Annenberg Institute
BROWN UNIVERSITY

EdWorkingPaper No. 26-1450

Democratizing School Reform: Race, Participation, and Redistribution in Education

Jonathan E. Collins
Teachers College, Columbia University

This paper examines a school-based participatory budgeting initiative as a form of race-conscious democratic design. Drawing on a multi-year study of Participatory Redistribution (PR) in middle schools, I analyze whether embedding deliberative structures into schools can empower racially marginalized youth. Survey evidence from two years shows mixed results: treatment students demonstrated knowledge gains and short-term increases in efficacy, though these gains weakened in less responsive contexts. Meanwhile, open-ended responses reveal short-term improvements in deliberative reasoning, with treatment students more likely than controls to justify their views with instrumental and normative arguments. These findings extend theories of democratic innovation by showing that true inclusion requires not only removing barriers but designing institutions to empower racially subaltern groups in the spaces they already inhabit.

VERSION: April 2026

Suggested citation: Collins, Jonathan E.. (2026). Democratizing School Reform: Race, Participation, and Redistribution in Education. (EdWorkingPaper: 26-1450). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/dq7c-qb29

Democratizing School Reform:
Race, Participation, and Redistribution in Education

Jonathan E. Collins
Teachers College, Columbia University

Abstract: This paper examines a school-based participatory budgeting initiative as a form of race-conscious democratic design. Drawing on a multi-year study of Participatory Redistribution (PR) in middle schools, I analyze whether embedding deliberative structures into schools can empower racially marginalized youth. Survey evidence from two years shows mixed results: treatment students demonstrated knowledge gains and short-term increases in efficacy, though these gains weakened in less responsive contexts. Meanwhile, open-ended responses reveal short-term improvements in deliberative reasoning, with treatment students more likely than controls to justify their views with instrumental and normative arguments. These findings extend theories of democratic innovation by showing that true inclusion requires not only removing barriers but designing institutions to empower racially subaltern groups in the spaces they already inhabit.

Keywords
democratic innovation; participatory budgeting; deliberation; race-conscious design; education governance; empowerment

Democratic theorists have long worried about who gets to participate in governance and under what conditions (Pateman 1970; Dahl 1989). Classical accounts assume that when opportunities are extended, citizens will engage and contribute to public life (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995). Yet, decades of research demonstrate a persistent democratic deficit: marginalized groups, and especially communities of color in the United States, remain less likely to participate in formal politics (Leighley & Vedlitz 1999; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady 2012), and when they do, they are often met with indifference or hostility (Hajnal 2009; Nuamah 2022). The problem is not merely one of turnout or motivation. It is a structural one. Participation opportunities are too often designed around the habits and interests of the already-empowered and too rarely around the lived realities of those on the margins (Fung 2003; Smith 2009; Mansbridge et al. 2012).

Explanations for this persistent gap typically fall into two categories. Psychological accounts emphasize the dispositions of marginalized communities: low political interest, disaffection, or learned helplessness (Campbell et al., 1960; Verba et al., 1995). Institutional accounts point to systemic barriers: restrictive rules, histories of discrimination, and governance practices that render marginalized voices inconsequential (Lerman & Weaver, 2014, Barreto et al., 2019; Trounstine, 2018). Both perspectives highlight real obstacles, but they share a blind spot. They describe how institutions fail marginalized groups but not how institutions might be redesigned to empower them intentionally (Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009).

This paper argues that genuine inclusion requires more than lowering barriers or inviting communities into existing participation spaces. It requires race-conscious institutional design; democratic structures deliberately crafted to meet marginalized communities where they are, in the institutions that shape their everyday lives, and in ways that recognize their distinct histories of exclusion. In short, empowerment is not a byproduct of generic inclusion; it is the outcome of purposeful design.

Thus, the central puzzle motivating this study is not how to identify factors that explain why marginalized youth are excluded from governance. Instead, I start from the premise that the participation opportunities available to them are often misaligned with their lived experience. Opportunities to engage tend to occur in spaces that are distant from everyday life – city councils, ballot boxes, advisory boards – where participation feels abstract, and stakes feel remote. For marginalized youth, the very design of participation alienates them from the democratic process.

By contrast, PR embeds democratic practice directly into a space where youth already have deep material and emotional investment: their school. The question this paper investigates is whether such design can foster empowerment where other institutions have failed. Can embedding deliberative structures in schools cultivate civic knowledge, efficacy, school utility, and higher-quality democratic reasoning? And can such design specifically empower racially marginalized students, rather than simply broaden inclusion in general?

The study draws on a two-year mixed-methods design including surveys and open-ended responses. Results show that PR had a complex impact. In Year 2, treatment students showed measurable gains in knowledge and efficacy, though school utility changes were more modest. Treatment school students also demonstrated stronger reasoning quality in open-ended responses on public budgeting. In Year 3, empowerment outcomes weakened as institutional follow-through faltered. Meanwhile, the control group closed the deliberative reasoning gap established in Year 2. However, most of the decline in reasoning is concentrated amongst returning students (as opposed to students exposed to the model for the first time).

Taken together, the findings reveal two important points of knowledge regarding racial subaltern groups within democratic governance. First, they underscore the fragility of empowerment: without institutional responsiveness, gains in efficacy and school utility erode quickly. Second, they demonstrate the malleability of deliberative reasoning: once a process presents students with an opportunity to practice reason-giving in a participatory space, they immediately showcase strong reasoning abilities. These results extend debates in democratic innovation by highlighting the importance of race-conscious design and by distinguishing between empowerment shifts and deliberative outcomes.

More broadly, the contribution of this study to the field of political science is twofold. To the literature on democratic innovation, it grapples with what is required of democracy when race is the focus. Most studies of participatory budgeting, deliberative polling, or citizens' assemblies emphasize inclusion writ large. Few consider how design might be tailored to racially marginalized groups. This paper shows that design not only shapes who participates, but how institutions can be structured to empower racial subaltern groups specifically.

To the literature on race and democracy, the contribution is institutional. Scholars have richly documented how institutions fail communities of color. Less often do they theorize how institutions might be restructured to succeed. This paper offers one model, demonstrating that race-conscious design in schools can foster empowerment and deliberative reasoning.

Finally, by situating the study in schools, this paper reconceptualizes education not merely as a site of civic socialization but as a governance arena where democratic practice can be embedded. This is particularly important given that schools are one of the few public institutions with which marginalized youth and families have sustained, daily contact.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on democratic innovation, race and exclusion, and schools as governance institutions. The following section presents the theoretical framework, emphasizing mechanisms of empowerment and conditions of fragility. The research design section details the intervention and data. The results section presents findings from surveys and open-ended responses, highlighting both empowerment outcomes and deliberative reasoning. The discussion situates these results within broader debates, and the conclusion underscores the implications for democratic theory and practice.

Democratic Innovation and Institutional Design

Over the past three decades, democratic innovations have emerged as a central response to concerns about declining participation and legitimacy in advanced democracies. These institutional experiments share the premise that design matters; that the ways in which participation is structured shape who participates, how they deliberate, and what outcomes are produced.

Classic cases illustrate the point. Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, institutionalized neighborhood-level assemblies in which residents debated and decided over municipal investments. Scholars showed how this design both demystified budgeting and brought working-class and poor residents into governance in unprecedented numbers (Baiocchi 2005; Wampler & Avritzer 2004). Deliberative polling, pioneered by James Fishkin (2009), demonstrated that ordinary citizens are capable of reasoned, informed judgment when given supportive conditions to deliberate. Citizens' assemblies in British Columbia and Ontario convened randomly selected citizens to debate electoral reform, showing that lay publics can deliberate effectively over complex institutional change (Smith 2009; Warren & Pearse 2008).

These cases, along with broader work on mini-publics (Fung 2003; Mansbridge et al. 2012), highlight the transformative potential of democratic innovations. They reveal that civic capacities are not fixed; under the right institutional arrangements, citizens can engage deeply with policy problems and make legitimate collective decisions. Innovations thus serve as counterarguments to narratives of apathy and incompetence.

Yet this literature also carries limitations. Innovations are typically framed as opening space for "the public" or "ordinary citizens," but with little attention to the differential ways social groups are positioned within them. Even in celebrated cases, inequalities persist. Research on participatory budgeting outside Brazil finds that middle-class actors often adapt more quickly and dominate proceedings, especially when meetings require specialized knowledge or flexible schedules (Talpin 2007; Gilman, 2016). Even in Porto Alegre, participation skewed over time toward better-resourced actors (Wampler 2012).

The lesson is that, while institutional design matters, its impact is uneven. Democratic innovations do not automatically empower marginalized groups. They can reproduce or even exacerbate inequalities unless design explicitly prioritizes equity. What remains underdeveloped, therefore, is a theory of race-conscious democratic design: how innovations might be structured not only to broaden inclusion in general but to empower racially marginalized communities in particular.

Race, Exclusion, and Democratic Participation

Parallel literatures in race and American politics diagnose how communities of color experience systematic exclusion from democracy. Dawson's (1994) foundational work articulated the concept of linked fate, showing that Black Americans often view their political fortunes as tied to the racial group. This sense of group consciousness motivates engagement, even when individual incentives are weak.

But consciousness alone does not guarantee participation. For linked fate to translate into action, there must be institutional conduits that channel group identity into political engagement. Historically, the Black church has served this role. Owens (2007), McDaniel (2009), and Warren (2001) document how churches provided organizational resources, civic skills, and moral frameworks that framed political action as both moral duty and racial uplift. Beyond the church, historically Black colleges, neighborhood associations, and grassroots organizations have provided communal environments where collective identity could be transformed into mobilization. These spaces highlight that political participation is not simply an individual act but one mediated through civil society organizations.

