



How do we improve America's lowest performing schools? Since the desegregation debates post-*Brown v. Board* ruling through the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* into the accountability systems of *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, this has been the leading question for education policy makers for decades. In terms of policy, reformers have turned to technology innovations, specialized curricular tools, extracurricular programming, and the creation of specialized schools and academies (Tyack and Cuban 1995; Hochschild and Scovronick 2005). Meanwhile, legislators have experimented with state takeovers of urban districts, allocating power to mayors, decentralizing power to the school level and sanctioning privatized models. Despite massive reform efforts, racial and economic gaps in academic achievement have persisted across the duration of policy experimentation. This proposal presents a new alternative model to facilitate school improvement that relies on investing in schools and democratizing the process of determining how schools use supplemental funding.

This is a new model of K-12 urban school improvement that centers around democratic innovation. The broad idea is that school communities can use mass public participation and small-group deliberations to identify and solve problems within their schools. Thus, instead of inundating our lowest-performing schools in new reforms, we use empowerment and parent and student voice as the pathways to improving the educational experience. This should position schools to remove idiosyncratic barriers to student learning based on the ideas and preferences of those most directly impacted by school operations: *the students and parents*.

In practice, I have created what I call “The Community Decides Project,” which functions as the treatment in a field-experimental-research design where mass populations of students and parents determine how to spend supplemental discretionary funds towards the goal of improving their schools. I partner with individual schools and, through these partnerships, parents and students make these collective decisions through a series of events – outreach activities, town halls, and an implementation course. I have built a causal inference design around the Community Decides Project by also sending grants of equal amounts to control group schools who do not receive the democratic innovation intervention. We are providing a glimpse of the future of American education reform.

