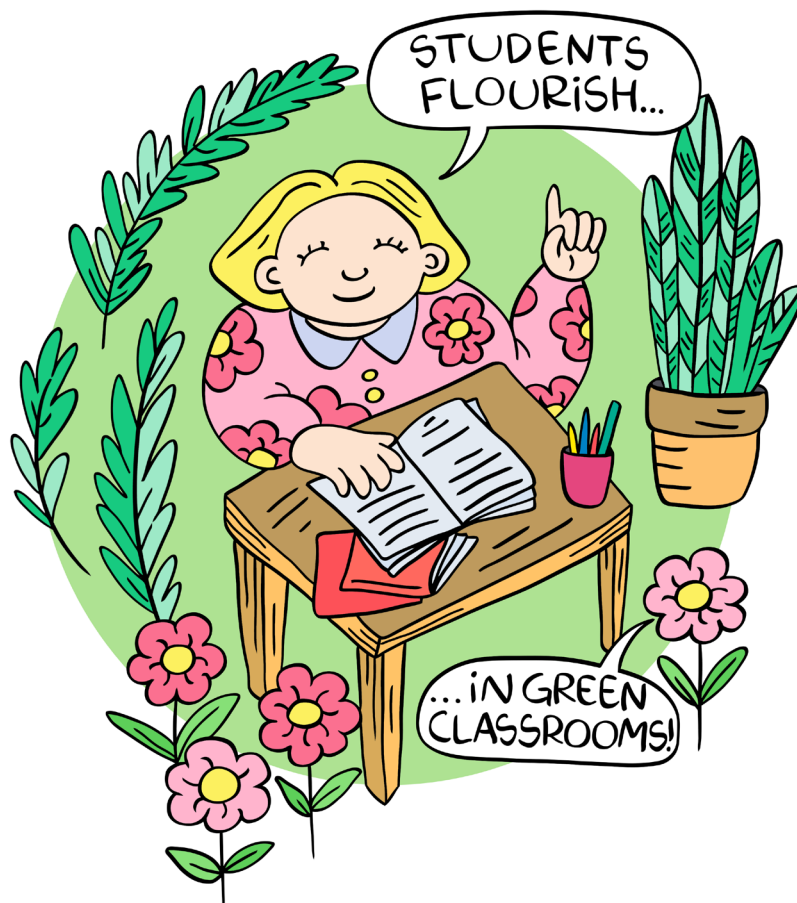
A study conducted by Transparency International also revealed that the more outside parties like civil society and company representatives are involved in governance in a given country, the less corruption there is to be found there. This analysis measured top-down participation, or the involvement of citizens

by those in governance. We can reword this thesis to say that in order for those in governance to get civil society and the private sector more involved, we need even more active and professional citizens who want and indeed demand the right to have their say.

However, it is naive to assume that citizens will become active overnight – the knowledge and courage to get involved need to be fostered from a young age. Participatory budgeting is a tool for just that: developing skills and values, and shaping the organisational culture of schools. Democracy starts in the classroom!

What sorts of ideas do students come up with?

Students tend to have no end of ideas, but examples of what has been done in the past are always useful for teachers and students alike to get the ball rolling. Examples from abroad include purchasing sports equipment and art supplies, inviting speakers and performers to give talks and concerts at the school, hiring a therapy dog, creating a dedicated quiet space and producing compost and collecting rainwater as part of the school's green transition. The following ideas



were implemented in Estonia within the framework of participatory budgeting during the 2020–2021 academic year:

- Air hockey tables were purchased for Tartu Annelinna Gymnasium
- The outdoor classroom was renovated, hammocks were purchased for the school yard and musical breaks and a school radio station were established at Tallinn Rahumäe School
- A mini-zoo and outdoor classroom were set up at Keeni Basic School
- Ping pong tables and equipment and outdoor chairs were purchased for Rapla Gymnasium

Feedback from students

When asked why they would recommend participatory budgeting to others, the students responded:

- "It gives you the chance to express yourself and put your ideas forward."
- "Because democratic decisions mean as many people as possible benefit."
- "It gets you thinking about all the ins and outs."
- "It's a great way for students to contribute to school life."
- "You learn what a budget is, and how to ask for quotes."
- "It's a really good experience and one that will come in handy in the future."
- "It brings everyone in the school together and it's just fun to see how everyone pushes their ideas."
- "It gives you the chance to share your views on things that affect you and other students, which leads to a better learning experience and environment."
- "Because every student is a member of the school community and it's important that they all know how to budget."
- "It shows you how budgets are put together and how to work as a group."

