Student Engagement through Participatory Budgeting

OVERVIEW
Across New York City, a bold experiment in participatory democracy is underway. Since 2012, the city council has steadily increased investment in a process called Participatory Budgeting, by which community members help decide how to spend part of a public budget. Through an eight-month process, neighbors come together and work with their government to propose, debate and ultimately vote on budget decisions that affect their lives.

This process, developed in Brazil in 1989, now takes place in 1,500 cities worldwide. In each location, PB brings together diverse communities to grapple with big questions at the center of urban development, while creating an opportunity for community members to transform the way they see their neighborhood, their neighbors and themselves.

Public Money delves into New York City’s PB process, the largest in the U.S., involving more than 100,000 people deciding how to spend over $35 million each year. Following the process over one year in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park—a multicultural neighborhood undergoing gentrification—this quietly observed, verité documentary asks, what happens when community members come together to discuss and decide what development should look like in their neighborhood?

Through the film Public Money, students will be introduced to the Participatory Budgeting (PB) model and how this process provided the residents of Sunset Park, Brooklyn with a voice in local government. Students will then translate the PB process to their own school and develop an Action Plan and Budget proposal that will address an issue in their community. Students will summarize and present their proposals to students and school administration in the form of an Elevator Pitch.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:
• Analyze community needs and their personal role in addressing those needs
• Demonstrate an understanding of Participatory Budgeting and its application in local governance and school administration
• Design a Participatory Budgeting Plan of Action to address an issue at their school

GRADE LEVELS: 8-12+

SUBJECT AREAS
Civics  Social Studies
MATERIALS

- Film clips from *Public Money*, and equipment on which to show them
- Teacher Handouts
  - Teacher Handout A: Discussion Activities
- Student Handouts
  - Student Handout A: What’s the Big Idea
  - Student Handout B: Rapid Feedback
  - Student Handout C: Public Money Discussion Questions
  - Student Handout D: Idea Evaluation
  - Student Handout E: Idea to Action Plan
- 20 sheets of large chart paper and sticky notes

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

Two 50-minute class period(s) + Assignment

**Preparation:** Create and cut-out the “pennies” described in the *Teacher Handout A: Discussion Exercises*. Hang three large sheets of chart paper around the classroom and label each as follows: OUR CLASS, OUR SCHOOL, FIVE YEARS.

ACTIVITIES

**What’s the Big Idea?**

**Part 1: Do Now**
When students arrive, have the following questions written on the board and instruct students to write a brief response for three to five minutes: *Who makes the decisions about how money is spent in our school? What role could students play in the decision-making process?*

Distribute two “pennies” from *Teacher Handout A: Discussion Activities* and have them write their names on each sheet. Explain that, as the lesson continues, you want to make sure that everyone’s voice will be heard and that each person can share their “two cents”. Each time a student participates in a discussion, they can hand in one of their pennies. By the end of the lesson everyone should have spent their pennies.

Have students share their responses and briefly discuss the following question using the Popcorn Sharing Method described in *Teacher Handout A: Discussion Exercises*: Why would it be beneficial for the school community if students helped decide how our school budget is spent?

**Part 2: Brainstorming**
*Facilitator Note: Encourage students to move through the brainstorming activities at a brisk pace.*
Ask students to imagine they have the opportunity to improve the school by deciding how the school’s budget is spent. Distribute sticky notes around the classroom and review the instructions below. Give students three to five minutes to brainstorm projects that would benefit each of the three communities. Students should write one idea per sticky note and post their notes on the appropriate chart paper (OUR CLASS, OUR SCHOOL, FIVE YEARS).

Instructions: Think of at least two projects that could benefit each of the following communities:

- Our classmates, teacher and classroom
- Our whole school
- Our school’s future students and teachers (A project that will benefit students over the next five years)

Divide the class into three groups by having each student count off one at a time. Assign each team a brainstorming category (OUR CLASS, OUR SCHOOL or FIVE YEARS) and have them review the responses. Instruct teams to reorganize the sticky notes into categories and divide the groups into smaller Design Teams – one team for each category. For example:

- School beautification
- Recreation
- Classroom materials
- Environment and sustainability

Distribute one copy of *Student Handout A: What’s the Big Idea?* to each Design Team. Have Teams select a note-taker, then discuss and organize the project suggestions using the prompts on *Page 1* of the handout.

**Part 3: Select and Explore**

Have each Design Team select a project to explore and use *Student Handout A: What’s the Big Idea?, Page 2* to describe and evaluate the benefit of this plan.

*Facilitator Note: A team might decide they don’t like the project suggestions they have to choose from. If so, explain that the goal of this activity is to practice the process of brainstorming, designing, presenting, and analyzing a project. Students might find that practicing with a random project idea can free them to up to experiment and think out of the box. Later in the lesson, everyone will have the opportunity to develop their own project ideas.*

**Part 4: Feedback and Reflection**

Have the Design Teams rejoin their groups and take turns presenting their project ideas using the Rapid Feedback process from *Student Handout B: Rapid Feedback*. Have teams use a stopwatch (or app) to manage the time for each step and keep up a brisk pace.