The reliance on such conduits is partly the product of exclusion from mainstream political institutions. Cathy Cohen (1999) and Hancock (2004) show how Black and feminist political traditions often developed outside formal politics because of marginalization. Frymer (2010) argues that electoral institutions systematically sidelined African Americans, treating them as secondary constituencies. Sally Nuamah (2022) illustrates how everyday encounters with discrimination depress political trust and participation. Lerman and Weaver (2014) demonstrate how contact with punitive state institutions produces "custodial citizenship," where communities of color interact with the state largely through surveillance and punishment, further alienating them from governance.

These works highlight that exclusion is not incidental but baked into institutional design. It is not enough to attribute nonparticipation to apathy; rather, institutions often signal to marginalized groups that their voices are unwelcome or inconsequential.

Policy Feedback: Institutions as Shapers of Participation

The policy feedback literature provides a conceptual bridge between diagnoses of exclusion and possibilities for empowerment. Pierson (1993) introduced the idea that policies, once enacted, reshape future political dynamics by creating constituencies, interests, and expectations. Mettler and Soss (2004) extended this argument to show how policies send messages about who counts as a legitimate citizen.

Feedback can be negative or positive. Negative feedback occurs when institutions stigmatize, punish, or disempower, reinforcing disengagement. Soss (1999) showed how welfare programs communicated distrust and dependency, discouraging recipients from civic engagement. Lerman and Weaver (2014) demonstrated how criminal justice contact eroded efficacy and trust. Positive feedback occurs when policies provide resources, recognition, and opportunities that encourage engagement. For example, Andrea Campbell (2003) showed how Social Security created a politically active constituency of seniors.

Feedback theory shifts the question from why marginalized groups are disengaged to how institutions create the conditions for disengagement or empowerment. Institutions are not neutral backdrops; they actively shape political behavior. For marginalized communities, the challenge is that most everyday institutional encounters – policing, welfare offices, immigration enforcement, even public schools – have historically generated negative feedback.

Yet feedback theory also points toward possibilities. If institutions can generate negative feedback, they can also be redesigned to generate positive feedback. For communities of color, this means locating empowerment not only in electoral reforms or mass mobilizations but in everyday institutional settings where feedback loops are constantly being created.

Schools as Democratic Institutions

Schools represent precisely such settings. Political science often treats schools as instruments of civic education, teaching students about government, rights, and responsibilities (Levine, 2015; Collins, 2024). But schools are also instruments of school systems with their own governance institutions. These school districts make binding decisions over resources, curricula, and discipline, decisions that structure the daily lives of students and families.

For students of color, schools are often their most sustained interaction with public institutions. Yet, these interactions frequently generate negative feedback. Research documents racial disparities in school discipline (Skiba et al. 2011), inequities in tracking and advanced placement (Oakes 2005), and resource gaps across districts (Kozol 1991). Levinson (2012) argues that U.S. schools teach a “democracy in deficit,” socializing students into exclusionary practices rather than democratic ones. In these contexts, schools function less as civic incubators than as institutions of alienation.

At the same time, education research highlights schools’ potential as democratic spaces. Rogers et al. (2012) show that student voice initiatives can cultivate civic identity. Kirshner (2015) documents youth participatory action research as a form of democratic practice. These

examples suggest that schools are not fixed as exclusionary. They can also be reimagined as sites of empowerment.

From a policy feedback perspective, schools are uniquely positioned to generate either positive or negative civic feedback (Nuamah, 2021). Silencing students, disregarding their input, or reproducing inequities produces alienation. But embedding participatory structures – giving students real voice in resource decisions – can provide recognition and resources that reinforce efficacy and school utility (Collins et al. 2024). In this way, schools can function analogously to the Black church: everyday communal institutions that translate collective identity into political engagement.

Toward Race-Conscious Democratic Design

Bringing these literatures together highlights a central theoretical gap. Research on democratic innovation demonstrates what is possible through institutional redesign. The rules, structures, and incentives for engagement can shape who participates and how that activity shapes decision-making (Fung 2004; Smith 2009). Yet, this literature has rarely grappled with how racialized inequalities structure participation, shaping not just the level of engagement but the distribution of democratic benefits. Meanwhile, the literature on race and democracy offers a rich diagnosis of exclusion and underrepresentation, documenting the ways in which institutions fail communities of color (Dawson 1994; Weaver & Lerman 2014). What these accounts less often do is articulate models of institutional design intended not simply to avoid failure but to intentionally empower racially marginalized groups. Policy feedback research offers another useful framework, demonstrating how institutions can cultivate or undermine civic capacities over time through encounters with government within everyday life (Mettler 2002; Campbell 2012). Yet much of this work emphasizes unintended feedback effects, rather than institutional architectures deliberately crafted to generate empowerment. Finally, scholarship in education research has shown that schools are sites of civic socialization (Levinson 2012; Kahne & Sporte 2008), but schools are rarely theorized as governance institutions, as organizations where authority over resources and rules can be redistributed through a governance design.

This paper advances the concept of race-conscious democratic design: institutional arrangements crafted not merely to broaden participation in general but to empower racially marginalized groups in particular. Many democratic innovations aim to either increase participation by lowering barriers to entry or to strengthen the quality of participation by centering citizen-level democratic deliberation. A race-conscious approach begins from the recognition that racially subaltern groups confront structural disadvantages that persist even once they enter the room. Race-conscious design, therefore, entails embedding participatory practices into everyday institutions where marginalized communities already have deep stake and frequent contact, and where empowerment can alter the feedback loop from one of exclusion to one of recognition and efficacy.

The Participatory Redistribution (PR) initiative examined here is one such design. PR is a programmatic innovation that adapts the well-established practice of participatory budgeting for middle schools serving predominantly students of color. The standard model of participatory budgeting has been celebrated for broadening inclusion and embedding deliberation, but it remains largely race-neutral in its theoretical underpinnings and institutional applications. PR departs from this by explicitly positioning redistribution and empowerment as race-conscious design goals. Rather than simply adding participation to the margins of schooling, PR embeds

participatory practices into the daily governance of schools, granting students genuine authority over the allocation of meaningful resources.

While the concept of race-conscious design is general – with potential application to other domains where marginalized groups confront institutional exclusion – schools represent a particularly impactful test case. Two features make them unique. First, due to compulsory school laws, schools are among the few universal institutions that reach nearly every young person. Second, because of enduring patterns of residential segregation and educational inequality, schools are often racially homogenous institutions, with students of color concentrated in under-resourced settings. This combination – universality of reach and depth of racialized inequality – makes schools both high-stakes and high-potential sites for democratic design. By embedding participatory practices into schools, we can observe whether institutions historically structured by racial exclusion can be reconfigured into institutions of empowerment.

The mechanism at the heart of this model is a feedback loop. In traditional governance structures, marginalized youth encounter disempowerment: rules are handed down, resources are allocated without their input, and opportunities for voice are limited or symbolic. These interactions generate negative feedback, diminishing civic knowledge, lowering efficacy, and weakening their sense of school utility. Race-conscious democratic design intervenes by redistributing decision-making authority in ways that require deliberation and justification. In PR, students collectively decide how to allocate a significant school resource, a process that cultivates:

1. **Civic Knowledge**: familiarity with governance procedures and collective decision-making.
2. **Political Efficacy**: belief in one's ability to shape institutional outcomes.
3. **School Utility**: belief that the day-to-day activities are useful.
4. **Deliberative Reasoning** – the capacity to justify preferences with reasons oriented toward others, not only oneself.

These dimensions map directly onto what Levinson (2012) calls the civic empowerment gap: the unequal distribution of civic opportunities and capacities across lines of race and class. If race-conscious design can strengthen these dimensions within schools, it demonstrates the possibility of institutions serving as sites of empowerment rather than exclusion.

From this framework, several hypotheses follow. If PR's model of race-conscious design is effective, we should expect:

1. Higher levels of civic knowledge, efficacy, school utility, and deliberative reasoning among students in treatment schools compared to control schools.
2. Evidence of stronger justification quality in deliberation, moving from simple preferences toward instrumental and normative reasoning.
3. Durability and growth of the impacts across multiple years, as participatory practices generate cumulative positive feedback.

In sum, this paper theorizes participatory redistribution as a practical instantiation of race-conscious democratic design. By embedding participatory budgeting in schools serving predominantly students of color, PR tests whether institutions historically structured by racial exclusion can be reimagined as engines of civic empowerment.

Research Design: The Participatory Redistribution Intervention

Cluster-Randomized Field Experiment

I test participatory redistribution model through constructing a cluster-randomized field experiment at the school level. I recruited two demographically comparable U.S. middle schools within the same New England school district and implemented separate models of decision-making. One school, which I will refer to as "Riverdale Middle, was randomly assigned to implement PR. The other school, which I will refer to as "Hillside Middle," was randomly assigned to serve as a control.

Because the number of clusters was very small (N=2), the design does not provide the statistical balance normally associated with large-scale randomized controlled trials. In practice, the study bears many of the limitations of a quasi-experiment. Still, random assignment of treatment and control strengthens internal validity relative to purely observational designs, and the naturalistic embedding of the intervention enhances ecological validity. This design also creates the foundation for scaling up to a true large-scale randomized control trial.

