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RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

More Districts Are Building Housing for Teachers. Here's What to Know



By [Madeline Will](#) — November 22, 2023 ⌚ 6 min read



Jefferson Union High School District's new housing complex for teachers and education staff is shown in Daly City, Calif., on July 8, 2022. It's among just a handful of places in the country with educator housing, a perk being considered by districts to attract and retain educators.

— Godofredo A. Vásquez/AP

School districts have a lot of responsibilities to manage. Some are adding housing to the list.

More and more districts across the country are building housing complexes to rent to teachers

and other school employees—often at below-market rates and on district-owned land. It's a recruitment and retention strategy that has been fueled by both rising housing costs and staffing shortages.

“There's momentum growing around this idea, and it's definitely becoming normalized as a mainstream approach,” said Troy Flint, the chief communications officer for the California School Boards Association, which has been working with school districts in the state that are considering the idea. “That's not to say most districts are doing this, but people understand the need and potential in a much more vivid way than they did even two years ago.”

Six percent of district leaders and principals said they provide teacher housing or a housing supplement, according to a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey conducted this fall. Two percent said they've introduced or improved those benefits in the past two years, in response to staffing challenges.

There is [not yet much substantive research](#) on how well these incentives work at recruiting and retaining teachers or on their broader place in affordable housing policy. But anecdotally, district leaders say that there's high demand from their staff.

A separate EdWeek Research Center survey, conducted in July 2022, found that 11 percent of teachers said free or subsidized housing for educators [would make them more likely to stay](#) in the teaching profession long-term.

And an analysis earlier this year from the National Council on Teacher Quality found that in many major metropolitan areas, [teachers are priced out of the housing market](#).

“We know that for teachers, housing is one of [their] primary financial concerns,” said Dana Cuff, the director of cityLAB, an architecture and urban research think tank at the University of California, Los Angeles. “Teachers need affordable housing.”

Workforce housing would also appeal to support staff, Flint said, adding that those classified employees are typically less well compensated than teachers and are more likely to live within the immediate community in which they work.

An effort taking root in California

California's statewide approach to teacher housing is among the most robust.

The CSBA is working with cityLAB and the Center for Cities + Schools, a research center at the University of California, Berkeley, to offer [resources and technical assistance to interested school districts](#). (The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative is supporting their work. CZI also supports Education Week, but the media organization retains full editorial control over its articles.)

The groups [released a report last February](#) that found that every county in California has land of one acre or more that's owned by a local education agency and is potentially developable, meaning it is underused or completely unutilized. Of the more than 7,000 properties with potentially developable land, 61 percent are located where beginning teachers struggle to afford housing.

"It's really beautifully distributed throughout the state," Cuff said. "In rural districts, there's not very much housing available within a reasonable distance. Urban districts are having deep problems with affordability."

Right now, at least three school districts in the state—Los Angeles, Santa Clara, and Jefferson Union, a high school district—have educator workforce housing developments. Many more are interested.

At least 80 school districts in the state have expressed interest in learning more about the process, although only about a dozen districts have enrolled in a series of workshops offered by the organizations so far. The workshops help districts explore the logistics of the process and put together a school board resolution to endorse the idea. A second phase of the training will walk districts that are further along through the process of preparing a request for proposal, Cuff said.

The factors districts have to consider

There's a lot of work districts need to do before they can even consider breaking ground on educator workforce housing, Flint said.

He recommends that districts start the process by surveying their staff and doing some research: How many employees would be interested in workforce housing? Does workforce

housing make sense, given the dynamics of the real estate market where educators currently live?

Districts should also look at demographic trends in the short- and long-term, Flint said. And they should consider their available land and how a housing development would fit into the surrounding neighborhood from a logistical and aesthetic perspective. How welcoming would the neighborhood be to this development?

Districts must also think through all the logistics of how educator workforce housing will work.

Jeff Vincent, the director of public infrastructure initiatives at the Center for Cities + Schools, said it's typically more cost-effective for districts to build multi-family housing, such as an apartment complex or townhouses, than single-family homes. But the staffing survey will help bring clarity about the type of housing that's needed, as well as the number and size of units.

Also, he said, districts need to consider how they'll structure tenancy rules, such as which employees are prioritized for limited housing, who qualifies for the housing, how long educators get to live in the units, and what happens if a tenant leaves the district.

Districts also may have to determine what percentage of the units are designated affordable housing.

County or city governments might contribute funding in exchange for a portion of the units being available for other public employees, Vincent said. Most of these housing development projects are financed through a variety of funding sources, he said, including general obligation bonds and government subsidies.

There's also the time frame to consider. Flint said it's typically a seven-year process from the exploratory and community engagement phase to when educators are moving into the housing units. He's hopeful that a [new law](#), supported by CSBA and drafted in part by CityLAB and Center for Cities + Schools, will reduce some of the red tape and shrink the timeline to five years or less.

Some have concerns about workforce housing

Not all education advocates are sold on the idea of district-run housing for educators. The United Educators for Housing and Literacy, a California-based nonprofit, is advocating instead for a federally funded stipend to offset teachers' housing costs—modeled after the military's basic allowance for housing.

Azalea Renfield, the founder of the UEHL and treasurer of its board of directors, said districts should be focused on education, not housing. And living in a housing complex might work for younger teachers who are fresh out of college, but not necessarily for teachers with families, she said.

Renfield added that workforce housing blurs the lines between one's work and personal life: "You're never going to be off the job," she said.

Supporters say they understand the calls for a housing stipend instead, or simply raising teachers' salaries across the board. But the money that would be used to fund the housing developments is earmarked for that exact purpose and would not be available for salaries.

And, at least in California, they say, districts are sitting on underutilized or vacant properties.

"What districts control is land," Cuff said. "That's the way they can contribute to recruitment and retention issues."



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