How should participatory budgeting be approached?

Implementing participatory budgeting is by no means complicated, but it does require a considered and consistent approach. Below are set out the stages a project ought to comprise in order to be viable, based on our experience to date, as well as recommendations and observations from teachers. The process may be (and in some cases will definitely need to be) amended given the specific nature of the school in question. As with any plan, the key to success is staying flexible and creative.



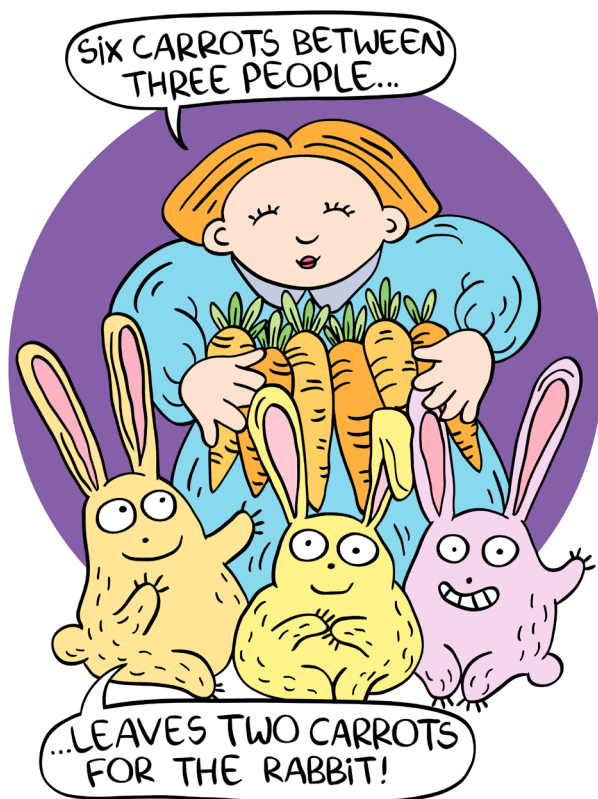
Preparations

Management support | Although most projects in schools tend to be instigated by a teacher or someone in charge of extracurricular activities who gets the green light from the school's management to go ahead with it, the participatory budgeting process does not necessarily have to follow this trajectory: for example, at Elva Gymnasium (the first school in Estonia to introduce participatory budgeting), the idea came from the school's headmaster and was implemented by its head of development and youth work. In any case, for participatory budgeting to work, the project must have someone to take charge of it (i.e. a **leader**) and resources (i.e. a **budget**).

” As to when participatory budgeting should be launched, in our experience autumn is the best time, as it is a less stressful period for both students and teachers. In this case, final-year students are likely to be more motivated to get involved as well, since with any luck they will get to see the fruits of their labour before they graduate.

As in local governments, the project budget in a school forms part of the overall budget. The project budget need not be large: schools have allocated from as little as 250 euros to as much as 2000 euros. Given the options available to the school in question, the following should be weighed up:

- How many ideas is it feasible to support as a result of the process? The simplest approach is to focus on one idea and ensure that it is properly implemented. As in local governments, schools may divide the budget up between two or more ideas, based on the distribution of votes, levels of study or categories of ideas. For example, at Elva Gymnasium the budget is split between Grades 1–6 and Grades 7–12.
- How visible or impactful should the results of the project (i.e. the winning idea) be? Although costlier does not necessarily mean better, a bigger budget means you can think about higher quality or more things, which can then be used by more students.
- Which students should be included in the project? There are no restrictions here, but you have to take into account the number of people needed to run the project. In bigger schools you can ensure the project does not get out of hand by limiting the number of students who can submit ideas: for example, opening it up to those from Grades 5–12, or just one specific grade.
- You should be guided by the options available to you, and you can always start small and then increase the scope of the project (and its target group) the next time around. During the 2020–2021 academic year, participatory budgeting was implemented at Tallinn Rahumäe School solely among 6th-grade students, directly linking the project to the social studies curriculum.



