Spring 2024

School Participatory Budgeting: A Civic Education Model for Critical Youth Empowerment

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2024

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

CAPSTONE PAPER SIGNATURE PAGE

CAPSTONE SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CAPSTONE TITLE: School Participatory Budgeting: A Civic Education Model for Critical Youth Empowerment

AUTHOR: Joshua Rodriguez

THE CAPSTONE PAPER HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

Audrey Falk, Ed.D. DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	Audrey Falk SIGNATURE	April 12, 2024 DATE
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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Pamela, Manny, and Janelle from Central Falls Public School District for their partnership and support of this research project. I am thankful for the data they helped make available for this research, and for dedicating time to meet with me about this evaluation. Furthermore, I'd like to thank my colleagues at the Swearer Center for Public Service who offered their support as reviewers and thought partners on this capstone. Georgina, Dan, and jesús, I appreciate each of you for being available to read and provide feedback on this capstone. Also, I'd like to thank Julie Plaut and Betsy Shimberg, colleagues who advocated that I pursue a Master's degree and wrote my letters of recommendation.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, my father and mother who have always encouraged me to continue my educational journey. Without your mentorship and encouragement none of this research would have been achievable.

Abstract

Young people's potential for meaningful participation in school has yet to be fully realized. They are constrained to low levels of involvement and remain, for the most part, controlled in most decision-making environments. Youth engagement models all strive to engage youth fully, but only some do. A School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) class at a New England High School offers a model for actualizing youth engagement at a critical level. Through SPB, youth demonstrate six dimensions of critical youth empowerment (1) a welcoming environment, (2) meaningful participation, (3) equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, (4) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, (5) participation to affect change, and (6) integrated individual- and community-level empowerment. This study conducted an evaluation of secondary data made available from the SPB program in order to assess youth empowerment. Findings determined that youth involved in SPB demonstrate improvements in civic knowledge, participatory competencies, and have improved perceptions of individual and community-level empowerment. The findings make a case for critical youth empowerment through SPB.

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School Participatory Budgeting: A Civic Education Model for Critical Youth Empowerment

Young people's potential for meaningful participation in school has yet to be fully realized. Participation for youth is in reference to the opportunities and ability they have to take action or take part in their community. Youth are constrained to low levels of involvement and remain, for the most part, controlled in most decision-making environments. Opportunities to practice civic processes in schools can empower youth and help them achieve higher levels of participation in the decisions that affect them.

All U.S. states have standardized civics education. Most U.S. states implement civic education through coursework and exams focusing on memorizing historical or geographical information to demonstrate proficiency in civic competencies (Godsay et al., 2012). Only some states dedicate educational resources to programs and processes that teach applicable civics skills. In some schools, administrators engage youth in civic activities through participation in student government. The challenge with student government approaches is that they include only the most advantaged students and exclude the disadvantaged (Akiva et al., 2014). Exclusion from student government can come down to arbitrary rules such as limiting access based on good behavior and high academic performance.

Youths deprived of decision-making opportunities are excluded from changing the oppressive structures that affect their lives (DeJong & Love, 2015). However, young people are marginalized from participating in the structures that determine how they navigate life and are restricted from developing crucial knowledge about those structures (DeJong & Love, 2015). As a result, youth are excluded from creating changes and eliminating their oppression.

A robust civic education should develop youths' knowledge of government systems and their ability to make informed decisions and empower them to take action to address the issues that affect them. In *Cook v. McKee* (2022), a group of local youth plaintiffs argued that young people in Rhode Island lack adequate civic education to prepare them for effective participation in their democracy. The result was a settlement by the Governor of RI to implement a Civic Readiness Task Force to improve civics education in Rhode Island.

If education aims to produce knowledgeable and capable citizens, educational institutions should prioritize participation and civic education for everyone. School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) is a model for inclusive civic education SPB is a form of participatory budgeting in which students and other key community stakeholders decide how public school funds are spent (Participatory Budgeting Project, n.d.-a). SPB takes a pedagogical approach to empowering youth through the development of self, others, and civil societies (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2021). SPB shows promising outcomes for positive youth development. For example, SPB in Bioscience High School in Phoenix, Arizona, resulted in positive growth in civic competencies for participating students (Cohen et al., 2015). PB also influences motivations for people to participate in their democracy outside of participatory budgeting and improves participants' civic competencies (Johnson et al., 2021).

Understanding the potential for critical youth empowerment, primarily opportunities for social and political empowerment, inherent to PB, this capstone will examine the outcomes of a School Participatory Budgeting curriculum in Central Falls High School in Central Falls, RI.

Literature Review

Young people are deemed powerless in many aspects of society, especially when making decisions. Young people face restrictions on where they can go to school, when they can drive,

and what they can and cannot vote on (DeJong & Love, 2015). The powerlessness youth experience is part of the oppression they experience as youth, which establishes, maintains, and perpetuates young people as subordinate to adults (DeJong & Love, 2015). DeJong and Love (1990) explain that powerlessness contributes to a lack of authority, status, and sense of self among youth.

The limited opportunity to exercise power extends into young people's social and community aspects (DeJong & Love, 2015). Schools are places in which youth experience limitations and restrictions in decision-making. Schools limit how students can make decisions, such as needing adult approval, ultimately removing students from exercising power (DeJong & Love, 2015). A study by Keri Dejong (2014) found that school committees need to actualize decision-making power for students because youth and adult members were not given equal rights and authority over decisions. Some schools exploit youth participation, such as requiring students to take standardized tests for revenue or soliciting student input, yet never credit students for their participation (DeJong & Love, 2015).

Empowerment Theories

Participation in SPB requires youth to have and exercise power. The more power youth can exercise, the more opportunity they have to develop agency over their personal, social, economic, and political aspects for improved quality of life (Jennings et al., 2006). Youth empowerment and SPB are closely related as they work together to promote the positive development of youth.

