

VOCES CON iPODER!

Participatory Budgeting in Central Falls School District
Summer 2021 // First Iteration
Report Prepared by Brown University



BROWN

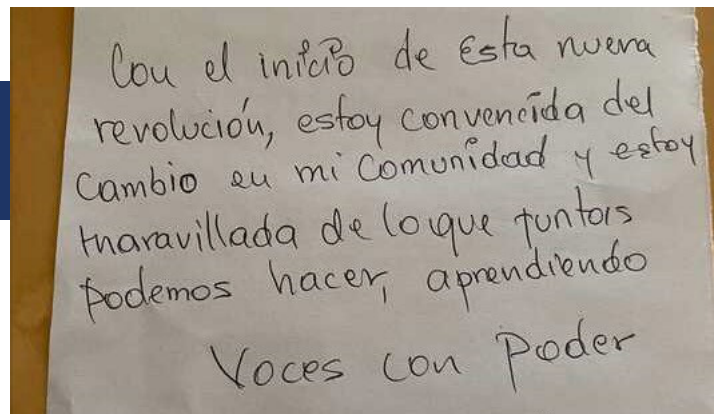


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“With the beginning of this new revolution, I’m convinced of change in my community, and I’m amazed at what we can do together, learning.

Voices with power”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details the design and impact of the Central Falls Public School District Summer 2021 Participatory Budgeting Initiative. At the outset of the summer, the leaders of the Central Falls Public School District (CFSD) of Central Falls, RI allocated \$100,000 for the public to decide its use. The dollars came by way of a federal grant received through the Elementary and Secondary School Relief (ESSER) funds. Public engagement in the decision-making process centered on a democratic innovation called participatory budgeting (PB).

The PB initiative in Central Falls was consistent with the traditional model. The district recruited community members to serve as delegates. As delegates, they were responsible for helping the district solicit ideas from the larger public, developing different potential plans for how to use the funding, and presenting their plans to the public. The decision about what to fund was made through a community vote. Delegates met twice-a-week for 6 weeks, progressing from general ideas to concrete proposals.

The process in Central Falls revealed several important findings. Over 150 Central Falls parents and students participated in the PB. Our analysis indicates a strong satisfaction amongst the public with the process itself. There was also variation in support for the various projects, which suggests that the proposals aligned well with the preferences of the community as a whole. After developing proposals, delegates demonstrated higher levels of empowerment and stronger community ties. They also overwhelmingly preferred that the district continue to employ PB as a method of utilizing funds.

INTRODUCTION

What is participatory budgeting? Why does it matter, specifically at Central Falls schools?



PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING (PB) IN CENTRAL FALLS SCHOOL DISTRICT

PB is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget. It gives people real power over real money. PB started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989 as an anti-poverty measure, and since then it has 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.

2019 marked the first year of Participatory Budgeting (PB) in Central Falls. Through the initiative, students at Central Falls High School got to democratically allocate \$10,000 to improve their school through a semester-long elective class.

In summer 2021, the Central Falls School District expanded PB to engage all students and parents in the District to decide how to allocate \$100,000 in COVID-19 relief funds to prepare for a successful 2021-22 school year. A group of parent and student leaders decided to name their initiative **VOCES CON PODER** (Voices with Power).

The process began by reaching out to the entire community to collect ideas for spending priorities. Then, student and parent delegates shaped those ideas into viable proposals, based on what would most benefit the school community.

The proposals were voted on by the parents and students in the District. Going forward, the project that received the most votes will be implemented in the schools. This process gives parents and students real power over real money to fund real projects for the Central Falls public schools.



WHY PB?

We want students and parents to feel **EMPOWERED** to speak up about the needs they see and changes they feel would improve the school district, and feel like they have a real **VOICE** in shaping the **VISION** of the Central Falls School District.

We want to better understand the needs of students and families in our District so we can improve **EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES, QUALITY OF LEARNING, ATTENDANCE** and **OPPORTUNITIES** for our students.

We want to create a more **TRANSPARENT** and **EQUITABLE** funding process for the District.

As families see **CONCRETE, VISIBLE CHANGES** in our schools, we create a pathway to increased civic engagement, which leads to a more united and resilient community.

WHO IS CFSD?

Central Falls School District (CFSD), located in Central Falls, RI, is an urban public school district located approximately 10 miles north of Providence, RI. The following 6 schools are served by Central Falls School District:

- Central Falls High School (9-12)
- Calcutt Middle School (5-8)
- Ella Risk Elementary School (K-4)
- Veterans Memorial Elementary School (K-4)
- Raíces Dual Language Academy (PreK-6)
- Captain Hunt Preschool (PreK-K)

Central Falls School District is governed by a 7-member Board of Trustees, nominated by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) Commissioner and appointed by the RIDE Board of Regents. **4 OF THE 7** Board of Trustee members must be Central Falls residents and must be parents of current or former CFSD students.

(1)

Hispanic or Latino	66.4%
White (non-Hispanic)	19.8%
Black or African American (non-Hispanic)	12.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.0%
Asian	0.6%
Total Population	22,583

2,800+ students in the district (2)

45% of students are multilingual learners (2)

71% 4 year graduation rate (2)

19% of students are enrolled in special education (2)

\$31,451 Median household income (2)

(1) [US CENSUS](#)
 (2) [RI Kids Count](#)



IMPACTS OF COVID-19

As the smallest and densest city in Rhode Island, Central Falls was one of the communities **HIT HARDEST** by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Rhode Island Department of Health, the rate of COVID-19 cases between March 2020 and September 2021 was 24,342 cases per 100,000 people.

“We have been keeping ourselves isolated in a way, [but] there is always a fear of getting sick. One never knows.”

-parent delegate

High rates of COVID cases within the area impacted **EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES** for students as well as **GENERAL ATTENDANCE** within the district. The Learning, Equity & Accelerated Pathways Task Force Report states that schools in Rhode Island experienced a 3.1% decrease in enrollment during the 2020-2021 school year. This rate of decrease was even higher in Central Falls (3.4%). Outlined in Rhode Island’s State Plan for the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, “Across the board, students of color, multilingual learners, and differently-abled students were more chronically absent compared to their peers”—a sharp decrease in attendance has also been noted throughout CFSD.

In response to the pandemic, Congress allocated funds for the Education Stabilization Fund through the Coronavirus Aid Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund). As of September 2021, Central Falls School District has received a total of \$23,617,110 in ESSER funding, of which \$100,000 was allocated to the Voces Con Poder Project.

PROCESS

What steps were taken during the participatory budgeting process? Why were these steps taken?



GENERAL FRAMEWORK

1) DESIGN THE PROCESS

May and June 2021: A steering committee composed of parents, students, and administrative leaders met to decide how the process would work.

2) BRAINSTORM IDEAS

Mid-June 2021: As delegate groups began their meetings, community members shared ideas on how to spend the \$100,000 through idea collection surveys.

3) DEVELOP PROPOSALS

June and July 2021: Delegate groups composed of students and parents met twice weekly to turn collected ideas into project proposals.

6) IMPROVE FOR NEXT YEAR!

5) FUND WINNING PROJECTS

2021-22 School Year: The winning project(s) get implemented in CFSD schools.

4) VOTE

August 14, 2021: All CFSD parents and students were invited to vote on which project to fund.



**Diagram framework adapted from and courtesy of the Participatory Budgeting Project*

THE PROCESS, BROKEN DOWN:

1) RECRUITING THE DELEGATES

A **MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH** was used to recruit delegates, which included everything from texting and calling individual families to distributing flyers on social media. CFSD administrators sent text messages through Kinvo, a school-based communication app, about two information sessions, of which one was virtual and one was in person. At the info sessions, parents were provided information about the time commitment, and the support that would be provided to help them participate. 50 parents signed up for info sessions. Students were recruited primarily through word-of-mouth from their teachers, who provided information to students they thought would be interested in joining.

Although over 40 parents and students attended the initial meetings, 33 delegates ended up attending the meetings throughout the summer (17 parents, including 5 parent facilitators, and 16 students) (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Delegates by gender, Voces Con Poder.

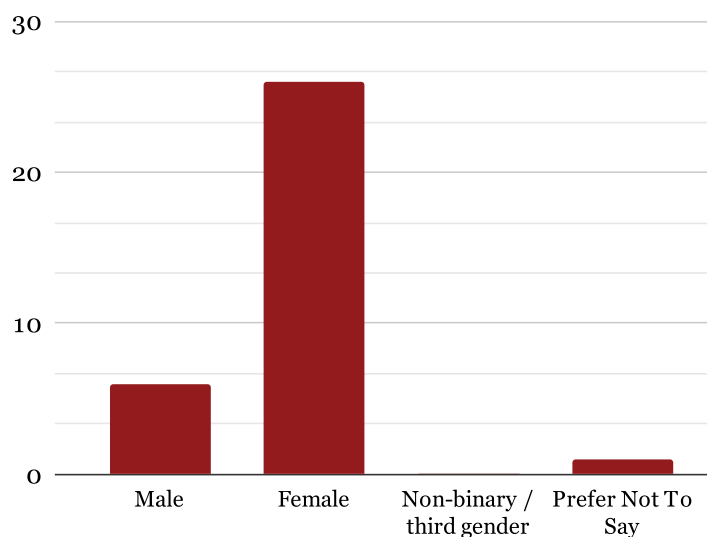
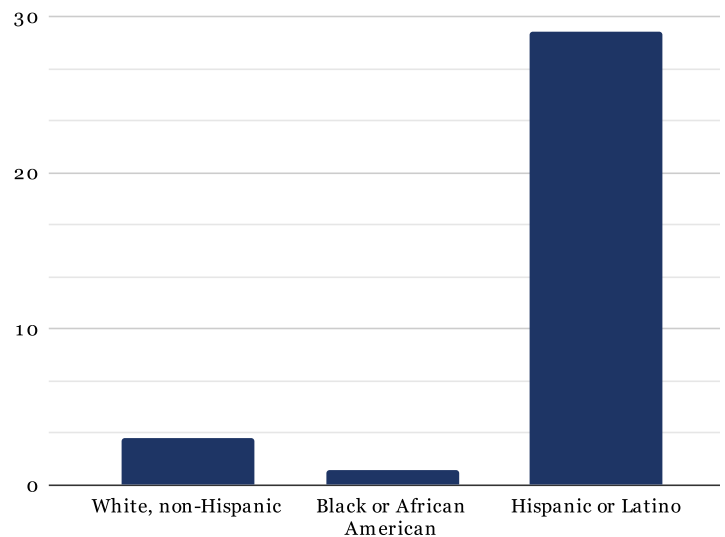


Figure 2. Delegates by ethnicity, Voces Con Poder.



