

How should we organise the participatory budgeting in schools? Good practices, recommendations as a part of the 'Scoală Mea' initiative.

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Citizen participation in the budget process is a key component in ensuring transparency of public spending in education. In this paper we will describe the extent to which the schools are ready to launch a participatory budgeting, how it can be organized in each educational institution and which are the advantages of a participatory process.

What is participation?

Participation involves financial decisions, in particular on the most sensitive subjects (inclusive education, education community moderator, etc.). It is important to understand that budget participation, as a process, can be different both in terms of its tasks and objectives, and of the involvement of each stakeholder. For example, participation of pupils in the budget process at the national level will be representative, via the parents and pupils associations, while at school level the participation of everyone is very simple because of the relatively limited number of participants.¹

This is why it is necessary to answer clearly to the following three questions before speaking about organizing the participation in the budget process.

1. Who participates?
2. What funds will be discussed?
3. Where will the process take place?

Advantages of the participatory budgeting in education:

- Creates a real partnership between the academic and financial staff, and the community of parents and pupils. While learning about democracy, pupils, parents and teachers become more active and democratic and understand better the complex problems and needs of the school.
- Identifies priorities and directs the funds to areas that will benefit children the most. When the school community members feel that they have a say in school decisions, they invest more time and energy in the school and build stronger school communities. The

¹Anatomy of priority driven budget process, Government Finance Office Association 2016
<http://www.gfoa.org/anatomy-priority-driven-budget-process>

political dialogue between pupils, teachers, parents and staff brings the school community closer.

- Ensures a better planning and better justified budgetary decisions. When the school community members are involved in the budget process, the school engages in more innovatory and more efficient spending. Community member have valuable knowledge about the school needs and new ideas about how these needs can be met.

How should we organize participation in schools?

The participatory budgeting in schools comes to inform the key stakeholders (teachers, pupils, parents, community) about the decisions on the distribution of the money appropriated for education and its organisation, and to justify the decisions on funds spending. On the other hand, the participatory budgeting process provides an opportunity for parents, pupils, and the community to choose the development priorities of the institution and to contribute to the improvement of the education process.

A participatory budget process is possible only if the following main conditions are met: existence of a team willing to organise this process in the school and existence of available funds that could be used to implement the projects selected as a result of the participatory budget process. If the school does not have any available resources to implement the projects selected via the participatory budget process, the institution's manager could use the resources provided by the community of parents, businesses, local public authorities.

So, how should we organize the participation?

Thus, the whole process can be divided into several distinct stages: concept design, stakeholder involvement, idea generation, decision taking and "learning".

The design of the participation concept envisages establishing clearly the parameters for participation: when, how the budget process takes place, its phases, who it refers to, who takes the decisions, and the justification of these decisions. For instance, building a new sports ground or increasing the rate of high school pupils who pass the exams.

It is important to note that initially the participatory budgeting will be a new process for pupils, parents and the community. It would be useful to have a visual presentation of the budget process (Budget Calendar in education), so that they would know at what stage to get involved and what actions they could take. First set the timeline: when you would like the pupils to vote for projects, and then decide on the action retroactively. Schedule the voting several weeks before the semester end, so that you could implement the winning projects (or at least start their implementation) before the semester ends. It would be best for pupils to see their ideas coming true as soon as possible.

As mentioned above, it is important to create platforms where young people can interact. Social networks nowadays offer great freedom of interaction, including the tools for observing and collecting opinions, feedback, etc. At the stage of identifying the potential leaders for this process, engaging pupils from representative structures - the pupils' Senate, class Presidents could easily legitimize the process among students.

Identify who will guide the process. Which teacher facilitates the project? Will it be done by a teacher or a group of pupils? Which pupils participate and how? In most schools participatory budgeting aims at

engaging young people, hence only they will vote. But it is up to the school or Board to decide to include the families, teachers and staff and thus changing the process accordingly. It is important to take into account the objectives and the capacity to develop eligibility rules for an individually selected process.

The next step involves the **stakeholders' participation**. Each institution must develop its own method of interacting with beneficiaries depending on the issue the institution wants to solve together with the beneficiaries. For example, if the purpose is to inform the public about decisions taken or about changes in policies, resources, or programs, then informing the public and maintaining transparency about decisions may be sufficient². In this case, the design of stakeholder engagement should aim to reach a large number of people, including specifically identified target audiences; use diverse modes and venues of communication; and seek to ascertain whether the public is, in fact, more aware of the issues and is satisfied with the institution's feedback.

In case of difficult decisions, especially in conditions of budget austerity, another approach is needed: making decisions in such a manner that stakeholders do not feel left out (for example, avoid rushing the decision-making process or delegating it to small, elite, or exclusive groups); emphasizing procedural fairness to enhance acceptance of decisions even among those with a different preferred outcome; encouraging broad participation, especially of key stakeholders; engaging in shared generation of knowledge and joint problem solving; using conflict management and negotiation techniques, including consensus-building approaches that aim for win-win solutions.