Empowerment theorists describe power as a continuum in which individuals gain more access to autonomy, self-agency, and authority over their environment. Arnstein (1969) describes empowerment as the Ladder of Citizen Participation, which examines power through the

progression of citizen participation. Through this framework, Arnstein (1969) categorizes power into three stages of progression: Nonparticipation, Degrees of Tokenism, and Degrees of Citizen Power. The Nonpartisan stage describes the absence of power and manifests in the manipulation of people. The Degrees of Tokenism stage describes the perception of power through tokenistic inclusion, manifesting in processes where people may be consulted and informed. The people in this stage are given the illusion of having power. The final stage, Degrees of Citizen Power, describes processes in which power is felt and experienced through partnership, delegation of power, and citizen participation. In addition, Arnstein's (1969) empowerment framework argued that the redistribution of power is a prerequisite for empowerment.

Rocha's (1997) empowerment framework expanded research and perceptions of power and described power as a relationship between individual and collective power. In Rocha's (1997) framework, the lowest type of power reflects individual power, and the highest reflects collective power. Through this framework, lower levels of empowerment take an individualistic approach, while higher levels enable individuals and groups to mobilize and influence change for a collective group. In a school setting, lower levels of empowerment might address the low academic performance of youth through individual intervention or tutoring. Higher levels of empowerment will seek to address low academic performance through advocacy for improved school culture or culturally responsive curriculum. In simpler terms, increased levels of empowerment would encourage youth involvement in addressing the issues found in their schools.

The context in which youth are empowered is also explored in Kabeer's (1999) empowerment theories which centers on agency and autonomy when it is otherwise denied. Among young people, power and participation is often denied due to restrictions such as age,

education, and physical ability. Kabeer (1999) also states that youth often are given opportunities to have "power to", and seldom experience opportunities to have "power over". In this instance, power to refers to how adults might give youth opportunities to have voice, but that voice has little authority over final decisions. Power over would empower youth to have authority over the decision making process.

Ladder of Children Participation

Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children Participation offers a framework to understand how youth gain more access to power through an ascending ladder of participation. According to Hart (1992), adults place an unrealistic expectation for youth to become participating citizens when they have not been prepared for participation. For youth to understand participation and develop the skills necessary, they require opportunities to learn through actual practice. Youth can successfully organize among themselves and enact power; however, the potential of youth-adult partnerships should not be dismissed. Adults promoting and encouraging youth participation is a pathway toward improving society for everyone (Hart, 1992).

SPB is a high-level youth-adult partnership centered around child-initiated action through shared deliberative processes with adults. According to Hart's (1992) framework, SPB exists among the higher rungs of the participatory ladder. The first three rungs are categorized under degrees of tokenism: Manipulation, Decoration, and Tokenism.

Youth engagement at these levels underestimates the potential for youth participation. Youth engaged at this level are given the illusion of participation; their involvement is minimal, or sometimes nonexistent, and yields very little power to young people (Hart, 1992).

As youth become involved, they progress in level on the Ladder of Children Participation and achieve greater degrees of participation. Hart categorized the top six rungs as Assigned but

Informed, Consulted and Informed, Adult-Initiated with Shared Decisions with Children, Child-Initiated and Directed, and Child-Initiated with Shared Decisions with Adults. Among the higher rungs, there are increased interactions between youth and adults, and there is more redistribution of power from adults to young people (Hart, 1992).

To increase youth participation, adults must ensure they are prepared to engage at the highest level, understand their participation, and have a meaningful stake in the process (Hart, 1992). These are also prerequisites for SPB processes to happen. The more youth are involved in decision-making by adults, the more power they are given to the decisions affecting them.

Critical Youth Empowerment Theory

The Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) Theory describes how multiple youth engagement efforts contribute to a critical youth empowerment experience (Jennings et al., 2006). Researchers (Jennings et al., 2006) assessed existing youth engagement models to develop a framework for CYE. They identified six dimensions of critical youth empowerment: (1) a welcoming environment, (2) meaningful participation, (3) equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, (4) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, (5) participation to affect change, and (6) integrated individual- and community -level empowerment.

Historically, youth engagement models have focused on rehabilitative practices with the goal of "correcting" youth. Developments in the practice have expanded and evolved to empower youth. While the different approaches to youth engagement are practical and effective in producing outcomes, many do not implement all dimensions, limiting their potential for empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006). For example, Adolescent Empowerment Models (AEC), Youth Development and Empowerment Models (YDE), Transactional Partnering Models (TP),

and Empowering Education Models (EE) all mention supporting a positive environment for youth, but each struggle to reinforce or meet that expectation (Jennings et al., 2006). Adults experience challenges such as creating opportunities for students to safely experience success and failure in youth engagement models or sometimes place unrealistic expectations on youth.

Some models lack dimensions found in critical youth empowerment models. YDE, for example, focuses on the empowerment of the individual and struggles to engage youth at community and sociopolitical levels (Jennings et al., 2006). The TP model meets the dimension of shared power the best among the existing models, but it fails to emphasize an environment in which youth are encouraged to critically reflect and developed a level of critical awareness (Jennings et al., 2006).

Critical Youth Empowerment occurs when youth are engaged across all six dimensions and promotes positive youth empowerment, resulting in more civically engaged youth. If all six dimensions are integrated fully, there is great potential for positive outcomes for youth empowerment, especially for community-level empowerment. CYE presents an opportunity to evaluate and measure outcomes for critical youth empowerment in SPB.

Youth Participatory Decision-Making

Youth participatory decision-making refers to processes in which young people are included in determining the decisions made in their community. It puts young people in charge of the decisions that affect their daily lives and empowers them to change the systems that continue to marginalize them (Owens et al., 2011). Researchers have found positive developmental and societal outcomes when youth participate in decision-making (Kara, 2015; Sutton, 2007).

There are benefits to decision-making among youth for all stakeholders. For youth, participation in decision-making has correlated to increased self-autonomy, civic knowledge, and community awareness in youth (Ramey, 2013). Participatory decision-making processes involving youth have also been linked to an improved understanding of youth needs and relevant issues and outcomes among adults and youth-serving organizations (Ramey, 2013). In society, decision-making opportunities for youth have significant implications for upholding children's rights, improving children's skills, and empowering young people (Franklin & Sloper, 2006).

