

VOCES CON ¡PODER!

Participatory Budgeting in Central Falls School District

IN BRIEF:



This report outlines the design and impact of the Central Falls Public School District Summer 2021 Participatory Budgeting Initiative. Funding for the initiative was provided by way of a federal grant received through the Elementary and Secondary School Relief (ESSER) funds following the COVID-19 pandemic. The process for the community decision making centered on a democratic innovation called participatory budgeting (PB). The process in Central Falls revealed several important findings. Over 150 Central Falls parents and students participated in PB throughout the process. Our analysis indicates a strong satisfaction amongst the public with the process, and significant changes in attitudes toward civic engagement.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

PB is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget. Community-based delegates are responsible for soliciting ideas from the larger public, developing potential plans for how to use the funding, and presenting their plans to the public. The decision about what to fund happens through a community vote. **This process ultimately gives people real power over real money for real projects.** PB began in Brazil in 1989 as an anti-poverty measure. It has since spread to over 10,000 cities around the world, and has been used to decide budgets from cities, schools, school districts, housing authorities, and other institutions.

CENTRAL FALLS

Central Falls is the smallest and densest city in Rhode Island. Its population is predominantly Hispanic, with 45% of the students being multilingual learners. Additionally, 40% of children under 18 live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold, compared to 17% in the State of Rhode Island. (<https://www.rikidcount.org/Data-Publications/Community-Profiles>).



BROWN



STRUCTURE OF PROCESS

Delegates were recruited from members of the CFSD community, which included parents and students. Meetings occurred twice weekly, and delegates were provided support such as childcare, language translation and interpretation, and a stipend—**all of which were crucial in facilitating the participation of the delegates.** Delegates were divided into six committees related to areas of need for the community, including student and family support, academic enrichment, and school environment. **Within each committee, delegates created project proposals, facilitated by proposal templates, meetings with experts, and committee discussions.** After being reviewed by the Superintendent to ensure feasibility, the process concluded with the broader community coming together to vote on the proposed projects.

IMPLICATIONS

Changes in Delegate Perceptions of Central Falls School District

Participating in the PB process led most delegates to temper their views about the Central Falls School District, resulting in more neutral perceptions of the district. The fact that delegates expressed somewhat lower levels of satisfaction with the district after the PB process may point to an increased knowledge and understanding of the workings of the School District due to PB, as well as a desire for ongoing participation and involvement in CFSD by community members. **International studies on PB show that PB can achieve positive change in attitudes about public institutions over time.**

“In a way, my perspective has changed now that I was part of a process in which I knew what money was being invested into, knowledge that parents had no access to before. This makes me want more transparency about the funds and the way schools of CF are run.”

-parent delegate

Evaluation of the PB Process and Changes in Skills Used in Civic Engagement

The majority of delegates (94%) evaluated their experience positively. **Nearly all of the delegates believed that the district should continue to employ PB practices.** Additionally, most delegates felt motivated by the possibilities of the future, inspired during the meetings, and hopeful for future outcomes. Over 80% of participants agreed that they were able to speak freely during meetings and that their opinions mattered and were taken seriously by their peers, noting an overall increase in feelings of empowerment.

“I... feel like I am better at sharing my opinions in a group and participating in discussions.”