Reconvene the class for a brief review and reflection using the following prompts, as needed (remind students who still have their Two Cents to participate in the discussion):

- What surprised you most during the activity?
- What questions and suggestions were most helpful?
• What changes would you make to your project and/or pitch based on the feedback your Team received?
• What project(s) are you most enthusiastic about? Why?
• If you wanted to implement one or more of these school improvement projects, how could you fund them?

**Activity: Watching and Discussing Public Money**

Introduce the film *Public Money* and instruct students to take notes on each project, including whom the project benefits and the problem it is trying to solve. Students should also note any questions they have about the Participatory Budgeting process.

Direct the class to breakout into small discussion groups of two to three students and distribute one copy of *Student Handout C: Public Money Discussion Questions* to each group.

Reconvene the class and reflect using the following prompts, as needed (who still needs to share their two cents?):

- What questions did the film raise for you and your discussion group?
- What does, “Budgets are the essence of what government does…” mean?
- What were some of the biggest challenges the participants encountered? What would you do to encourage more collaboration across cultural and language obstacles?
- How did the participants assess the needs, challenges, and priorities of Sunset Park residents?
- How could the PB process connect with a broader audience?
  - For example: Partnering with grassroots and community organizations that serve the community; partnering with local school leadership, afterschool and service learning programs; creating and distributing multi-language surveys online and IRL; interviewing community members directly; integrating outreach and feedback processes into existing neighborhood events; asking for input from local specialists in relevant professions to assess feasibility.
- The surveillance camera project was the most controversial proposition on the ballot. Why do you think the cameras made some residents feel safer and other residents feel less safe? What are some arguments for and against surveillance cameras?
  - Background: Security cameras raise concerns about constitutional rights, privacy, mass surveillance, racial bias in policing and accountability. Evaluations of major U.S. cities have also shown that surveillance cameras are ineffective for neighborhood security but can reduce crime in parking lots. Security cameras, which require long-term maintenance, are also much more expensive than proven solutions like improved street lighting.
- What should happen when a large population votes for a project that is potentially detrimental for a minority of residents? Should the majority always “win” regardless of the consequences for minority groups? What can be done to ensure that the needs and priorities of smaller populations are represented as well?
- How did the PB process and outcomes benefit the Sunset Park community?
• What did you like most about the film *Public Money* and the Participatory Budgeting process?
• How could we translate a project like this into a school setting? Which activities, processes, ideas and procedures from *Public Money* would be useful for a school-based project?

**Activity: Idea to Action Plan**

*Facilitator Note: If your class will be developing theoretical PB Action Plans but not implementing projects in your school, follow the instructions below. You can suggest a hypothetical budget limit for the projects, such as $2,000. If your school can allocate a budget for student-led Participatory Budgeting, skip the following activity and visit participatorybudgeting.org where you will find the step-by-step Guide to Participatory Budgeting in Schools and additional tools and resources.*

Discuss: Do you think a fixed portion of the budget should be set aside every year to be allocated through Participatory Budgeting? How could a PB process benefit our school community?

Explain: You will have the opportunity to apply your new project planning skills and your understanding of the Participatory Budgeting model, as illustrated in *Public Money*, to develop a Plan of Action for a PB project in our school. You will develop a “pitch” for your project ideas and present them to our class (as well as: students from another class, the Principal or members of the school administration, etc.)

Organize students into Design Teams of three to four students and distribute three sheets of chart paper and sticky notes to each team. Instruct Teams to write “Problems to Solve” on a sheet of chart paper and post it on the wall. Give them three to five minutes to brainstorm responses to the following question, write one response on each sticky note, then post it on the chart paper: What would you like to see changed or improved in your school? (Be as specific as possible.)

Have teams review their responses and identify themes, similarities and/or patterns that emerge. Instruct teams to reorganize the sticky notes into categories and select one category to focus on. Category examples:

- School beautification
- Recreation
- Classroom materials
- Environment and sustainability

Ask Teams to write “Solutions/Projects” at the top of a sheet of chart paper and hang it on the wall. Give Teams three to five minutes to brainstorm projects that could address their issue, write one response on each sticky note, and post them on the chart paper. Have teams evaluate their project ideas using *Student Handout D: Idea Evaluation* and select a project to pursue.
Assignment (In-Class and/or Homework)

Distribute one copy of Student Handout E: Idea to Action Plan to each group. Have Teams develop their plans, budget and “Elevator Pitch”, then partner with another team to refine their ideas using the Rapid Feedback process.

Teams should “pitch” their completed project ideas and budget to the class (as well as: students from another class, the Principal or members of the school administration, etc.)

Option: If time and resources are available, Design Teams can create project display boards in the style of the PB participants in Public Money to showcase their project proposals. The displays can be exhibited in a common area of the school (library, assembly hall, cafeteria, etc.) and the student body can vote on their favorite presentation.