I recruited the schools through a partnership with the district. The research office agreed to circulate my recruitment letter to principals asking for schools interested in participating in a research study on how schools spend supplemental funding. However, we limited recruitment to principals of schools that were 1) low-performing (as indicated by students' collective performance on statewide assessments) and 2) enrolling mostly Black and Latino students. The latter was necessary in order for the study to be a test of race-conscious design. I wanted to engage students of color through a democratic process with material stakes ($10,000) in a place of everyday existence (the public school). Both schools enrolled close to 1,000 students each.

Participatory Redistribution Treatment

The school assigned the PR treatment – Riverdale Middle School – received the promise of $10,000. However, it came with the stipulation that they must decide the use of funds through a democratic process designed by the Principal Investigator (PI). Riverdale would implement PR for 3 consecutive years, receiving $10,000 each year to support school improvements/student well-being. Year 1 was decimated by COVID-19, but it served as a learning experience through which to cement the implementation sequence used in Years 2 and 3.

That specific sequence is a process to designed to generate both mass participation and small group-deliberations in route to deciding the use of real funds (See Figure 1 for full conceptual model).

The three stages are as follows:

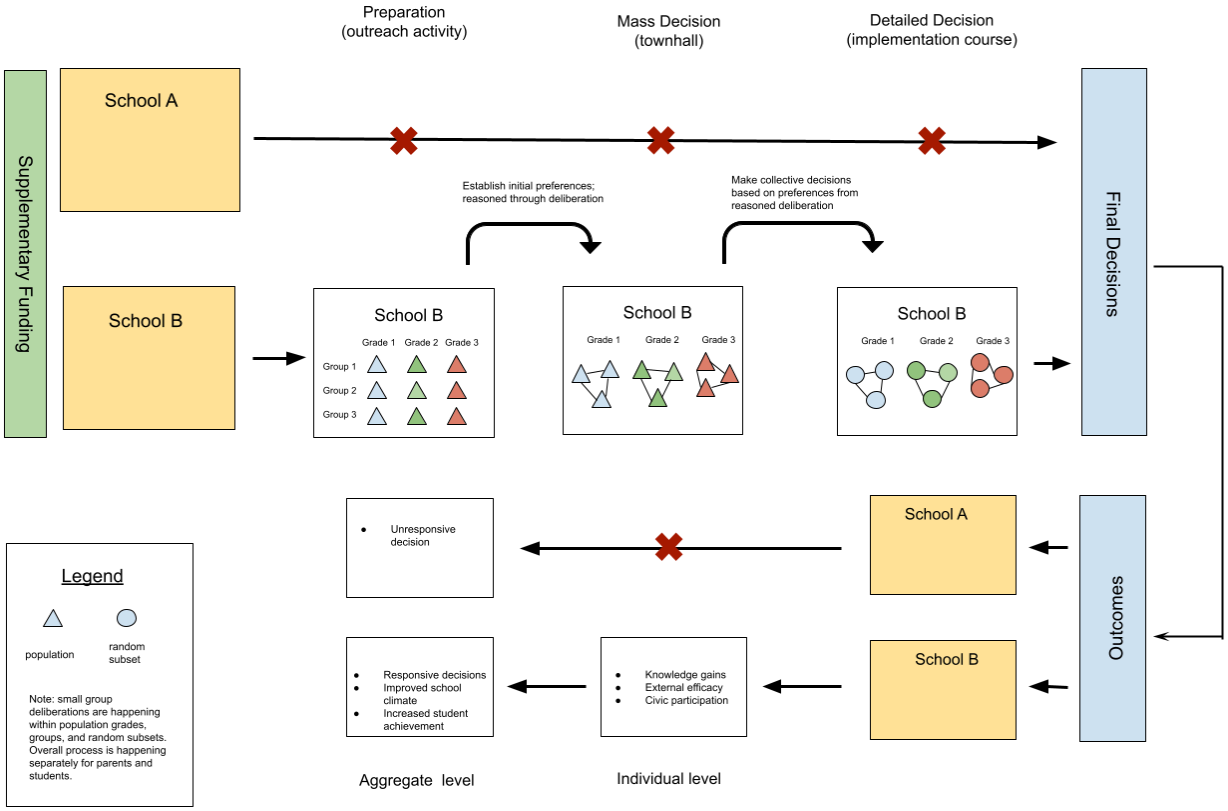
1. **Outreach Assembly.** All students participated in mass assemblies at the start of the process. These sessions introduced participatory budgeting, announced the $10,000 award being received by the school, provide policy information about school finance (how much their school spends per pupil, how much funding comes from the city vs. the state vs. the federal government, and the percentage of funding going towards teachers), and initiate "practice deliberations," where students begin generating ideas for investing incoming funds. The assemblies were led by the research team.
2. **Town Hall Deliberations and Voting.** Students reconvened in a school-wide town hall that featured deliberation. In large grade-wide assemblies, students sorted into small groups and deliberated over a set of 10 priorities identified by our research team through the pre-surveys and group worksheets completed during the Outreach Assembly. The

town hall concluded with a rank-choice voting activity, allowing students to decide collectively among the deliberated options. The town hall was led by the research team.

3. **Implementation Course.** A subset of students (n=75) selected at random enrolled in a semester-long implementation course, led by undergraduate research assistants. During the class, students transformed the top 3 categories into line-item budgets. This required sustained small-group deliberation and negotiation as students developed concrete spending proposals and submitted them to the university, who purchased the $10,000-worth of items and sent the items to the school.

Through this design, PR created opportunities for mass participation and deliberation at both the beginning and midpoint of the process, and sustained student agency through the implementation stage. Unlike the standard PB model, which narrows broad participation to two discrete points (idea-collection at the outset and voting day at the end), PR embedded deliberation as a routine institutional practice. This institutional innovation directly operationalized the theoretical goal of race-conscious democratic design: empowering marginalized youth not only to voice preferences but also to reason together, decide collectively, and see their decisions carried through to implementation.

Figure 1. Participatory Redistribution Implementation Design



Study Control

Hillside Middle, the control school, receive the same promise of $10,000 per year. However, they were not required to implement a school-wide democratic process. Instead, I presented the project to the principal as a study of how leaders make decisions with supplemental discretionary

funds. This means that the principal was allowed to determine how the school spends the $10,000, and in return, the principal agrees to be interviewed periodically (3 times per year) to discuss their process for deciding how to use the funding. Hillside's principal also had to agree to allow us to circulate a survey to students about their spending priorities.

Our goal was to align as much of the major activities together between control and treatment as possible. I conducted interviews with the control principal around the same time that our research team conducted the Outreach Assembly and town hall, and we administered the schoolwide survey at the control school as we were surveying students in the treatment school post-town-hall. We also need to document whether the treatment school implemented its own democratic process for spending the funds (they did not; the principal(s) made decisions unilaterally).

Measures of Interest

I rely on survey instruments as the primary tool for measuring variables associated with my test of the effectiveness of participatory redistribution. For the treatment school, my research team and I administered surveys to students at three specific points:

1. Within 3 days prior to the Outreach Assembly at the beginning of the academic year.
2. Towards the middle of academic year, immediately following the deliberative town hall.
3. Towards the end of the academic year (to test for lingering shifts).

Surveys contained a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions. Close-ended questions were mainly traditional political science measures of political and civic behaviors and attitudes, with wording adjustments made to increase the accessibility for middle school adolescents. More specifically, I measure policy knowledge, internal political efficacy, and school utility. The latter, school utility, is a variable measured through surveys administered by the state education agency that we adopt for establishing a baseline.

I utilize the open-ended responses to measure reasoning quality. Deliberation scholars often employ the discourse quality index (DQI) measure (Steenbergen et al. 2003; Batchtiger & Parkinson 2019) to assess the quality of deliberations occurring amongst parliaments and even adult groups of ordinary citizens. I measure the quality of the reasoning in students' open-ended responses to the question of how to spend the $10,000.

I also use the final decisions on how to spend the $10,000 as data as well. I compare the kinds of items purchased by each school each year. This offers a qualitative view of the difference between the PR model versus the control method.

Lastly, I retrieve aggregate student outcome measures on academic achievement and absenteeism during the period in which I conduct the study. The schools' state education agency provides this information. More specifically, I collect student proficiency rates in math and English Language Arts each year. I also examine school-level chronic absenteeism rates by school by year. Because of the small sample size, I am unable to make any causal claim about the effect of PR on these kinds of education outcomes. However, exploring preliminary relationships provide a theoretical basis for what can be tested for should PR be implemented at scale.

Measurement Strategy

I estimate treatment differences using two strategies: within-treatment comparisons and treatment-control comparisons. For students of color to be positively impacted by Participatory Redistribution, we must see changes in attitudes and behavior from those exposed to the model. The within-treatment comparisons become crucial. This method of analysis helps determine the extent to which the primary event of the intervention, the deliberative townhall, influences the study participants along the variables of interest**.** Specifically, I expect for students to show increases in policy knowledge, political efficacy, and their sense of school utility in the post-townhall surveys, relative to their responses in the pre-surveys. I am also expecting that those shifts will be persistent and, therefore, remain during the follow-up surveys administered months after the intervention.

The other measurement strategy I employ is the treatment-control comparison. Here, the treatment group provides an external comparison to account for the possibility that changes within treatment are a function of a larger ecological effect (a larger tide raising all boats) instead of the treatment itself. Thus, I directly compare the treatment group to the matched control recruited to be demographically and culturally similar to the treatment. Because the survey dissemination happens at roughly the same time, we have an external comparison of the effect of the treatment that represents the counterfactual of the treatment had the intervention never taken place. These two analytic strategies, together, inform us of the true effect of participatory redistribution.

