



Participatory Budgeting Handbook for Schools

VERSION 01.2

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Introduction

This handbook is for teachers, principals, administrators, students, and even parents who want to plan and run a Participatory Budgeting (PB) program for their school, class or extracurricular program using the FirstRoot app.



Participatory Budgeting is a democratic process in which a group of people (such as a school or a class) decide how to spend a part of a shared budget. Participants submit their ideas, refine them into proposals, vote for the best, and fund actual projects with real money.

The PB process was first developed in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989. Since then, PB has spread to over 3,000 cities and schools all over the world. Most of these PB projects are sponsored by local government officials. PB has also been used for counties, states, housing authorities, schools and school systems, universities, and other public agencies.

Why do PB in school?

- It's democracy in action!
- It gives students a positive civic engagement experience
- It brings students closer to their community
- It strengthens the relationship between students and administration
- It shows students the benefits of getting involved

By participating in PB, students will...

- Collaborate with other students, leaders and teachers
- Develop financial literacy skills by funding projects with real money
- Develop research skills in order to validate proposals
- Develop design-thinking, problem-solving and critical thinking skills
- Increase their awareness of community needs
- Develop a sense of social responsibility

How PB works?

FirstRoot has identified several patterns on how to run a successful PB cycle at school. This is actually a great advantage due to being a fully configurable digital experience:



A teacher or administrator **creates an account** on the FirstRoot platform



The teacher **configures the PB program**, such as establishing the budget, duration and who can participate.



FirstRoot guides students through the PB program:
Students **create, refine, vote and fund** on proposals



The teacher purchases student-funded proposals and shares progress to all participants.

1. Set up the PB plan, theme & categories
2. Share your student list in a spreadsheet to set up their accounts
3. Choose a PB cycle timeline that better suits your vision
4. Get volunteers to become student leaders
5. Notify students about the PB budget, theme and timeline

FirstRoot PB setup

- We can help you every step of the way, feel free to reach out directly to pb@firstroot.co and let us know what's happening and how can we help you.
- What kind of **PB cycle** do you want to run?
 - PB Sprint (1 Week)
 - Short PB Cycle (3-6 Weeks)
 - Long PB Cycle (4-6 Months)
- What is the **PB theme**?
 - i.e. "We want to make our school fairer and more inclusive for everyone"
 - i.e. "We want to make our school a safe place for everyone"
- What are the **PB categories**?
 - i.e. "Facilities, Equipment, Science lab, Sports, etc" (up to 10 categories)
- Download this [Excel spreadsheet](#) and fill out with students info
 - Name
 - Grade
 - School Email Address
- Tell everyone to join FirstRoot PB Cycle at www.firstroot.co/pb

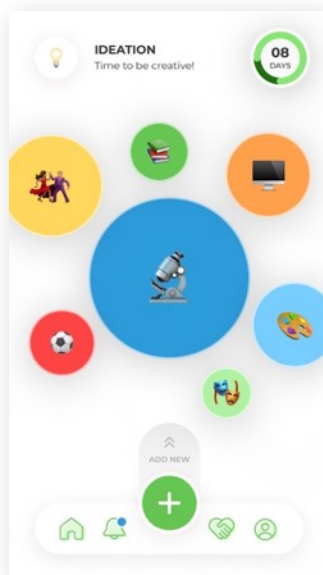
FirstRoot PB stages



Onboarding

As a first step, students will...

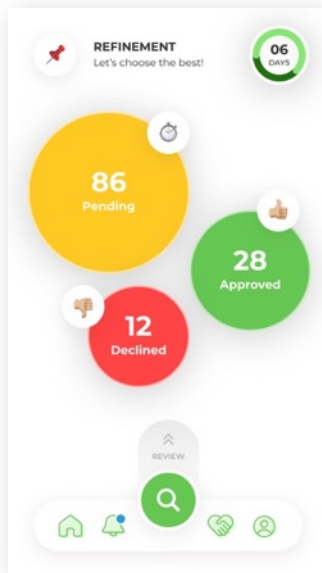
- Join FirstRoot app
- Know about the PB theme
- Be introduced to the PB budget through a wallet
- Get to see the PB progress in the PB map
- Be able to receive notifications in real-time
- Be able to edit their profile



Ideation

This is where students get to be creative and...

