News Item, 01/03/2013, Gütersloh: Political decision making for school students

Germany's first Students' Budget allows young people to help shape school environment

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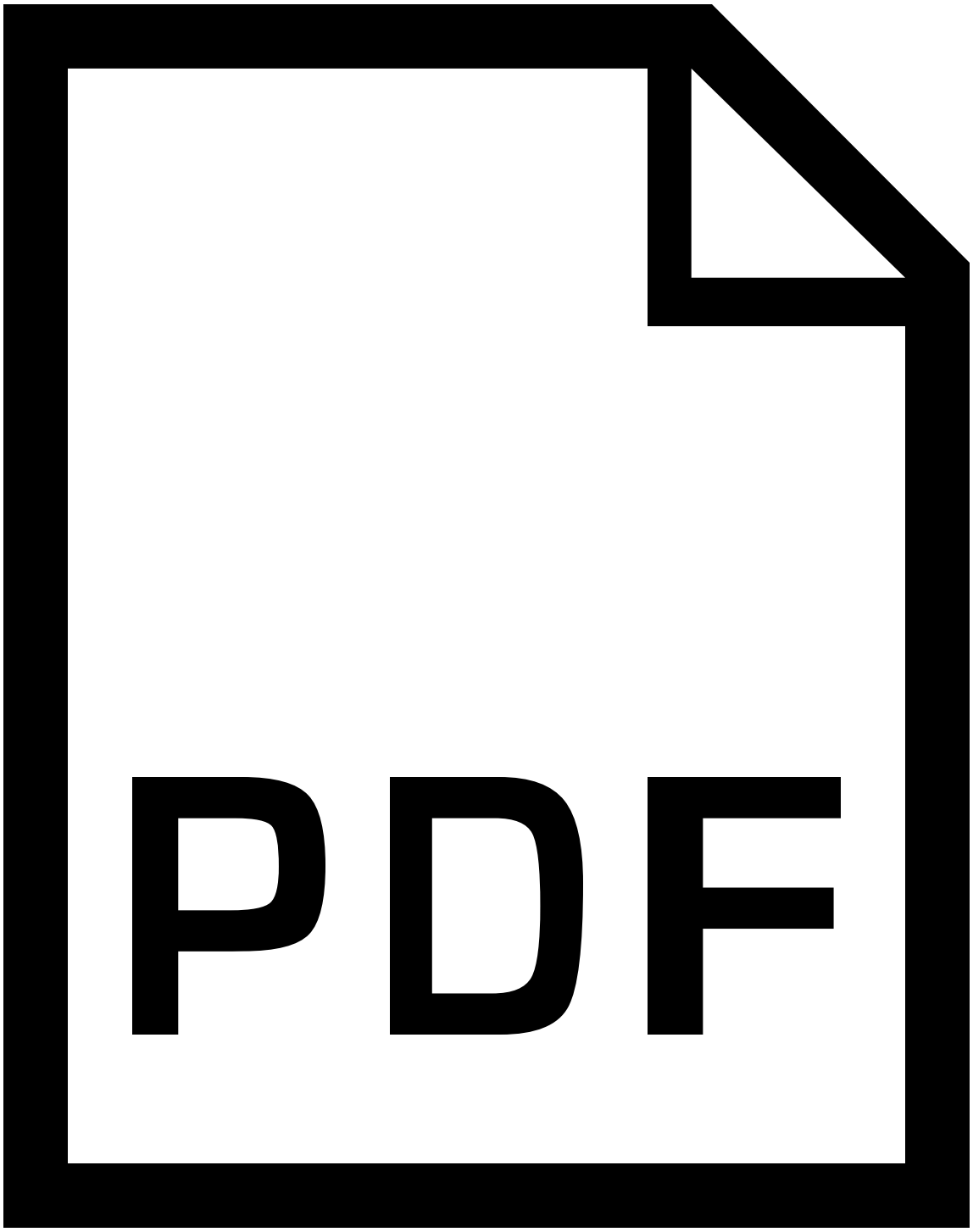

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Alexander Koop

Rarely have so many youngsters taken part in a policymaking decision: between 87 and 93 percent of the students at the four secondary schools in Rietberg near Gütersloh voted to determine what will happen with a portion of the funds made available to their schools by the city. Last Thursday the students presented their ideas to local policymakers, and the city's Schools Committee then unanimously approved spending on a range of items, including new lockers, meeting rooms and punching bags. With that, Rietberg's Students' Budget was given the green light – and must now be implemented.

