



Article

Broadening Public Participation in the Budget Process and Enhancing Inclusiveness: Mechanisms

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Abstract: This article examines the issues of broadening public participation and enhancing inclusiveness in the budget process using the “My School” project as an example. It sheds light on the institutional and practical significance of involving schoolchildren in budget processes through this project. Students’ putting forward and discussing initiatives aimed at improving school infrastructure, and taking part in voting, are assessed as an effective tool for building civic engagement. The article also analyzes the opportunities the project offers for developing in the younger generation the skills of collective decision-making, identifying priority needs and making rational use of available resources. It is substantiated that involving students in budget processes at an early stage within the project strengthens the elements of openness, accountability and public oversight in school governance and serves as an important institutional basis for shaping active, responsible and financially literate citizens in the future. On the basis of the research results, scientific and practical proposals have been developed to further improve the financial efficiency and inclusiveness of the “My School” project.

Keywords: Budget process, public participation, inclusiveness, “My School” project, initiative budgeting, financial literacy, public oversight, openness, accountability, financial efficiency.

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1. Introduction

Uzbekistan’s school education system is large in scale. According to the 2025 indicators, the country has 11,014 general secondary education institutions, of which 10,038 are general education schools; the total number of students is 6,773 thousand. According to forecasts, the number of students in general education schools will grow by 30,4 percent, from 6,366.5 thousand in 2024 to 8,300.9 thousand in 2030 [1]. Consequently, decisions on school infrastructure and equipment directly concern millions of families, and there is a broad young generation, a large share of which can become participants in the budget process.

Initiative (participatory) budgeting is a mechanism in which citizens directly decide how to spend part of the budget funds; after its introduction in 1989 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, it spread to thousands of cities and organizations worldwide [2], [3]. In recent decades this practice has also entered educational institutions: Portugal has had a national-level “Schools Participatory Budget” since 2017 [4]-[6], the Poitou-Charentes region of France has applied a separate participatory budget for secondary schools [7], and in the USA participatory budgeting has also been piloted at the level of youth and school districts [8] [9]. These programs are aimed at developing young people’s active participation in the

budget process, civic sense (political efficacy and trust in institutions), financial literacy, and public oversight over implementation. –

In Uzbekistan, citizens' participation in the budget process rests on the principles of openness and transparency in the Budget Code [10]. The school-level form of this experience, the "My School" project, was piloted in 14 districts in 2024 [11], [12] and will cover 10,038 schools in the 2025/2026 academic year [13]. In two years the coverage will expand from 612 schools to more than 10 thousand schools, about 16.5 times. –

The essence of the problem is that most local research focuses on adults' participation in the "Initiative Budget" and its financial and legal aspects [14–17]; the school model with students' participation, its funding sustainability, and its impact on students' financial literacy, civic sense and public oversight skills have not been the subject of separate systematic analysis. Foreign studies, for their part, show that a school participatory budget can be a means of civic education, but if poorly designed it creates the risk of "democratic deception" and of deepening inequality [4; 6]. Proceeding from the above, the purpose of this article is to analyze the institutional and practical foundations of the "My School" project and to develop scientific and practical proposals that serve to enhance students' participation in the budget process, their civic sense, financial literacy and public oversight.

P. Abrantes, who has researched budgeting with the participation of school students, emphasizes the program's positive potential and points to three risks: that the program is not implemented in many schools, that participation is low in schools and regions with limited capacity (the "Matthew effect"), and that, unless the program is linked to an educational project, it may turn into "democratic deception" [4]. A study conducted for UNESCO noted high levels of participation and satisfaction, while inequality was the most frequently mentioned negative effect [4; 6]. A. Brown, in a study conducted in one of the US school districts, showed that although participation is mass-scale on voting day, it is narrower at the stage of preparing and discussing proposals, and therefore the role of student committees and teacher-mentors is important [8]. N. Gibbs and co-authors studied theoretically and empirically the effect of budgeting with the participation of school students on students' sense of political efficacy [18]. In the United Kingdom, the concept of student voice in school governance ("Student Voice") was developed in the works of M. Fielding [19]. According to L. Lundy, the "opportunity to vote" is not enough in itself: for a child to express an opinion, space, voice, audience and the opportunity to influence must be ensured equally [20]. R. Hart, for his part, proposed a ladder leading from "symbolic" forms of participation to genuine participation [21].

