



Participatory Budgeting Handbook for Schools

VERSION 01.5

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Introduction

This handbook introduces Participatory Budgeting to teachers, principals, administrators, students, and even parents who want to plan and run a Participatory Budgeting (PB) program for their school, class or extracurricular program using the FirstRoot app.



Participatory Budgeting is a democratic process in which a group of people (such as a school or a class) decide how to spend a part of a shared budget. Participants submit their ideas, refine them into proposals, vote for the best proposals, and implement them using the original budget.

Participatory Budgeting was first developed in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989. Since then, PB has spread to over 3,000 cities and schools all over the world. Most of these PB projects are sponsored by local government officials. PB has also been used for counties, states, housing authorities, schools and school systems, universities, and other public agencies. The leaders of FirstRoot are experts in Participatory Budgeting, have produced PB programs in the public and private sector for more than a decade.

Why do PB in school?

- It's democracy in action!
- It gives students a positive civic engagement experience
- It brings students closer to their community
- It strengthens the relationship between students and administration
- It shows students the benefits of getting involved

By participating in PB, students will...

- Collaborate with other students, leaders and teachers
- Develop financial literacy skills by funding projects with real money
- Develop research skills in order to validate proposals
- Develop design-thinking, problem-solving and critical thinking skills
- Increase their awareness of community needs
- Develop a sense of social responsibility

How does it work?

FirstRoot has identified several patterns on how to run a successful PB cycle at school. We've integrated these patterns into a seamless experience.



FirstRoot works with teacher or administrators to **provision their school** on the FirstRoot platform.



The teacher **configures the PB program**, such as establishing the budget, duration and who can participate. Teachers invite students to participate through the app.



FirstRoot guides students through the PB program:
Students **create, refine, vote, and fund** on proposals.



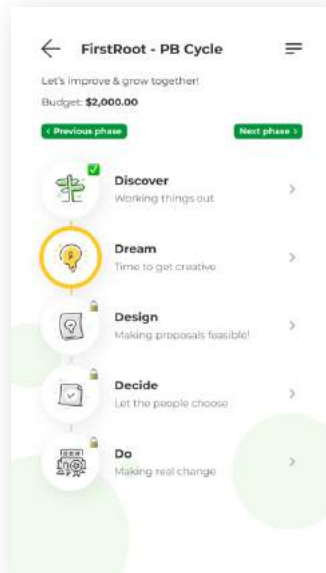
The teacher purchases student-funded proposals. Students track implementation progress through the FirstRoot app.

Planning your Participatory Budgeting program

Here are some of the main questions you will need to answer:

- What kind of **PB cycle** do you want to run?
 - PB Sprint (1 Week)
 - Short PB Cycle (3-6 Weeks)
 - Long PB Cycle (4-6 Months)
- What is the **PB theme**?
 - i.e. "We want to make our school fairer and more inclusive for everyone"
 - i.e. "We want to make our school a safe place for everyone"
- What are the **PB categories**?
 - i.e. "Facilities, Equipment, Science lab, Sports, etc" (up to 10 categories)
- Who are the **participants**?
 - Just the students in a single class?
 - Just the students in a grade?
 - Everyone in the school?

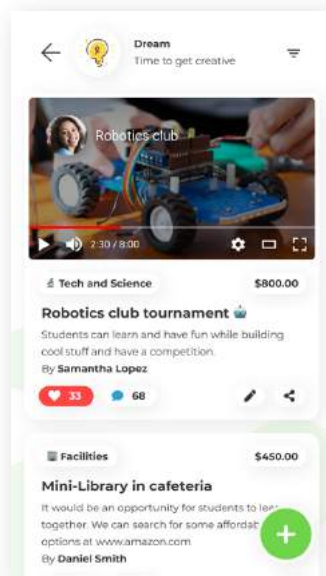
FirstRoot Participatory Budgeting phases



Discover

As a first step, students will...