Generation of ideas comes after participation, but this stage should meet several preconditions for a quality process: simulate budget exercises (this can be done during civic education classes, identify leaders and create platforms where they could interact, and attract community leaders when preparing the budget).

How many pupils from the school should participate in the idea generation process? Is 'the more – the better' principle applicable? A more reasonable question would be what is the minimum number of participants that you can obtain and that would ensure diversity of opinion and representativeness of pupils' opinions? Also take into account the amount of money that you work with. If the budget is very small, it would be senseless to involve the whole school.

Here are some ways by which pupils could collect ideas.

1. Meeting at the school level

A group of pupils make a quick presentation about the PB and then the pupils from the audience fill in the questionnaires. The advantage of this instrument is that you can obtain plenty of ideas at once. The disadvantage is that it is difficult to schedule meetings at the school level, the experience of presenting in front of the whole school may be intimidating, therefore pupils need to practice in advance.

2. Interviews by classes

² Government Finance Office Association, School Budgeting Best Practices, http://gfoa.org/sites/default/files/PK12_1E.pdf

Pupils go to other classes in order to collect ideas in small groups. To collect ideas, pupils may work with small groups in classrooms or collect surveys. The advantages consist in the fact this activity can be organised during the courses, but with the teachers' consent. The disadvantage is that you'll be able to collect fewer ideas.

3. Pop-up stations. The Ideas and Suggestions Box is a classic example. They will be placed in halls or in the canteen in order to collect ideas during breaks or during the lunch.

Decision-making is the most difficult stage. Decisions can only be take place in a controlled, inclusive, informed environment, according to a clear timetable and on a clear platform, either for the general or tripartite meeting (management, parents, pupils).

Here are some ways of organising the decision-making voting:

1. Meeting at the school level

The Board or the Pupils' Council could produce some short video clips or short presentations about each project during a school meeting. The pupils from the audience fill in the voting ballots after seeing all the presentations or video clips. Advantages: you may be sure that everyone has heard the information about the project and can vote having fresh information on their mind.

Disadvantages: lengthy time necessary to make the presentations or video clips.

2. Presentation of projects and voting for them

Make a fair scientific exhibition in a large meeting room within the school. Pupils will develop their projects in advance. On the exhibition day, their colleges will come and visit the different projects in order to hear the most important aspects from the pupils presenting the projects, and then will vote. Advantages: the activity of creating banners/posters is not time consuming, can be very interesting and contribute to the organisation of interesting events.

3. Voting in the classroom

Invite pupils to make quick presentations in other classrooms. After the presentation, the pupils from that classroom could fill in the voting ballots.

'**Learning**' stage means that, given that budgetary decisions involve compromises and some parts will not be satisfied with the decisions, it is imperative that participants have a chance to provide feedback during and after the decision making process. Like the involvement stage, there should be a series of ways to provide a feedback. Nonetheless, the feedback methods should be structured in order to provide useful information.

- How did the participation take place? How they aligned to the best practices and the annual progresses reporting. Although we recognise that some schools will not implement the participatory process, they should clearly describe, in the annual progress reports, the cause, the challenges encountered and possible solutions.
- It is important to understand that solving the issue of participatory budgeting is directly linked to the enhancement of the legal framework for participation. Thus,

the Education Code states that participation cannot take place in the absence of a Council, approved on the basis of a sample Regulation. The publication of this Regulation is delayed for the second consecutive year, thus its participation framework cannot be enforced. We recommend its urgent publication and support for its implementation.

- How did that institution's headmaster ensure that the winning projects were implemented? Communicating the results to the community and to everyone who was involved in this process is of crucial importance in this regard.

The success stories³ of the "Școala mea" project where participatory budgeting was implemented, reveal that at times involving the community in the school budget planning has led to better financial support to resolve infrastructure problems⁴ or better identification of spending priorities. This shows once again, that through the involvement and participation of pupils and parents, the school and its educational process have nothing but to gain from it. Participatory budgeting also contributes to creating a culture of fiscal accountability for institution managers and informed collaboration from the community of parents and pupils who are often more sensitive to school issues and more aware of the link between budget allocations and school services. It is also born to form a common area of continuous education and training. In this sense, we can only urge schools to create opportunities for participation, and parents and students to get involved in the school budget process.

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³ <http://scoalamea.md/category/istorii-de-succes/>

⁴ <http://scoalamea.md/unde-i-unul-nu-i-putere-unde-s-doi-puterea-creste-sau-cum-crearea-coalitiilor-ajuta-scolile-in-solutionarea-celor-mai-stringente-probleme/>