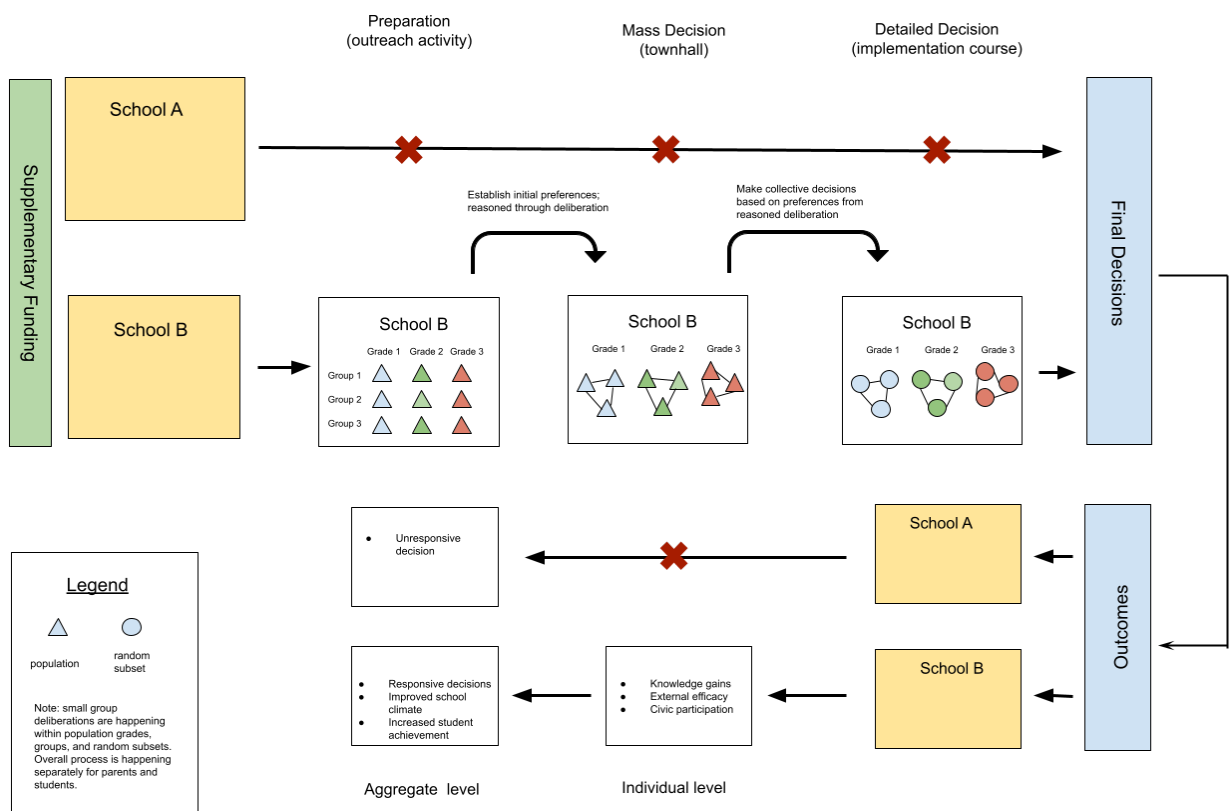
The Community Decides Model

Community Decides offers a unique conceptual model for facilitating school improvement (see Figure 1). The model is grounded in the political science literatures on participatory democracy and democratic deliberation (Cohen 1989; Pateman 2012; Neblo et al. 2018; Collins 2021). In essence we use mass public participation coupled with small-group deliberations to identify problems, surface solutions, facilitate empowerment, and improve schools. In practice, we partner with schools and schedule public meetings with parents and students, respectively. The first meeting is what I call an Outreach Activity, where my research team and I introduce the concept of participatory budgeting and parent/student empowerment, while delivering information on how school district governance and budgeting works. We, then, facilitate a simulation of the town hall. In this simulation, we have them reflect on their individual

preferences before directing the meeting attendees into small groups and having them deliberate over ways to best utilize what has to this point been a \$10,000 grant.

For the actual town halls, we narrow the scope of the decision to the prominent issue areas identified in the pre-townhall survey, and during the townhall we guide attendees into small groups, once again, to deliberate over the use of funds, but with more precise issue options. The town halls conclude with ranked-choice voting on the previously identified issues coupled with the group-level preferences that we collect via worksheets completed in the small groups. The worksheets show the participants' shared rationale that emerges through the deliberations. We also survey them afterwards to retrieve their individual preferences.

Figure 1. The Community Decides Theoretical Model



The Community Decides Model concludes with an implementation course. Once the town halls are completed, a subset of students selected at random participate in a course designed to teach students more in-depth about how budgeting, school finance policy, and school governance all work. Then, the central goal of the course is to empower students to take the lead in producing budget invoices for myself, the grant provider, to use for purchase. Students, however, develop the budgets during our 12-week course through constant deliberations, where

students are reasoning through how to narrow from relatively broad issues voted on by their peers to actual line-items used to make purchases. Community Decides democratizes every aspect of the school improvement process.

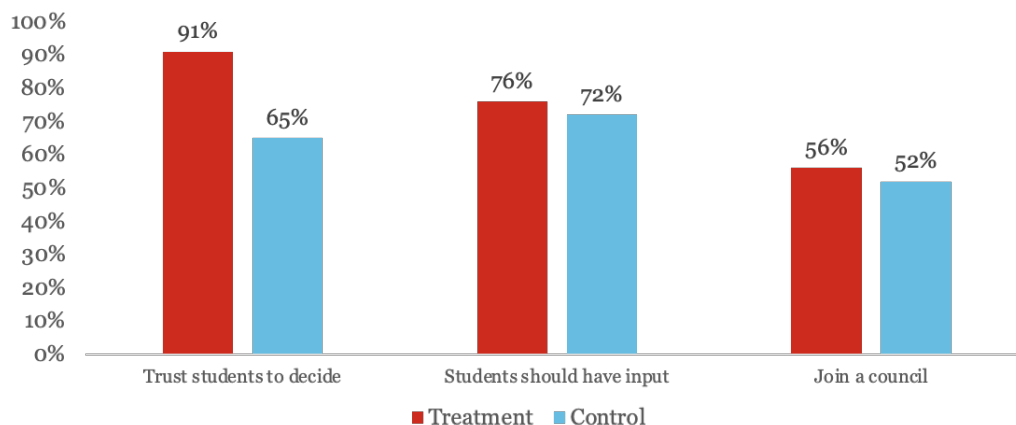
This model seeks to improve education as a public good, while also providing pedagogical value. Community Decides is educational in practice. Gains in policy knowledge have been some of the strongest effects of the intervention thus far. Moreover, in addition to teaching parents and kids about how school funding policy and local governance works, the model teaches them important civic skills such as: talking in groups, advocating to school leaders, and informed voting. Our participants learn to articulate policy preferences, discuss the reasoning for those preferences, and make decisions based on the alignment of those preferences. The ultimate goal, however, is for parents and students to use this process to identify idiosyncratic obstacles to student learning. Can a democratic innovation strategy based on mass participation and public deliberation create better conditions for marginalized kids to learn math and science or the arts? If so, under what parameters? These are the primary questions that this proposed project seeks to understand.