In Uzbekistan, U. Oroqov studied the organizational-legal foundations and practical mechanisms of initiative budgeting [14]. Kh. Khamidov covered citizens' rights and freedoms in initiative budgeting processes [15]. G. Kasimova analyzed the theoretical approaches to the initiative budget and its results in local budgets [16]. N. Primova studied the fiscal consequences of the initiative budgeting methodology and strategies for experimentation in the regions [17].

Existing studies have examined the initiative budget mainly at the level of the population and the mahalla. By contrast, the activity of students' participation at the school level, the sustainability of funding, the formation of financial literacy and civic sense, and the link with public oversight have not been studied. This article aims to fill that gap.

2. Research methodology

Systemic, institutional and integrated approaches were used in the research process. Comparative analysis, content analysis, statistical grouping and logical generalization methods were applied in assessing the content and practical results of the “My School” project. The project’s impact on involving school students in the budget process, on their financial literacy, civic activity and participation in public oversight was analyzed systematically. In addition, the efficiency of the use of budget funds, the priority of initiatives and the level of participation were studied in their interrelation. On the basis of institutional analysis, the current state of the organizational, financial and participation mechanisms within the project was assessed.

3. Results

The legal basis of the project is formed, as a common foundation, by the principles of openness and participation in the Budget Code [10] and Resolution No. PQ-3917 of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan [22]. The school-level process began on a pilot basis in the 2024/2025 academic year in one district (city) each of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the regions and the city of Tashkent, pursuant to paragraph 12 of Decree No. PF-37, which approves the state program for implementing the “Uzbekistan – 2030” strategy in the “Year of Supporting Youth and Business” [11]. By Resolution No. KQ-10-V of the Council of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis dated 5 December 2024, the Temporary Regulation on the procedure for implementing the “My School” project was approved, and it was determined that from the 2025/2026 academic year the project would be implemented in all general education schools [12].

While the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Preschool and School Education are the authorized bodies for organizing and regulating the process, the screening of projects is carried out by a working commission approved by a joint order of the district (city) departments of economy and finance and of preschool and school education.

According to the Regulation, the process is held every year in October–November. The projects must be aimed at activities in the following four groups: improving infrastructure, purchasing equipment and appliances, improving the sports and cultural environment, and environmental and green initiatives [1].

For each school, an extra-budgetary “My School Fund” is opened under the district (city) departments of preschool and school education. The Fund’s resources are formed from the funds provided for in the district (city) budget, sponsorship funds of individuals and legal entities, grants from international financial institutions and foreign organizations, and other sources not prohibited by legislation [12]. The Senate Council resolution requires ensuring that, in the 2025 expenditure estimates, funds are allocated in the amount of 150 times the base calculation unit; the funds are spent according to the choice of grade 5–11 students. The funds are transferred to the school funds at least one month before the start of the process, are directed only to implementing winning projects, and spending them for any other purpose is prohibited [12].

When the mechanism for implementing the “My School” project in our country is compared with the experience of some foreign countries, it was found that alongside a number of advantages there are also some contentious issues that need to be resolved (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the mechanism for implementing the “My School” project in Uzbekistan with foreign experience

Function	Mechanism in Uzbekistan	Foreign experience	Contentious issue
Active participation in the budget process	each grade 5–11 student submits one project and votes for one project; via the “Open Budget” portal or mobile app using a personal keyword	Portugal: 1 euro per student, support from 5 percent of students is sufficient for a proposal, voting takes place at school by open ballot	The project with the most votes in the school wins
Building civic sense	“master classes” during class hours, group work, independent decision-making for one’s own school; rejection is justified on the portal only on the basis of established criteria	Portugal: democratic participation, reducing distrust; United Kingdom: “Student Voice” experience	No student representative in the working commission
Enhancing financial literacy	price in the templates, funding ceiling, stating the initial cost in an independent project, several winners within one school	Portugal’s Ministry of Education also envisaged financial literacy among the project’s objectives	No measurement tool or training module
Expanding public oversight	implementation chronology, “green–yellow–red” assessment, “Emergency Report”, annual reports, school rating, internal audit	Cascais: young people were given the opportunity to monitor the implementation of their own project	Assessment results and the rating are not published as open statistics

