

Rogers Park & Edgewater

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High School Students Lend a Hand in Ward Budgeting

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ROGERS PARK — Many of them can't vote at the ballot box, but a group of high school students is helping decide how to spend \$1 million in city taxpayer money.

The group of students from the Chicago Math and Science Academy and the 49th Ward have partnered for the first time in this year's [participatory budgeting process](#), which allows residents to help decide where to spend \$1 million in aldermanic discretionary money.

"It helps me become a better person," said Cesar Ayala, 19, who attended community brainstorming sessions with his classmates alongside fellow residents to help determine what infrastructure projects could be added to the ballot this May. Ayala, who has been anxiously waiting college acceptance letters, said being involved gave him more than just a résumé booster. He has family in the neighborhood, including two brothers at Kilmer Elementary School, 6700 N. Greenview Ave., and he wants to make his neighborhood a better place for them.



Chicago Math and Science Academy seniors, from right, Alexis Castro, 18, Amanda Hyde, 17, Cesar Ayala, 19, and Pedro Reyes, 17, walk in Touhy Park alongside their social studies teacher Tom Stonis, 39.

Tom Stonis, a social studies teacher at the [Chicago Math and Science Academy](#), 7212 N. Clark St., uses participatory budgeting to teach the students about taxes and government spending. The 39-year-old teacher taught at [Fenger High School](#), 11220 S. Wallace St., before coming to the academy four years ago. He wants his students to be at the front lines of change in their neighborhood. "Why not get involved and make it happen?" he said. "If you have a voice, and a loud enough voice," you can make change happen.

The office of Ald. Joe Moore (49th) said 267 people attended the brainstorm meetings to suggest projects, and now committees are being formed to hash out the feasibility of each one.

Some of the possible projects this year include new lighting on west Jonquil Terrace, a community garden at Willye B. White Park at 1610 W. Howard St., and a renovated bathroom at Loyola Beach.

In last year's election 1,657 people, 16 and older regardless of citizenship, voted. Passed projects included a new playground at Touhy Park, 7348 N. Paulina St., to be built for \$125,000; more than 100 trees to be planted around the ward for \$75,000; and 20 murals to be painted on Metra and Chicago Transit Authority underpasses for \$120,000.

Ward 49, under Moore's direction, was the first political jurisdiction in the United States to implement participatory budgeting, but the practice has since expanded to three other wards this year.