Another benefit relates to the quality of decisions young people make. A qualitative study on participatory decision-making found that young people's decisions improved services and utilization of those services among youth (Ramey, 2013). The same study found that participatory practices led to organizations learning about the importance of involving youth and how that informs organizational governance (Ramey, 2013). The potential outcomes for involving youth in decision-making are a significant testament to the transformational potential of inclusive decision-making processes.

Several criticisms exist about the composition and processes of youth participatory models. Studies of participatory decision-making processes have found issues with the type of young people involved (who tend to be among the most elite and educated) and struggles to involve marginalized youth (Faulkner, 2009). This is counterintuitive as participatory decision-making processes should be designed to promote everyone's inclusion.

Decision-making processes that include youth are often criticized by adults who report negative experiences related to additional responsibilities, loss of power, and frustration with how long the process takes (Flicker, 2008). In addition, youth involved in participatory decision-making processes are met with skepticism. Youth in society are perceived to be less developed

than adults regarding their thinking. One example is when adults perceive youth as incapable of thinking of others when making decisions (Faulkner, 2009).

Youth are also vulnerable to tokenistic involvement by those in power. Young people need more knowledge so that adults can adequately involve them. As a result, inexperienced or uneducated youth may be unaware of the potential for tokenism in participatory decision-making processes (Kara, 2007). Well-intentioned participatory decision-making processes fall victim to tokenizing their participants because the intentions behind their participation enamor them, but they are ignorant of how it harms the process.

Participatory Decision-Making

Participatory decision-making processes promote the inclusion of anyone with a stake in the decision (Community Toolbox, n.d.). Participatory practices impact how those with power share or redistribute power and reduce differences in power between social groups (Mulder & Henk, 1970). A study found that participation in decision-making correlates to people feeling more empowered in their community (Duati, 2015). In Albania, citizens prompted to participate in decision-making by their municipal leaders were found to have increased knowledge of local government affairs, confidence in their elected officials, and agency over decisions made (Duati, 2015).

Participatory decision-making incorporates processes with frequent communication, deliberation, and learning among the stakeholders. Individuals involved in these processes describe how these processes result in successful solutions and decisions (Flicker, 2008). Participation in decision-making can also be understood as a continuum of involvement (Kirby et al., 2003) that comprises multiple steps and interactions between dominant and subordinate groups. Advisory boards, Participatory Action research, and Participatory Budgeting are

examples of participatory decision-making processes. Participatory decision-making processes are respected by investors, elected officials, and members of society because of their potential to educate voters and strengthen collaboration skills between citizens and their local municipalities (Wampler & Toucton, 2014).

The advantages of Participatory decision-making processes include increased ownership, multiple stakeholders, diverse opinions, strengthened decisions on issues, and credibility surrounding decisions (Community Toolbox, n.d.). Despite these known benefits, it can be difficult for participatory decision-making to succeed, particularly if the people involved need to meet specific prerequisites. Mulder and Henk (1970) explain that for participation to exist, people must first have some motivations for involvement. Simply having a voice is enough motivation for most involved in decision-making processes.

However, more than motivation is needed for participation to exist. Participation also requires an active commitment by those with power to redistribute power (Mulder & Henk, 1970). For youth to participate in decision-making, the redistribution of power is expected due to the lack of power they have access to. Youth involved in participatory decision-making opportunities highlighted the significance of adult partnership in decision-making processes (Kara, 2007).

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a model for citizens to exercise control over a public budget through participatory decision-making. The model emerged from a 1989 anti-poverty measure in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to address poverty and child mortality rates (Participatory Budgeting Project, n.d.-b). The premise behind PB is to put people in control of public funds to improve the lives of people in society. In Brazil's PB project, the outcome saved lives by

reducing child mortality rates by 20 percent (Baiocchi, 2001). Since its introduction in Brazil, Participatory Budgeting has expanded into countries worldwide, including the U.S.

The PB project in Brazil is renowned for being truly inclusive and redistributing power to people without power, especially compared to other Participatory decision-making processes (Baiocchi, 2001). A significant innovation PB introduces to participation is how it facilitates it. PB does not rely on organized systems to operate. Instead, it interfaces with the community directly through established networks and institutions they are already a part of (Baiocchi, 2001). The strength of PB is how it empowers people to take control and contribute to the solutions generated for members of their community. As a facilitator of social transformation, PB is highly regarded for sponsoring utopian thinking (Baiocchi, 2014). The principles inherent to Participatory Budgeting are active participation, deliberation, and transfer of power and knowledge. It does not discriminate as to who can participate and seeks to create new forms of inclusion among members of society (Baiocchi, 2014).

Researchers Baiocchi and Lerner (2007) found potential for PB to be successful in America because of its pre-existing civic infrastructure. The role it plays in North American democracy differs from formats found in the Latin American model, which is informed by the socioeconomic and political foundations (Baiocchi & Lerner, 2007). Introducing PB into North American territories has led to PB projects in local municipalities and schools.

Participatory Budgeting works through a series of deliberations leading to a vote or collective decision. In Brazil's Orçamento Participativo - Participatory Budgeting Project - members of society were selected to represent their communities and neighborhoods. These individuals and their communities were engaged by their municipal leaders through a year-long process in which they would attend steering committee meetings, facilitate assemblies in their

community, generate ideas, amend those ideas, and facilitate a community-wide vote; the most popular ideas would be chosen (Baiocchi, 2001).

Most PB processes implement a similar framework. It starts with municipal leaders identifying and representing their community in a steering committee or board. In some instances, those leaders are selected by members of the community. Following establishing a steering committee, leaders facilitate public forums to gather input and voice from their community on issues or ideas to resolve them. Those ideas are then deliberated in steering committee sessions or public forums. Eventually, the ideas generated are put up for a public vote. The deliberate voting process repeats until the community comes to a consensus on decisions together. Throughout the process, participants are intentionally involved in public sessions that inform and develop an awareness of PB processes and issues in their communities.

Research supports how PB improves how municipalities govern, the quality and delivery of services they provide their citizens, and communication between ordinary citizens and their governing institutions (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014; Cabnnes, 2015). Baiocchi (2001) found correlations between participants of PB and improved negotiation skills, relationships with community members, and solidarity with others. A case study analysis of PB in New York City identified how PB led to more equitable spending when community members and residents were involved in decision-making (Hagelskamp et al., 2020). Overall, research supports that PB changes who is involved in decision-making and how they learn about their democracy, improving the outcomes of decisions.