Preliminary Results

Year 1

Two consecutive years of pilot study reveal promising results. Year 1 of the pilot study (2020-21) was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While schools eventually opened, health and safety restrictions presented large gatherings of students. Nonetheless, we administered the outreach activities by going classroom-to-classroom, and we held our large townhall with the students via Zoom. The results from the surveys revealed a small but encouraging finding: Treatment school students receiving the Community Decides model were much more likely to believe that students should be able to help make school budgeting decisions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Effect of Community Decides on Student Civic Attitudes (Year 1)

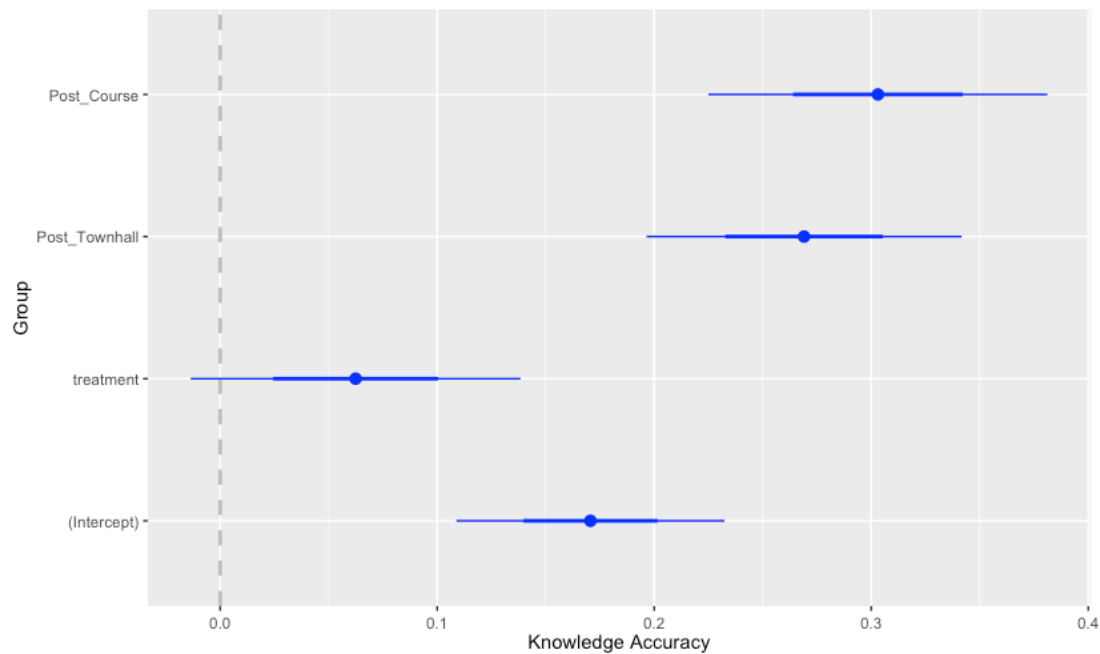


Notes: Results are percentages based on survey questions administered to students of both the treatment school and the control school. Survey respondents were given yes/no options.

Year 2

Community Decides started to cement itself in year 2. Armed with a new 2-year \$75,000 racial equity grant from the Spencer Foundation, my team and I replicated our study, but with fewer health and safety restrictions in place. We also strategically incorporated the more educative component, using our outreach activities and townhall as opportunities to teach students about how school funding works. As a result, our most robust findings were increases in knowledge gains from the students of the treatment school. Figure 3 shows knowledge accuracy on the question of how much of their district’s budget goes toward teachers. According to the regression models, students of the treatment school were getting the answer right at a rate that is about 20% points higher than their rate before the townhall (and outreach activity). Moreover, they were still getting the answer right at a similarly high rate months later after the conclusion of the implementation course. The treatment school students, however, were getting the right answer at higher rate than the control group even before the intervention, which raises questions of confounding.