2) SUPPORTING THE DELEGATES

LANGUAGE ACCESS: Many of the meetings were conducted primarily in Spanish, with interpreters who translated into English when necessary. Visual resources, like videos and infographics, were also in both languages. Once the delegates broke into committees, most committee discussions were either conducted entirely in Spanish, or in Spanish with English interpretation. All printed materials and presentations were translated into Spanish.

FOOD AND CHILDCARE: A light dinner was provided at each of the meetings, as was childcare in a separate room, for parents who needed to bring their young children to the meetings. Many delegates noted that childcare was an **ESSENTIAL SUPPORT** needed for their participation.

STIPEND: Due to the intensive, bi-weekly time commitment required of the delegates, they were provided with a stipend at the end of the process.

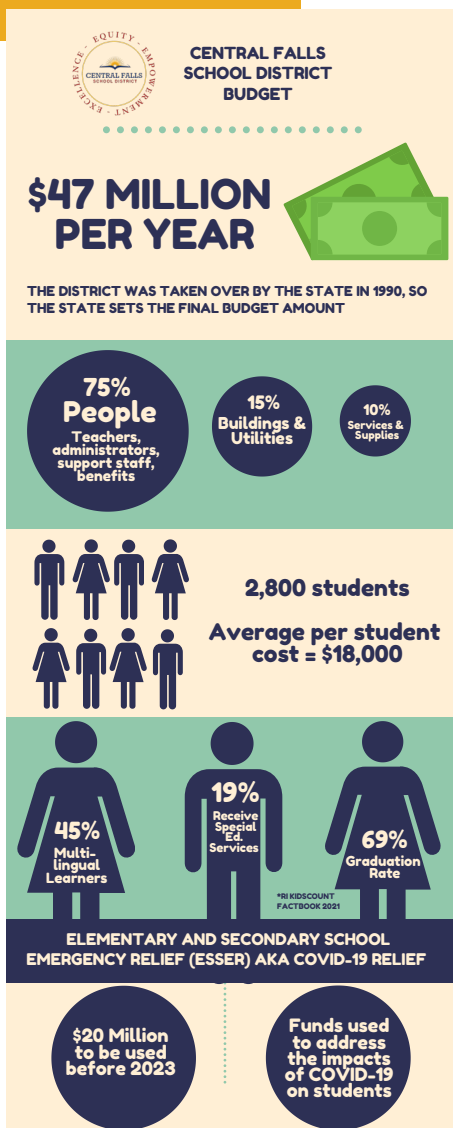
53.33% of participants said that the stipend was “very important” in their ability to participate in Voces Con Poder. The **SAME PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS**, 53.33%, said that childcare was “very important” in their ability to participate in Voces Con Poder.

3) ORIENTING THE DELEGATES

The initial meetings had two primary goals—**(1) TO DISCUSS THE GOALS OF THE PB PROCESS AND LEARN ABOUT THE DISTRICT BUDGET**, and **(2) TO CREATE A BOND BETWEEN DELEGATE PARTICIPANTS**. The first meeting happened on the night of June 15th, which began with icebreakers, welcomes from special guests, and food. A presentation about participatory budgeting, which included videos and images, outlined the steps of the process. Multiple representatives, such as city officials and the superintendent, were present at the first meeting to welcome everyone and answer delegates’ questions.

EQUITY

Discussions about equity were important to frame discussions about district needs. Early on in the PB process, representatives from **PARENTS LEADING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY (PLEE)** and **EQUITY INSTITUTE** provided an educational and interactive presentation about equity. Delegates were made aware of the district’s unique financial situation, being under state control. Delegates discovered that while over \$18,000 was being spent per student, many **VITAL NEEDS WERE NOT BEING MET** due to a lack of funding. During the equity workshop, delegates compared Central Falls School District with other Rhode Island schools and learned about differences between equity and equality. This discussion, helped delegates to center equity when formulating their project proposals.



<< Resources like this were presented in the meetings to contextualize equity and the school budget.

WHAT DID MEETINGS LOOK LIKE?

Once delegates were separated into committees, the typical meeting structure was as follows:

- Food and introduction, given by facilitator Pam (15-20 minutes)
During this portion of the meetings, Pam would give instructions, present new information, or share relevant community news.
- Group breakouts (approximately 1 hr.)
Each group would work at the task at hand, whether it be prioritizing ideas, discussing with experts, engaging in deliberation, or creating posters.
- Exit survey (conducted before participants left)
At every meeting, participants were asked to fill out a survey, generally containing three main questions: (1) a 1-10 scale of how they rated that day’s meeting; (2) a one-word description of the committee; and (3) a meeting-specific question requiring a longer answer.

4) COLLECTING IDEAS

Ideas for how to spend \$100,000 to improve the Central Falls public schools were collected from the community. Respondents were asked to identify problems they see with the schools and propose solutions to those problems.

WHY? To provide a wide range of ideas to inform the delegates as they develop equitable solutions to meet the needs of the entire district.

WHO RESPONDED? Parents, teachers, students, and Central Falls community members, with parents responding the most.

HOW? Delegates reached out to community members; text messages with the survey link were sent to all parents; emails were sent to teachers who both filled it out themselves, and shared it with students. Delegates were taught how to distribute this survey, and engaged in role plays to practice in both English and Spanish. Each delegate was asked to get responses from 10 community members. Overall, delegates felt it was more effective to gather ideas using paper surveys, over a digital option with QR code.

HOW MANY? Approximately 240 ideas were gathered.

WHAT? Problems within the district, and solutions to solve them. Also, demographic information was collected.

WHEN? During the last week of school in June. At the second meeting, delegates were introduced to the idea collection survey.

WHERE? Within Central Falls.

COMMON THEMES? A main theme from the survey was some kind of deficit—whether that be a lack of academic supplies, teachers, adequate facilities, or other resources like after school opportunities.

5) FORMING COMMITTEES

At the third meeting (on June 22nd), delegates were introduced to the 6 different committees which were determined based on themes identified in the idea collection survey. As a part of the exit survey for this third meeting, delegates were asked to rank the three groups that they were interested in. With consideration for group size and distribution of parents and students, the delegates were **DIVIDED INTO SIX COMMITTEES:**

- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1) EXTRACURRICULARS | 5) HEALTH AND SAFETY |
| 2) STUDENT SUPPORTS | 6) SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT |
| 3) FAMILY SUPPORTS | & FACILITIES |
| 4) ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT | |

Most committees mixed students and parents of the District, however, a special consideration was made for the Family Support group, which contained primarily parent participants due to the nature of the issue. Each committee had a lead facilitator, who was in charge of making sure the committee stayed on track with the tasks that had to be completed at each meeting.

6) DEVELOPING PROJECT PROPOSALS

STEP 1: Ideas from the idea collection survey were separated into lists and given to each delegate group. Each idea was sorted into six categorical lists, which corresponded to each of the committees.

STEP 2: Each committee then organized their respective list of ideas by grouping them into similar themes.

STEP 3: Delegates then rated each idea or theme using an equity rubric, helping them determine which projects are most needed and would have the biggest impact on District's schools.

STEP 4: Based on their priorities, delegates drafted their proposals, and brainstormed questions that they still needed to answer. Many expressed their need for more clarity and guidance. This is when the meeting with experts was particularly helpful.

STEP 5: Committee members met with experts, who were school district or district-affiliated personnel with experience that fell into the categories of the specific committees. These included:

- Program directors
- Principals and Vice Principals
- Dining Services and Operations & Safety Directors
- Other members of the CFSD School Administration

WHAT DID DELEGATES AND EXPERTS DISCUSS?

After introductions between experts and delegates, the committees presented their draft proposals and expressed their questions and concerns about the projects. Most of the experts required interpreters in order to speak with the committees that used

Spanish as their primary language for discussion.



Experts then gave feedback on the committees' proposals. Experts' responses varied in each committee—for some projects they agreed with the feasibility of the implementation of the proposed projects, in other cases they expressed that the projects would not be viable.

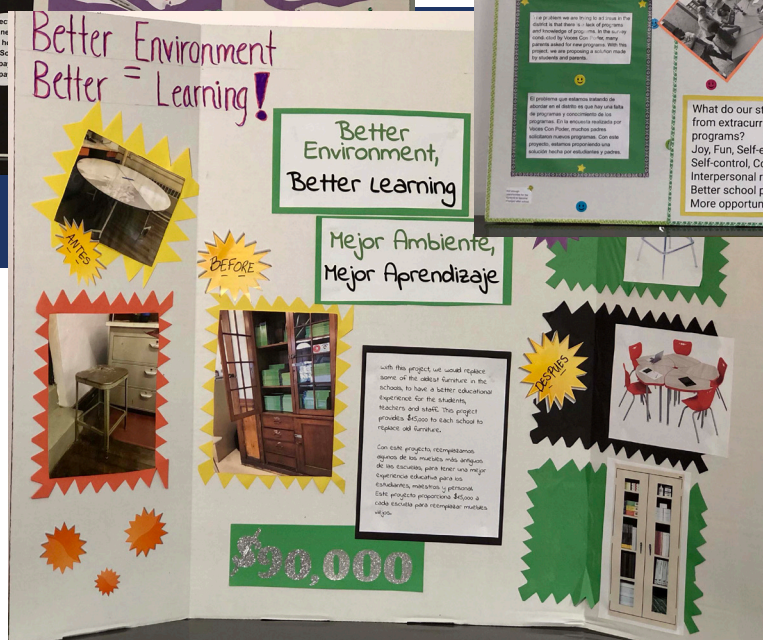
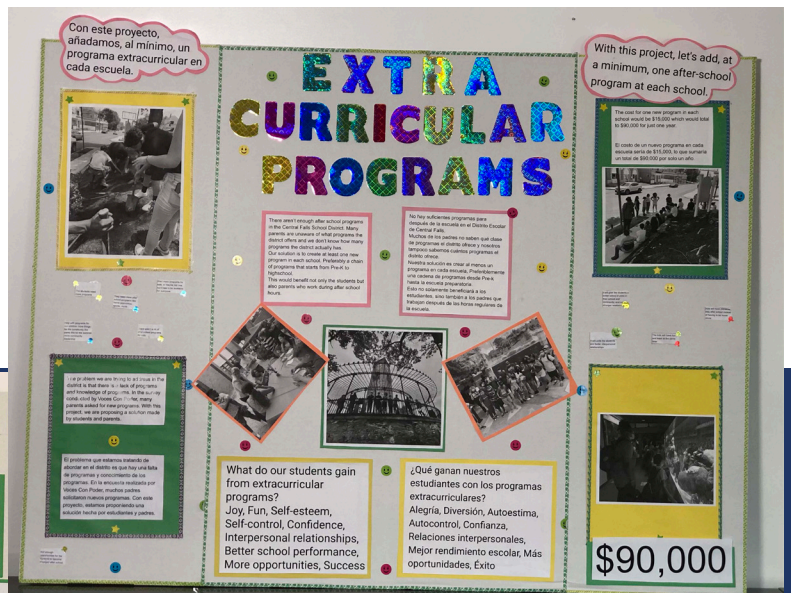
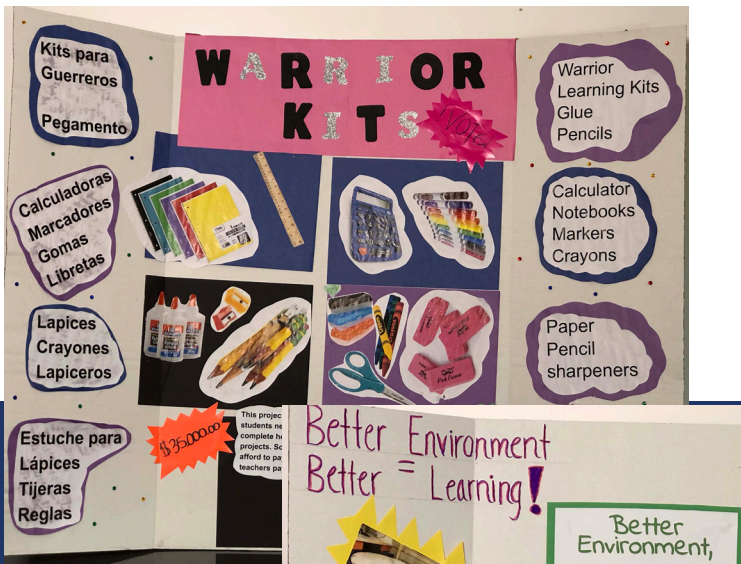
The approach that each expert took within each group varied. Within some committees the meeting looked more like a discussion where the experts and delegates discussed alternatives and changes to their projects. In other committees the discussion was more of a question answer format.