School Participatory Budgeting

School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) is a tool for facilitating civic learning and democracy in schools through participation and decision-making (Participatory Budgeting

Project, n.d.-b). The goals of SPB are to improve civic knowledge, encourage civic engagement, and involve students in deciding how their school spends its budget (Participatory Budgeting Project, n.d.-b). Like municipal PB, SPB teaches through doing and practicing democracy in real life with tangible outcomes.

SPB is facilitated globally in South America, North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. It was first introduced in the United States in 2013 at Bioscience High School in Phoenix, Arizona (Bartlett et al., 2021). In 2016, the Phoenix Union High School District adopted the first district wide SPB, which brought PB to 5 high schools and 3,500 students (Bartlett et al., 2021). Now, SPB is facilitated in various U.S. schools and gives thousands of students responsibility over how to spend a portion of their school's budget (Gibbs et al., 2021).

The barriers to implementing SPB are minimal. SPB requires a budget and willingness to facilitate the process. SPB incorporates similar principles and design concepts found in municipal PB processes. A key difference in SPB is that the process is student-led. SPB implements a five-stage process: *process design*, *brainstorming*, *developing project proposals, casting votes*, and *funding winning projects* (Bartlett et al., 2021). By appointing a youth steering committee, youth facilitate engaging their entire school community.

SPB can last an entire academic semester or academic year. Funds for SPB can be sourced federally, from the school districts themselves, or discretionary funds, such as the principal’s budget and donations or fundraising (Bartlett et al., 2021).

Youth School Participatory Budgeting

While research on the effects of SPB is relatively new, studies support the potential for positive youth development and promotion of civic competencies among participants (Cohen et al., 2015). The opportunity for improved civic skills and participation is especially significant as

concerns regarding declining youth participation in civic and political activities continue to rise (Syversten et al., 2011). Poor civic education, reduced trust in democratic processes, and disempowerment are reasons for the decline in youth civic engagement (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2023). SPB, by design, addresses all of those reasons and aims to facilitate processes to improve youth civic engagement.

Studies on SPB have led to increased youth civic knowledge, civic engagement, improved school spirit, and better spending of public funds (Cohen et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2023). In the case of Bioscience High School, for example, SPB effectively developed civic competencies among participants compared to other available participatory strategies (Cohen et al., 2015). Research also supports how SPB leads to increased political efficacy among participants (Gibbs et al., 2021), noting that SPB sponsors trust and belief in their ability to influence decisions. Connected to themes of trust, SPB also positively impacts school climate, such as deepening youth-adult relationships (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2023). Bartlett and Schugurgensky (2023) also found SPB to promote youth empowerment through the development of leadership skills, collective problem solving, and concerns for the good of others. Also, teachers, students, and their families benefit from being engaged in deciding how their school districts or administrators spend budgets. SPB creates a pathway for schools and school districts to engage their stakeholders (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2023).

SPB requires careful consideration during the design process to ensure students' voices inform processes and facilitate inclusivity for everyone (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2023). Compared to other civic engagement programs, SPB demonstrates the most potential to be inclusive. However, factors such as the school's engagement culture in general, unequal

representation within the steering committee, and the inner workings of the steering committee can harm its inclusive potential (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2023).

In addition, SPB can fall victim to the challenges in municipal PB processes, such as tokenism and issues related to power imbalance. A common challenge for youth in exercising power in SPB processes relates to barriers created by non-negotiables from those in power. For example, youth could be limited in influencing decision-making processes. These limitations could come from restricted funds and federal rules and guidelines. These are not necessarily connected to overt oppressive manifestations of power but impact how youth can exercise power.

Central Falls School District and Central Falls High School

Central Falls High School is located in Central Falls, Rhode Island. It is part of the Central Falls School District, considered an urban public school district. The district has jurisdiction over six schools: Central Falls High School, Calcutt Middle School, Ella Risk Elementary School, Veterans Memorial Elementary School, Raíces Dual Language Academy, and Captain Hunt Preschool. Across the city's schools, 80 percent of enrolled students are from racially minoritized backgrounds, and 55.1 percent come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (RI Department of Education, 2024).

At Central Falls High School, 96.9 percent of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged. According to a 2022-2023 academic year report card by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), of the 811 students in the school, 50.2 percent identify as Hispanic, 21.2 percent as White, 18.6 percent as Black or African American, 7.2 percent as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.3 percent as more two or more races, and 0.4 percent as Asian. Of the total enrolled students, 41.7 percent are chronically absent, meaning they are absent from more than 10 percent of school days in Central Falls School District, which is about

18 days or more out of the school year. RIDE's report cards illustrate challenges related to low academic performance and test scores across the Math, English, and Science categories (RIDE, 2024).

Central Falls High School's mission is to cultivate academic, social, and civic responsibility within the school community as it prepares students for participation in a global society (Central Falls High School, n.d.-b). The school supports marginalized students, offers multiple learning pathways, and promotes a strong school spirit and community.

Warriors for Change Participatory Budgeting Class

The Warriors for Change Participatory Budgeting Class is a semester-long SPB process in which Central Falls High School students decide how to spend $10,000 to improve their school. Funds For this SPB come from the Rhode Island Department of Education (Warriors for Change, 2019). This SPB was the first in the State of RI. The course was offered as an elective as part of the school's Career & Technical Education (CTE), which offers an array of courses that give students course credit for experiential learning opportunities in and outside the classroom (Central Falls High School, n.d.-a). The first time the class was offered was in 2019, and outcomes from those projects led to renovations to school bathrooms and cafeterias. The course is offered every spring semester and is taught by one of the school's teachers or administrators.

The primary learning outcome of the class is to educate students about civics through understanding how local government and budgeting work. In addition, the course seeks to empower youth to become civically engaged and promote a responsibility to live civically engaged lives.