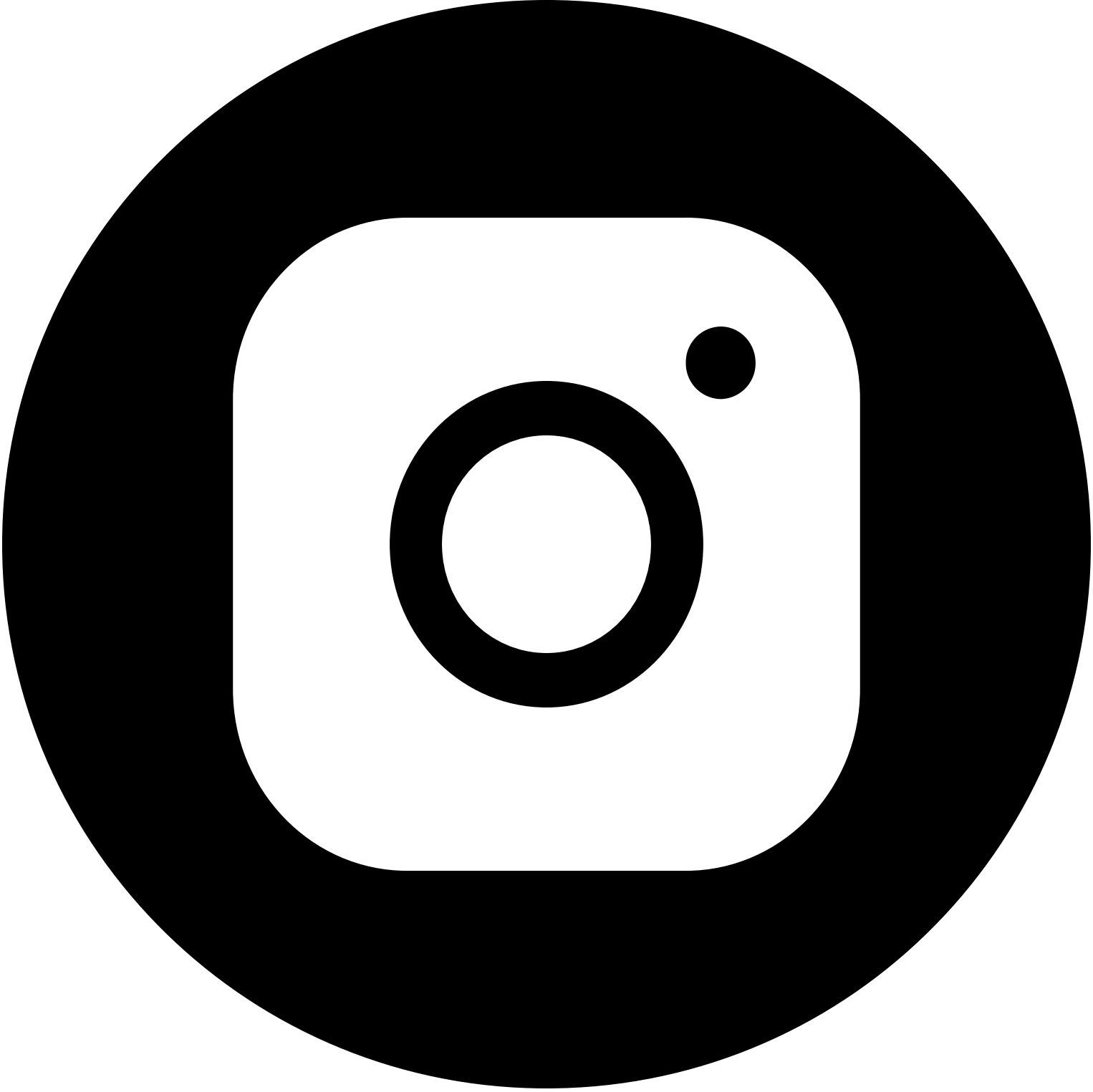
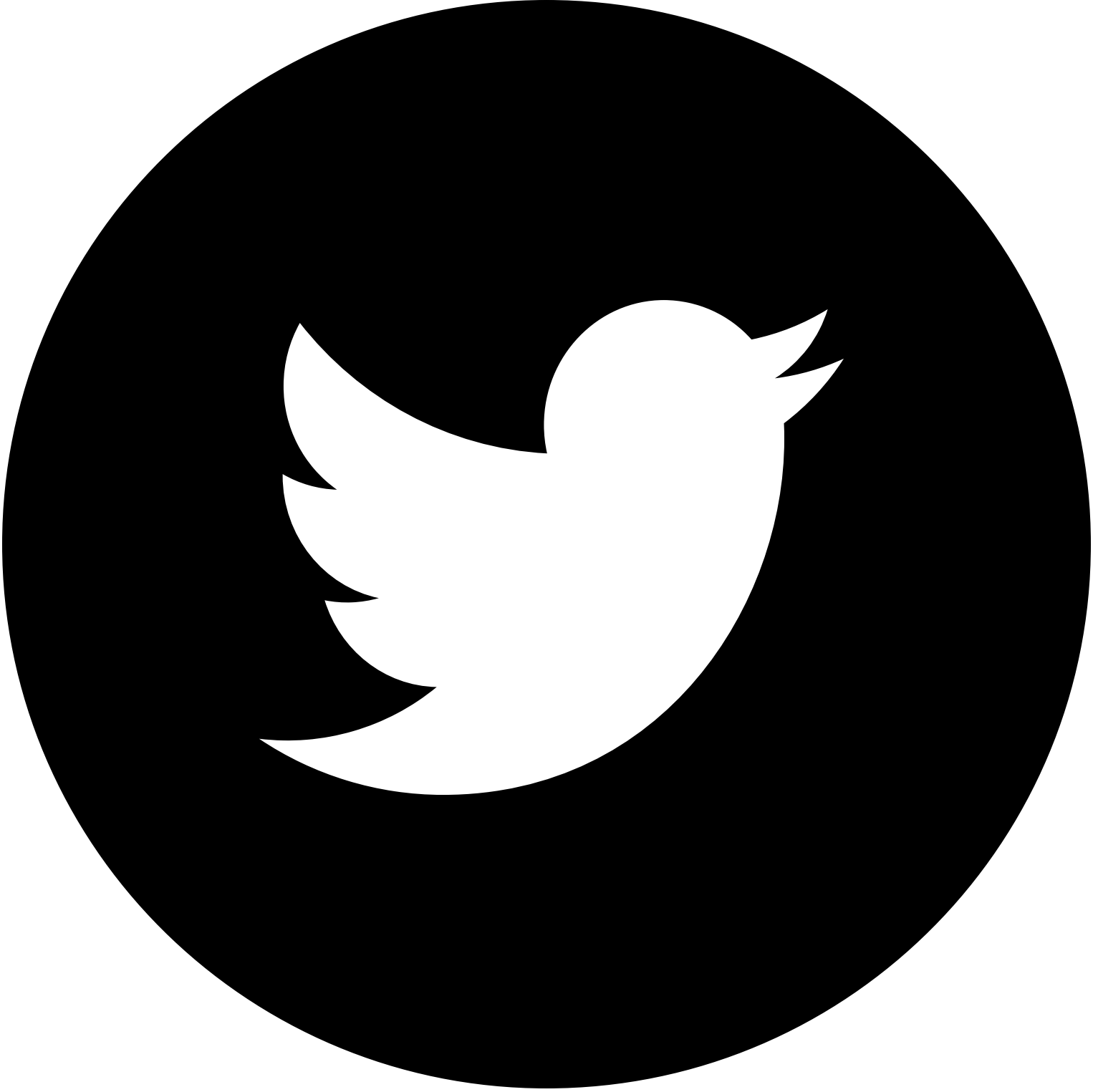
Last summer the City Council in the community of 28,000 reached a decision that was, at the time, unique in Germany, when local politicians decided to allow youngsters to allocate up to a quarter of the annual funding for the city's schools. All of the 2,600 students at Rietberg's secondary schools took part. The idea for a Students' Budget was first launched by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, which supported the undertaking from the start, all the way up to and including yesterday's committee meeting.