According to data from the “Open Budget” portal, in the 2024 pilot season 160,068 students studied in grades 5–11 (8,134 classes), 30.6 bln UZS was allocated to the project and 19,545 proposals were submitted; about 47 thousand votes were cast in 612 schools and 1,387 projects won. In the first season of the 2025/2026 academic year the allocated amount was 300.7 bln UZS, 112,272 proposals were submitted (most – from the city of Tashkent, 18,229), 111,270 of them went to voting, a total of 310,926 votes were cast, and 14,745 projects (worth 259.2 bln UZS) were declared winners. 36 schools left without a winner in season 1 were given the opportunity to participate again in season 2. (Table 2).

Table 2. Indicators of the “My School” project

Indicator	2024 (pilot)	2025/2026 season 1
1. Number of schools	612	4,978
2. Number of grade 5–11 students	160,068	2,169,467
3. Average number of eligible students per school	≈262	≈436
4. Funds allocated to the project, bln UZS	30.6	300.7
5. Funds allocated per school, mln UZS	50.0	60.4
6. Allocation per student, thousand UZS	≈191	≈139
7. Number of proposals submitted	19,545	112,272
8. Average number of proposals per school	31.9	22.6

9.	Share of proposals relative to the number of grade 5–11 students	12.2%	5.2%
10.	Average funds per proposal, mln UZS	1.57	2.68
11.	Votes cast	≈47 thousand	310,926
12.	Winning projects	1,387	14,745
13.	Share of winning projects	7.1%	13.1%
14.	Votes per school	77	62.5
15.	Votes per proposal	2.4	2.8
16.	Participation rate	29.4%	14.3%

The following conclusions follow from the table:

- *Imbalance between coverage and participation.* Coverage grew from 612 pilot schools to 4,978 schools in season 1 of 2025/2026 (8.1 times), and the number of students eligible to participate from 160,068 to 2,169,467 (13.6 times). Since a student cannot submit more than one proposal, the ratio of the number of proposals to the number of students gives an upper bound of participation at the proposal stage: in the pilot it was 12.2 percent, and in season 1 it fell to 5.2 percent; that is, as coverage expanded, participation at the proposal stage fell by more than half (by 7.0 percentage points). The same is observed at the voting stage: the participation rate fell from 29.4 percent in the pilot to 14.3 percent in season 1, that is, roughly halved. Although the number of students who voted rose 6.6 times (from ≈47 thousand to 310,926), the participation share fell because the number of students eligible to vote grew 13.6 times. This indicator is well below the 2017 level of Portugal's school participatory budget (46 percent) [4].
- *Relationship at the school and student level.* Proposals per school fell from 31.9 to 22.6 (by 29 percent), and votes per school from 77 to 62.5 (by 19 percent), even though the number of students per school rose from ≈262 to ≈436 (1.7 times). That is, as schools grew larger, activity at the school level did not rise but fell. Votes per proposal rose slightly, from 2.4 to 2.8, but even this average is below the 10-vote threshold required to win. The share of winning projects rose from 7.1 percent to 13.1 percent: while the number of proposals grew 5.7 times, the number of winning projects grew 10.6 times.
- *Equality of allocation.* The allocation per school rose from 50.0 to 60.4 mln UZS (by 21 percent), but because the number of students per school grew 1.7 times, the allocation per student fell from ≈191 thousand UZS to ≈139 thousand UZS (by 27 percent). That is, the allocation did not grow in proportion to the number of students, and the amount allocated to each student participating in the same project decreased compared with the pilot. The total funds allocated to the project rose from 30.6 bln UZS to 300.7 bln UZS (9.8 times), which is slower than the growth in the number of eligible students (13.6 times). In season 1 the value of winning projects was 259.2 bln UZS, that is, 86.2 percent of the allocation (259.2 / 300.7); the average value of a winning project was ≈17.6 mln UZS.
- *Relationship between participation and allocation.* In the two observations, voting participation fell together with the allocation per student: at ≈191 thousand UZS – 29.4 percent, at ≈139 thousand UZS – 14.3 percent (the allocation fell by 27 percent and participation by about 51 percent). Conversely, although the allocation per proposal rose from 1.57 to 2.68 mln UZS (1.7 times), participation did not change in the same direction: each proposal's chance of being funded increased (the share of winners rose from 7.1 to 13.1 percent), yet voting activity fell. Two points are insufficient for a causal conclusion; other factors (the rapid expansion of coverage, school and district category, the preparedness of class teachers, the timing of the