Figure 3. Teacher Pay Knowledge Accuracy by Group

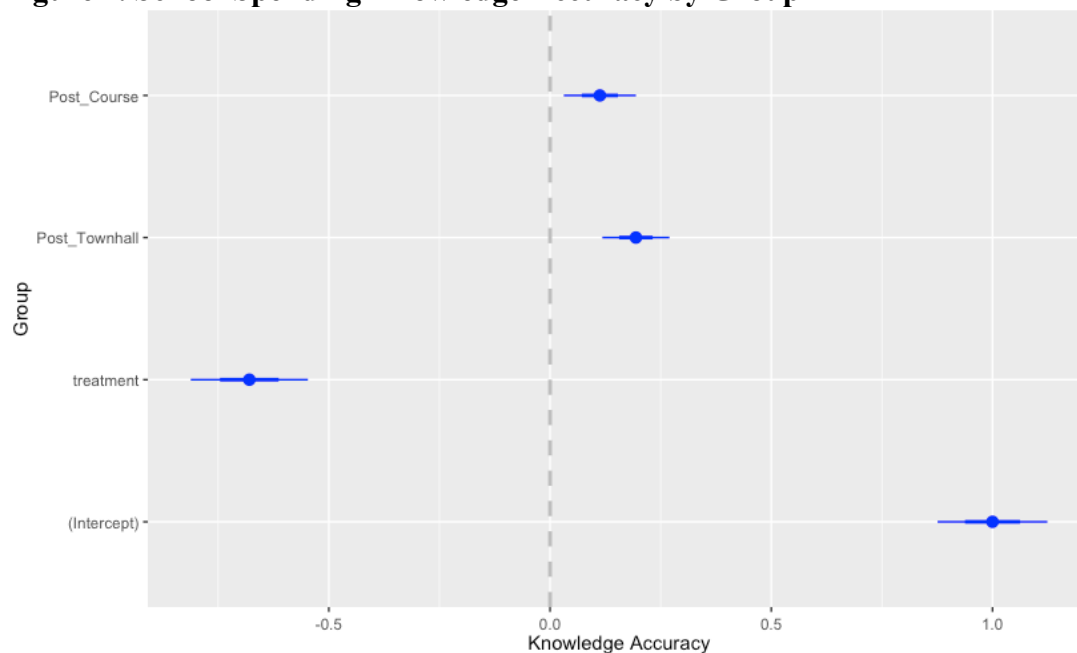


Note: This figure captures difference in difference (DID) estimates of the effect of the Community Decides Project on students’ knowledge of how teacher pay works.

The results from the other two knowledge questions assuage those concerns. We assessed student knowledge of how much their school spends per pupil and which level of government the majority of their district's school funding revenue comes from (local vs. state vs. federal). As a whole, the control school students got the answers right at a higher rate than the treatment students. However, the students from the treatment group got the answer correct at a higher rate after the outreach activity and townhall than in the pre-survey (see Figure 4). Moreover, they were still getting the answer right months later after the implementation course ended, although at not quite as high of a rate as they were immediately post-townhall.