STEP 6: After meeting with experts, each committee used the new information and ideas offered by the experts to develop their final proposals. The delegates were given project proposal worksheets, which included:

1. Proposal name - creativity was encouraged!
2. A brief and long description of the project
3. Photos
4. A table to estimate each of the budget line-items
5. The estimated total cost

STEP 7: Final project proposals were reviewed by the Superintendent to ensure they were feasible, and had an accurate cost estimate.

STEP 8: Delegates created tri-fold poster boards to inform voters about the details of their projects.



7) VOTING

The voting took place on **SATURDAY, AUGUST 14TH** in the Gym at Calcutt Middle School. The vote site was coordinated by volunteers and district staff, and was set up as a fun, community event, with a DJ, cookout and ice cream truck. Posters displayed at the entrance educated voters about the projects they would be able to vote for. The voting felt much like a traditional voting site, as voters cast their votes using authentic ballots and voting machines provided by the office of Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea.

VOCES CON PODER ¡DECIDA CÓMO GASTAR \$100,000 PARA MEJORAR NUESTRAS ESCUELAS!

¡FIESTA DE VOTACIÓN!

SÁBADO, 14 DE AGOSTO DE 10AM A 3PM
GIMNASIO DE LA ESCUELA CALCUTT

BARBACOA "BBQ", HELADO, MÚSICA Y RIFAS

¡CUALQUIERA QUE SEA ESTUDIANTE O PADRE / TUTOR EN LAS ESCUELAS PÚBLICAS DE CENTRAL FALLS PUEDE VOTAR!

REGÍSTRESE PARA VOTAR
[BIT.LY/VCPVOTE](https://bit.ly/vcpvote)



With the goal of making the vote an inclusive event, **ANY PARENT OR STUDENT WAS ABLE TO VOTE**, regardless of voter registration status or age. For many, this was the first time they were **ABLE TO VOTE** in an official capacity.



Voters were allowed to choose **3 PROJECTS** to vote for. The projects included (Figure 3):

Figure 3. Project proposals by number of votes, Voces Con Poder.

# OF VOTES	PROJECT TITLE	PROJECT DESCRIPTION
69	Extracurricular Programs	Introduce at least one new afterschool program at each school. This project would provide \$15,000 to each school for afterschool and enrichment programs.
62	School Safety App	Innovative app that would allow the children, parents and staff to be able to communicate about safety concerns at school. Students will be able to share their problems and concerns in this app, such as bullying or mental health concerns.
56	Better Environment, Better Learning	Replacement of some of the oldest furniture in the schools, to have a better educational experience for the students, teachers and staff. This project provides \$15,000 to each school to replace old furniture.
55	Bilingual Community	Provide stipends to a committee of 14 bi-lingual volunteers who will help with interpreting in the schools throughout the district.
48	If You Have to Go.....Enjoy It!	Students deserve to have clean, functioning bathrooms. Voting for bathroom makeover ensures that the students at every school will have that. This project provides \$10,000 to each school to improve the bathrooms.
41	Healthy Minds	Support our students by providing personal hygiene products and introducing health class to the district to teach us more about ourselves and how to be safe.
41	Warriors Kits	Provide school supply kits for home for each student in the district to be able to learn and do their school work.
32	Let's Get Smart with Smart Boards	Purchase 25 smart boards for interactive learning in classrooms across the school district.
30	Get to School Safely	Collaborate with traffic police to make school drop-off and pick-up more safe for the whole community.

METHODOLOGY

What tools were used to collect the data?



Photo courtesy of City of Central Falls Facebook Page

In order to collect data throughout the PB process, the research team administered a **VARIETY OF SURVEYS** both to delegates and to other individuals involved in the process, such as Central Falls students and community members and those who participated in voting day.

DELEGATE PRE-PARTICIPATION SURVEY:

The goal of the pre-participation survey was to collect initial information about the delegates. This information included their motivations for participation in PB, any prior participation in community organizations, and their **LIKELIHOOD** for future participation; baseline measures of self-efficacy, efficacy and trust related to the school district, and understandings of social and civic power in the community **TO TEST THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PB PROCESS**; and demographic information. This survey was administered at the beginning of the PB process in June 2021 and was completed by delegates either electronically using Qualtrics (online data collection software) or on paper.

IDEA COLLECTION SURVEY: (n=240)

The goal of the idea collection survey was to hear from a **LARGER SAMPLE** of Central Falls students, parents, and community members about the problems they had identified with the school district and their thoughts on potential solutions and their impact. It also asked community members for their feelings about the school district. This survey was completed at the beginning of the process in order to inform delegates of feelings in the broader community about problems within the district and possible solutions. The district distributed the survey through their text message platform, Kinvo, and via social media. Delegates reached out to people in their networks through in-person conversation, social media, and text message. Additionally, teachers were sent the survey over email, and several teachers completed it themselves, or asked their students to complete it. The survey was completed either on paper or electronically through Qualtrics.

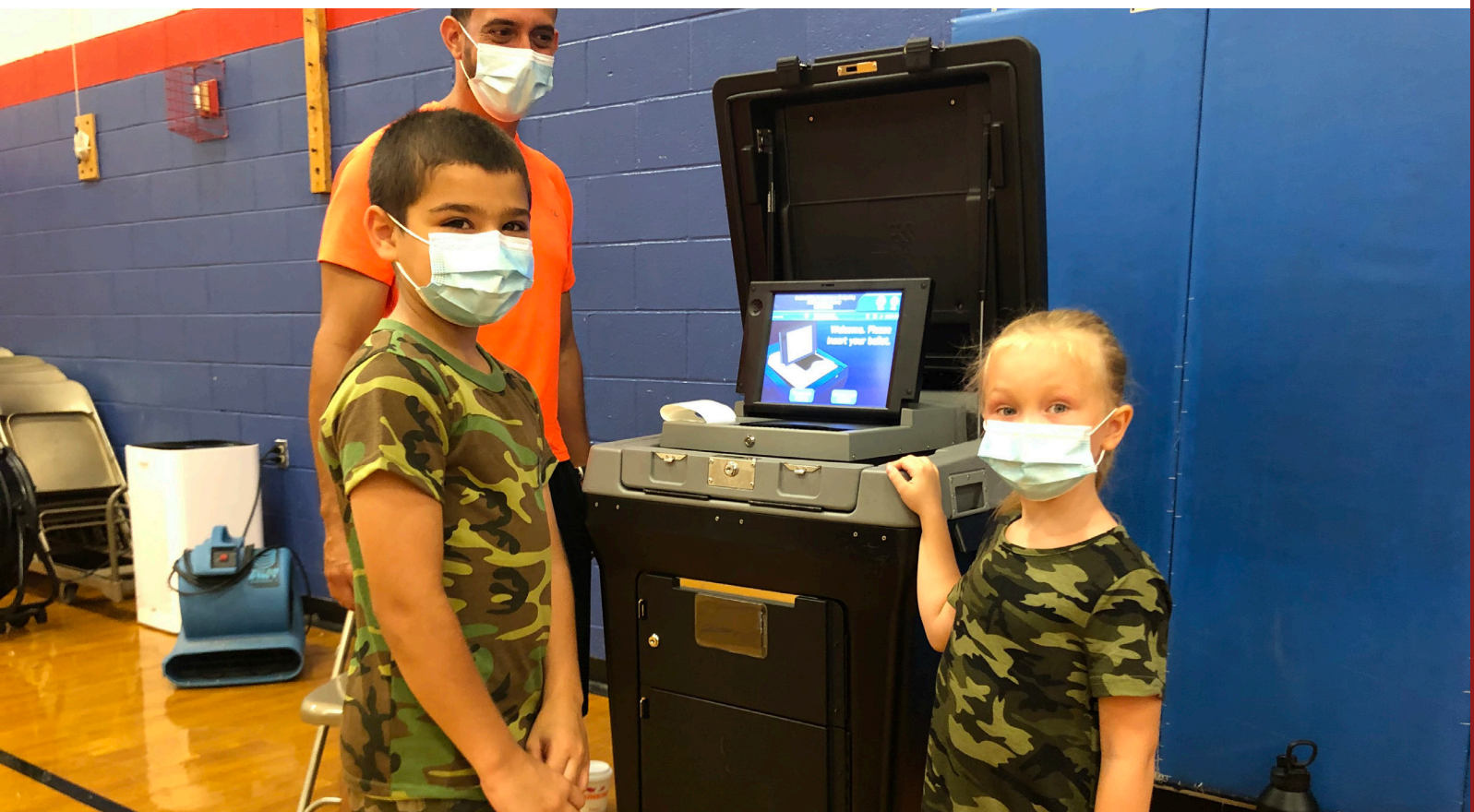
EXIT SURVEYS AND OBSERVATIONS FROM EACH MEETING:

Exit surveys were completed at the end of each meeting to collect data about delegates' feelings about the meeting. Delegates were asked to rate the meeting, share a few words explaining how they felt about the meeting, and to **SHARE** a high and low point from the meeting. These were completed in order to have real-time feedback on how the process was going for the delegates, and to identify any adjustments needed to be made for future meetings.