process) may also have had an influence. This hypothesis needs to be tested with data from the next season.

- *Limited scale of coverage.* In season 1, 4,978 schools took part, which is about 49 percent of the country's 10,038 general education schools; the 2,169,467 students eligible to participate make up about 33 percent of the 6,773 thousand students in general education schools, because the process is intended only for grades 5–11. According to the forecast, the number of students in general education schools will grow from 6,772.6 thousand in 2025 to 6,995.9 thousand in 2026 and 8,300.9 thousand in 2030. The number of additional classes to be opened each year is estimated at 8,933 in 2026 and 16,330 in 2030, and the additional annual expenditure at 1,267.4 bln and 3,392.3 bln UZS respectively [1].

Discussion

In two years “My School” has grown from a pilot into a nationwide process and, as in foreign countries, has given Uzbek young people the opportunity to directly influence decisions on the use of budget funds. In a single season: hundreds of thousands of proposals and hundreds of thousands of votes. The institutional design is well thought out – a single portal, a personal keyword for each student, pre-set prices in the templates, a closed list of grounds for rejection and the obligation to give reasons, automatic determination of the winner and the implementation chronology, and public oversight through “green–yellow–red” assessment and the “Emergency Report”.–

The prices in the templates introduce students in practice to the concept of a funding ceiling and project cost; this can be a natural tool for building financial literacy [23; 24]. The “master classes” held during class hours, group-work skills, and collective decision-making about one's own school develop civic sense.

Alongside the above positive aspects, six problem areas were identified in the course of the research:

1. *Problems related to financial sustainability.* The Fund is formed from local budget allocations, sponsorship and grants. Sponsorship may be lower in some regions and higher in others. This may repeat the “Matthew effect” observed in Portugal's experience [4]. Residual funds are directed not to projects again in the current year but to the next year's process.
2. *Problems related to depth of participation.* The participation rate fell from about 29.4 percent in the pilot to about 14.3 percent in season 1, and on average 2.8 votes fall on one proposal. In Portugal, for a proposal to be put to a vote at least 5 percent of students must support it, and voting takes the form of a free election organized by a student commission at the school [4]. The US experience shows that participation is narrower at the stage of discussing proposals and shows the importance of student committees [8].
3. *Problems related to freedom of choice.* Although project templates simplify the choice, dependence on templates creates the risk of “symbolic participation”. In Lundy's interpretation, for “voice” to turn into influence, the administration must act as an audience and give real opportunity to influence [20].
4. *Problems related to the composition of governance.* The working commission includes parents (at least three), but there is no student representative. Foreign studies particularly emphasize the role of a student committee [8].
5. *Problems related to equality and coverage.* The process is only for grades 5–11 of general education schools. A participation mechanism for specialized and inclusive boarding schools has not been separately provided. Because the allocation is set equally per school, the allocation per student differs 1.4 times between seasons. Sending keywords to parents' phone numbers may create a risk of digital inequality and of third parties participating on behalf of the student.

6. *Problems related to evaluation of results.* The Regulation provides for school ratings and annual reports, but general information on their results, the share of independent projects, statistics of the “green–yellow–red” assessment, or changes in students’ financial literacy and civic sense is not given in the sources studied.

4. Conclusions and proposals

The “My School” project is the first large-scale school-level form of participatory budgeting in Uzbekistan; its normative design (personal keyword, template prices, closed list of grounds for rejection, implementation chronology, “green–yellow–red” assessment, “Emergency Report”, rating) makes it possible, as in foreign countries, to build among Uzbek young people the skills of active participation in the budget process, civic sense, financial literacy and public oversight.