- In order to take a diversified approach, participatory budgeting can be linked to lessons: the issues of democracy, corruption and free and fair elections can be woven into history and social science lessons; drawing up a budget can form part of maths and business studies; and the creation of campaign materials can be linked to IT and media studies. Some students are motivated by being graded on their development of their idea, which means that participation can be tied in to research, project work or a specific subject.

” It may seem as though getting younger students involved in such a complex topic is neither easy nor advisable, but sometimes it is the exact opposite case: at Keeni Basic School, for example, the winning idea (a mini-zoo) was put forward by students from Grade 1.

” **Tip:** Link the project to specific learning outcomes or subjects. In the national curriculum, the aim of social studies is set out as being for students to gain social literacy: knowledge, skills and attitudes for coping in society and making important decisions.

So that the leader does not take on too much, assistants should be brought on board. Since two (or more) heads are better than one, it is a good idea to establish a **working group** whose members have clearly delineated areas of responsibility. The working group can also include **mentors** who are prepared to help students in wording, justifying and drawing up a budget for their ideas and negotiating when obtaining quotes. Although the number of mentors that will be required is difficult to foresee, a few teachers and other members of staff could be found to share their knowledge with the students. Practice has shown that the more people from a school who are involved, the stronger the sense of community within the school becomes.

The task of the working group is to determine what the **conditions** for the ideas submitted should be and to decide on the **timetable** and **communication** for the project.

It is important to let people know in advance what conditions the ideas will have to meet. Schools have a number of choices in this regard. Thought should be given to the following:

- Is the idea something that will benefit the entire school (not just boys or girls or a specific grade or class) or help to reduce inequality (in which case it may not and need not be of benefit to everyone)?
- Can the idea be one-off (e.g. a specific event) or should it be ongoing/permanent (a thing that is retained by the school or an event that can be repeated at no cost)?

- Is the idea likely to lead to unreasonable extra costs or could it form part of a plan spanning a number of years?
- Can ideas only be submitted by groups (preferably of 2–6 people) or by individual students as well?

Every school is different, but you should plan on **8–12 weeks** for the entire process, from calling for ideas to final voting and implementation. In planning your timetable it is a good idea to set indicative dates for the following milestones:



Brainstorming

It is recommended that ideas be sought in a workshop involving all (or a certain number of) students. Since the undertaking will be new to most students, a workshop is a suitable format in which to explain participatory budgeting, the structure of the school's budget and the aim of the project. In the course of the brainstorming, the students can come up with initial ideas that could be implemented as part of participatory budgeting in their school. Based on experience, rough ideas can prove very useful – for example, they can bring to light issues that students have not mentioned to anyone and which are easy to resolve. Ideas may also be offered which go beyond the scope of both participatory budgeting and the school budget (e.g. building a pool or ice rink), which can then be explained to students. During the brainstorming, students can form groups for the development of a certain idea or to gather ideas for the next stage of the process.

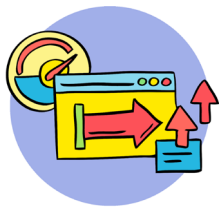
” The results of the brainstorming should be retained for the following year, as they may seed new projects.

It has been noted in the ideas put forward by students that the ideas are influenced by the time at which the brainstorming occurs. For instance, in winter, proposals are made to purchase blankets, beanbags and the like; in spring, renovating outdoor classrooms and buying hammocks for the school yard have been suggested.