Targeting Race-Conscious Design Towards Schools

This study seeks to test the effect of a race-conscious democratic model of resource distribution. It thus requires the research design to target racial subaltern groups as study participants. For this, the focus on schools becomes important. I leverage the segregated nature of America's public schools to recruit mass publics of low-income families of color to participate in the study. Education policy research has been documenting the growing levels of racial and economic segregation in America's schools (Frankenberg et al., 2025). On average 45% of Black K-12 public school students attend predominantly Black schools; over 50% of Hispanic students attend mostly Hispanic schools. These rates have been steadily increasing since the year 2000, when courts largely lifted school desegregation oversight.

School segregation is not a problem *de facto*. American families have the right to choose cultural homogeneity. Segregation, however, becomes a significant civil rights violation, when separation results in disparities in resources (school spending, facilities, additional support staff, technology, etc.) and it reinforces ideas that certain groups may be naturally inferior to others. Recall that the major research finding contributing to the Supreme Court to strike down school segregation in the famous *Brown v. Board* case was the infamous "doll study," which found that both Black and white children as young as 3-years-old exhibited prejudices against black dolls (Clark & Clark 1950). Racial segregation exposes seismic power imbalances.

Racial segregation also intersects with socioeconomic class. Evidence suggest that class-based school segregation has been rising at even higher rates than racial segregation. Thus, the problem is not just that Black students remain isolated in Black-populated schools; it is that Black and poor children – and Hispanic and poor children – remain trapped in homogenous schooling environments. It also means that white students living in poverty are highly concentrated together as well. Schools serving these student populations are responsible for not

just administering education but for also implementing antipoverty initiatives such as: feeding programs, providing clothing and school supplies, and providing counseling for students managing significant trauma. For these reasons, schools, in the face of persisting school segregation, are the optimal spaces for testing participatory redistribution as a race-conscious design.

Targeting Democratic Design Towards Schools

Schools are also important institutions for testing democratic redesign. America's K-12 public schools are true public institutions operating from public funds. In fact, American governments collectively spend nearly $1 trillion on public schooling each year. Meanwhile, compulsory schooling laws mean that young people are required to interact with school daily, creating unusually dense contact between marginalized youth and a public good.

Schools also exist within a democratic infrastructure. Most operate under the purview of a school district with a publicly-elected school board that appoints the superintendent, makes local policy decisions, and oversees the schools' budgets. Parents and other adult members of a school district have the ability to hold school boards accountable for policy decisions by voting in local school board elections, raising concerns at school board meetings, or protesting school board decisions. For schools operating outside of a district, each state has a statewide education agency run by a state board of education and a commissioner/superintendent of education, both of which are either publicly-elected or appointed depending on the state. Education is the only policy area within American politics that has its own system of governance.

The need for redesign, however, emerges from the realities of school governance. Despite the routine contact with schools, Americans tend not to participate in politics at the school district level. School board election voter turnout rate remains, on average, between 5-10% of the local electorate (Cai, 2020) and largely below 50% (Kogan et al. 2018). Only about 25% of Americans attend not a school board meeting but a local public meeting of any kind in any given year (Collins, 2021). And, there is no evidence that people of color are any more (or any less) likely to participate in school district politics. These low (overall) levels of engagement are alarming, given the importance of education, the size and duration of racial disparities in outcomes, and the amount of public investment in schools. A democratic redesign focused specifically on schools and racial inequality in education is an obvious need.

Against this backdrop, Riverdale Middle was randomly selected to implement the Participatory Redistribution (PR) model, while Hillside Middle served as the control. Both schools are Title I-eligible, serve racially diverse but predominantly Black and Latino student populations, and operate in neighborhoods with the characteristics of places that receive subpar political representation (mostly low-income and Black and Brown). Their comparability makes them a meaningful test case for evaluating whether race-conscious democratic design can reconfigure everyday governance institutions to generate civic empowerment where it is most urgently needed.

Data and Sample

For the study, I target schools that fit three primary criteria: high student poverty, mostly Black and Latino populated, and low student achievement. Table 1 shows the characteristics of both schools involved in the study. Both schools have majority Black and Latino populations, and the

vast majority of the students attending both schools qualify for the federal Free or Reduced Lunch Program, which education researchers rely on as an indicator of student poverty.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Participating Schools

	Riverdale	Hillside
School Size		
Enrollment	> 900	> 500
Race-Ethnicity		
Percent Black	17%	20%
Percent Hispanic	65%	64%
Poverty		
Percent Free Reduced Lunch	79%	84%
Student Achievement		
Percent Proficient in Math (2018-19)	20%	7%
Percent Proficient in Math - Black	20%	10%
Percent Proficient in Math - Hispanic	16%	6%
Percent Proficient in ELA (2018-19)	26%	13%
Percent Proficient in ELA - Black	24%	17%
Percent Proficient in ELA - Hispanic	23%	12%
Condition Assignment	Treatment	Control

Note: Results come from the state education agency's data portal.

There are also small differences. Riverdale is a noticeably larger school in terms of enrollment size. Moreover, while both schools fall well below the state's academic proficiency goal (75% proficiency across subjects), we do see slightly higher levels of performance on state standardized tests from Riverdale than Hillside. While these are not major differences that overshadow the utility of the treatment, they are worth noting and considering, given the small scale of this initial study.

Implementation and Results

I conducted the study with the same two participating schools over the course of 3 years (2020-23). I present the results for years 2 and 3, as the 1st year of implementation at the treatment school was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were in school during year 1, but there was mandated social distancing in classrooms. Moreover, students were not allowed to convene for in-person assemblies.

In year 1, we made several implementation adjustments that were suboptimal. Without the ability to hold assemblies, my research team and I conducted the outreach assembly by traveling from classroom-to-classroom over a span of 3 days. The townhalls took place via Zoom at the classroom level, with students posting ideas from their deliberations on a Google Jam board. Ultimately, the Jam Board was shut down due to inappropriate posts from a rogue student. And, once we salvaged the implementation process by using survey results and early screenshots of the Jam Board to identify students' agenda for spending the $10,000, an antiquated district

policy that barred schools from receiving "gifts," prevented us from allowing the principal to purchase items for the students. Instead, we learned that we were only able to purchase items for schools and/or pay invoices for contracted services. Unforeseen logistical issues limited the impact of year 1.

In year 2, we returned with the implementation design displayed in Figure 1. We convened students for the Outreach Assemblies, with students rotating into the school cafeteria in groups of classrooms at a time over the course of 2 days. These assemblies took place in October of the academic year. We returned early in the spring semester (March) for the deliberative town hall. Convening students one full grade at a time, students gathered in the school auditorium and deliberated in small groups over how to spend the $10,000 grant, before participating in a dot-sticker ranked-choice voting activity, with the choice options plastered along the walls for students to place their stickers. Our research team compiled the voting results and the themes from group worksheets students completed during the small group deliberations, and we used that information to produce a "Spending Priority Agreement" outlining the agenda for spending the $10,000.

In year 2, we also solved the purchasing problem from year 1. We proactively worked with the Riverdale administration to create a "budgeting course" for a subset of students to turn the Spending Priority Agreement into a line-item budget that we take to the university to purchase items to be sent to the school. I requested the principal select 75 students (25 students per-grade) at random for participation to ensure the class was not populated with only high-achieving students. Students met twice per week for 8 weeks in the school library during an extra planning period usually used for students to do homework or some extra learning activity. The course was taught by undergraduate research assistants.

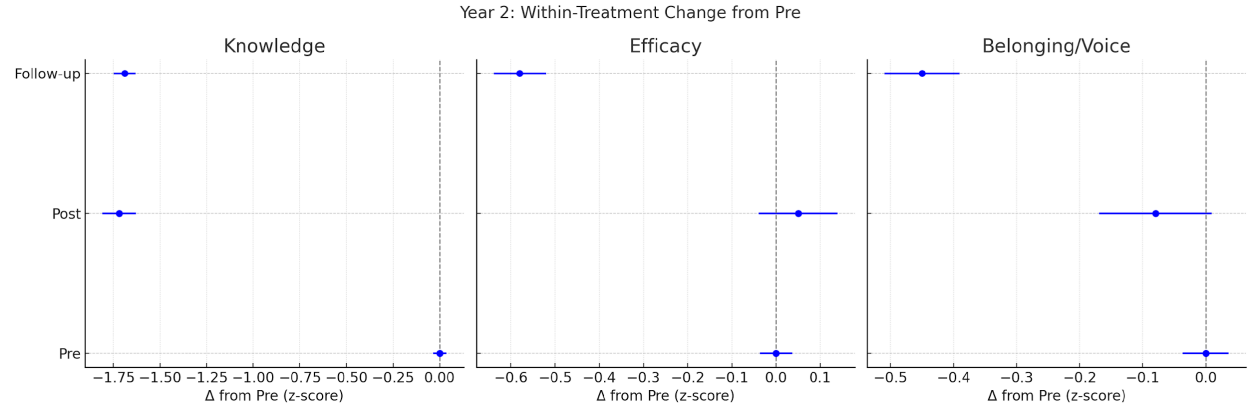
In year 3, we repeated the same process from year 2 but with a few additional features. Specifically, we incorporated the school finance policy information into the presentation at the beginning of the town hall (year 2 the information was only provided during the outreach activity). We partnered with the school to secure a Spanish-language translator for the assemblies and town halls. We also held a final banquet and presented certificates for students who completed the implementation course during the spring semester. The celebration created a small incentive for students to consistently attend the course meetings. It also gave us the opportunity to use the banquet as a recruitment tool for surveying parents. As result, we received a survey response from a parent of 36 of the 75 students participating the budgeting course. Together this implementation process allows us to understand the impact of PR, when implemented with high fidelity.