The analysis led to two main conclusions. First, voting participation was ≈ 29.4 percent in the pilot and ≈ 14.3 percent in season 1. However, no monotonic decline with scaling was observed: participation was twice as high in the periods when the allocation per student was high. Because the allocation is set almost equally per school, the allocation per student differs between seasons. Second, the project’s effectiveness depends on the sustainability of funding, the completeness of coverage and the system for measuring results: the Fund is formed from local budget, sponsorship and grants, there is no student representative in the working commission, and there are no indicators on financial literacy and civic sense, nor open statistics on the results of oversight.

In our opinion, in order to broaden public participation in the budget process, enhance inclusiveness, and improve the mechanism for implementing the “My School” project, it is expedient to carry out the following measures:

1. *Sustainable financing of the project from state budget funds.* In order to ensure young people’s active participation in the budget process and to fully realize their initiatives, it is proposed to implement the “My School” project on a permanent basis in all general education schools from state budget funds, to raise financial literacy by involving students in the process of using budget funds, and to encourage young people’s initiative. This proposal is based on the results and the six identified problem areas, and, as in foreign experience, is aimed at jointly developing young people’s participation in the budget process, civic sense, financial literacy and public oversight skills.

Under the current procedure the Fund is formed from local budget allocations, sponsorship and grants. Our proposal is as follows: the allocation for each school is set as a targeted transfer from the republican budget to district (city) budgets, on a per-student norm basis; sponsorship and grants remain an additional source and do not replace the base allocation.

2. *Making coverage complete and inclusive.* The participating schools are only general education schools; it is proposed to bring the remaining schools, as well as specialized and inclusive boarding schools, into the process. For them, adapted forms are necessary, such as assisted participation (support from a caregiver), an interface in an accessible format, and a set voting hour in the computer science room in schools with limited internet.
3. *Establishing a financial literacy module.* Financial literacy should not be a by-product of the process but its measurable goal. The Regulation already provides for holding “master class” lessons during class hours. On this basis, a 3–4-hour “School Budget” module is proposed within “Informatics” or “Fundamentals of Economics” lessons. It covers calculating the funding ceiling and project cost, comparing prices, preparing a project passport, and reviewing the implementation report. A short methodological guide is prepared for class teachers.

4. *Encouraging youth initiative and civic sense.* To reduce the second risk (depth of participation), the following measures are proposed:
 - a week at school for presenting and discussing proposals before voting, and the possibility of collective (class) proposals;
 - a “School Budget Committee”: including student council representatives in the working commission as observers;
 - piloting a class-level support stage before a proposal is put to a vote (similar to Portugal’s 5 percent rule);
 - turning the “Most Interesting Project” contest into a permanent recognition mechanism for students and class teams.
5. *Deepening public oversight.* The oversight tools in the Regulation (chronology, traffic-light assessment, “Emergency Report”, rating) make it possible to involve students in oversight. Proposal:
 - (a) publishing statistics of the “green–yellow–red” assessment and “Emergency Reports” openly by school and district;
 - (b) setting a deadline for responding to appeals;
 - (c) showing on the Portal the difference between the contract price and the template price and in implementation time;
 - (d) involving students in the commission that accepts the project for use.
6. *Increasing voting activity and reliability.* It is recommended to publish the participation rate by school and district; to allocate a strictly set lesson hour in the computer science room during the voting period; to keep a log of keyword use and audit suspicious votes. These measures are aimed at reducing possible abuses linked to keywords sent to parents’ phones (voting on behalf of a student).
7. *Improving the rules for determining winners and for residual funds.* First, under the Regulation, residual funds are directed to cover the difference when the price is clarified or to the next year. It is proposed to finance in the same year the next project with the most votes whose cost fits into that residual (the absorption rate in season 1 was ≈86 percent). Second, tying the 10-vote threshold to the number of students in the school (a relative threshold) will be tested experimentally. Third, procurement deadlines should be set identically in the Regulation and in the presentation.

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