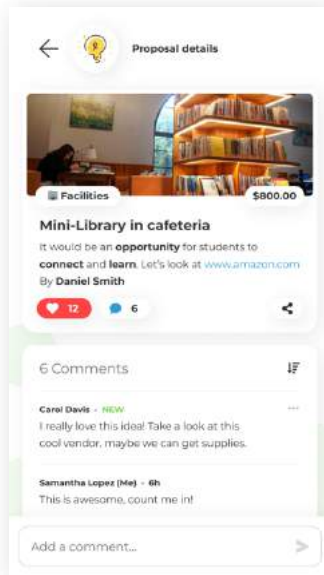
- Join the FirstRoot app
- Learn about the PB theme and budget
- Understand their progress via the PB map
- Be able to receive notifications in real-time
- Be able to edit their profile



Dream

This is where students get to be creative and...

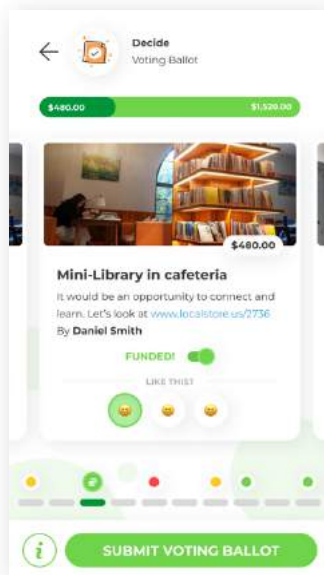
- Create ideas to improve the school
- Develop ideas to help other students
- Make thoughtful and high-impact proposals
- Browse through all proposal categories
- Review, like, and comment on proposals
- Submit as many proposals as they want!



Design

After getting awesome proposals, it's time for students and teachers to collaborate:

- Remove impossible proposals
- Merge similar proposals into one proposal
- Refine final proposal descriptions
- Determine implementation costs
- Confirm proposal impact
- Outline implementation plans

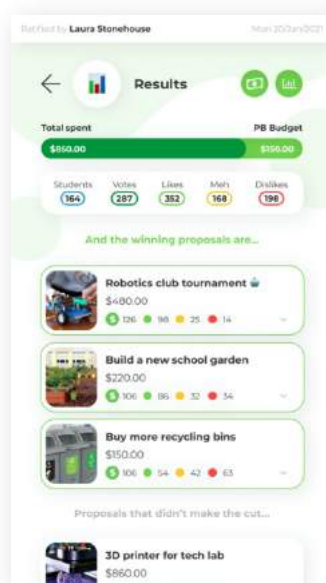


Decide

Now, it's time to let the students choose...

- Students can fund their favorite proposals
- Students can identify proposals they do not support
- Students can share proposals with other classmates

Teachers will ratify the final results.



Do

Lastly, real change happens when students...

- Review voting results
- Implement the proposals
- Compare budgeted and actual costs to learn about financing and real-world spending

Implementing winning proposals

Now that the PB stages are completed it's the admin's (principal, teacher, coach) turn to make sure the winning projects are implemented.

First, make the official announcement of the winning projects within the FirstRoot app to all participants and stakeholders.

Then, implement the winning projects as soon as possible. The sooner they are implemented, the more positive the student experience.

FirstRoot recommends that students be meaningfully included in the implementation process and be involved in tracking projects. FirstRoot allows a real-time feed so everyone can share photos of the projects progress within the app. A student who worked on developing a winning proposal could be a leader on tracking their project and responding to issues that may arise.

What needs to be purchased?

The students may have specified something that's sold out, or maybe there are a few versions of the thing to choose from (like different tablets). Get students and leaders to help here.

Why isn't the project done yet?

Encourage student leaders to reach out and update their fellow students during classes, recess, assemblies and talk about the projects' progress.

Communication guidelines

As a part of the PB setup process, FirstRoot encourages PB admins to send introductory emails for the school staff, parents and of course, for the students who will participate in the PB program for the school. The following are email drafts that can be used to communicate effectively about the PB program overview, feel free to copy, paste & edit as needed.