Primary Outcomes: Civic Knowledge, Efficacy, and School utility

What was the effect of the Participatory Redistribution model on civic knowledge and attitudes? I begin with analyzing differences in means within the treatment group, across different points of implementation. Figure 2 displays the results for year 2, while Figure 3 presents the results for year 3. When establishing the pre-survey (administered days before the outreach activity) as the baseline, I find that students of Riverdale (the treatment group) were maintaining high levels of political efficacy and a sense of school utility after the town hall, but then we see significant regression by the end of the academic year, when students are surveyed during the follow-up survey. Meanwhile, students were answering the knowledge questions correctly at just almost half the rate at which they were in the pre-survey, and the lack of knowledge retention persists

into the end of the academic year. The treatment's effect in year 2 on civic knowledge and attitudes shows to be limited.

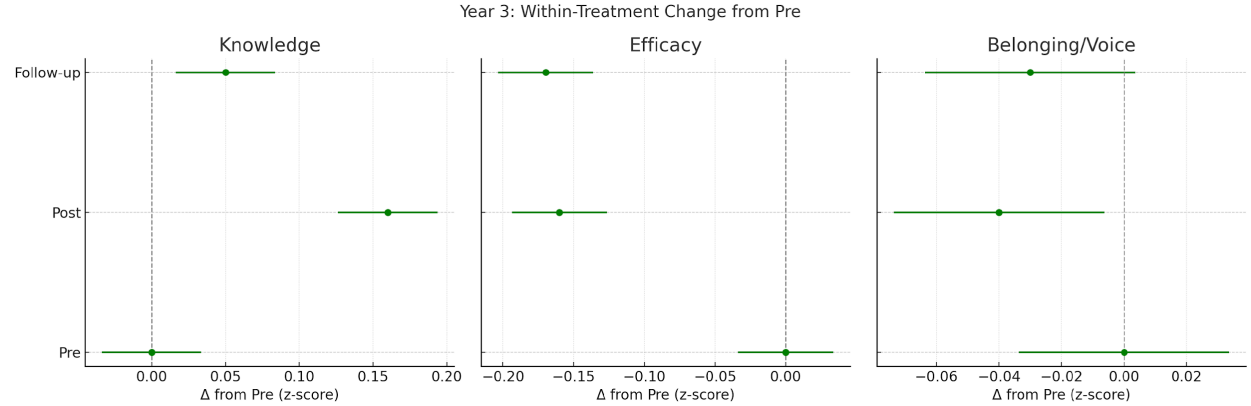
Figure 2. Within Treatment Difference-in-Means, Knowledge and Attitudes (Year 2)



Note: Dot-whisker plot: Riverdale, Year 2 Outcomes: Knowledge, Efficacy, School utility. Dots = means relative to pre-survey means, whiskers = 95% CI, periods = pre (pre-townhall), post(post-townhall), follow-up(end of school year).)

In year 3, we see a slight difference. Riverdale students demonstrated knowledge gains after the town hall that reach statistical significance at the 99% confidence level. This can be attributed to the added emphasis on the school finance policy issues incorporated into the town hall event. However, we also find that students retained some of the knowledge gains even into the end of academic year. The progress in knowledge gains pairs with regression in political efficacy. This regression, however, is significantly smaller than the declines from year 2. In year 3, students' sense of political efficacy drops at less half the rate at which it dropped in year 2. Meanwhile, students' sense of school utility remains the same into the end of the academic year. Combined, the results suggests that the effect of the PR model strengthened over time.

Figure 3. Within Treatment Difference-in-Means, Knowledge and Attitudes (Year 3)



Note: Dot-whisker plot: Riverdale, Year 3 Outcomes: Knowledge, Efficacy, School utility. Dots = means relative to pre-survey means, whiskers = 95% CI, periods = pre (pre-townhall), post(post-townhall), follow-up (end of school year).)

Treatment–Control Comparisons

The strength of the design lies in comparing Riverdale's trajectory to Hillside's. Recall that the surveys were collected so that the post-town-hall responses from Riverdale (the treatment group) align with survey responses collected from the control group (Hillside). Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the difference in means comparisons between the two schools for years 2 and 3, respectively, of the study. We see that, in both years, the students of Riverdale (treatment) are answering, on average, one-and-a-half more of the 4 knowledge questions correctly than the students at Hillside (control). Moreover, while we see no statistical difference in political efficacy and school utility during year 2, we see differences in both variables during year 3 that reaches statistical significance at the 99% confidence level. The efficacy difference in particular is more than half of a full-scale difference, meaning over half the distance of responses on a 7-point Likert scale. The results, year 3 in particular, suggests that the PR model had a significant effect on the civic knowledge and attitudes for the students of Riverdale.

Figure 4. Treatment vs. Control Difference-in-Means, Knowledge and Attitudes (Year 2)

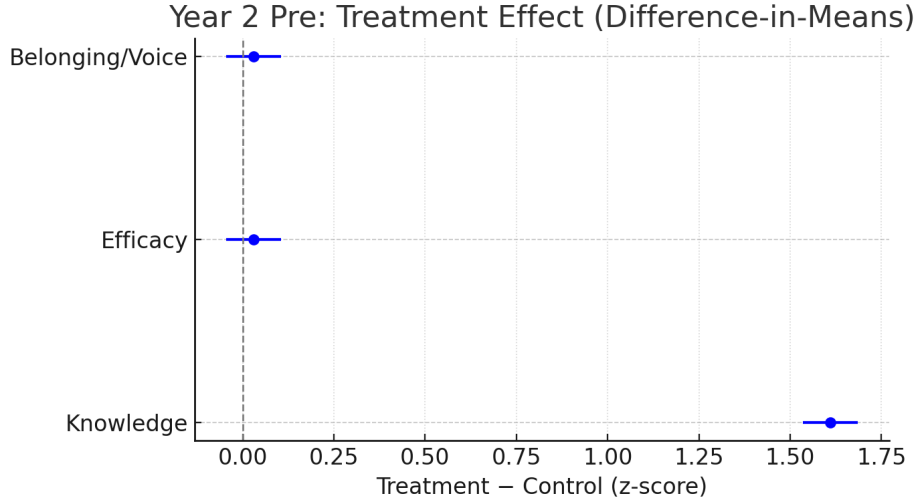
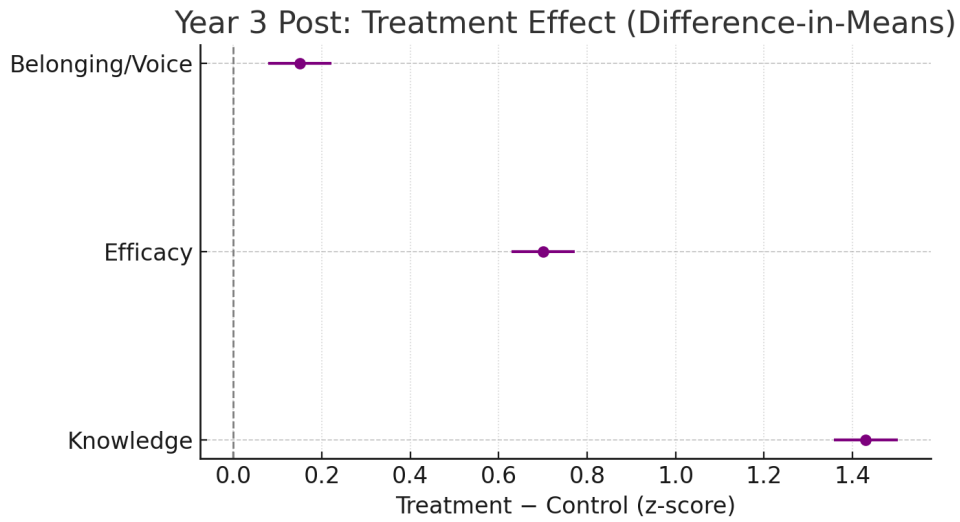


Figure 5. Treatment vs. Control Difference-in-Means, Knowledge and Attitudes (Year 3)



Behavioral Outcome: Deliberative Reasoning

In addition to testing the effect of PR on knowledge and civic attitudes, I include a behavioral outcome: deliberative reasoning. Using an adaptation of the Deliberative Quality Index (Steenbergen et al. 2003), I coded, for justification quality, open-ended responses to the question that, after asking them how the school should spend the $10,000, asks students: "Why would you want to spend the $10,000 this way? How would this make going to school better for you and other students?" Students provided either: 1) simple preferences (largely just restating their preference from the previous question), 2) instrumental arguments that use the grant to satisfy more individualized interests, or 3) collective reasoning that considers the shared interests of peers.

Figures 6 and 7 visualize these results, showing the difference-in-means across justification categories in Years 2 and 3. In Year 2, Riverdale students provided stronger justifications than Hillside peers, with fewer simple preferences and more instrumental and normative reasons (mean DQI = 1.82 vs. 1.67). In Year 3, the results are more complicated: Riverdale students provided more instrumental reasons, but fewer collective reasons than Hillside peers. The overall results suggest that both groups are largely reasoning at the same level (mean DQI = 2.02 vs. 2.09). Still, overall, we see evidence of stronger deliberative quality from the treatment group, particularly in Year 2. However, that gap appears to close over time.