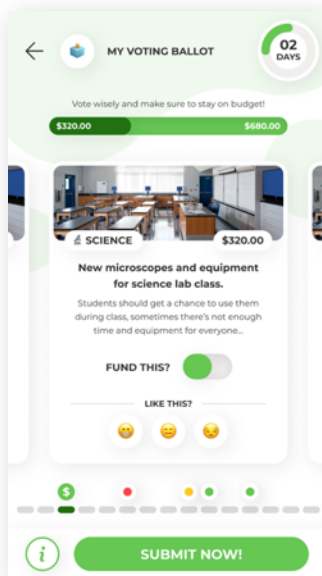
- Think of ways to improve the school
- Think of how things can help other students
- Make thoughtful and high-impact proposals
- Browse through all proposal categories
- Like & comment proposals they like
- Submit as many proposals as they want!



Refinement

After getting awesome proposals, it's time for...

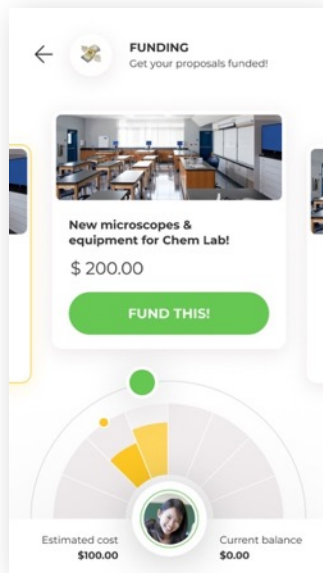
- Teacher & student leaders to work together
- Remove impossible proposals
- Merge similar proposals into one
- Refine final proposals
- Research estimated cost for the proposal
- Think of how the proposal can help the school
- Think of what's required to get it done



Community voting

Now, it's time to let the students choose...

- Everyone gets an equal share of the PB budget
- Votes relate to the budget and the proposal cost
- Students can support their favorite proposals
- Students can vote against proposals
- Students can get together to support a proposal
- Students can share a link with other classmates
- Voting can become a collaborative activity



Funding

Lastly, real change happens when students...

- See how much money they have to spend
- See proposals progress and how much is needed
- Add funds to proposals from their wallet balance
- Collaborate with classmates to support a proposal
- Get proposals fully funded
- Learn about financing and real-world spending

PB Winning projects implementation

Now that the PB stages are completed it's the admin's (principal, teacher, coach) turn to make sure the winning projects happen in school.

First, make the official announcement of the winning projects through an email and within the FirstRoot app and make sure to communicate the results right away to everyone who was involved and participated in the PB cycle.

Then, get the winning projects going as soon as possible. The sooner they are implemented, the more positive the experience will be for students. Implementation takes time, but it can be a real letdown if the winning projects aren't visible in a long period of time.

FirstRoot recommends that students be meaningfully included in the implementation process and be involved in tracking projects. FirstRoot allows a real-time feed so everyone can share

photos of the projects progress within the app. A student who worked on developing a winning proposal could be a leader on tracking their project and responding to issues that may arise.

What needs to be purchased?

The students may have specified something that's sold out, or maybe there are a few versions of the thing to choose from (like different tablets). Get students and leaders to help here.

Why isn't the project done yet?

Encourage student leaders to reach out and update their fellow students during classes, recess, assemblies and talk about the projects' progress.

Communication guidelines

As a part of the PB setup process, FirstRoot encourages PB admins to send introductory emails for the school staff, parents and of course, for the students who will participate in the PB program for the school. The following are email drafts that can be used to communicate effectively about the PB program overview, feel free to copy, paste & edit as needed.

Sample email for teachers (Introduction)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] staff,

I'm excited to announce that our [GRADE] students will have the opportunity to make their school better. The purpose of this email is to provide an overview of the program and how you can help all participating students succeed.

We will use participatory budgeting (PB) to empower students to collaborate and choose how to spend the school's budget of \$[AMOUNT] to improve the school. Students will apply skills from design-thinking, financial literacy, and civics. The PB cycle will culminate in implementing the winning proposals selected and funded by the students.

Some of this work will be supported by FirstRoot, a Silicon Valley startup that is building a PB app specifically designed for high schools.

The PB cycle has five main phases:

1. **Ideation:** Students create proposals on how to make the school better.
2. **Refinement:** Student leaders will review and select the proposals that are feasible based on budget, cost and scope.
3. **Voting:** All students participate and choose the proposals they like the most.
4. **Funding:** Students use real money to fund proposals.
5. **Implementation:** The funded proposals are implemented. The details of implementation depend on each proposal. For example, if it consists of simply getting supplies for the school, the PB admin will just buy the supplies.

