



# UCLA AFFORDABLE HOUSING POLICY BRIEF

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The UCLA Ziman Center for Real Estate presents the next in a series of Affordable Housing Policy Briefs. In this September 2019 Brief, CityLAB - UCLA Director Dana Cuff explores the many advantages of bringing housing to California school properties.

## At Home in the 21st Century Schoolyard: California Schools Have Room for Affordable Housing

By [Dr. Dana Cuff](#)

Everyone is acutely aware of California's rising land costs and affordable housing crisis. But what if you discovered there were 10,668 free sites --together the size of seven Manhattans-- hidden in every neighborhood in the state, each with the opportunity for housing construction?

This is exactly what cityLAB - UCLA has determined through research into the feasibility of co-locating affordable housing on public-school campuses in California. Since an outdated, single-use zoning mentality still burdens our collective imagination, schools have been overlooked as potential housing sites, but today, there's every reason to consider the nexus of residential and educational uses.

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First, take a look at the real estate of public schools. The State's school system is comprised of 10,521 K-12 public schools, 114 community colleges, 23 state colleges, and 10 university campuses. These school grounds are speckled with surface parking lots, buildings needing modernization, replaceable portable classrooms, and frayed peripheries – all potential sites for affordable housing without touching precious campus green space. Because construction on school sites requires infill interventions that are more like acupuncture than a universal cure, cityLAB is undertaking architectural as well as planning research with support from the UCLA Ziman Center for Real Estate. In a state where land costs comprise 10-15% of total development cost for affordable housing,<sup>1</sup> public land – essentially “free” land – offers extraordinary promise for the public, and all stakeholders. These infill projects will not only combat existing housing shortages and threats of displacement, but can strengthen school sites and their surrounding neighborhoods. For example, new multifamily affordable housing can accommodate families of students, teachers, and staff, and can upgrade school facilities with new ground floor classrooms or tech-labs open to the neighborhood for evening classes. What results is a “win-win-win” approach that holistically serves prospective residents, schools, and the community at large.

Second, one look at the state's *student* housing crisis and the need for a schoolyard-housing nexus is clear: while nearly all Californians are experiencing soaring rents and increased housing insecurity, students are among the most vulnerable resident populations, and our collective future depends upon their education. More than 2 million children live in poverty in California, and for college students, national rates of housing insecurity are rising (meaning difficulty paying rent or utilities, or living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions). At current rates of insecurity (60% for 2-year students, and 48% for their 4-year peers), more than 1.6 million higher education students in California have serious housing problems.<sup>2</sup> Among all student groups, rates of homelessness are astounding: over 17,000 LAUSD students, 1 in 5 California community college students, and at least 1 in 10 California university students have experienced homelessness within the past year.<sup>3</sup> College students are working to make ends meet rather than studying, falling deeper into debt, commuting from hours away, or living in cars just to get by. The financial, social, and mental pressures they face are known impediments to academic success. In post-secondary education, housing insecurity has been linked to lower college completion rates, persistence, and credit attainment.<sup>4</sup> At younger ages, the impacts on student achievement resulting from household insecurity is exacerbated by high turnover rates among teachers who themselves cannot afford housing. A recent study found that in 40% of the State's school districts, a first-year teacher could not afford a one-bedroom apartment.<sup>5</sup>

Third, joint housing-school development can address integrated problems of enrollment and facilities. At the K-12 level, LAUSD and the California Department of Finance anticipate an 119,000-student enrollment decline – the highest in California – over the next 10 years as more students and staff are priced out of their districts.<sup>6</sup> This population shift has a direct impact on school financing: Since districts are funded on a per-pupil basis, the loss of students makes it difficult to maintain basic operations and upgrade facilities.<sup>7</sup> As a result, districts are struggling to do more with less. LAUSD, for example, is facing problems with aging facilities, budget shortfalls and temporary classrooms, which remain on site for years after their planned obsolescence. California schools currently use over 80,000 portable classrooms,<sup>8</sup> space that could be

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<sup>1</sup> City of Los Angeles. [“Affordable Housing Benefit Fee Study: The Nexus between New Market-Rate Development and the Subsequent Increase in Demand for Affordable Housing in the City of Los Angeles.”](#) City of Los Angeles Housing Department and the Department of City Planning, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, C. [“Child Poverty Drops in California, but is Still the Nation's Highest.”](#) EdSource. April 17, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Crutchfield, R. [“Serving displaced and food insecure students in the CSU.”](#) California State University. 2016; University of California Office of the President. [“Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California.”](#) University of California, December, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Lambert, Diana and D.J. Willis. [“California's Teacher Housing Crunch.”](#) *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 21, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> California Department of Finance. “California public K-12 graded enrollment and high school graduate projections by county - 2017 Series.” California Department of Finance, December 2017.

<sup>7</sup> California Department of Finance, December 2017.

<sup>8</sup> California Air Resources Board. [“Report to the California Legislature: Environmental Health Conditions in California's Portable Classrooms.”](#) California Department of Health Services, November 2004.

permanently re-located inside new mixed-use structures made for living *and* learning. New housing construction also offers real opportunities to improve schools by re-framing scattered campuses, providing additional security, developing shared open space, and sustainably promoting full-time use, day-and-year-round.

To those who think this a radical proposal borne of increasingly extreme housing needs, the idea of schoolyard housing is not new. For 300 years, residence halls have been a priority on American college campuses. And for the past century, public schools have been the heart of American communities: The first principle of educational sociologist and urban planner Clarence Perry's 1923 "neighborhood unit" was to "center the school in the neighborhood."

In Los Angeles, schools have anchored residential masterplans from Aliso Village to Playa Vista, and both the Department of City Planning and United Teachers Los Angeles teachers' union have called for affordable housing on school sites.<sup>9</sup> For today's students and teachers, reliable, affordable housing must be considered more than a resource: It is a basic educational requirement. And today's schools and neighborhoods are key if we are to develop a more walkable, sustainable, livable city – in short, a post-suburban L.A.

cityLAB is no stranger to hidden housing potential on already occupied sites. After studying secondary units in backyards across L.A., in 2016 we co-authored new State policy that incentivizes Accessory Dwelling Units, effectively doubling the density of the single-family zone and creating a whole new, hidden crop of smaller units on "free" land. cityLAB continues its studies of the 21st century schoolyard as a living-learning environment, and how it can be accomplished in terms of State and local policy, financing strategies, as well as design solutions. For more information about the lab's ongoing work, visit [cityLAB.ucla.edu/projects](http://cityLAB.ucla.edu/projects).



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<sup>9</sup> W. Huang. "Conceptual affordable housing projects on Pasadena Unified School District sites." Presented on February 8, 2016; United Teachers of Los Angeles. "Community demands package: Bargaining proposal September 15, 2017." United Teachers of Los Angeles, September 15, 2017.