The following is a **sample** workshop that can be run in person or online using apps like Mentimeter, sli.do or Google Forms to gather ideas:

- A representative of the local government outlines the process of participatory budgeting in the town/city/municipality, including the results (10 min)
- The school's headmaster explains how the school's budget is arrived at, how big it is and how acquisitions take place in the public sector (10 min)
- Participatory budgeting in our school: its aims, timetable and conditions for ideas and why you should get involved (led by someone from TIE or the school; 15 min)
- Brainstorming: what could make our school life even better? The students jot down their initial ideas, if desired, indicating who will develop the idea further (10 min)
- An introduction to the online platform with an explanation of digital signatures (led by someone from the ECA or the school; 10 min)
- Summary: what ideas have the students come up with, and what next? (5 min)

Total duration: 55 min



Development of ideas

Deadline for submission of initial ideas | Depending on students' workload, school holidays and the like, it is a good idea to set a deadline of 2–3 weeks for the submission of initial ideas following the brainstorming workshop. Overlapping ideas can be merged, or the students can be asked to make them more distinct from one another. Submission of ideas is followed by working with the mentors, who help the students eliminate any shortcomings and unsuitable ideas.

Deadline for submission of final ideas | By this point the ideas need to have been transformed into posters, videos or other campaign materials and uploaded to the online platform. Again, a period of 2–3 weeks should suffice.

Campaigning and awareness-raising | A separate event can be organised at which to showcase the ideas (physically and/or online) or a period established during which the campaign materials will be on display in the school or on the platform. The aim is to get the students to take a creative approach and to think

about why others should get behind their idea in particular. For example, if the idea is to buy a billiard table for the school, the students proposing it could point out that the game develops strategic thinking and hand and eye coordination; if a ping pong table, mathematical thinking could be mentioned. In both cases, the fact that the games are useful as well as fun should be highlighted.



Voting

Real-life 'elections' can be simulated in the final stage of the process, both in person and online. Since the project is of importance to the entire school, voting rights can be extended to all students and staff. In this regard it makes sense to take a combined approach:

- **Online voting** takes place on the online platform <https://kaasavkool.rahvaalgatus.ee/>, to which the personal ID codes of all eligible voters are added. The students and staff can then vote for their favourite idea and confirm it with their digital signature, as in actual online elections. For the sake of clarity, online voting could take place during a certain period in advance of in-person voting so as to avoid duplicate ballots being cast. The use of ID codes on the Inclusive Schools platform has been coordinated with and approved by the Data Inspectorate, which confirmed that the codes do not constitute sensitive personal data. Instead, they are classed as ordinary personal data and their use is no more restricted than that of a person's name or date of birth. To establish a section on the platform for your own school, contact the ECA by e-mailing info@kogu.ee.
- Since not everyone has an ID card or the passwords with which to use it, it is a good idea to provide physical **ballot boxes** for voting once the online voting period has come to an end. Physical ballots always override online votes. At the polling station, voters must identify themselves by presenting an ID document and their ID code and signing against their name on the 'electoral roll'. Ballot papers are marked with a stamp and are placed in the ballot box by the voters themselves. When counting the votes it is a good idea to get student **scrutineers** involved to keep a careful eye on proceedings. Implementing all of these steps will prepare the students to take part in actual elections.

” To further hone the students’ skills, we recommend Democracy Fitness.

Democracy Fitness is a fun and active form of training that targets specific democracy muscles: active listening, verbal self-confidence, disagreement, mobilisation, compromising, empathy, opinions and activism. Three quarters of the students who participated in the Democracy Fitness training that took place as part of participatory budgeting in the 2020-2021 academic year came away from it satisfied or highly satisfied.

The earlier the training is carried out, the more scope the groups have to put the skills they learn into practice.

NB! See more at www.arvamusfestival.ee/demokraatiatrenn.

In order for students to be able to look at their schools from a different angle and prepare to get involved, it is important to draft a **communication plan** for the project. It makes sense to inform the students of the project in advance of the brainstorming session and, where possible, to link it to what is being taught in lessons. A poster for the project can be displayed on the school’s screens and walls, with preliminary information also being shared online and teachers talking about the project in their classes. This will ensure that as many students as possible take part in the brainstorming and that nobody is left out because they knew nothing about the project. It is also useful to inform parents of the project via the school newsletter and the wider public via e.g. a local newspaper.