You can help in the following ways:

- Encourage your students to participate by submitting proposal ideas.
- Remind students that proposals that benefit the greatest number of students and fit within the budget are most likely to be submitted to voting.
- Encourage students to use design-thinking to create proposal ideas.
- Inform the students that they will be using FirstRoot's app and that they should let FirstRoot know if they experience any problems using the app. They should also tell FirstRoot how they'd like to improve the app.

We think this project will be a lot of fun precisely because it puts the students in control of a real budget and they will see real change happen.

Thank you, and please let me know if you have any questions.

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

Sample email for students (Introduction)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] students,

I'm excited to announce our participatory budgeting (PB) program. This will give YOU the opportunity to make our school better and a bit more awesome. How? REAL MONEY.

Our PB program will give every student an equal share of our budget of \$[BUDGET] to use it to improve the school. The PB process works like this:

1. **Preparation:** You will receive an email from FirstRoot inviting you to create and account. Don't worry, the email is legit and you should register.

2. **Ideation:** All students will use the FirstRoot app to create proposals on how to make [SCHOOL NAME] a better school.
3. **Refinement:** Student leaders will review and select the proposals that are feasible based on budget, cost and scope.
4. **Voting:** All students will be able to participate in a democratic voting process to choose the proposals they like the most.
5. **Funding:** Students use real money to fund proposals.
6. **Implementation:** The funded proposals -meaning, the winning proposals- get implemented. The details of implementation depend on each proposal. For example, if a proposal consists of simply getting better supplies for the school, the PB admin will just buy the supplies.

Here are some tips:

- Think of ways in which you can make [SCHOOL NAME] better. Submit these proposals through the FirstRoot app.
- Remember that proposals that benefit the greatest number of students and fit within the budget are most likely to be submitted for voting.
- Use design-thinking techniques to create your proposal ideas.

Note: You will probably be using a beta version of FirstRoot's software. Email FirstRoot at support@firstroot.co if you experience any problems or if you have cool ideas on how to make the app even better.

Keep in mind: this is your money, and your school. We look forward to seeing how you invest and what your awesome ideas are.

Let me know if you have any questions.

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

Sample email for teachers (Voting stage)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] staff,

Thank you for your support in our Participatory Budgeting program! XX students have accessed the app creating XX proposals. These proposals have been refined with cost forecasts and are now ready for voting!

Voting will begin on [DATE]. Students vote for their favorite proposals via the app. Voting will end on [DATE]. Results will be tabulated and confirmed over the weekend and the winning proposals will be announced on [DATE]. We'll start implementing the proposals in [DATE].

As a reminder, the PB cycle has five main phases. We're in phase 3.

1. **Ideation:** Students create proposals on how to make the school better
2. **Refinement:** Student leaders review proposals and select the ones that are feasible based on cost and scope.
3. **Voting:** All students will participate in a voting process, voting on the proposals they like the most.
4. **Funding:** The winning proposals are *funded*.
5. **Implementation:** The funded proposals – in the case, the winning proposals – are implemented. The details of implementation depend on the proposal. For example, if a proposal consists of simply getting supplies for the school, we'll just buy the supplies.

Let me know if you have any questions

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

Sample email for students (Voting stage)

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] students,

Get ready: You're about to make the final choices on how to invest \$[AVAILABLE BUDGET] to improve the school!

How? Vote for the proposals you think are best for the school.

Voting will begin on [DATE]. Students vote for their favorite proposals via the app. Voting will end on [DATE]. Results will be tabulated and confirmed over the weekend and the winning proposals will be announced on [DATE]. We'll start implementing the proposals in [DATE].

We look forward to seeing which proposals you think will make the most positive impact.

Let me know if you have any questions.

[TEACHER'S SIGNATURE]

FirstRoot PB and Covid-19

We know that these are hard times for everyone, the most important thing for us is the safety of the students, principals, teachers and staff members. There has been a lot of PB cycles around the world that have been affected and even cancelled by C19, that's why we strongly believe that FirstRoot can help bring a digital experience for Participatory Budgeting. In-person PB cycles can take a lot of time, effort and money, as well as putting people at risk during C19 times, so we hope that by using FirstRoot will make everything easier for both staff and students, being able to do a PB cycle entirely digital using a laptop or smartphone.