Central Falls High School's SPB engages its teachers, administrators, and students throughout the process. For this SPB, students in the class become the steering committee leading the process, known as Change Warriors. This group collects ideas from teachers and students and develops proposals from the generated ideas. Ideas are sourced through various modes, such as speaking to students during classes, idea submission boxes in classrooms, online forms, public school bulletin boards, and weekly teacher meetings. Project proposals are open for students, parents, teachers, and administrators to submit. Change warriors review submissions and determine projects to develop formal proposals. Change Warriors are the only members responsible for developing formal proposals based on submissions received.

Change Warriors select two chairs to lead their steering committee. These students are responsible for determining timelines for the SPB, facilitating meetings, and keeping records of decisions made. They also serve as the liaisons between the adult and student stakeholders involved. The Change Warriors have two committees: The social media/publicity committee and the fundraising/event planning committee. Decisions are made through a consensus process. The process usually entails introducing projects, a discussion, a deliberation, a vote, and a decision.

The proposals are then shared with the entire school and are put up for a school-wide vote. During this process, formal project proposal expositions are held to inform voters about the details of each project proposal. Anyone is eligible to vote if they are a student, teacher, school administrator, or parent of a student at Central Falls High School. Voting is facilitated at the school through an in-person event. Voting materials and information are available in different languages to encourage participation. The most popular project gets selected, funded, and implemented. The selected project is publicly announced, and a celebration commemorates the process.

After selections are made, Change Warriors and school administrators, part of the PB oversight team, meet to evaluate the SPB process. Students in this setting can offer feedback about the process and propose amendments. The PB oversight team also supports Change Warriors in assessing project proposals' feasibility, eligibility, and costs. They often offer feedback to inform youth on developing project proposals according to eligibility and cost. In addition to leading the process, students receive frequent instruction through workshops and guest speakers to learn more about democratic processes.

Outcomes for this SPB are measured through pre-post surveys administered to students in the course. Voters are also surveyed to understand their experiences with the voting process.

Capstone Project

This capstone evaluates the SPB curriculum of Central Falls High School. It will examine how SPB uses critical youth empowerment frameworks to improve civic knowledge and participatory skills and contribute to the collective empowerment of youth. A focus group of Central Falls administrators, teachers, and PB researchers was engaged in a presentation and discussion about findings and possible recommendations. The project concludes by sharing the outcomes of the focus group, disclosing limitations to the research, and illuminating considerations for future research.

Methodology

This research implemented a mixed-methods program evaluation, using secondary research to analyze the impacts of SPB on young people enrolled in the Warriors for Change Participatory Budgeting class in the 2022-2023 academic year and young voters during the school’s Voting Day. The evaluation examined SPB's impact on empowering youth and assessed the program using a critical youth empowerment framework.

Evaluation Questions

- How does PB impact youth civic knowledge?
- How does PB impact youth participatory competencies?
- How does PB impact youth empowerment?

Data Sources

The pre- and post-survey data was collected by disseminating paper and online surveys in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. In addition, participants completed project proposal tickets and voted on them as part of the program's democratic processes. Completed surveys and project proposal tickets were collected and categorized using physical and online survey tools.

A data-sharing agreement with Central Falls School District made the data available to me electronically via Excel documents. The data for this evaluation was free of personally identifiable information. Participants' student IDs were removed. One Excel spreadsheet contained pre-and-post survey responses, another contained Voting Day responses, and another contained aggregate demographic data about the SPB class cohort.

Data Analysis Plan

Using the questions in the Central Falls High School SPB survey instruments, I first identified a list of proxy questions to evaluate the program. I met with School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) program managers to identify some evaluation questions for their evaluation. The outcome of that focus group discussion identified three program evaluation questions: (1) What is the impact of SPB on youth civic education, (2) what is the impact of SPB on youth participatory competencies, and (3) what is the impact of SPB on youth empowerment? Table 1 lists the proxy questions. Using exploratory data analysis, I compiled average responses to questions in the pre- and post surveys and the voting day survey responses. This data was used to

interpret changes in youth perceptions of civic knowledge, participatory competencies, and empowerment.

Second, I reviewed survey instruments and identified proxy questions for my program evaluation. I analyzed the SPB Class Survey and the Central Falls High School Voting Day Survey. A total of 12 proxy questions were identified from the SPB Class survey and Voting Day Survey to examine as a part of my analysis. From the SPB Class Survey, four proxy questions were assigned to analyze civic knowledge, three proxy questions were assigned to participatory competencies, and two to youth empowerment. Eleven of the questions were quantitative, and three questions were qualitative. Three questions from the Voting Day Survey were also identified as proxy questions for the analysis. An SPB point-in-time survey was also reviewed, capturing youth perceptions on voting day. These were scrubbed of personally identifying information with some demographics available (e.g., grade, gender, and language). Table 2 lists the proxy questions taken from the Voting Day survey. This data was also used to reinforce findings from the course assessments.

Third, I accessed secondary data through a data-sharing agreement with Central Falls School District. I accessed pre-survey and post-survey responses to the 2022-2023 SPB Class survey and the 2022-2023 Voting Day Survey. I used Microsoft Excel sheets to complete an exploratory study of the data set for the analysis. Changes in pre and post-survey question averages were collected and assessed to identify trends or patterns. Averages in responses in the voting day survey were also calculated.

A presentation was developed for a small evaluation review team comprised of School Participatory Budgeting program managers convened at the school and school district. During a one-hour review, a presentation showcased the data across the three main evaluation themes: 1)

civic knowledge; 2) participatory competencies; and 3) youth empowerment. Participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of the findings and offer observations, considerations, and questions. This data was then assessed in conjunction with the evaluation findings to help create a set of recommendations for the program.