Work on the project began after last year's autumn break, when students focused on the question: What do we want most for our school? Ideas were collected and debated, before students went to the polls in November. Every youngster chose their favorite from the ideas listed on the ballot. After the votes were counted, the suggestions were examined for feasibility, which meant casting some aside or refining them further. Finally, student representatives from the various schools presented their plans to the Schools Committee, which is responsible for distributing funds.

The winning proposals include new lockers, vending machines for drinks, punching bags, new tables and chairs, school t-shirts, hammocks, chill-out rooms, whiteboards and funding for school newspapers. "Some ideas might seem a bit strange, but school is where we spend our time," said Laura Balke, who presented her school's ideas at the committee meeting. "That's where we are for most of the day – sometimes until 5 in the evening. And we want to feel at home there."

Not all of the ideas receiving a large number of votes could be realized. Many students said they wanted free wireless Internet access, a proposal that had already been rejected for legal reasons and because of the possibility of misuse. "I voted for it and think it's a shame that we're not going to be able to make it happen," said Jonas Glennemeyer, who represented Martin School. "But that's how it goes when it comes to politics – it's a learning experience."

"We're really happy at how engaged and responsible the students were and how much fun they had," said Alexander Koop, project manager at the Bertelsmann Stiftung. "The students came up with the proposals, supported each other and then cast their votes. Such enthusiastic participation is something politicians can only dream about."

Rietberg's mayor, Andreas Sunder, was also impressed. "The Students' Budget was democracy at its best," he said. "The youngsters did an outstanding job making it happen. I would like to see the project extended. You can't start early enough getting young people involved in democratic processes."

Rietberg's Students' Budget is proof that one community's good practices can find an audience elsewhere, since the idea originated in the city of Recife, which created its fifth Students' Budget in 2010. The Bertelsmann Stiftung introduced the idea to Germany, and the Rietberg City Council agreed to create the country's first Students' Budget last June. Another German community has also taken the idea on board: the town of Wennigsen near Hannover, where students are now preparing to present their ideas to local policymakers.