Sample email for teachers (Introduction)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] staff,

I'm excited to announce that our [GRADE] students will have the opportunity to make their school better. The purpose of this email is to provide an overview of the program and how you can help all participating students succeed.

We will use participatory budgeting (PB) to empower students to collaborate and choose how to spend the school's budget of \$[AMOUNT] to improve the school. Students will apply skills from design-thinking, financial literacy, and civics. The PB cycle will culminate in implementing the winning proposals selected and funded by the students.

Some of this work will be supported by FirstRoot, a Silicon Valley startup that is building a PB app specifically designed for high schools.

The PB cycle has five main phases:

1. **Discover:** Administrators define the theme and budget for the PB cycle.
2. **Dream:** Students create proposals on how to make the school better.

3. **Design:** Student leaders will review and select the proposals that are feasible based on budget, cost and scope.
4. **Decide:** All students participate and choose the proposals they like the most while using real money to fund proposals.
5. **Do:** The funded proposals are implemented. The details of implementation depend on each proposal. For example, if it consists of simply getting supplies for the school, the PB admin will just buy the supplies.

You can help in the following ways:

- Encourage your students to participate by submitting proposal ideas.
- Remind students that proposals that benefit the greatest number of students and fit within the budget are most likely to be submitted to voting.
- Encourage students to use design-thinking to create proposal ideas.
- Inform the students that they will be using FirstRoot's app and that they should let FirstRoot know if they experience any problems using the app. They should also tell FirstRoot how they'd like to improve the app.

We think this project will be a lot of fun precisely because it puts the students in control of a real budget and they will see real change happen.

Thank you, and please let me know if you have any questions.

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

Sample email for students (Introduction)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] students,

I'm excited to announce our participatory budgeting (PB) program. This will give YOU the opportunity to make our school better and a bit more awesome. How? REAL MONEY.

Our PB program will give every student an equal share of our budget of \$[BUDGET] to use it to improve the school. The PB process works like this:

1. **Discover:** You will receive an email from FirstRoot inviting you to create an account. Don't worry, the email is legit and you should register.
2. **Dream:** All students will use the FirstRoot app to create proposals on how to make [SCHOOL NAME] a better school.
3. **Design:** Student leaders will review and select the proposals that are feasible based on budget, cost and scope.



4. **Decide:** All students will be able to participate in a democratic voting process to choose the proposals they like the most while using real money to fund proposals.
5. **Do:** The funded proposals -meaning, the winning proposals- get implemented. The details of implementation depend on each proposal. For example, if a proposal consists of simply getting better supplies for the school, the PB admin will just buy the supplies.

Here are some tips:

- Think of ways in which you can make [SCHOOL NAME] better. Submit these proposals through the FirstRoot app.
- Remember that proposals that benefit the greatest number of students and fit within the budget are most likely to be submitted for voting in Decide phase.
- Use design-thinking techniques to create your proposal ideas.

Note: You will probably be using a beta version of FirstRoot's software. Email FirstRoot at support@firstroot.co if you experience any problems or if you have cool ideas on how to make the app even better.

Keep in mind: this is your money, and your school. We look forward to seeing how you invest and what your awesome ideas are.

Let me know if you have any questions.

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

Sample email for teachers (Decide phase)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] staff,

Thank you for your support in our Participatory Budgeting program! XX students have accessed the app creating XX proposals. These proposals have been refined with cost forecasts and are now ready for voting in Decide phase!

Decide phase will begin on [DATE]. Students vote for their favorite proposals via the app. Decide will end on [DATE]. Results will be tabulated and confirmed over the weekend and the winning proposals will be announced on [DATE]. We'll start implementing the proposals in [DATE].

As a reminder, the PB cycle has five main phases. We're in phase 3.

1. **Discover:** Administrators define the theme and budget for the PB cycle.
2. **Dream:** Students create proposals on how to make the school better
3. **Design:** Student leaders review proposals and select the ones that are feasible based on cost and scope.