Table 1

Table of Proxy Questions from SBP Class Pre- and Post-Survey

SBP Class Pre and Post-Survey Proxy Questions
Civic Knowledge *Question 1*: Who is the mayor of Central Falls? *Question 2*: What do you think the City Council of Central Falls does? *Question 3*: Please rate the amount of power the following people/groups have in creating change in the community: a. The Mayor b. City Council c. Superintendent d. Business Owners e. Youth *Question 4*: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements: a. Community leaders care about my well-being b. I know how decisions are made in school c. I know the needs of students in my school d. I know about participatory budgeting
Participatory Competencies *Question 5*: Please rate your level of COMFORT with the following activities a. Helping to organize others to solve a problem b. Listening carefully before responding c. Analyze information to create project proposals d. Organize ideas into project proposals e. Resolve conflicts f. Making decisions as a group g. Advertise project proposals

SBP Class Pre and Post-Survey Proxy Questions
h. Motivate others to get involved i. Talking to students, I don't know j. Understanding budgets k. Contacting government officials l. Reaching out to school staff and administrators m. Talking to members of my community about political issues *Question 6*: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: a. I'm involved with issues and current events happening in my community b. I know how to get involved in events happening in my community c. I have worked with others in this community on solving community problems d. I expect to vote as soon as I am allowed to *Question 7*: How interested are you in doing each of the following: a. Being able to have a say about decisions that affect my neighborhood b. Joining a committee or group to solve problems in my community c. Organizing a committee or group to solve a problem
Youth Empowerment *Question 8*: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: a. I see myself as capable of making positive changes in my community b. I am concerned about fixing problems in my schools c. I feel confident I can make a difference in my school d. I am interested in participating to make changes in my school e. I believe when people work together they can make a difference f. I feel my ideas are being heard g. People like me have power to make change in my community *Question 9*: Do you agree or disagree that people like you have the power to create change in your community? *Question 10*: Should students have a voice in how schools spend money?

Table 2

Table of Proxy Questions from Voting Day Survey

SBP Voting Day Survey Proxy Questions
Question 11: After voting today, how easy or complicated is voting? *Question 12*: After voting today, how much power do you feel you have in your school? *Question 13*: After voting today, how important do you think it is to be involved in your community in the future?

Results

A total of 23 students enrolled in the class. Twenty of those students were on free or reduced lunch, and the other three paid for lunch at school. One student was in the 9th grade, six were in the 10th grade, 11 were in the 11th grade, and five were in the 12th grade. Of the 23 students enrolled, one identified as American Indian or Alaskan, four as Black or African American, seven as White, ten as Hispanic or Latino of any race, and one as two or more races.

The SPB Class Survey had 15 responses in the pre-survey and 13 in the post. Nine students took both the pre-survey and the post-survey (n=9). There were 517 responses to the Voting Day Survey.

Civic Knowledge Results

In response to *Question 1*, eight students responded "I don't know" when asked who the mayor was, and seven responded correctly with "Mayor Rivera." In the post-survey, the response to the same question changed from one student responding with "I don't know" and 12 students responding correctly.

In response to *Question 2*, during the pre-survey, 10 responses indicated needing to know what the city council does. Two responses claimed the city council makes the community better, one claimed the city council holds the community accountable, one claimed it handles

community affairs, and one response said the city council does nothing. In the post-survey, one response mentioned not knowing what the city council does, four said it makes the community better and handles city affairs, and three said the city council fixes city issues. Two responses in the post-survey indicated that city council helps make decisions, and one response said it exists creating events. Another response in the post-survey said it city council helps hold the government accountable.

Question 3 asked students to rate the amount of power key figures in the community have in creating change in their community. Their choice in responses was coded as 1 = no power, 2 = a little power, 3 = some power, and 4 = a lot of power. When asked how much power the Mayor has, the average response in the pre was 3.47, and in the 3.69 in the post. The response for City Council in pre was 3.13, and 3.62 in the post. The response for Superintendent in the pre was 2.87, and 2.92 in the post. The response for Business Owners was 2.4 in the pre, and 2.69 in the post. Response for the amount of power youth have in creating change was 2 in the pre, and 2.15 in the post.

Question 4 asked participants to respond with their level of agreement about their knowledge on various civic competencies. The choices in responses were 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither disagree no agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree. When asked how they agree on community leaders care about their well being, the average students response in the pre was 3.33, in the post the average response decreased to 3.23. When asked if they know how decisions are made in school the average response in the pre was 3.13, and the post increased slightly to 3.15. When asked if the know the needs of students in their school, the average response in the pre and post was 3. When asked if they know about participatory

budgeting, students' average response in the pre was 3, and in the post the average response rose to 3.92.

Participatory Competencies Results

Question 5 asked participants to respond with their level of comfort related to participatory activities. The choices in responses were 1 = Not at all comfortable, 2 = A little bit comfortable, 3 = Comfortable, 4 = Very comfortable. When asked about their comfort organizing others, students responded with 2.2 in the pre, and 2.85 in the post. When asked about listening carefully before responding, students average response in the pre was 2.6, and 3.08 in the post. When asked about analyzing information to create proposals, students average response in the pre was 2.13, and in the post it was 2.85. For the question asking them about organizing ideas into project proposals, students average response in the pre was 1.87 and 2.46 in the post. When asked about resolving conflict, the average response in the pre was 1.92, and in the post it was 2.15. When asked about their level of comfort making decisions in a group, the average response was 2.2, and 2.93 in the post. When asked about talking about project proposals with others, the average response of participants in the pre was 1.67, and 2.38 in the post. The question inquiring about the level of comfort with motivating others to get involved found that the average response in the pre was 1.73 and 2.46 in the post. When asked about their level of comfort with talking to other students they don't know, the average response of participants in the pre was 1.8, and in the post the average response increased to 2.08. When asked about understanding budgets, no students were asked in the pre, but in the post the average response was 3.15. When asked about contacting government officials, the average response in the pre was 1.22, and the post 1.77. When asked about reaching out and talking to school administrators, the average response in the pre survey was 1.93, and in the post the average response was 2.54.

The last question in the series asked participants about their level of comfort talking to members of their community about political issues, the average response in the pre-survey was 1.6 and in the post the average response was 1.92.

Question 6 asked participants to respond with their level of agreement about their knowledge on various civic activities. The choices in responses were 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither disagree no agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree. When asked if they are involved with issues or current events in their community, participants average response in the pre-survey was 2.8 and in the post-survey the response was 2.38. When asked if they know how to get involved with issues or events in their community, participants average response in the pre-survey was 2.6 and in the post-survey the response was 2.62. When asked if they have worked with others to solve a community problem, participants average response in the pre-survey was 2.67 and in the post-survey the average response was 3.0. When asked if they expected to vote once allowed to, participants average response in the pre-survey was 3.8 and in the post-survey the average response was 3.85.