Information should be well thought through for every stage of the project. It is a good idea to combine summaries of what has been done (such as about the ideas put forward during the brainstorming session) with reminders of deadlines and calls for students to get involved. A ‘showroom’ or presentation day could be organised for the ideas that are to be put to the vote. In addition

to the options offered by the school, it is a good idea to encourage students to create campaign materials that can easily be shared on social media and the school's website.

” The vocabulary you use is very important: words we view as perfectly normal may seem complicated or boring to students (especially younger ones). Use simpler expressions to avoid such problems.



Implementation

Think about **who will implement the winning idea**. In terms of learning outcomes, it is a good idea to set students the task of requesting quotes, negotiating on them and placing the final order. This applies mostly to older students rather than younger ones.

The students at Rapla Gymnasium wanted to obtain outdoor chairs for the school yard (coordinated with the school's architect), but based on the budget they were working with, they would only have been able to purchase one chair if they had taken the first quote they were given. Encouraged by their mentor, the students explained that they wanted to buy the chairs for their school as part of participatory budgeting – upon hearing which, the company offered four chairs for the same price. As the saying goes, never look a gift horse in the mouth!

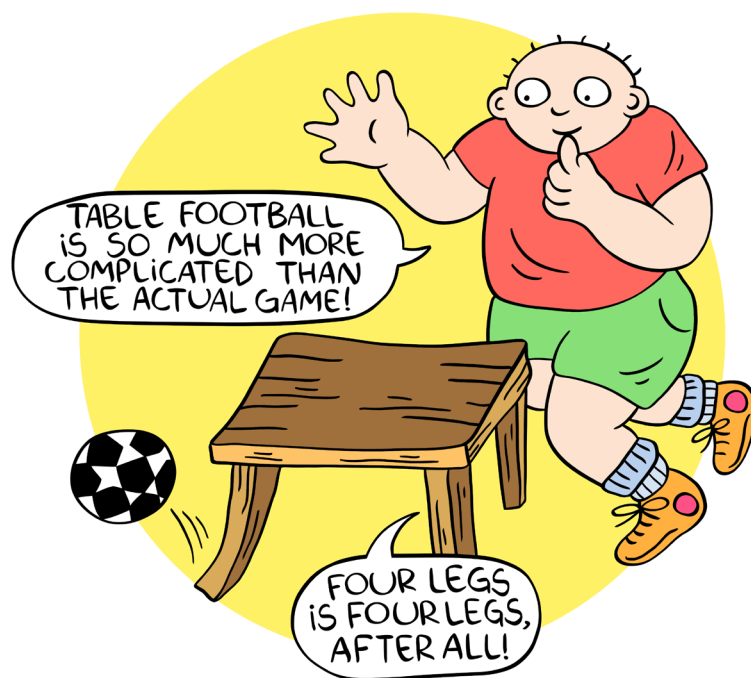
Winner(s) decided and idea(s) implemented, it is a good idea to invite everyone at the school to attend an **opening or unveiling ceremony** to remind everyone how many ideas were put forward, how many people voted and what the process resulted in. A plaque or sign could even be attached to an item stating when the idea was implemented and which project it formed part of. Such information serves as a positive reminder of what can be achieved through active involvement.

Summarising projects

In order for the next project to be even more of a success, time should be set aside for making summaries, which includes gathering feedback from students, mentors and the working group. Points to consider include:

- Were the duration and timetable of the project reasonable?
- Were enough ideas submitted? If not, why not?
- What sorts of ideas were put forward? Are there any ideas that could be implemented outside of the context of the project?
- Was the budget and the number of winning ideas sufficient?
- How effectively did the students and mentors work together?
- What was the percentage of voter turnout? Was this enough, or should it be higher? By way of comparison, slightly more than 5% of eligible voters participated in Tallinn's participatory budget vote in 2021, while 32% of students and staff at Rapla Gymnasium took part in theirs, and voter turnout at the 2017 local government elections in Estonia was 53.3%.
- Are students and staff willing to get involved again next year? What could everyone do better (or differently) next time round?