Facilitator Note: Review the papers to make sure that all students have contributed their “Two Cents” to the discussion. You may want to assign a point system to the sheets to help grade class participation.

If you have additional class time, consider introducing a ‘Design Thinking’ model into the idea development process. Examples:

- Equity Centered Design, Stanford d.school
- The Design Thinking Bootleg, Stanford d.school
- Design Thinking for Educators, IDEO

EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS

Implementing Participatory Budgeting in Your Community
After taking part in a simulated PB process, students may be excited to implement PB in their broader community. Students can plan and carry out an advocacy campaign for voters to consider implementing a PB program in their municipal or state government. Possible activities include writing letters to elected officials, holding a meeting with local representatives and their staff, submitting a ballot measure proposal or gathering signatures for a petition. To gather public support for their proposal, students should brainstorm ways to communicate information about the PB process to the adults they know and to explain its benefits in an engaging way. This may involve designing posters, distributing flyers, or even organizing a community screening and discussion of Public Money, which is available through POV’s free screening program (communitynetwork.amdoc.org).

Investigating You State and Local Budget
Many Americans don’t know where their tax dollars go or why. How do state and local governments decide what taxes to collect and what projects to spend their budget on? How do they decide to spend money on education or law enforcement or city parks or roads? Why do State Budget procedures on balanced budgets, the budget cycle, the governor’s authority, earmarked and federal funds, allocations, etc. vary from state to state?
Have students work in small research groups (three students) to read and review State and Local Expenditures on urban.org then sketch a simple flow chart that illustrates the general process by which state funds are spent.

Next have them visit What everyone should know about their state’s budget and locate their state’s budget information:
   - What are the top five expenditures for your state?
   - Which three expenditures have the most significant impact on you personally?
   - What are the most surprising expenditures on your states budget?

Ask groups to create a pie chart that illustrates the full budget amount and highlights the top five expenditures. What percentage of the budget is left when the five expenditures are accounted for?

Instruct the groups to repeat the process with the state budget from five years ago and the budget from 10 years ago. Compare the three pie charts:
   - How have expenditures changed over the past 10 years?
   - What do you think has accounted for that change?
   - Have expenditures that affect your life changed as well? If so, did you or your family notice that there was a difference?

Have each student in the study group select one of the pie charts and have them investigate the policies and political trends that influenced the spending priorities for that year.

Have the groups reconvene and share their findings. Instruct them to collect their research in a multi-media report that illustrates the forces and events that influenced the state’s budget priorities over 10 years and how these changes affected their lives.

Resources:
   - State and Local Expenditures: urban.org
   - What everyone should know about their state’s budget: urban.org
     http://apps.urban.org/features/what-drives-state-spending/
   - State Budget Procedures: National Conference of State Legislatures
   - Budget Processes in the States: National Association of State Budget Officers
     https://www.nasbo.org/reports-data/budget-processes-in-the-states

The Global Impact of Participatory Budgeting
Thirty years ago, the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil launched the first full participatory budgeting process for its municipal budget. Today, PB has spread to over 1,500 cities around the world including more than 310 processes in North America.
Have students research the history of Participatory Budgeting and review evaluations of PB projects.

Have students select three PB case studies from different countries/continents around the world and compare the PB processes and outcomes as well as the impact on local communities. Students can use the *16 Key Metrics for Evaluating Participatory Budgeting* and *PB Case Study Data* as a jumping off point for their comparative evaluation.

- 16 Key Metrics: [https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/for-researchers/](https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/for-researchers/)
- PB Case Study Data: [https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/pb-map/](https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/pb-map/)

**RESOURCES**

**POV: Public Money**  
[http://www.pbs.org/pov/publicmoney](http://www.pbs.org/pov/publicmoney)  
The film’s official POV site includes a discussion guide with additional activity ideas and resources.

*Public Money*  
The film’s official website provides information on the film and filmmakers.

**POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films**  
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

**The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP)**  
[www.participatorybudgeting.org](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org)  
This website provides resources, toolkits and detailed guides for Participatory Budget programs in schools and local government.

**Urban Center: What everyone should know about their state’s budget:**  
An interactive web tool that allows users to get under the hood of their government and understand not only how much a state spends, but also what drives that spending.

**STANDARDS**

**Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects**  
([http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf))

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10
topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**Content Knowledge:** [http://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/] a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Level IV (Grade 9-12)
3. Understands the argument that economic responsibilities follow from economic rights
4. Understands contemporary issues that involve economic rights such as consumer product safety, taxation, affirmative action, eminent domain, zoning, copyright, patents

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
Allison Milewski has developed media education resources for a range of award-winning filmmakers and national media organizations, including PBS LearningMedia, Independent Television Services (ITVS), Latino Public Broadcasting, HBO Documentaries, and Tribeca Film Institute. She is also the founder of the international media education program, PhotoForward.org.