Figure 6. Differences in Deliberative Reasoning between Treatment and Control (Year 2)

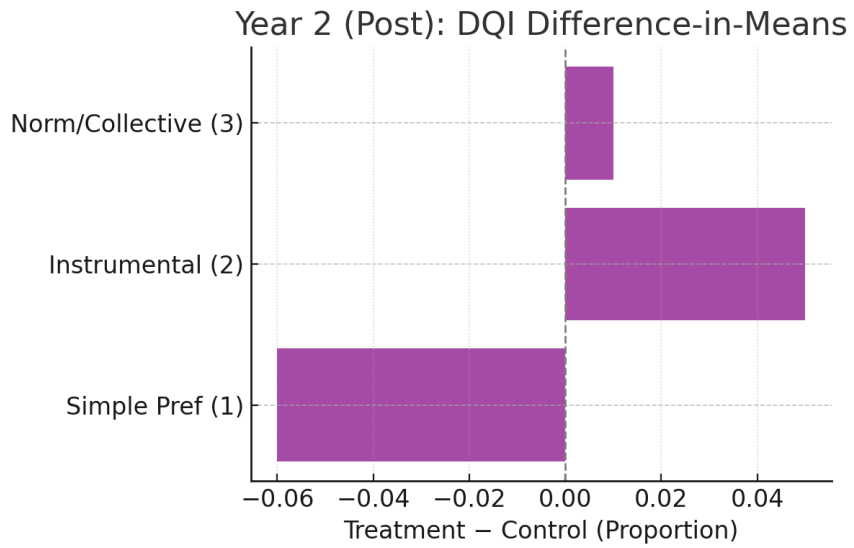
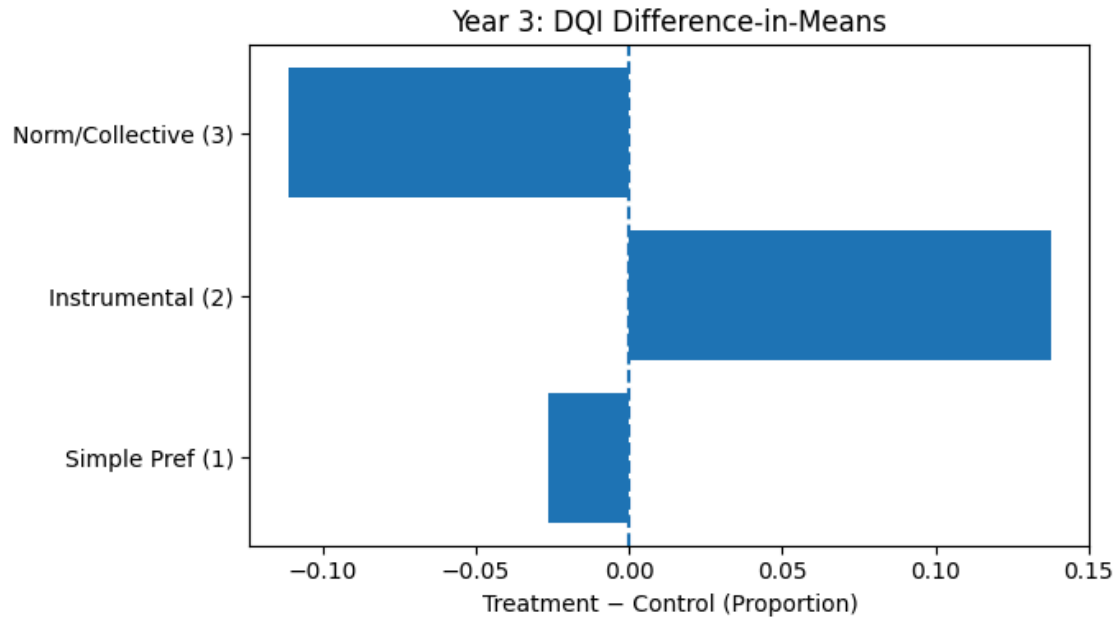


Figure 7. Differences in Deliberative Reasoning between Treatment and Control (Year 3)



Spending Decisions

In addition to the additional and behavioral outcomes, the designs allows me to compare how the schools actually used the $10,000 they received each year as a part of the study. Again, because of the district's policy on gifts, I could only purchase $10,000 worth of items for each school each year, as opposed to sending the money to the schools for them to make the identified investment. This method of spending, however, allowed me to more directly document how the schools used each grant.

There were clear differences in how the schools decided to spend their grant money. Table 2 lists the types of items. Hillside (the control group) used the grant to purchase items for either students with more specifically, specialized needs or for very general purpose. In year 1, the principal used the funds for supplies to complete the creation of an autism room within the school. In year 2, the principal requested the purchase of theraputty and musical instruments for students experiencing social-emotional challenges as well as dry erase boards, athletic balls, and office supplies for general purpose. In year 3, the principal mainly used the funds for the main office: a smart tv and wall mount, a rally bar for virtual meetings, and a window air conditioner. Items either went to support students with special needs or very broad general needs identified by the principal.

Table 2. Items Purchased through Study Funds

Hillside	**Riverdale**
Year 1	
Autism room	Cooking class supplies
Year 2	
Athletic balls (soccer, baseball, basketball)	Water bottles
dry erase boards	Bathroom repairs
theraputty	Seasoning station
Office supplies	
Musical instruments	
Year 3	
Smart tv & wall mount	Field trip (as reward for achievement)
rally bar	‘Pastelitos Day’ in the cafeteria
window air conditioner	

Note: This table represents a list of the types of items purchased, not an exhaustive list of every item.

Riverdale (the treatment group) put the funds toward the shared interests of the students. In year 1, we spent the funding on cooking supplies for a cooking class, as students identified the cafeteria as the main issue needing improvement. In year 2, the students submitted for the purchase of water bottles (the school drinking water was unsafe), repairs to outdated bathrooms, and a seasoning station in the cafeteria (food quality remained a significant issue). In year 3, the students used the funds toward a skating field trip, as students had been denied field trip opportunities since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (this was 2023). Students also requested purchase of ingredients for the cafeteria to cook pastelitos for all the students at the end of the academic year. The purchases directly reflected the shared interests of the student body.

Educational Outcomes

The final part of the analysis for the study is a comparison of educational outcomes. Specially, I compare student achievement in math and English Language Arts (ELA) as well as chronic absenteeism. These types of educational outcomes are quite complex. The strongest explanations

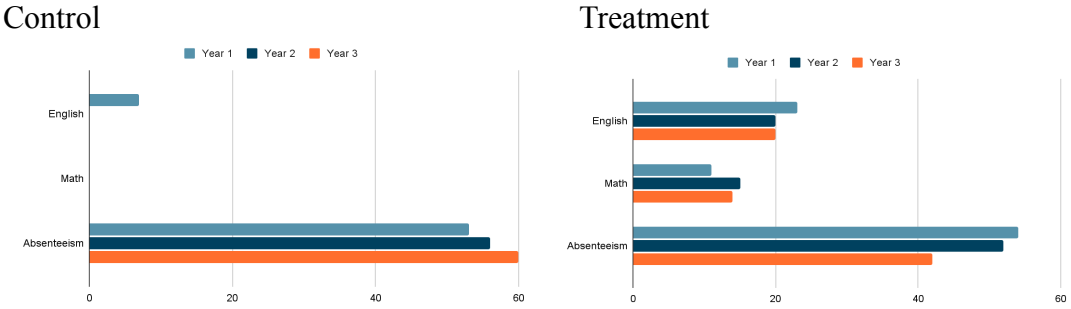
for the variation are household and classroom related factors; parental involvement and teacher effectiveness, in particular matter most. This study, therefore, introduces the comparison of educational outcomes with the understanding that the study design and the complexity of the outcomes themselves bar me from making any sort of causal claim. This is a comparison to check for evidence that may warrant any sort of expectation should PR be implemented at scale as a randomized control trial.

That said, there are clear differences between treatment and control on educational outcomes that form during the period in which the study was implemented. Figure 8 shows the results. At Hillside (the control group), the story of the educational outcomes is one of tragedy. Only 10 percent of students reached proficiency in ELA during year 1 of the study. During years 2 and 3, the scores likely declined even more. The state does not report proficiency rates for schools when fewer than 10% reach state the state proficiency level. Meanwhile, chronic absenteeism increase, climbing from a 50% absenteeism rate in year 1 to 60% in in year 3.

Riverdale (the treatment) experienced more positive outcomes. The school's math proficiency rate increased slightly from 12% in year 1 to 15% by year 3. The school performed well in ELA (relative to Hillside), with 20% of students reaching proficiency each of the 3 years of the study. Chronic absenteeism declined from 55% in year 1 to 42% in year 3.

While the difference in educational outcomes cannot be directly attributed to the intervention. There is reason to suspect that PR may have played at least a small role, particularly with the Riverdale's reduction in absenteeism. The schoolwide assemblies and the ability to influence real dollars being invested into their school created an added motivation for attendance. We can deduce this based on the stronger sense of political efficacy that develops as well as the stronger sense of school utility, especially in year 3. We also saw real evidence of this through informal conversations with students at the school. The "empowerment" effect was quite visible, and it is likely that it contributed in at least a small way to the educational outcomes.

Figure 8: Educational Outcomes by Assignment Group



Summary

Across two years, the PR initiative generated consistent evidence of empowerment shifts. Students at Riverdale Middle demonstrated higher levels of civic knowledge, efficacy, and school utility than the Hillside control school, even in a context of broader decline in civic confidence. They also expressed stronger trust in peers and teachers, saw greater utility in school, and produced higher-quality justifications after deliberative activities. These findings support the broader claim that institutional design matters; that race-conscious democratic

design, embedded in schools, can transform institutions historically experienced as exclusionary into spaces of empowerment.