It is a good idea to gather feedback from students using an anonymous questionnaire. An example can be found at the end of this handbook.



There are other ways to approach participatory budgeting; the process set out above is simply the one that was tested by TIE, the ECA and the schools involved in the pilot project. Other schools are of course free to choose their own approach.

Once participatory budgeting has been carried out a number of times, fully fledged ideas can be sought straight away, skipping the brainstorming step. Since encouraging all students to get involved is more restricted in this case, you may find that fewer ideas are submitted or that they are put forward by students who are already active in this regard. As such, if you go down this route it makes sense to run an information session or event showcasing the project(s), at which students can ask questions.

Potential further developments – have the courage to give something a go!

Participatory budgeting may be aimed at resolving a particular social issue. In Scotland, for example, attempts have been made to address inequality and child poverty. Therein, discussions were held with students and their parents, who were asked how much it cost them to send their children to school. Ways of bringing these costs down for families of limited means were then sought as part of the project. Ideas suggested included a breakfast club, to ensure that the students could get a hot meal before starting lessons; a homework club, offering students help and somewhere to be while their parents were still at work; and easier access to IT resources.

In the United States, especially in larger schools, it is common practice for students to take the lead in participatory budgeting themselves: groups of up to 20 or so students run brainstorming sessions, conduct surveys (asking fellow students how necessary or useful they feel the ideas that have been put forward are) and turn the ideas into projects. Not all students are involved in the development phase in this case, but it does mean that the process is almost entirely overseen by students themselves – and in the end all students and staff still get to vote.

More information and examples can be found on the People Powered website (www.peoplepowered.org), including surveys, reports and materials pertaining to participatory budgeting in schools and universities and at the local and national levels around the world.

Sample form for submitting ideas

What would you change in the school?
You have XXX euros to play with -
so submit an idea!

What is your idea? Recommendation: Come up with a catchy phrase that will bring a smile to people's faces.
What does your idea involve and what is it designed to achieve? Point out why your idea is the best, what you want to achieve with it and how everyone in the school will benefit from it.
How much will your idea cost? <i>Present a detailed budget listing amounts/numbers and prices and providing an explanation. Check what prices different stores are offering before doing so. Note: Make sure that the final amount is within budget after VAT is added.</i>
Upload it to the online platform or add a link to the materials you will use to promote your idea to others (e.g. photos, posters, illustrations or videos).
Who is behind the idea? (Names, group name, class/grade, etc.)

Sample questionnaire for obtaining anonymous feedback from students

1. In your estimation, how often are students involved in making decisions that are important to the school community?
 - *Always or nearly always*
 - *Often*
 - *Sometimes*
 - *Very rarely*
 - *Never*
 - *Don't know*
2. To what extent do you agree with the claim that all students are involved in making decisions that are important to the school community?
 - *Agree completely*
 - *Tend to agree*
 - *Neutral*
 - *Tend to disagree*
 - *Disagree completely*
 - *Don't know*
3. In your opinion, how important is it that students are involved in making decisions related to the school's budget?
 - *Very important*
 - *Quite important*
 - *Neutral*
 - *Not very important*
 - *Not important at all*
 - *Don't know*
4. What are your feelings in regard to your school's participatory budgeting process?
 - *I liked it a lot*
 - *I quite liked it*
 - *Neutral*
 - *I didn't like it much*
 - *I didn't like it at all*
 - *Don't know*

5. Would you recommend participatory budgeting to other students? If so, why? If not, why not? (*open question*)
6. Would you like participatory budgeting to take place again at your school next year?
 - *Yes*
 - *Maybe less frequently*
 - *No*
 - *Don't know*
7. If participatory budgeting takes places at your school again, what would you do differently? (*open question*)

Notes and observations