Question 7 asked participants to rate their level of interest in participating in civic activities. The choices in responses were 1= Not interested at all, 2 = Somewhat interested, 3 = Neither interested nor uninterested, 4 = Interested, and 5 = Very interested. When asked about being able to have a say about decisions, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 2.8, and in the post-survey the average response was 3.15. When asked about joining a committee or a group to solve problems in their community, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 2.27, and in the post-survey the average response was 2.23. When asked about organizing a committee or a group to solve issues in their community, the average

response of participants in the pre-survey was 2.27, and in the post-survey the average response was 2.38.

Youth Empowerment Results

Question 8 asked participants to rate to what extent they agree or disagree with various statements. The choices in responses were 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither disagree no agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree. When asked if they see themselves as capable of creating change in their community, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 3.2, and in the post-survey the average response was 3.85. When asked if they are concerned about fixing problems in their school, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 3.2, and in the post-survey the average response was 3.69. When asked if they feel confident they can make a difference in their school, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 2.53, and in the post-survey the average response was 3.23. When asked if they are interested participating in making changes in their school, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 3.13, and in the post-survey the average response was 3.77. When asked if they believe that when people work together they can make a difference, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 3.93, and in the post-survey the average response was 4.08. When asked if they feel their ideas are being heard, the average response of participants in the pre-survey was 2.93, and in the post-survey the average response was 3.15.

Question 9 asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the statement that people like them have the power to make change in the community. The choices in responses were 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither disagree no agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree. The average response among participants in the pre-survey was 3.2 and in the post-survey the average response was 3.15.

Question 10 asked participants to answer if students should have a voice in how schools spend money. In the pre survey there was one response for "no". In the post survey there was no response for "no". In both the pre-and-post survey there was 13 responses saying yes. Six responses in the pre-survey mentioned yes, because schools are for students, in the post there five mentions of this. Another type of response was because students know what is right or wrong for the school, there was one response in the pre-survey, and three responses like this in the post-survey. In pre-survey six responses said yes, because students should have a say in what happens in their schools, in the post there were four responses citing this reason. Another response described the reason being students are affected by the decisions make in schools, there was one response like this found in the pre-survey, and there were four responses like this found in the post survey. One response in the pre-survey listed that students have good ideas for one of the reasons. One response was found in both the pre and post survey describing that having a voice empowers students to make decisions. One response was found in the post-survey describing it to be fair to give students a say in how schools spend money.

Voting Day Survey Results

A total of 503 youth participants responded to *Question 11* in the Voting Day Survey. When asked how easy or complicated they think voting was after voting, 2.19% (n=11) said it was very complicated, 10.93% (n=55) said it was a little complicated, 25.05% (n=126) said it was neither easy or complicated, 34.99% (n=176) said it was easy, and 26.84% (n=135) said it was very easy.

A total of 489 youth participants responded to *Question 12* in the Voting Day Survey. When asked how much power they think they have in their school, 9.0% (n=41) said they have

no power, 15% (n=73) said they have a little power, 27% (n=134) said neither a lot or a little power, 34% (n=167) said some power, 15% (n=74) said a lot of power.

A total of 500 youth participants responded to *Question 13* in the Voting Day Survey. When asked how important voting is after voting, 2% (n=9) said not at all, 6% (n=29) said not very important, 32% (n=161) said somewhat important, 38% (n=191) said very important, and 22% (n=110) said extremely important.

Focus Group Presentation

During the focus group presentation, the analysis results were shared with four members of the participatory budgeting management team. This group was asked to reflect on the analysis related to the evaluation questions and their takeaways from the data shown. In response to this question, one focus group member said, “The data analysis shows me that there is potential for SPB to improve students' youth civic empowerment, as shown in the data in which students in the class demonstrated more civic and participatory competencies.” In response to this statement, another focus group member added, “Amending the survey questions to measure if students' civic competencies or knowledge is better after SPB class could help link students' self-reporting to particular activities facilitated by SPB. For example, asking which SPB class activities contributed to understanding how to advocate for others.”

In response to the findings, focus group members mentioned being surprised by the increased level of comfort students in SPB class reported having with their peers and, most notably, adults in their school. The focus group collectively positively highlighted the data point describing youth comfort in talking to adults at the school about issues and working with them to create solutions. One focus group mentioned that regarding youth empowerment, this discovery connects with how they designed SPB in the first place. According to the focus group member,

youth and adults are meant to work together in SPB, and this collaborative relationship fosters empowerment.

Several focus group members mentioned that a limitation of their SPB is that comparing its impacts with students not enrolled in the course is hard. They explain how SPB is an optional elective. In response, another focus group member shared how they hope to broaden their impact and collect data on how much knowledge or power students who aren't enrolled in the class feel over time.

One focus group member described how they were surprised that, in the pre-and post-survey, students' answers to "What is your level of agreement with the following: People like me have the power to make a change in my community" decreased in favorability. The average response was neither agree nor disagree in the pre-test (average score of 3.20) and the post-test (average score of 3.15). When reflecting on this finding, another focus group member commented that we should consider what kind of student is taking the course and do more to learn about that in our data collection. They added that perhaps students were already going in with an understanding of their power and may have already felt empowered. Responding to that comment, another focus group member proposed exploring what students who were not involved in the class would say about their level of empowerment.

A focus group member described the findings from the voting day survey as interesting, regarding how many students in the school feel voting is easy and important for civic participation. This same focus group member wanted to explore how the answers to Voting Day survey questions differed from those who took it in different languages. Understanding how SPB impacted the feeling of empowerment among immigrants or non-English speakers would be data they would like to explore.

Finally, another focus group member shared that this research illuminated ideas for how SPB is connected to other areas of students' academic performance. Because schools are usually test-score reliant, it would be crucial to determine whether SPB and youth empowerment connect to other factors such as decreasing chronic absenteeism, improving school spirit, or improving test scores.

Discussion

Evidence exists that SPB empowers youth in their schools. Empowerment theories identify education as a prerequisite to empowerment, especially among youth. The more youth know about their civic society, the more skills they have to apply and liberate themselves. Also, participation and inclusion are significant in creating environments for youth to become empowered. SPB shows that it gives youth opportunities to develop and practice participation. There are also important notes in which youth work with adults to create change. SPB demonstrates how it engages youth across the six dimensions as a model for CYE. It presents the best model for actualizing CYE because it implements a multi-faceted approach to youth participation.