This study advances our understanding of democratic governance. A significant amount of recent political science research has identified democratic backsliding, especially within the context of American politics. This opens questions as to how democracy can be deepened. There is a volume of work, largely in political communications and democratic theory, that shows the promise of democratic innovation designs, but rarely do these redesigns center – and therefore offer evidence of its implications for – communities of color, particularly adolescent youth. This study, therefore, addresses an important gap in the political science literature.

This study is not without its limitations. As a pilot study, it lacks the size and, therefore, the reliability of an RCT. This study is, instead, a precursor to an RCT design; evidence from an experimental pilot intervention that can be scaled up as an RCT and add more confidence to the effects. The case selection also brings complications. While both schools are similar, the control school did suffer from even lower student performance at the outset of the study. Thus, it cannot be ruled out that the intervention is being compared to a school already trending in the wrong direction.

These limitations, though, are the cost of conducting research that is truly community-engaged. Piloting this level of an intervention required coordination (and thus frequent communication) with the treatment school administrators. It required navigating district policies. Most importantly, it required the research team to build trust with the students and cultivate the belief that university outsiders entering their space with the promise of a $10,000 grant could deliver on that promise and were doing so out of genuine care.

The implications of this study far outweigh its limitations. This project surfaces critical components of how American politics works. It adds to a growing literature, particularly within the study of state and local politics, that institutional design choices matter. We are more familiar with this idea within the context of voting (off-cycle elections, voter ID laws). This study shows that institutional design choices matter equally, if not more, for the prospect of inclusive and responsive policy decision-making. Moreover, we learn, through this work, that racially minoritized communities engage in sophisticated democratic participation when institutional designs offer accessible opportunities and communal incentive. Lastly, we learn that democracy – particularly local democracy – can be reimagined by building the right structures, and this democratic reconstruction can – if not should – start in our schools with our kids.

References

Bächtiger, A., & Parkinson, J. (2019). *Mapping and measuring deliberation: Towards a new deliberative quality*. Oxford University Press.

Baiocchi, G. (2005). *Militants and citizens: The politics of participatory democracy in Porto Alegre*. Stanford University Press.

Barreto, M. A., Nuño, S., Sanchez, G. R., & Walker, H. L. (2019). The racial implications of voter identification laws in America. *American Politics Research*, *47*(2), 238-249.

Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1960). *The American voter*. University of Chicago Press.

Campbell, A. L. (2003). *How policies make citizens: Senior political activism and the American welfare state*. Princeton University Press.

Campbell, A. L. (2012). Policy makes mass politics. *Annual review of political science*, *15*(1), 333-351.
Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. P. (1950). Emotional factors in racial identification and preference in Negro children. *The Journal of Negro Education, 19*(3), 341–350.
Cohen, C. J. (1999). *The boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the breakdown of Black politics*. University of Chicago Press.
Cai J. (2020). *The public's voice: Uncontested candidates and low voter turnout are concerns in board elections*. https://www.nsba.org/ASBJ/2020/April/the-publics-voice
Collins, J. E. (2021). Does the meeting style matter? The effects of exposure to participatory and deliberative school board meetings. *American Political Science Review*, *115*(3), 790-804.
Collins, J. E. (2024). Policy Solutions: The case for sensory civics education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *106*(3), 50-51.
Collins, J. E., Jennings, P., Lioe, M., Echavarria, C. O., Haire, J., & Miller, E. B. (2024). Participatory budgeting in schools as a tool for racial justice. In *Educating for Democracy* (pp. 37-57). Edward Elgar Publishing.Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press.
Dawson, M. C. (1994). *Behind the mule: Race and class in African-American politics*. Princeton University Press.
Fishkin, J. S. (2009). *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy and public consultation*. Oxford University Press.
Frankenberg, E., Farrington, C., Debray, E. H., Siegel-Hawley, G., Leibovitz, T., Mccollum, S., & Mcdermott, K. A. (2025). Eroding integration: 21st century segregation trends in US public and charter schools and implications for the enduring promise of Brown. *Urban Education*, 00420859251329310.
Frymer, P. (2010). *Uneasy alliances: Race and party competition in America*. Princeton University Press.
Fung, A. (2003). Survey article: recipes for public spheres: eight institutional design choices and their consequences. *Journal of political philosophy*, *11*(3).
Fung, A. (2004). *Empowered participation: Reinventing urban democracy*. Princeton University Press.
Gilman, H. R. (2016). *Democracy reinvented: Participatory budgeting and civic innovation in America*. Brookings Institution Press.
Hajnal, Z. L. (2009). *America's uneven democracy: race, turnout, and representation in city politics*. Cambridge University Press.
Hancock, A. M. (2004). *The politics of disgust: The public identity of the welfare queen*. NYU Press.
Kahne, J. E., & Sporte, S. E. (2008). Developing citizens: The impact of civic learning opportunities on students' commitment to civic participation. *American Educational Research Journal, 45*(3), 738–766.
Kirshner, B. (2015). *Youth activism in an era of education inequality*. New York University Press.
Kogan, V., Lavertu, S., & Peskowitz, Z. (2018). Election timing, electorate composition, and policy outcomes: Evidence from school districts. *American Journal of Political Science*, *62*(3), 637-651.
Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. Crown.

Leighley, J. E., & Vedlitz, A. (1999). Race, ethnicity, and political participation: Competing models and contrasting explanations. *The Journal of Politics, 61*(4), 1092–1114.
Lerman, A. E., & Weaver, V. M. (2014). *Arresting citizenship: The democratic consequences of American crime control*. University of Chicago Press.
Levine, P. (2015). *We are the ones we have been waiting for: The promise of civic renewal in America*. Oxford University Press.
Levinson, M. (2012). *No citizen left behind*. Harvard University Press.
Mansbridge, J., Bohman, J., Chambers, S., Christiano, T., Fung, A., Parkinson, J., ... & Warren, M. E. (2012). A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. *Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale.* Cambridge University Press., 1-26.
McDaniel, E. (2009). *Politics in the pews: The political mobilization of black churches*. University of Michigan Press.
Mettler, S. (2002). Bringing the state back in to civic engagement: Policy feedback effects of the GI Bill for World War II veterans. *American Political Science Review*, *96*(2), 351-365.
Mettler, S., & Soss, J. (2004). The consequences of public policy for democratic citizenship: Bridging policy studies and mass politics. *Perspectives on politics*, *2*(1), 55-73.
Nuamah, S. A. (2022). *Closed for democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
Owens, M. L. (2007). *God and government in the ghetto: The politics of church-state collaboration in black America*. University of Chicago Press.
Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press.
Pierson, P. (1993). When effect becomes cause: Policy feedback and political change. *World Politics, 45*(4), 595–628.
Rogers, J., Mediratta, K., & Shah, S. (2012). Building power, learning democracy: Youth organizing as a site of civic development. *Review of Research in Education*, *36*(1), 43-66.
Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2011). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *The Urban Review, 34*(4), 317–342.
Schlozman, K. L., Verba, S., & Brady, H. E. (2012). *The unheavenly chorus: Unequal political voice and the broken promise of American democracy*. Princeton University Press.
Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic innovations: Designing institutions for citizen participation*. Cambridge University Press.
Soss, J. (1999). Lessons of welfare: Policy design, political learning, and political action. *American Political Science Review, 93*(2), 363–380.
Steenbergen, M. R., Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M., & Steiner, J. (2003). Measuring political deliberation: A discourse quality index. *Comparative European Politics, 1*(1), 21–48.
Talpin, J. (2007). *Schools of democracy: How ordinary citizens (sometimes) become competent in participatory budgeting institutions*. ECPR Press.
Trounstine, J. (2018). *Segregation by design: Local politics and inequality in American cities*. Cambridge University Press.
Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.
Wampler, B. (2012). Participatory budgeting: Core principles and key impacts. *Journal of Public Deliberation*.

Wampler, B., & Avritzer, L. (2004). Participatory publics: Civil society and new institutions in democratic Brazil. *Comparative Politics, 36*(3), 291–312.
Warren, M. R. (2001). *Dry bones rattling: Community building to revitalize American democracy*. Princeton University Press.
Warren, M. E., & Pearse, H. (Eds.). (2008). *Designing deliberative democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly*. Cambridge University Press.

Lerman, A. E., & Weaver, V. M. (2014). *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control*. University of Chicago Press.

APPENDIX

Table A1 presents the Year 2 survey questions administered at the treatment school (left column) along with the time point(s) at which each question was asked (pre-, mid-, and/or post-survey). Unless indicated by an asterisk (*), the same questions were also included on the control school survey. Unless noted otherwise, all questions are multiple choice.