-student delegate

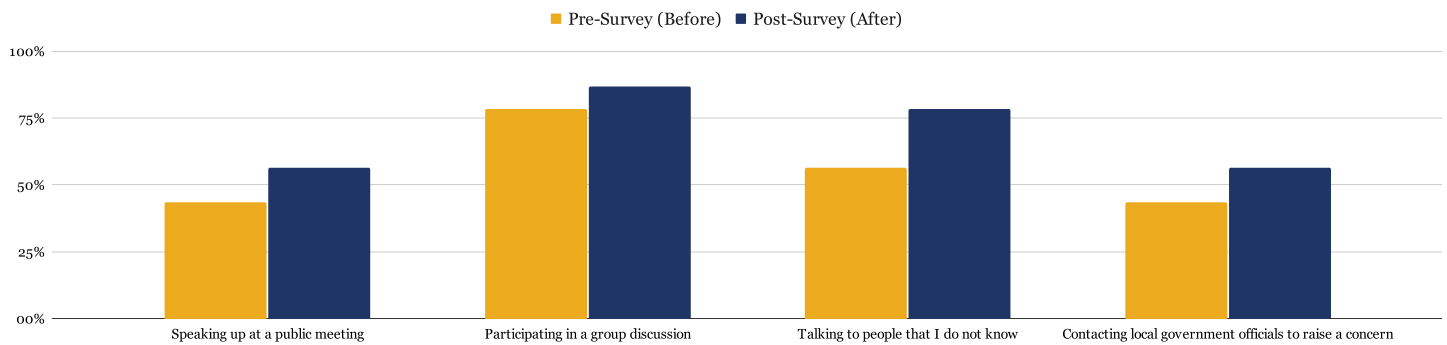
Views on Future Participation

After participating in PB, delegates reported an increased interest in future participation in their community, especially in participation centered around groups and collective action. After participating in PB, ratings of power for individual community members remained low, but there was an increase in the rating of power for community-led groups and organizations.

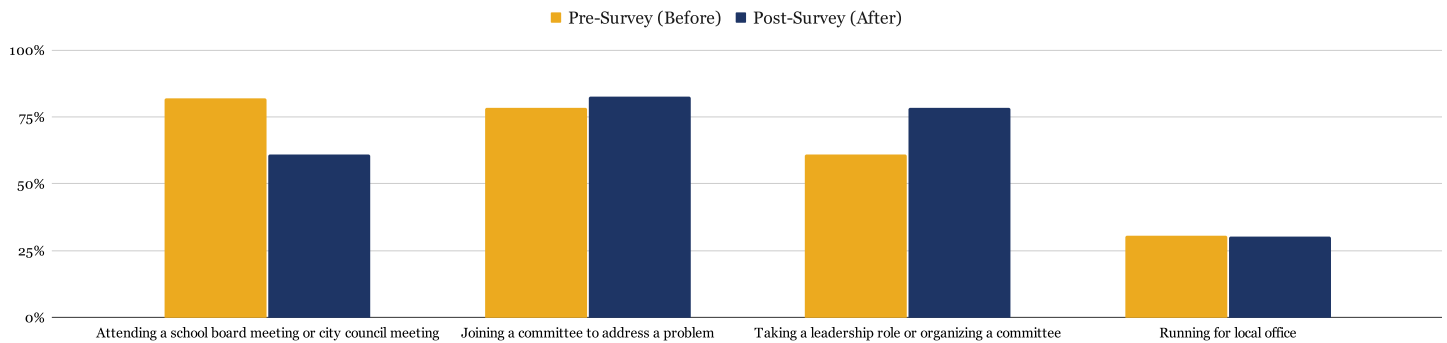
“My participation and that of all the other delegates was very important. It demonstrates that more people can participate in making decisions, this way it is more just and equitable--it is not the same two or three people who are always making the decisions.”

-parent delegate

Delegates interested and very interested in activities associated with self-efficacy, before and after VCP



Delegates interested or very interested in civic engagement, before and after VCP



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: Allocate more money through participatory budgeting.

International studies find that more money allocated through PB processes leads to greater participation, and more money would also provide significantly greater opportunities for more critical engagement from diverse community stakeholders. These positive outcomes could be multiplied with more funding.

Recommendation #2: Implement additional strategies for multilingual group communication.

Heavily investing in multilingual accessibility is a worthy use of funds. Some specific examples of how to invest in multilingual infrastructure include: utilizing headsets for interpreting; identify bilingual facilitators; utilize ice-breakers, team building exercises, diversity and inclusion training and other strategies to build cross-cultural understanding.

Recommendation #3: Invest in community outreach.

Funds should be used for community outreach to ensure participants are representative of the community. Specific examples of effective outreach strategies include texting, phone banking and door knocking.

Recommendation #4: Invest time into conversations between stakeholders and content area experts.

The opportunity for participants to talk to content area experts builds up knowledge about and comfort with civic participation.. The overall process of engaging with those with technical expertise, including from outside the district, is a critical part of the process that requires thoughtful planning to make sure it is effective.

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