DELEGATE POST-PARTICIPATION SURVEY:

This survey was completed by delegates at the end of the PB process, after voting but before the results of the vote were announced. The questions in the post-survey echoed those in the pre-survey. This data was meant to gauge the **EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATION** in the PB process on delegates' interest in future participation, self-efficacy, efficacy and trust, and understanding of political and social power. It also sought to garner feedback on the PB process, with the goal of informing future iterations of Voces Con Poder. The delegate post-survey was administered online through Qualtrics.





VOTER SURVEY:

The goal of the voter survey was to learn about the **VOTING EXPERIENCE** for the students and parents who participated. They were asked how they heard about the event, what their experience of voting was like, and how well they believed the projects aligned with their understanding of the district's needs. The survey also asked for demographic information from parents.

INTERVIEWS:

Members of the research team completed interviews with nine of the PB delegates. The goal of these discussions was to gain a deeper understanding of delegates' feelings about the PB process, how they viewed the impact of their participation on both themselves and the community, and their thoughts about the future of PB in Central Falls. These conversations took place after voting day and were completed by phone in English or Spanish, based on the preference of the interviewee. Most conversations lasted approximately 30 minutes.

IMPLICATIONS

*What information do the collected data provide?
How can we interpret the collected data?*



INTERPRETING THE DATA:

1. CHANGES IN DELEGATE PERCEPTIONS OF CENTRAL FALLS SCHOOL DISTRICT

The chart below shows how delegates' views about Central Falls School District changed after participating in the PB process (Figure 4). Overall, the percentage of delegates who expressed dissatisfaction with the school district increased by 3.36 percent (those who stated that they were “very” or “somewhat dissatisfied”). Delegates who expressed satisfaction (those who stated that they were “very” or “somewhat satisfied”) decreased by nearly 20 percent.

Figure 4. Changes in delegate satisfaction with Central Falls School District.

	PRE-SURVEY	POST-SURVEY	CHANGE
VERY DISSATISFIED	13.64%	4.35%	-9.29%
SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED	9.09%	21.74%	+12.65%
NEITHER DISSATISFIED NOR SATISFIED	40.91%	56.52%	+15.61%
SOMEWHAT SATISFIED	27%	4.25%	-22.92%
VERY SATISFIED	9.09%	12.04%	+2.95%

However, looking more closely at the data reveals some important nuance. The majority of delegates state that they are either “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” “somewhat satisfied,” or “very satisfied” with the school district, both before (77 percent) and after (nearly 73 percent) participating in PB. Additionally, the percentage of delegates who stated that they are “very dissatisfied” with the district decreased by 9.29 percent after participating in PB.

The percentage of delegates stating that they were “very satisfied” with the district increased slightly, by 2.95 percent. It appears that participating in the PB process led most delegates to **TEMPER THEIR VIEWS** about Central Falls School District. This pattern resulted in less extreme, more neutral perceptions of the district, with the exception of the slight increase in “very satisfied” delegates.

“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

The fact that some delegates expressed somewhat lower levels of satisfaction with the district after participating in the PB process may point to the desire for ongoing involvement in changemaking in CFSD. In fact, the shift in delegate perspectives could serve as **AN EFFECTIVE CATALYST** for change in the district. PB creates a meaningful space for stakeholders who are dissatisfied with the schools. The popularity of Voces Con Poder among delegates signals that continuing PB in Central Falls may be a way to **ACHIEVE POSITIVE CHANGE** in the district moving forward.

2. EVALUATION OF THE PB PROCESS AND CHANGES IN SKILLS USED IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Despite their varying levels of satisfaction with the district, the **VAST MAJORITY** of delegates had a positive experience with the PB process. Overall, nearly all of the delegates (96.67 percent) believe that Participatory Budgeting should continue in Central Falls, with the exception of one delegate who said they were “Not sure.”

Nearly 94 percent of delegates rated their experience with PB a seven or higher out of ten. 86.67 percent of delegates are “very” or “somewhat likely” to recommend that a friend or family member serve as a PB delegate.

Additionally, delegates reported that during their participation in Voces Con Poder, they often felt **MOTIVATED BY POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE**: 70 percent of delegates “always” or “frequently” felt inspired at Voces Con Poder meetings and 67 percent “always” or “frequently” felt hopeful.

“I think it should continue because it allows community members to have a say in what they want and they’re the ones that know what [the] community actually needs.”

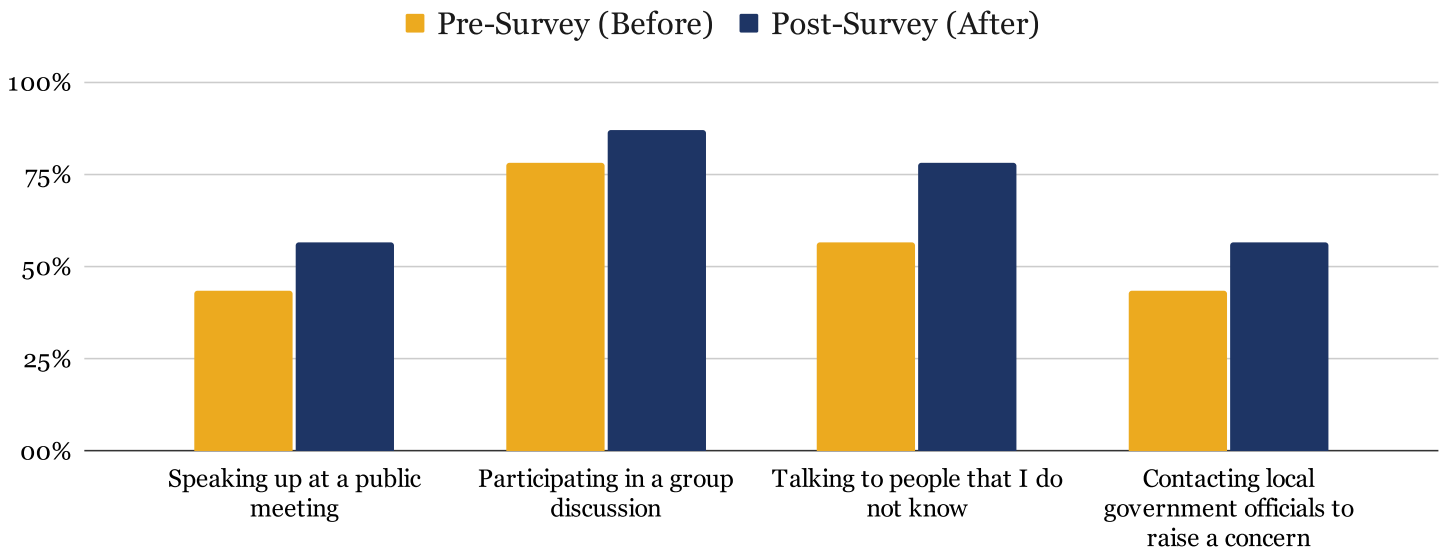
-parent delegate

Delegates’ positive perceptions of the PB process may stem from an increase in feelings of self-efficacy (defined as an individual’s belief in their ability to effectively use specific skills in order to reach a goal) and empowerment. Delegates reported an increase in comfort for several of the skills necessary for **EFFECTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**, such as: speaking up at a public meeting (13.04% increase in comfort), participating in a group discussion (8.69% increase in comfort), talking to people they do not know (21.74% increase in comfort), and contacting local government officials to raise a concern (13.04% increase in comfort) (Figure 5).

Perhaps due in part to this skill building, delegates also described **INCREASED FEELINGS OF EMPOWERMENT** after participating in PB. Specifically, they felt that they were able to express their opinions and that their views were valued by those around them. In their evaluation of the PB process, over 83 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I was able to speak as much as I wanted to.” Nearly 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My opinion mattered in my group.” And over 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “The other members of my group took my opinions seriously.”

Figure 5. Delegate levels of self-efficacy before and after the VCP intervention.

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



Delegates also felt that their voices were heard beyond their peers who participated in PB. They shared that PB allowed them to express their opinions with the school district as well as with the larger Central Falls community and that by doing so, they felt they were able to have an **IMPACT ON DECISION MAKING**. After participating in PB, there was a nearly 10 percent decrease in the number of delegates who disagreed with the statement “I see myself as being capable of making positive changes in my community.”

“My voice matters and sometimes one forgets to take advantage of that...Education goes both ways—the home and the family are part of what happens at school so we need to maintain open communication and participation to make everyone’s voices heard.”

-parent delegate

Overall, delegates enjoyed the PB process and would like to see it continue in Central Falls. After participating in PB, delegates reported higher feelings of self-efficacy and empowerment. **MOST IMPORTANTLY**, they believed that they could use their voices to make a difference in their community.

3. VIEWS ON FUTURE PARTICIPATION

When delegates were asked if they had “worked or volunteered with other people in your neighborhood to fix a problem or improve something in your community, prior to PB”, 61 percent of delegates said “no” or “I’m not sure.” In contrast, after participating in PB, delegates reported an increased interest in **FUTURE PARTICIPATION IN THEIR COMMUNITY**.

Compared to avenues of future participation such as attending school board or city council meetings, or running for office, the largest increases in delegates’ interest in future participation centered around joining or organizing a group or committee. Over 78 percent of delegates were interested in “organizing a committee or group to solve a problem,” and nearly 83 percent were interested in “joining a committee or group to solve problems in my community.” Comparing pre and post-surveys, there was a positive change of 4.34 percent in interest in joining a committee and a positive change of 17 percent for organizing a committee. Delegates overall showed an increased interest in forms of future participation that **CENTERED AROUND GROUPS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION** (Figure 6).

COMMUNITY BUILDING AND PB:

When asked about their experiences with their groups, 90% of delegates said they felt listened to in their group; 73% of delegates said they made relationships with people they did not know before.