Regarding facilitating a welcoming environment, SPB encourages youth to care, participate, and develop solutions for their community. Analysis' findings support the idea that youth know adults and students in their community value one another and care about students in school. Meaningful participation is found in the SPB class, where youth are encouraged to lead their school community in making changes in their school. Students in the course demonstrated increased knowledge of how to participate meaningfully. For example, youth in the course reported increased comfort in organizing their peers to solve issues. This indicates there are more skills to participate and engage in creating change.

Power sharing between youth and adults is part of SPB's design. The data in this analysis shows how young people understand their power, especially regarding adults. Evidence from this analysis shows how youth perceive themselves to have less power than adults but also indicates how they know they should have decision-making powers concerning the way schools spend money. Through SPB, youth and adults navigate sharing decision-making powers to create change. As a result, youth reported increased comfort in going to school administrators to express issues found in their schools.

SPB facilitates critical reflection and sociopolitical processes. Analysis suggests that youth in the course demonstrated a strong level of civic competencies and critical awareness of their community. As critical thinkers with sociopolitical awareness, youth are better positioned to be engaged and empowered to create and affect change in their community.

The focus group found that there are connections that could tie SPB to Critical Youth Empowerment theory. Students were able to define if they enjoyed their school, or if they experienced improved relationships with adults through the SPB class. However, the class and data collected via the surveys can do more to clearly define and measure the critical empowerment opportunities for youth. This could be achieved through measuring students' competencies across the six dimensions and asking them to self-report on how their skills have changed pre and post participating in the SPB class.

Recommendations

Several recommendations emerged for future SPB processes and studies through this analysis and focus group discussion. The first suggests strengthening linkages in survey tool questions to the dimensions found in CYE. Through this refined approach, researchers might

find more evidence to understand how SPB helps actualize CYE models. This study was limited by the available questions and survey responses that could be used to conduct this analysis.

Another recommendation would be to compare the impacts of students taking the class and those who do not. This will help researchers and school administrators determine if SPB is responsible for critically empowering youth in their schools. Because the class is an optional elective, it is difficult to gauge what kind of student is enrolling in the course. For example, are the students who choose to enroll already entering with perceptions of empowerment? A recommendation would be to enroll students who are less likely to be engaged in this way. This programming could lead to more inclusivity and involve students less likely to participate in SPB opportunities.

Another recommendation for the SPB class at Central Falls High School would be to conduct a longitudinal study of class participants or compare voting trends of students in the age group when eligible to vote to understand the long-term impacts of SPB. This study could contribute to understanding how CYE models impact students' participation in high school or early adulthood.

Limitations of the Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to explore the critical youth empowerment potential for youth involved in SPB. In this study there were limitations constraining aspects of this evaluation. A limitation found in this study was the proxy questions available to assess the critical youth empowerment of SPB. There were gaps to questions that could be tied to the six dimensions of critical youth empowerment. a result, there was a lack of data that could be interpreted for this study.

This limitation also contributed to challenges to interpreting the data. This was most evident during the focus group presentation. Several focus group members noted that the questions found in the survey were worded in ways that could make interpreting impact of youth empowerment challenging because some questions asked youth to predict future actions or behaviors, as opposed to gauging their current perceptions or opinions on self or collective empowerment.

As the researcher, I was able to select which questions from the survey to use as proxy questions. This created a bias towards selecting questions I thought would help my research and evaluation. As a result, I may have missed opportunities to incorporate other proxy questions as part of this study.

Implications for Future Projects

The findings and discussion from this research study have several implications for future studies or projects. These implications can guide school administrators, youth engagement organizations, and researchers in their pursuit of empowering youth and giving them a meaningful role in decision-making. SPB employs a combination of youth empowerment tools and participatory research. Future projects could benefit from adopting SPB to explore and examine youth empowerment opportunities found in schools. One implication for future study would be to refine research questions to more closely assess the critical youth empowerment potential of SPB. This can contribute to a greater understanding of how schools facilitate empowerment for their youth across the six dimensions.

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Appendix A

Evaluation Review Questions

Question 1: Who is the mayor of Central Falls?

Question 2: What do you think the City Council of Central Falls does?

Question 3: Please rate the amount of power the following people/groups have in creating change in the community:

a. The Mayor

b. City Council

c. Superintendent

d. Business Owners

e. Youth

Question 4: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements:

a. Community leaders care about my well-being

b. I know how decisions are made in school

c. I know the needs of students in my school

d. I know about participatory budgeting

Question 5: Please rate your level of COMFORT with the following activities

a. Helping to organize others to solve a problem

b. Listening carefully before responding

c. Analyze information to create project proposals

d. Organize ideas into project proposals

e. Resolve conflicts

f. Making decisions as a group

g. Advertise project proposals

h. Motivate others to get involved

i. Talking to students, I don't know

j. Understanding budgets

k. Contacting government officials

l. Reaching out to school staff and administrators

m. Talking to members of my community about political issues

Question 6: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

a. I'm involved with issues and current events happening in my community

b. I know how to get involved in events happening in my community

c. I have worked with others in this community on solving community problems

d. I expect to vote as soon as I am allowed to

Question 7: How interested are you in doing each of the following:

a. Being able to have a say about decisions that affect my neighborhood

b. Joining a committee or group to solve problems in my community

c. Organizing a committee or group to solve a problem

Question 8: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

a. I see myself as capable of making positive changes in my community

b. I am concerned about fixing problems in my schools

c. I feel confident I can make a difference in my school

d. I am interested in participating to make changes in my school

e. I believe when people work together they can make a difference

f. I feel my ideas are being heard

g. People like me have power to make change in my community

Question 9: Do you agree or disagree that people like you have the power to create change in your community?

Question 10: Should students have a voice in how schools spend money?

Question 11: After voting today, how easy or complicated is voting?

Question 12: After voting today, how much power do you feel you have in your school?

Question 13: After voting today, how important do you think it is to be involved in your community in the future?