Table A1. Y2 Survey Questions

Variable	Survey
Language survey was taken in [1] English [2] Spanish	Pre
What is your grade level?	Pre
What is your racial-ethnic background?	Pre
What is your gender?	Pre

How happy are you with your school?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the teachers?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the principals?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the building?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the learning activities?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with school safety?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the friendships?	Pre, Mid, Post
If you had to guess, how much of the school district budget is used to pay teachers?*	Pre, Mid, Post
How much money do you think your school spends on each student every year?	Pre, Mid, Post
Where do you think most of the money for your school comes from?	Pre, Mid, Post
[*Open-ended*] Your school is receiving a $10,000 grant. Please complete the following sentence on what you would change in the school: With the $10,000 grant, I would…	Pre, Mid
In your opinion, which item from the list below should be the main focus for the $10,000 grant?*	Pre, Mid

[1] improving the food [2] building repairs [3] improving the gyms [4] new furniture [5] extra activities [6] new school supplies [7] something else [8] field trips	
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what you would like to see done to make the food better.*	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what you would like to see done to make the building better.*	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what you would like to see done to make the gym better.*	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what kinds of new furniture we should purchase.*	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what types of new activities you want to see.*	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what new supplies you want the school to buy.*	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what you would like to see the money used for.*	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, tell us what types of field trips you want to see.*	Mid
[*Open-ended*] Now, tell us why you would like to see the money used this way. How does this make the school better for you and the other students?*	Pre, Mid
Instead of asking adults, this project uses student ideas to spend some of the school's extra money. Do you think this is a good way to improve the school?*	Pre, Mid, Post
[*Open-ended*] What do you like about using student ideas instead of asking teachers and other adults?*	Pre, Mid, Post
[*Open-ended*] What would be a better way?*	Pre, Mid, Post
I trust our students to come up with a good decision for how to spend the money.*	Pre, Mid, Post

I believe that students should always help schools decide how to spend extra money.*	Pre, Mid, Post
I would join a student-led group to decide how to spend some of the school's extra money.*	Pre, Mid, Post
Someone like me can have an impact on how local governments spend money.*	Pre, Mid, Post
How often do you use ideas from school in your daily life?*	Pre, Mid, Post
How useful do you think school will be to you in the future?*	Pre, Mid, Post
How much do you feel you belong at your school?*	Pre, Mid, Post
How much respect do students in your school show each other?*	Pre, Mid, Post
What do you think you will do after high school?*	Pre, Mid, Post
[*Open-ended*] In a few short words, describe what it was like attending school during the COVID-19 pandemic:*	Pre
[*Open-ended*] What is your favorite thing about school?*	Pre, Mid
Did you attend the outreach activity in the cafeteria back in early March?*	Mid, Post
On a scale from 1-5 with 5 being the best, how would you rate the outreach activity?*	Mid, Post
What was your favorite part of the outreach activity?* [1] Budget trivia game [2] Talking in small groups [3] Candy [4] Not being in my normal class [5] Seeing the Brown University college students [6] Something else	Mid, Post

Did you attend the special town hall activity that we just had on March 24th?*	Mid, Post
Did you participate in this course?*	Mid, Post
Now, think about a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the most: how much do you trust your fellow students to make a good decision for how to spend the money?	Mid, Post
Thinking again about the 1-5 scale with 5 being the highest, how strongly do you believe that students should always help schools decide how to spend extra money?	Mid, Post
How about on a 1-5 scale? How much would you like to join a student-led group to decide how to spend some of the school's extra money?	Mid, Post
We will also be offering a course for students to complete the process of spending the $10,000. If given the chance, would you want to participate in this type of course?*	Mid
What about on a 1-5 scale with 5 being the highest, how strongly do you believe that someone like you can have an impact on how local governments spend money?	Mid, Post
Over the past 2 months, we also ran an implementation course at your school, where we worked with students to create budgets and purchase items for the school. We usually met in the auditorium or the cafeteria during the planning period. Did you participate in this course?*	Post
Would you like for Community Decides to continue next year at your school?*	Post
[*Open-ended*] In one sentence tell us why you would like to see Community Decides continue.*	Post
[*Open-ended*] If you have any other thoughts about Community Decides, please type them below:*	Post

Note. *Pre* = Question was asked on the pre-survey; *Mid* = Question was asked on the mid-survey; *Post* = Question was asked on the post-survey.

Table A2 presents the Year 3 survey questions administered at the treatment school (left column) along with the time point(s) at which each question was asked (pre-, mid-, and/or post-survey). Unless indicated by an asterisk (*), the same questions were also included on the control school survey. Unless noted otherwise, all questions are multiple choice.

Table A2. Y3 Survey Questions

Variable	Survey

Language survey was taken in [1] English [2] Spanish	Pre
What is your grade level?	Pre
What is your racial-ethnic background?	Pre
What is your gender?	Pre
How happy or unhappy are you with the teachers?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the principals?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the building?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the learning activities?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with school safety?	Pre, Mid, Post
How happy or unhappy are you with the school overall?	Pre, Mid, Post
What are the three categories that you think your school district spends the most money on?	Pre, Mid, Post
How much money does your school get to spend each year?	Pre, Mid, Post
How much does the school spend per year on each student?	Pre, Mid, Post
In most places, the _____ MAKES the budget and sets the other policies for all the schools in the district	Pre, Mid, Post

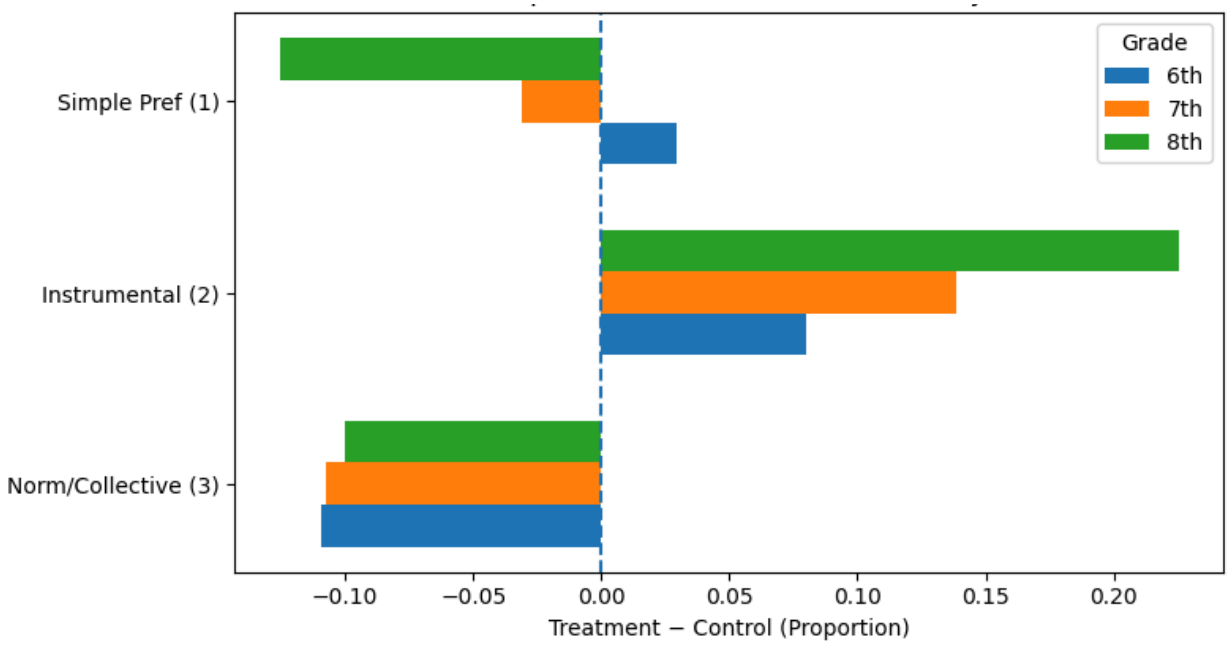
[*Open-ended*] Should the students have a voice in how the school spends money?*	Pre, Mid
In your opinion, how should we spend the $10,000 this year? *Pre*: [1] Tech Upgrades [2] Tools to make learning easier [3] After school activities [4] New school supplies [5] Something else *Mid*: [1] Tech Upgrades [2] Computers [3] Field Trips [4] Clubs & Teams [5] Gym Renovations [6] P.E. Equipment [7] School supplies [8] Water fountains [9] School furniture [10] School Renovations (not including the gym) [11] Lunch [12] Snacks [13] Something else	Pre, Mid
[*Open-ended*] Why do you want to spend the $10,000 this way? How does this make the school better for you and the other students?	Pre, Mid
I trust our students to come up with a good decision for how to spend the money.	Pre, Mid, Post
If students tell schools how to spend money, the students will not choose the right things.	Pre, Mid, Post
I would join a student-led group to help fix problems at my school.*	Pre, Mid, Post
Someone like me can have an impact on how the school district spends money.	Pre, Mid, Post
I feel comfortable telling my teachers and principals about problems I see in the school.	Pre, Mid, Post
How often do you use ideas from school in your daily life?	Pre, Mid, Post
How much do you feel you belong at your school?	Pre, Mid, Post
[*Open-ended*] What makes going to school worth it for you?	Pre, Mid, Post
On a scale from 1-5 (5 being the best) how much did you enjoy the activity in the cafeteria where you filled out the white sheets?*	Mid

On a scale from 1-5 (5 being the best) how much did you enjoy the activity in the auditorium where you filled out the options sheets?*	Mid
[*Open-ended*] Do you think the students did a good job of deciding how to spend the $10,000?*	Post
[*Open-ended*] Would you like to see this project continue next year?*	Post
If the class is offered again next year, would you want to join it?*	Post
In your opinion, who should be involved in making decisions at the school? (Please select as many as apply) [1] The students [2] Teachers [3] Parents [4] The principal, superintendent and other administrators [5] The government	Post

Note. *Pre* = Question was asked on the pre-survey; *Mid* = Question was asked on the mid-survey; *Post* = Question was asked on the post-survey.

Figure A1 presents Discourse Quality Index (DQI) score differences by grade-level between treatment and control.

Figure A1. Differences in Discourse Quality Index (DQI) Scores by Grade



Ethical Standards

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved as protocol #1911002568 by the author's home institution. The authors affirm this article adheres to the principles concerning research with human participants laid out in APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research (2020).

Data Availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, I provide limited access to the data. The data will include only the variables relevant for this analysis and will only be publicly available during the first year after publication. These restrictions are in place to protect the information of schools, kids, and families that entrusted the researcher with their responses.