

Hands-on democracy: K–12 students learn how to budget, vote in ASU program

Research finds that School Participatory Budgeting teaches career-ready skills

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Story highlights

Arizona State University is partnering on a program that puts civics lessons into practice in more than 100 K–12 schools statewide.

Through School Participatory Budgeting, thousands of students vote on how to spend real money on campus improvements like shade structures and murals.

ASU research shows that they are developing career-ready skills.

America's celebration of its semiquincentennial this summer highlighted the role of civics education in sustaining democracy. And this year also marks the 10th anniversary of a program that puts civics lessons into practice.

Through [School Participatory Budgeting](#), thousands of K–12 students across Arizona have chosen how to spend real money on campus improvements — while research shows that they are developing career-ready skills.

The hands-on program has students identify what their schools need and develop project ideas — like shade structures, water-bottle fillers, gardens or new furniture. With more than 100 Arizona schools participating, students learn that they can make a difference.

Two ASU professors, [Tara Bartlett](#), a Principled Innovation Fellow, and [Daniel Schugurensky](#), with the School of Public Affairs, have researched the impact of School Participatory Budgeting.

“One thing that we've really been trying to communicate is that civic skills are workplace skills and durable skills,” Bartlett said.

“When students are asked to be a project manager throughout this process, those skills are transferable to anywhere else that they might go in life.”

The program is a partnership between Arizona State University's [Participatory Governance Initiative](#) and the nonprofit Center for the Future of Arizona. Schugurensky is director of the Participatory Governance Initiative, and Bartlett is co-director.

Students research the cost and feasibility of projects, campaign for their favorite and communicate the benefits. They contact vendors for quotes, handle the complicated logistics of organizing a vote, report to school administrators and often appear at public governing board meetings.

The culminating event is voting day, usually held in the spring. Some schools work with their county recording office to use real voting booths and actual “I voted” stickers. Any student who will be 18 by the next general election can register to vote, and more than 9,400 young people have done so since 2016.

“That’s really the beauty of this knowledge — they get a very hyperlocal understanding of democracy,” Bartlett said.

“They understand that our superintendent is appointed by our governing board, and this governing board holds so much power and they're elected officials.

“They start to understand that this tiny little ecosystem of a school they're in has this greater leaning into democracy, just not at the scale that they're probably talking about on a daily basis in their classrooms.”

One school administrator called the initiative “democracy with training wheels.”

Michael Penca, superintendent of the Flagstaff Unified School District, said that in 2023, the students at Flagstaff High School decided to spend their \$10,000 on an ice machine, which beat out three other projects: locker renovations, furniture for a common area and a project to turn tennis courts into pickleball courts.

“The adults were all thinking, ‘Oh, they’ll be throwing ice,’ but they were really responsible. They're very proud of that ice machine,” said Penca, who spoke at a recent event held by the Center for the Future of Arizona to mark a decade of supporting the initiative.

“We’re learning that it doesn’t have to be perfect. But every experience I have with our students, I walk away with more hope for our future, our state and our nation,” he said.

Jeff Armstrong, executive director of elementary education at Higley Unified School District, said his students got a reality check on how far their \$5,000 would go.

“They wanted to buy a shade structure and the facilitator goes, ‘OK, here’s the district vendor list,’ and they get the measurements, call the vendor and it’s \$75,000.

“But the dialogue between the students and the constructive criticism and productive arguments were absolutely astounding.”

What students are learning

Bartlett and Schugurensky have studied the impact of the program through surveys and focus groups. They co-wrote a [book](#) about the initiative. They found that:

Students reported gains in understanding how budgets work, how decisions are made and how to participate in a democratic process.

Students said they felt they had more voice and influence in decision-making.

Students practiced collective problem-solving, with increases in discussing school problems and generating solutions.

Students moved toward broader civic habits, reporting stronger plans to work on school improvement and to help make decisions at school.

The program is especially helpful for students who haven’t experienced much civic participation, such as voting, in their families, Bartlett said.

The Center for the Future of Arizona, working with the [Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation](#) and the Participatory Governance Initiative, provides training and technical assistance to educators, schools and districts, plus an [online resource hub](#).

Learning to lead

Christine Njuguna learned a lot of life lessons from School Participatory Budgeting. As a high school junior, she wanted to bring the program to Gilbert Classical Academy and asked the Center for the Future of Arizona for support.

“In the beginning, they didn’t realize I was a high schooler, and I didn’t realize that it was a teacher who was supposed to reach out,” said Njuguna, now a first-year student majoring in business and public policy at ASU.

Njuguna got her school administrators onboard and started recruiting students to help her.

“I did choose the type of students that were already in a lot of other stuff because I was like them, already in a lot of other stuff,” she said.

She kept the project on track and organized the logistics for the vote, even after learning halfway through the year that voting day conflicted with exams.

“I got our master schedule and I had to color-code it all, figure out when people would come and how to organize it. And I had to email all the teachers,” she said.

She learned about delegating, communicating and follow-up.

“I wanted to control everything and I wanted to do everything, and I realized that's not realistic. I ended up being burnt out, and things were falling through the cracks,” she said.

“So I was learning how to distribute work and understand my role in the process.”

On voting day, students chose a project to beautify the courtyard with a mural and furniture. But the implementation stalled during Njuguna's senior year, even as students were asking her to start a new round of the program.

“The first part was a lot of adrenaline and fun stuff, but the implementation was the hard stuff, and not as glamorous,” she said.

And she learned in real time that change takes persistence.

“We had students complaining, ‘We want this. We want that.’ And we were providing them with a model to do that and saying, ‘We can help improve things.’

“And there was still hesitancy. ‘Will this actually do anything?’ So it made me realize that you have to put in a lot of effort.

“But also, so many people helped me. So I learned that there really are a lot of people who care.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Students at West Point High School in the Tolleson Union High School District voted to buy shade umbrellas for their courtyard through ASU's School Participatory Budgeting program. Courtesy photo

Text image(s)



Tara Bartlett, a Principled Innovation Fellow at ASU, spoke at a recent event held by the Center for the Future of Arizona about her research on the impact of School Participatory Budgeting. Photo by Ari Gajraj/Center for the Future of Arizona



Christine Njuguna, now a first-year student at ASU, spoke at a recent event held by the Center for the Future of Arizona on School Participatory Budgeting. She moderated a panel of students from around the state. Photo by Ari Gajraj/Center for the Future of Arizona