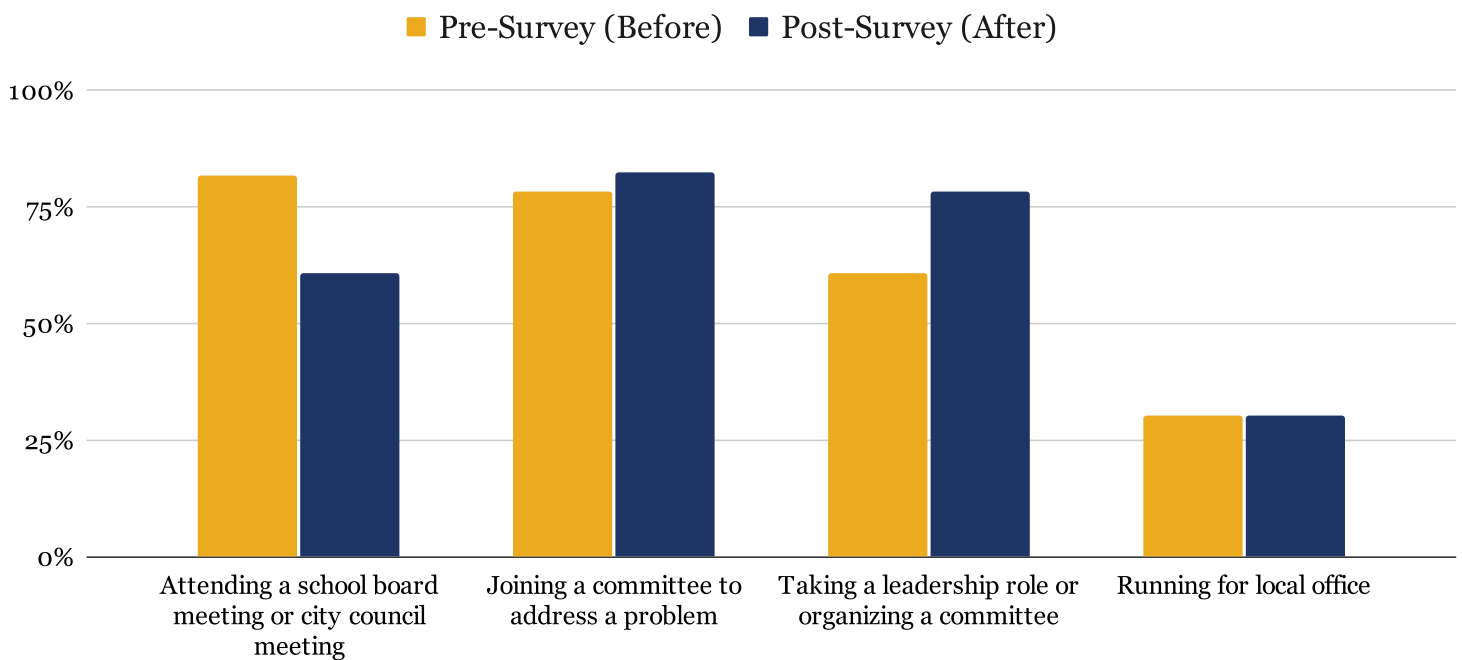


“My participation and that of all the other delegates was very important. It demonstrates that more people can participate in making decisions, this way it is more just and equitable--it is not the same two or three people who are always making the decisions.”

-parent delegate

Figure 6. Delegate interest in participating in community participation activities before and after the VCP intervention.

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



The delegates’ interest in future participation on committees or in groups aligns with their views about the concentration of power within their community. Delegates did not view individual community members, regardless of socioeconomic status, as having a substantial influence on decisions within the community. However, their views of community groups that facilitated collective action changed. Specifically, the belief that community groups had power increased by 4.35 percent. After participation in PB, nearly 57 percent of delegates expressed the belief that community groups had “a great deal” or “a lot” or power.

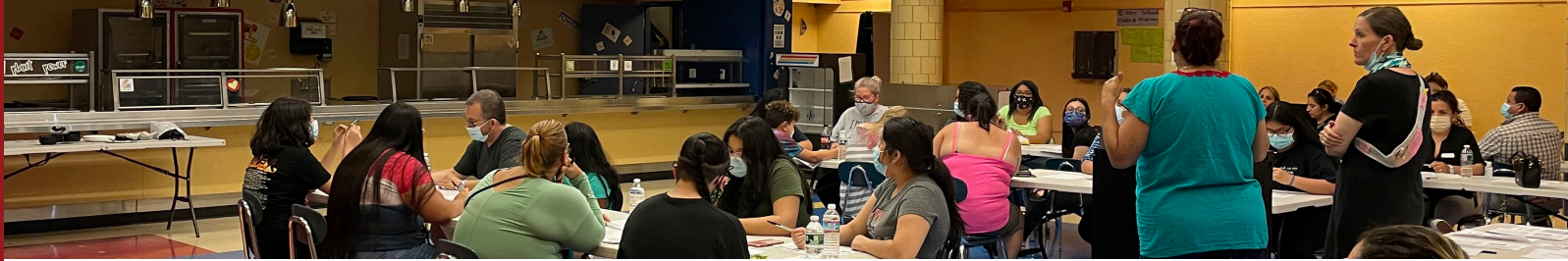
After participating in PB, ratings of power for historically marginalized individual actors remained low, but there was an **INCREASE IN THE RATING OF POWER FOR COMMUNITY GROUPS**. This increase may relate to delegates’ increased interest in future participation in committees and groups, including taking on a group leadership role.

OUTCOMES

Have the goals outlined with VCP been met? What changes can be made to bring further success with VCP?



At the beginning of the Participatory Budgeting process, the Steering Committee, made up of parents, students and school administrators, came up with **FOUR FUNDAMENTAL GOALS** for the process. Below are the goals and key data points that highlight accomplishments toward those goals, as well as some areas for improvement.



Goal 1: Students and parents feel *EMPOWERED* to speak up about the needs they see and changes they feel would improve the school district, and feel like they have a real *VOICE* in shaping the *VISION* of the Central Falls School District.

+ After participating in PB:

- 70% of delegates “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “I see myself as being capable of making positive changes in my community.”
- 72% said “A lot” or “Some” when asked “How much influence do you think people like you can have in improving the schools in Central Falls?”
- Delegates expressed an increased interest in joining groups, and they felt like community groups have more power after the intervention.

Δ Room for growth:

Although many delegates had positive experiences meeting with experts who helped them develop their proposals, some delegates expressed frustration about experts inhibiting their ability to propose the changes they hoped to see. In reference to their committee’s expert meeting, one of the delegates stated “We felt our voices weren’t being heard,” and another stated, “The help of the experts was not successful.”

Goal 2: We want to *BETTER UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS* of students and families in our district so we can improve *EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES, QUALITY OF LEARNING, ATTENDANCE and OPPORTUNITIES* for our students.

- + **240 surveys** about problems facing CFSD schools and ideas for how to solve those problems were submitted by parents, students, and teachers from across the district.
- + **PB provided several different entry points** for engagement, from submitting ideas, to joining a committee to develop ideas, to voting. People who signed up to be delegates tended to have a lower level of satisfaction with the district, compared to people who submitted ideas and voted, indicating that the role of delegate can create a meaningful opportunity for stakeholders who face challenges with the schools to give input into shaping the district.



Goal 3: Create a more *TRANSPARENT and EQUITABLE* funding process for the district.

- + **76% of delegates** agree or strongly agree: “I have a better understanding of the school district budget.”
- + **Over 150 people** came together to make decisions collaboratively as delegates or voters.
- + **Low-income parents felt the projects on the ballot address the needs of the district.** 41% of parent voters reported a household income of \$25,000 or less. Of those voters, 92% agree or strongly agree “that the projects on the ballot address the needs of the district.”

△ Room for growth:

As noted in the Evaluation section above, after participating in PB, some delegates reported a lower satisfaction rating with the district. In addition, after PB, 27% of delegates do not feel that they “trust the school administration to make good decisions about our schools.” It is extremely important that stakeholders feeling distrust or dissatisfaction with CFSD be involved in the PB process to provide input on growth. The feedback that dissatisfied CFSD community members provide leads to change that would increase their satisfaction with the school district.

Goal 4: As families see concrete, visible changes in our schools, we create a pathway to increased civic engagement, which leads to a more **UNITED AND RESILIENT COMMUNITY.**

- + As highlighted earlier, there were notable changes in delegates’ comfort with skills necessary for civic engagement, including: “speaking up at a public meeting”; “talking to someone I don’t know”; “contacting local officials to raise a concern”; and “participating in a group discussion.”

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

-student delegate

- + **Going into PB, most delegates said they had not worked with others in their community to solve a problem**, however, after participating in PB, 73% of delegates said they had built new relationships and 84% said they were interested in “joining a committee or group to solve problems in my community.”
- + **As PB continues to grow in Central Falls**, longitudinal data will allow us to measure changes in civic engagement over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: Consider allocating a larger pot of money...

...through PB in the future. When asked “Did you have enough money to create project proposals?”, 47% of delegates thought that there should have been more funding allocated for the VcP process. International research on PB has found that, “Communities that allocate more money through PB tend to see greater participation.”¹

Recommendation 2: Expand the role of the committee facilitators.

Although 80% of delegates agree that their committee worked well together, some delegates commented on challenges with group dynamics in their committees. For example, some delegates expressed that “Teamwork needed improvement,” and “It was challenging to make decisions as a group.” In addition, a few young people reported that they did not always feel included in their group discussions. Furthermore, well-trained facilitators can step into higher-level coordination roles, to ease the requirements of staff and administrators.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Enlist Voces Con Poder veterans as facilitators and do in-depth training with them on facilitation, managing group dynamics and group decision-making. Within the training, emphasize how to lift up youth voices and how to facilitate intentionally, so young people feel useful and empowered. Encourage students and their parents to participate in different committees.
- Put facilitators in charge of facilitating meeting agendas, meeting benchmarks along the timeline, and communicating with the delegates on their committee. This ensures that delegates are engaged, attending the meetings, and participating equally.

¹ People Powered, “Impacts of Participatory Budgeting on Civil Society & Political Participation”

Recommendation 3: Adjust the *timeline*.

- Extend voting over more than one day to allow for early voting (similar to the process with regular elections).
- Hold the vote during the school year.
- Elongate the process to allow more time for community members to share ideas. Allow the delegates to have more time to do research and site visits in order to develop detail. A longer time span will also make the proposal development process less labor intensive for district administrators.
- Holding the process during the school year would make it easier for parents, students and teachers to participate.
- Additional time for planning would allow for more strategic recruitment of delegates, and ensure that they are folks who will be able to remain engaged throughout the process. Being intentional about recruitment among all the schools leads to more equal representation—for example, Captain Hunt Preschool parents were under-represented in this first VCP iteration. In addition, some delegates noted tension around having charter school participants involved in the process.



Recommendation 4: Refine the experience with the *“experts”*.