Take the first step and get in touch with us at pb@firstroot.co

Frequently asked questions

Where does the money for Participatory Budgeting come from?

- Principals may provide funding
- The PTA / PTSA / PTO may provide funding
- The student council may provide funding
- FirstRoot may provide funding to qualified Title 1 schools

How does FirstRoot make money?

When a debit card is used to make a purchase, a small portion of that money is distributed to the banks and credit card processing companies like Visa, Mastercard, etc.

FirstRoot will make a small amount of money (0.005%) for every PB program that uses a FirstRoot debit card. When many schools are using FirstRoot there will be enough money for FirstRoot to create a sustainable business.

Will teachers be paid?

Congruent with school and union policies, FirstRoot intends to offer teachers a small stipend to compensate them for their support of this program. As a startup we have not yet established the amount, but we anticipate the stipend to be \$500.

How is the budget managed?

Teachers can manage the budget through spreadsheets or through a free, FirstRoot issued debit card. The advantage of the FirstRoot issued debit card is that students can see the transactions made on the card. This build trust by demonstrating that the projects they selected are purchased and implemented.

What controls do teachers have?

Teachers and school administrators set the policies, such as the maximum cost of a single proposal or requiring that proposal be for capital improvements. Student leaders and teachers review all proposals to ensure they meet school guidelines.

What training does FirstRoot provide?

FirstRoot will provide free video training courses on our website. We will also work with our community of teachers to create additional training videos.

Additional resources:

- [Participatory Budgeting in Schools from PB Scotland](#)
- [Civics for all: Participatory Budgeting Curriculum from NYC Dept. of Education](#)

Is this a school-wide or classroom project?

Most Participatory Budgeting programs are run as a school-wide program, but it also can be for classroom, project-based learning or even an extra-curricular project.

What is the research on program effectiveness?

Research has shown that:

- PB in schools increases civic engagement, even when there is not a formal curriculum driving the process.¹
- PB in schools and the community influences budget priorities.²
- “Most scholars and participants of PB’s agree that one of their most important benefits is the deepening of the exercise of democracy”.³

Does FirstRoot have any influence or control over the program?

No.

What will FirstRoot do with the profits?

FirstRoot will use our profits to continue to expand the use of Participatory Budgeting in schools both in the US and globally.

Do student’s grades impact their participation?

Teachers, coaches and school administrators determine who may participate in the program. FirstRoot does not determine who participates.

What policies exist to keep students safe?

Student submitted content is automatically reviewed to identify and remove offensive or potentially offensive images or language. Students can flag content for review by teachers. Offensive content can be removed by teachers.

¹ Cohen, M., D. Schugurensky and A. Wiek (2015). Citizenship Education through Participatory Budgeting: The Case of Bioscience High School in Phoenix, Arizona. Curriculum and Teaching, Volume 30, Number 2, pp. 5-26. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/193620515.pdf>

² [New research on Participatory Budgeting Highlights – Community Pri](#)

³ [72 Frequently Asked Questions about Participatory Budgeting](#), UN-HABIT.

Is school district approval required?

FirstRoot has no knowledge that school district approval is required. We recommend that teachers check with their principal, school district or other administrators to confirm that a PB program is suitable for their school.

Is FirstRoot compliant with teaching regulations?

FirstRoot is actively monitoring relevant state and national standards for educational content. At present, we do not know of any teaching regulations that govern the use of Participatory Budgeting in schools.

How will we judge long-term success?

FirstRoot is planning to use these outcomes to determine long-term success:

- Improved credit scores
- Increased savings rates
- Greater civic engagement
- Increased involvement in school and the broader community
- Self-confidence and 'comfort' with money

How is data protected?

FirstRoot was created by extremely experienced software developers with backgrounds in information and data security, app development, and hosted software development.

- All data is stored in an encrypted format in Amazon Web Services
- Access to the service is controlled through SSL (Secure Sockets Layer)
- FirstRoot is FERPA and GDPR compliant

Can I use FirstRoot with kids under 13?

FirstRoot is not yet COPPA compliant and cannot be used with children under the age of 13. FirstRoot expects to complete our COPPA compliance in Q2-2021.

How will FirstRoot choose which Title 1 schools are funded?

FirstRoot will provide a means for interested Title 1 schools to register for a grant. A lottery process will be conducted to determine which schools are selected for funding.

How do I get started?

Contact us at hello@firstroot.co

Or join our Slack community: <https://pbforschools.slack.com>