4. **Decide:** All students will participate in a voting process, voting on the proposals they like the most. And the winning proposals are *funded*.
5. **Do:** The funded proposals – in the case, the winning proposals – are implemented. The details of implementation depend on the proposal. For example, if a proposal consists of simply getting supplies for the school, we'll just buy the supplies.

Let me know if you have any questions

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

Sample email for students (Decide phase)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] students,

Get ready: You're about to make the final choices on how to invest \$[AVAILABLE BUDGET] to improve the school!

How? Vote for the proposals you think are best for the school.

Decide phase will begin on [DATE]. Students vote for their favorite proposals via the app. Decide will end on [DATE]. Results will be tabulated and confirmed over the weekend and the winning proposals will be announced on [DATE]. We'll start implementing the proposals in [DATE].

We look forward to seeing which proposals you think will make the most positive impact.

Let me know if you have any questions.

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

FirstRoot Participatory Budgeting and Covid-19

Our commitment to the safety of students, principals, teachers and staff members is one of the reasons we started FirstRoot.

Historically, Participatory Budgeting was implemented as an in-person process. Unfortunately, Covid-19 has caused many schools to either cancel or significantly reduce their PB programs. By creating an easy to use app, FirstRoot supports schools who want to create a safe implementation of PB.

Managing the budget

How much money should be given to students?

The budget given to students is essential: you want to have enough money to be meaningful, without having a budget so large that adults would feel compelled to control the process. Most PB programs budgets range from \$1,000 to \$10,000. Some schools have gone much higher, with budgets as high as \$50,000.

Where does the money for Participatory Budgeting come from?

- Principals may provide funding
- The PTA / PTSA / PTO may provide funding
- The student council may provide funding

How is the budget managed?

Teachers or school administrators manage the actual budget outside of the app.

Teachers should make certain that students have access to all financial information associated with implementing the winning proposals, as this builds trust by demonstrating that the proposals they selected are purchased and implemented.

Managing Student Privacy, Data, and Security

What controls do teachers have?

Teachers and school administrators set the policies, such as the maximum cost of a single proposal or requiring that proposal be for capital improvements. Student leaders and teachers review all proposals to ensure they meet school guidelines.

What training does FirstRoot provide?

FirstRoot will provide free video training courses on our website. We will also work with our community of teachers to create additional training videos.

Additional resources:

- [Participatory Budgeting in Schools from PB Scotland](#)
- [Civics for all: Participatory Budgeting Curriculum from NYC Dept. of Education](#)

Determining Program Scope

Most Participatory Budgeting programs are run as a school-wide program, but it also can be for classroom, project-based learning or even an extra-curricular project.

What is the research on program effectiveness?

Research has shown that:

- PB in schools increases civic engagement, even when there is not a formal curriculum driving the process.¹
- PB in schools and the community influences budget priorities.²
- “Most scholars and participants of PB’s agree that one of their most important benefits is the deepening of the exercise of democracy”.³

Does FirstRoot have any influence or control over the program?

No.

¹ Cohen, M., D. Schugurensky and A. Wiek (2015). Citizenship Education through Participatory Budgeting: The Case of Bioscience High School in Phoenix, Arizona. Curriculum and Teaching, Volume 30, Number 2, pp. 5-26. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/193620515.pdf>

² [New research on Participatory Budgeting Highlights – Community Pri](#)

³ [72 Frequently Asked Questions about Participatory Budgeting](#), UN-HABIT.

Do student's grades impact their participation?

Teachers, coaches and school administrators determine who may participate in the program. FirstRoot does not determine who participates.

What policies exist to keep students safe?

Student submitted content is automatically reviewed to identify and remove offensive or potentially offensive images or language. Students can flag content for review by teachers. Offensive content can be removed by teachers.

How is data protected?

FirstRoot was created by extremely experienced software developers with backgrounds in information and data security, app development, and hosted software development.

- All data is stored in an encrypted format in Amazon Web Services
- Access to the service is controlled through SSL (Secure Sockets Layer)
- FirstRoot is FERPA and GDPR compliant

How do I get started?

Contact us at hello@firstroot.co

Or join our Slack community: <https://pbforschools.slack.com>