Participation of individuals with technical expertise (“experts”) in the issue areas the delegates identify is critical for delegates to develop viable project proposals. However, delegates’ feelings about the meeting with the “experts” varied. Some expressed how helpful it was in providing them more clarity and guidance on their projects, while others expressed frustration and discontent as they felt that it was not helpful and disheartening to have their ideas denied, in many cases due to cost constraints.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Prepare experts ahead of time with background about the project ideas being developed, as well as a list of questions the delegates hope to get answers for. In addition, hold training for experts to prepare them for meeting community members, as many of them do not typically interface with parents and students.
- Prepare delegates ahead of time on how to advocate for the needs they have identified and propose alternative solutions if they are told certain ideas are infeasible.
- Consider enlisting people from outside of the district who are experts in the content area relevant to the committee.

Recommendation 5: Continue to build up communication and administrative infrastructure.

- Set up communication channels to regularly update delegates and the community on the **STATUS OF PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION.**
- Continue to grow the use of text messages as both an outreach strategy to engage the community and a retention strategy to keep delegates engaged.
- Consider setting up a texting channel with the delegates and set up facilitators with the tools to communicate with their committees over text. Facilitators can be the point of contact for the delegates, making sure the delegates are attending all the meetings and participating.
- Ask all the participants which school they are affiliated with, not just the grade level.
- Closely monitor voter sign-in to ensure that all voters fill out the sign-in sheets completely, so they can be added to communication channels. Consider using a digital sign-in sheet on voting day, or do real-time data entry, to eliminate the need for data entry after the vote.

Recommendation 6: Implement additional strategies for *multilingual group communication*.

Despite the availability of interpreters and bilingual materials, 30% of delegates reported that “A language barrier made it difficult for our committee to communicate.”

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider 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 and patience with multilingual groups and the use of interpreting.
- Make sure all participants understand ahead of time that meetings are conducted in multiple languages.



CONCLUSION

What are the implications from this process?

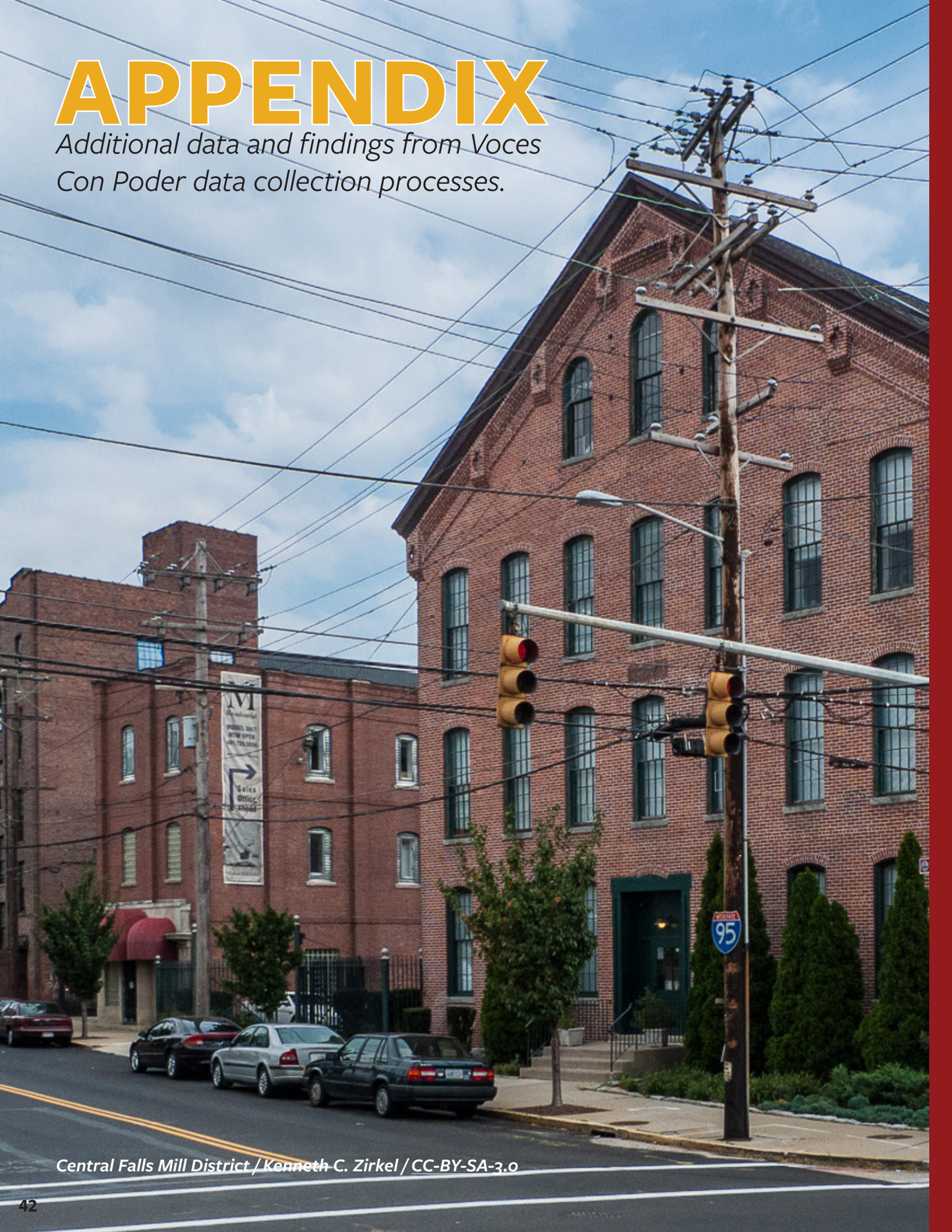
Valley Mills Canal / Magicpiano / CC-BY-SA-4.0

The outcomes of Voces Con Poder affirm that Central Falls School District can not only empower and educate its students, but also empower and educate its families and the greater community. Learning and education, both at the individual and policy levels, involve processes and institutions that **SHOULD ENGAGE ENTIRE FAMILIES**. Participatory and engaged processes, like participatory budgeting, can outsource decision making to crucial community stakeholders, paving the way for substantive policy reform. Given its inherently open and transparent nature, this way of budgeting also helps to gain the trust of community members at large. Participatory processes are not only about the empowerment of the individual, but also about **“PEOPLE POWER”**—the development of a community provides for the long-term health of any policy intervention in CFSD. More broadly, participatory budgeting will greatly aid CFSD’s stability and community image in the long run. The ability of residents to buy into decisions affecting their lives helps create a healthy culture of **COLLABORATION AND MUTUAL TRUST** - and to craft the best possible policies for students and families.

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APPENDIX

*Additional data and findings from Voces
Con Poder data collection processes.*



Central Falls Mill District / Kenneth C. Zirkel / CC-BY-SA-3.0

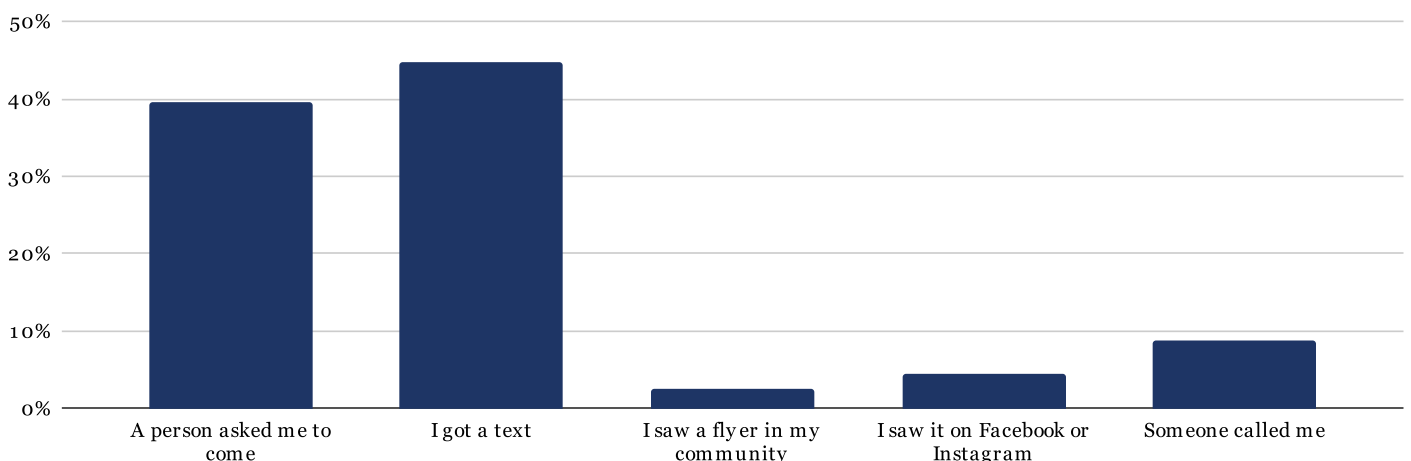
VOTING DATA:

- 146 parents and students voted, with **52% being parents** and **48% being students**.
- **73% of parent voters** were female, **53% of student voters** identified as male.
- **73% of parent voters** identify as Hispanic or Latino*.
*student survey did not ask for race/ethnicity
- **81% of parent voters** identified as having a household income under \$50,000*.
*student survey did not ask for household income
- When asked “Before today, have you ever helped to fix a problem or improve something in your neighborhood”, **63% of parents** responded “No, I haven’t” or “I’m not sure”.

Parents and students in the district were notified about the vote through several methods, including: phone banking; door knocking; texting; social media; and delegates getting their neighbors to pledge to vote. Of those methods, **the majority said they heard about voting from a text message.**

Figure 7. Voting communication source, voter survey.