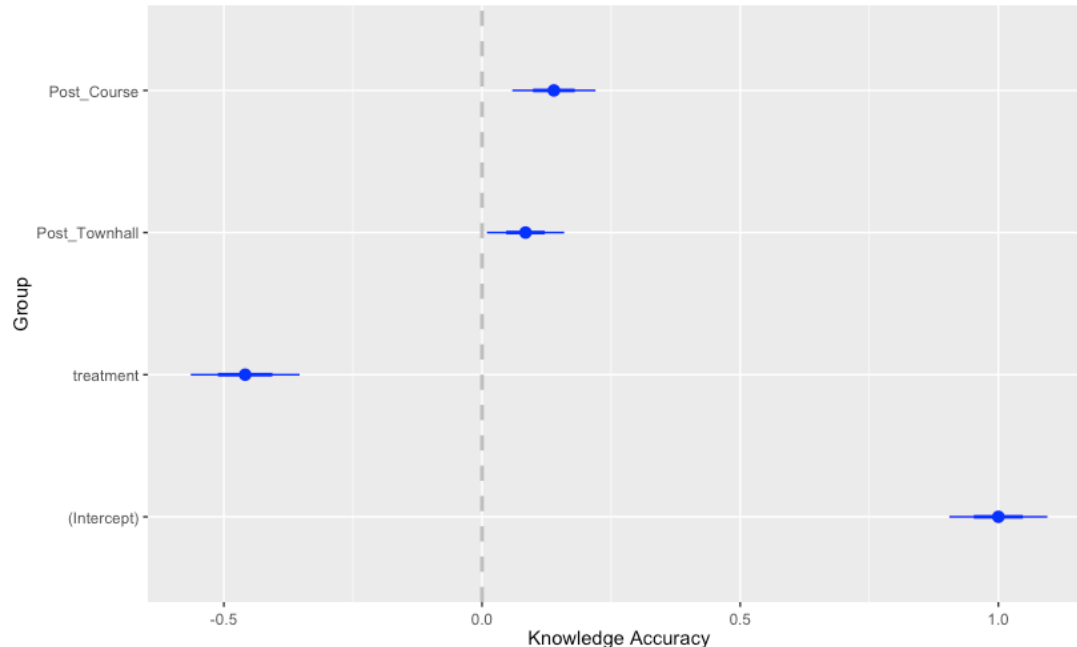
A similar occurrence emerges from the results of our assessment of knowledge on the source of school funding. Once again, the control group school answers the question correctly at a higher rate than the treatment school overall. However, the students of the treatment school are answering the question correctly at a higher rate post-treatment (after the outreach activity and townhall) (see Figure 5). Once again, students of the treatment school were answering the question correctly 3 months later after the completion of the implementation course. Technically, they were answering it correctly at a slightly higher rate (although the difference does not reach statistical significance). In sum, students exposed to the Community Decides model showed tangible gains in knowledge of education funding.

Figure 4. School Spending Knowledge Accuracy by Group



Note: This figure captures difference in difference (DID) estimates of the effect of the Community Decides Project on students' knowledge of school spending works.

Figure 5. School Funding Source Knowledge Accuracy by Group



Note: This figure captures difference in difference (DID) estimates of the effect of the Community Decides Project on students' knowledge of where school funding comes from.

Final Decisions

In addition to knowledge gains, there were noticeable differences in final decisions for how to spend the funding. For year 1, the control school spent the grant funding on developing a room to support the special learning needs of students with autism. For year 2, the school developed a plan to use the funds to purchase items that can be used as incentives to increase attendance rates amongst the most truant. The school reached this decision by the principal identifying an area of need and using our loosely restricted funds to address that need. Minimal student input was incorporated, but the result serves a greater good. On its own, the control is a compelling study of power of accessible discretionary funding for urban school leaders.

Meanwhile, within the treatment school, students identified issues with the school lunch and the quality of the facilities. They used the Community Decides model's process to, in the first year, develop a cooking course and a campus garden so that students can learn how to prepare healthy meals with fresh foods. After year 2, they decided to put the money towards repairing damaged bathrooms, improving the food seasoning offerings in the cafeteria, and developing a student council that will meet regularly with the school chef to provide input on the

food offerings. The students have used the intervention to improve the quality of their experience there.

Next Steps

My research team and I are building on our initial success. We are actively recruiting new school district partners to scale up our implementation. Those potential partners range from Districts 3, 4, and 5 within the New York City Department of Education to districts in cities others states such as Missouri, Ohio, and Kentucky.

In preparation for expansion, we have been developing a new technology platform, OUTREACH, that will enable us to administer the Community Decides Project in these districts across the U.S. simultaneously. This also gives us an apparatus for data collection that will allow us to continue to study the effects of the project. The ability to implement at scale and collect data will enable us to study the implementation as a randomized control trial (RCT). Producing positive results from an RCT should create the conditions for recommending participatory budgeting in schools as large-scale policy reform.

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