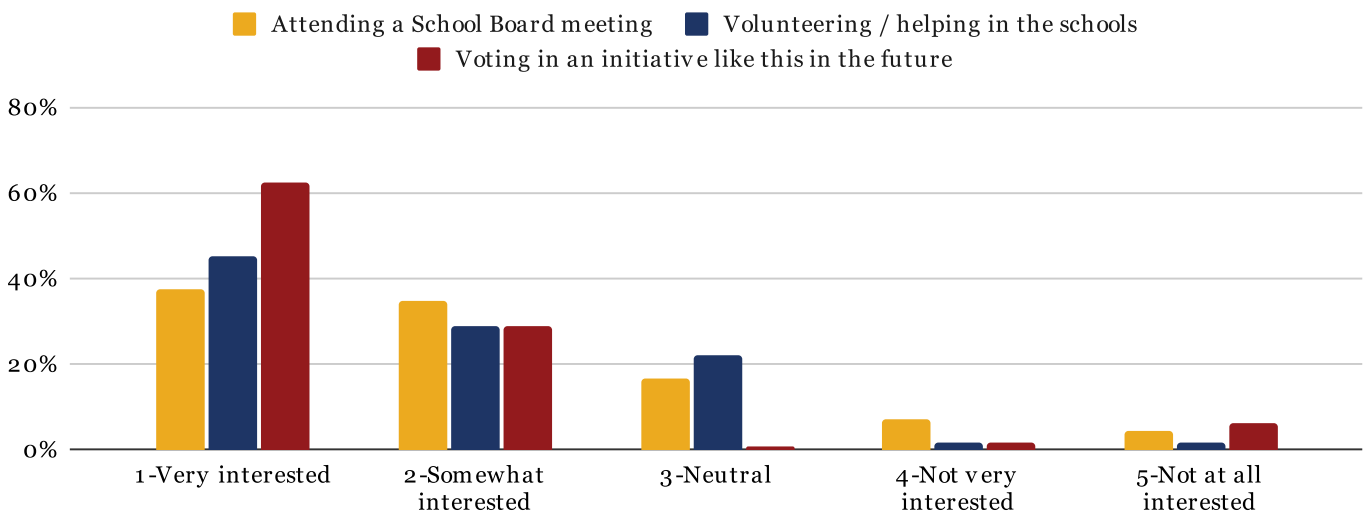
How did you hear about the voting today?



Compared to other types of school engagement activities, “**Voting in something like this**” was the activity voters were **most interested** in:

Figure 8. Likelihood of community participation, voter survey.

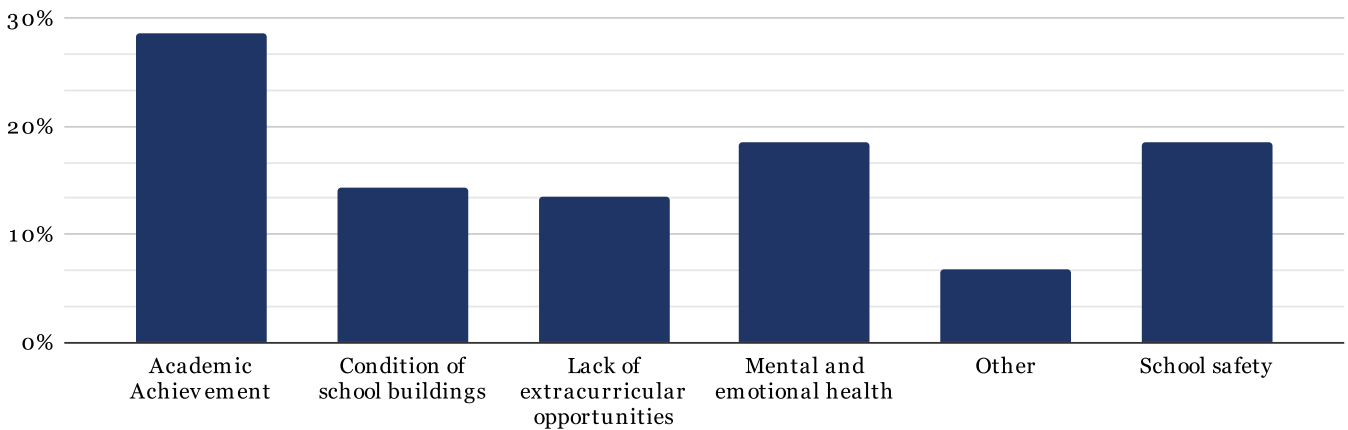
How interested are you in each of the following activities?



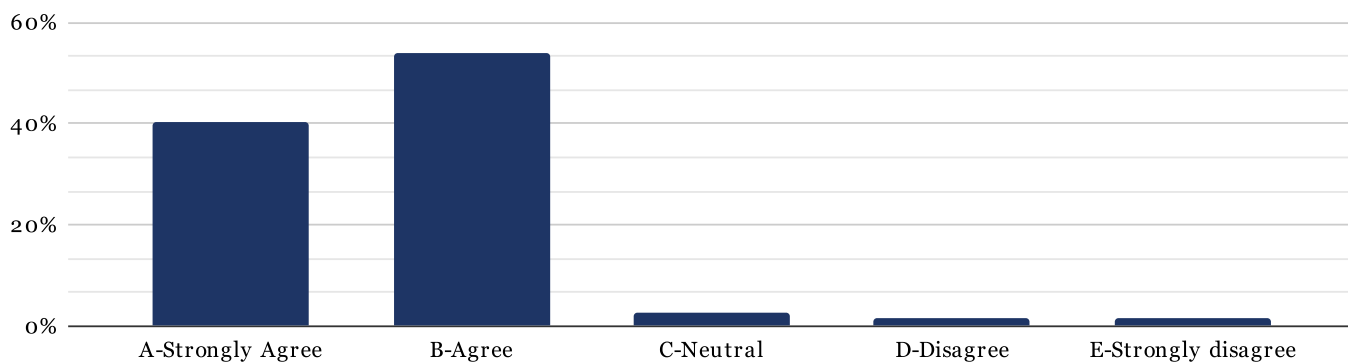
Voters were asked to identify the biggest challenge facing the students in the district, and then they were asked if they felt that the projects adequately addressed the needs of the district. **94% of voters agreed or strongly agreed** that the projects addressed the needs of the district:

Figures 9 and 10. Percieved challenges facing students and proposal adequacy, voter survey.

What is the biggest challenge facing our students?



The projects on the ballot today address the needs of the school district.

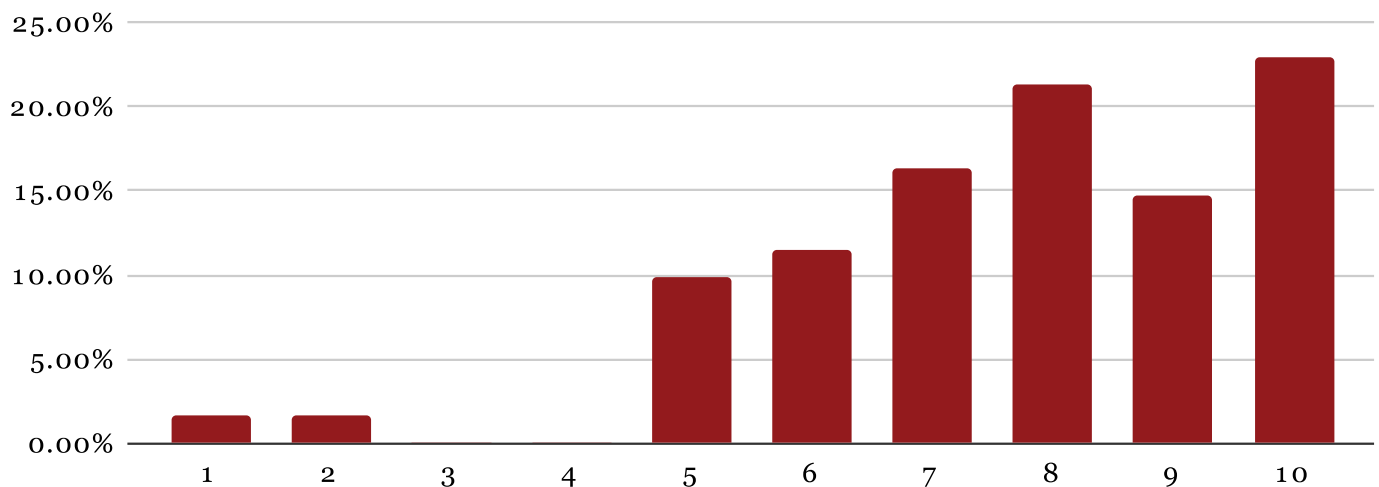


COMMUNITY vs. DELEGATE SATISFACTION

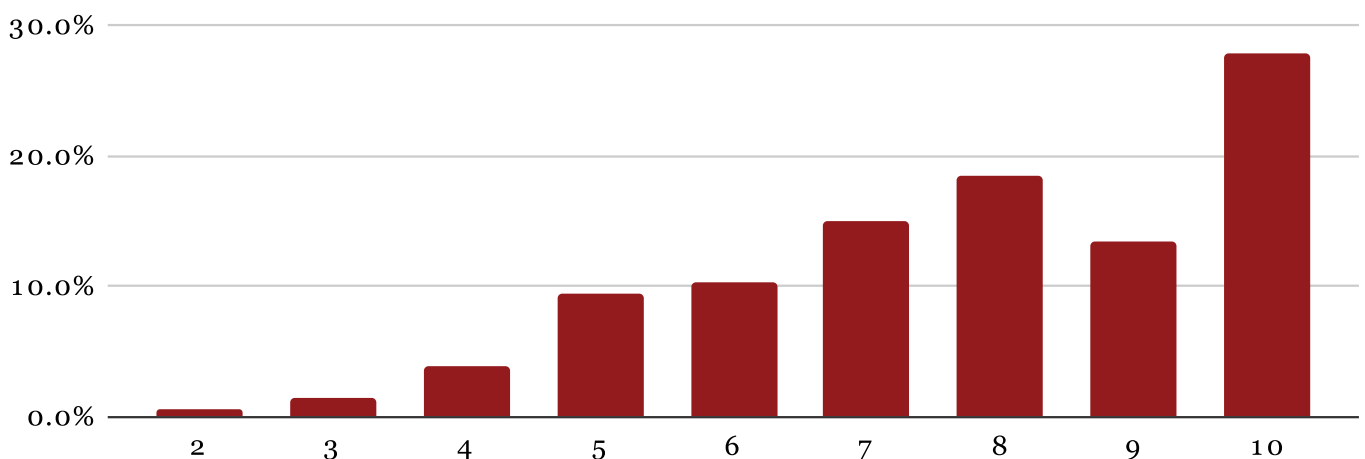
A difference in satisfaction with Central Falls School District between the members of the community and the delegates was found, which is helpful to contextualize why delegates may have left VCP more dissatisfied with the school district. A question to consider is the role of dissatisfied community members in VCP—can dissatisfaction play a role in furthering the empowerment and self-efficacy of the community members, initiating the capacity for important structural change in the school district? Attached below are three charts with ratings of the school district:

Figures 11, 12, and 13. Voter survey, idea collection survey, and delegate post-survey rating of Central Falls School District.

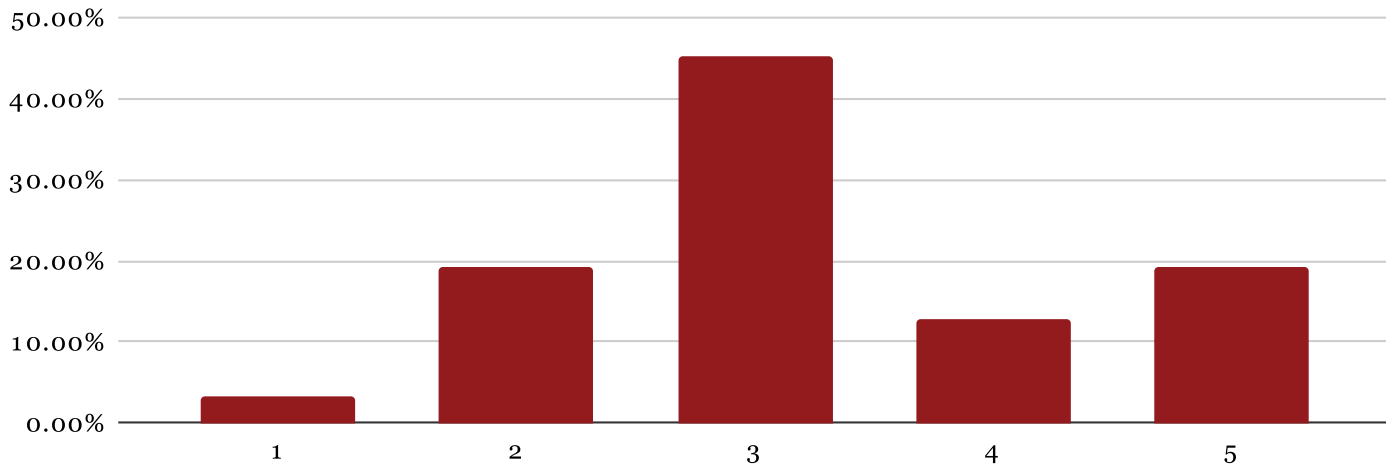
Voter Rating of District (10 being the best)



Idea Collection Rating of School District (10 being best)



Delegate Rating of District (5 being the best)

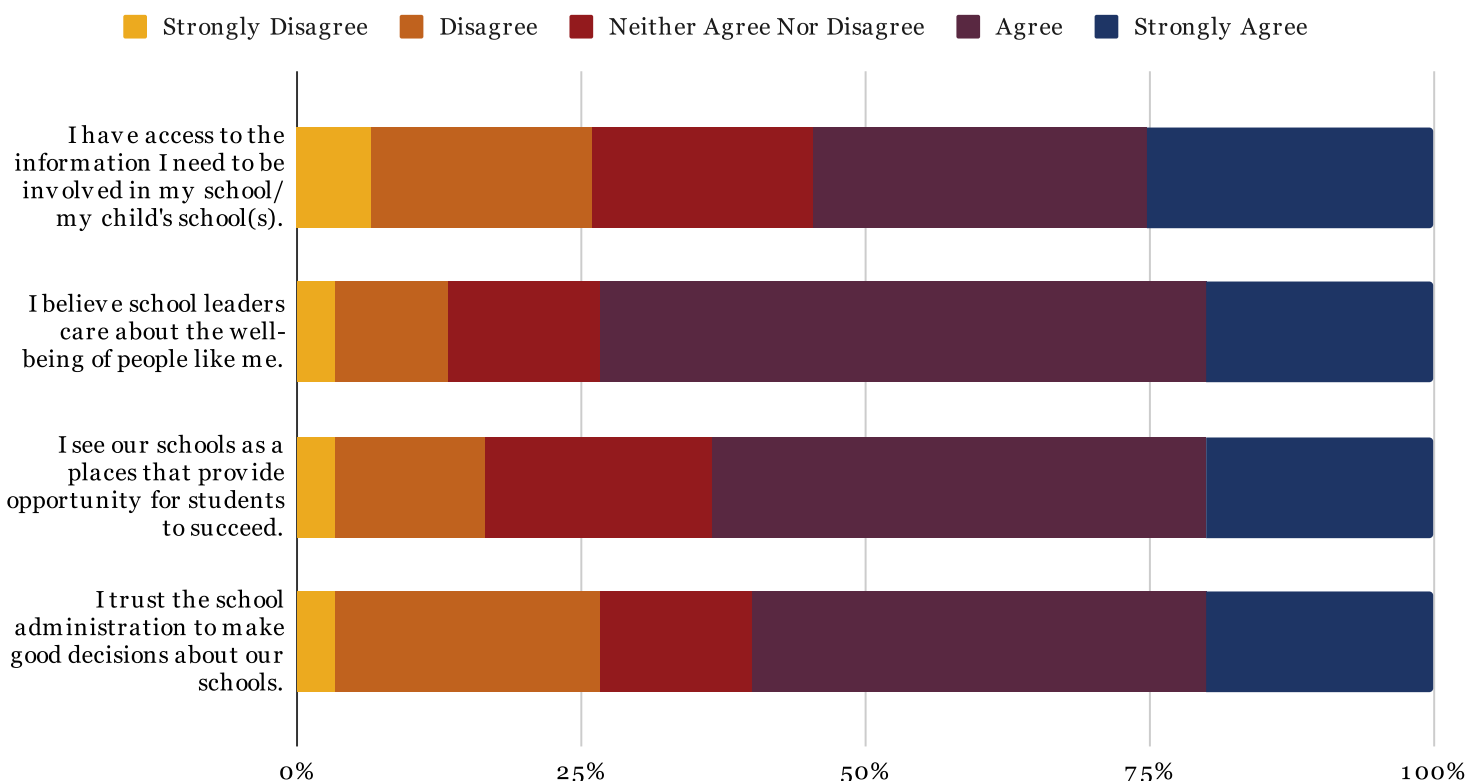


SCHOOL DISTRICT SATISFACTION LIKERT:

A likert array of questions which discussed more specific aspects of delegate satisfaction was asked after VCP to get a sense of the origin of satisfaction/dissatisfaction within the school district.

Figure 14. Likert survey questions regarding satisfaction with schooling experience, delegate post-survey.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?





All unlabeled photos and videos courtesy of Dr. Jonathan Collins, Pam Jennings, and Matthew Lioe.

EXIT SURVEY MEETING SATISFACTION:

Each meeting's exit surveys asked delegates to rank their experience at the meetings from a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the most positive). All of the surveys were completed on paper handouts, with the exception of 6/15 and 6/17's meetings, where surveys were completed on Qualtrics digitally.

Figure 15. Average satisfaction at VCP meetings.

6/15	6/17	6/22	6/24	6/29	7/01	7/13	7/15	7/20	7/22	7/27	7/29
9.19	9.00	8.56	8.91	9.17	9.13	8.90	7.57	8.46	8.71	9.05	9.06

FIGURE LIST:

Figure 1. Delegates by gender, Voces con Poder. (12)

Figure 2. Delegates by ethnicity, Voces Con Poder. (12)

Figure 3. Project proposals by number of votes, Voces Con Poder. (20)

Figure 4. Changes in delegate satisfaction with Central Falls School District. (26)

Figure 5. Delegate levels of self-efficacy before and after the VCP intervention. (29)

Figure 6. Delegate interest in participating in community participation activities before and after the VCP intervention. (31)

Figure 7. Voting communication source, voter survey. (43)

Figure 8. Likelihood of community participation, voter survey. (44)

Figures 9 and 10. Percieved challenges facing students and proposal adequacy, voter survey. (44)

Figures 11, 12, and 13. Voter survey, idea collection survey, and delegate post-survey rating of Central Falls School District. (45-6)

Figure 14. Likert survey questions regarding satisfaction with schooling experience, delegate post-survey. (46)

Figure 15. Average satisfaction at VCP meetings. (47)

Figure 16. One-word exit survey response positivity/neutrality, or negativity, by percentage. (49)

THE RESEARCH TEAM:



**VCP EVALUATION
TEAM HEADS TO
THE CENTRAL FALLS
PORTUGUESE FESTIVAL!**



DR. JONATHAN COLLINS is an Assistant Professor of Education, Public Policy, and International and Public Affairs. His research focuses on urban school reform, local politics, race and ethnicity, civic engagement and deliberative democracy. Currently, Dr. Collins is a democracy visiting faculty fellow at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Harvard Kennedy School.

PAM JENNINGS (she/her) is the Voces Con Poder Project Manager. She has managed Participatory Budgeting processes in New York City, Boston, Cambridge, Vallejo, CA and Central Falls, RI. A native of Providence, she is focused on establishing Participatory Budgeting as a common practice in Rhode Island, building on her work as a former project manager with the Participatory Budgeting Project.





JANELLE HAIRE (she/her) is the new Director of Data and Policy at Central Falls School District. Her educational background is in Secondary Education and Urban Education Policy (graduated May 2021), with work experience in classroom teaching and district turnaround policy. A born and raised Rhode Islander, Janelle is happiest at the beach with a good book in one hand and good food in the other!

EMMA BRITTON MILLER (she/her)

is a Data Fellow at the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE). She was recruited to NJDOE through the Strategic Data Project (SDP) Partnership, based out of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. Emma graduated from Brown University with an MA in Urban Education Policy in May 2021. Prior to enrolling in graduate school, she spent eight years as a teacher in a variety of diverse school communities across the country.



KENDALL MOORE-FIELDS (she/her)

is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Urban Education Policy from Brown University. Prior to joining the UEP program, Kendall graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Education Studies from Brown University in May 2021. In her free time, Kendall enjoys trying out new recipes, listening to country music, and taking her dog on walks.





MATTHEW LIOE (he/him) is a second-year undergraduate student at Brown, concentrating in International and Public Affairs and Architecture. After graduating, Matthew hopes to use his knowledge from Brown to plan and design Southeast Asian cities (with participatory budgeting, of course). When not doing work, Matthew enjoys cooking Indonesian food, gardening, and exploring Providence.

CAMILA OLANDER ECHAVARRIA

(she/her) is an undergraduate student currently completing her second year at Brown University. She is hoping to concentrate in International and Public Affairs with a focus in Development, and has a particular interest in engaging with diverse communities to learn about their experiences and create more equitable systems. Beyond studies and work, Camila enjoys painting, hiking, and modern dance.



GABE MERNOFF (he/him) is a second-semester junior at Brown concentrating in Public Policy. He first became passionate about advocacy and social justice after getting involved in students-rights activism as a Providence Public Schools student. Gabe hopes to build a career in which he can continue to advocate with community members for better policy, particularly in the area of education, that improves opportunities for the most marginalized.



VOCES CON PODER

Participatory Budgeting in Central Falls
School District
September/October 2021

Dr. Jonathan Collins
Pamela Jennings
Janelle Haire
Emma Britton Miller
Kendall Moore-Fields
Matthew Lioe
Camila Olander Echavarria
Gabriel Mernoff



BROWN

