

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

'Lesson Planning in the Laundry Room': What Housing for Teachers Looks Like



By [Madeline Will](#) — December 04, 2023 ⌚ 7 min read



Lisa Raskin, who is a teacher at the Jefferson Union high school district, talks about living on her own at the district's new housing complex in Daly City, Calif., on July 8, 2022. Only a handful of places in the country have educator housing, but teacher shortages and rapidly rising rents are making more districts take note.

— Godofredo A. Vásquez/AP

To respond to both soaring housing costs and staffing shortages, more school districts across the country are getting into the property management business.

District leaders say that renting housing units to educators at below-market rates has become an effective recruitment and retention strategy. While overseeing housing complexes can be

complicated, it can also be cost-effective: School districts can tap outside sources of funds to build the units, instead of dipping into their own coffers. Some districts even already own the land.

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.

The exact details vary from place to place. Education Week spoke to officials from four districts with workforce housing projects. Here's how districts devised solutions in their communities.

In Miami, teachers could live and work in the same building

Florida's Miami-Dade county and its school system are including workforce housing in a multi-million-dollar expansion of Southside Preparatory Academy, a pre-K-8 magnet school that needed additional seats for its middle school grades.

The seven-story building in the downtown Brickell neighborhood of the city will add capacity for 630 new students and include 10 housing units for educators in the district. The teachers who live in the building can—but do not have to—work at Southside.

Raul Perez, the chief facilities, design, and construction officer for the school district, said he saw some comments on social media from teachers who were concerned about the implications of living on the same site as a school. For example: "If I call out sick, they can come to my apartment to check on me."

"The way that we envision it is not that at all," Perez said.

The building is designed so that there is no overlap between the residential and the educational sides. If a teacher wanted to go from the school to their home, they'd have to leave the building and walk around the corner to a separate restricted-access entrance for residents only.

The district hopes to have the housing units available by the start of next school year. The county will determine the exact rental prices based on tenants' income, but it'll be significantly less than Miami's typical market, Perez said.

“This is a way of having new teachers come on board and having an opportunity to start off with reasonable rental [prices]—and move on from there as their careers start to grow,” he said.

The district wants to replicate this project elsewhere, Perez said. Some schools are being underutilized due to recent enrollment declines, so renovating the school building and adding a residential component would be a “win-win,” he said.

In San Francisco, workforce housing has led to more teacher collaboration

The Jefferson Union high school district, located just south of San Francisco, opened an educator housing development a year and a half ago. District staff can live in one of the 122 units—which range in size from one to three bedrooms—for below market-rate rent.

The district has just started collecting data on the effects of the program, but Austin Worden, the district’s director of communication and staff housing, said early signs are promising. The district started this school year fully staffed with certified teachers.

It aims to keep the housing development approximately 60 percent certified staff and 40 percent classified staff, he said.

“A lot of teachers who live in the building, they love it,” Worden said. “They’re still able to maintain a sense of privacy ... [but] they’ve really embraced the sense of community living there.”

The building is designed with several community spaces, and Worden said the district staff and their families will often come together for karaoke nights or game-watching parties. Some of the teachers who live there will use the common areas for collaboration—he’s even noticed “lesson planning in the laundry room.”

The district is now exploring building another apartment complex on the same site that would generate money through market-rate rents.

A 100 percent goal for workforce housing in Aspen, Colo.

The Aspen school district is in a Colorado ski town, where property values are “through the roof,” said Superintendent Dave Baugh.

“Nobody can afford to buy a house,” Baugh said, adding that affordable housing is 60 to 70 miles away from the district’s schools. “As a superintendent, I can’t afford to live here.”

Baugh lives in district-owned housing—along with about 37 percent of the system’s 271 full-time employees. The district’s 15-year goal is to have the capacity for all its employees to live in workforce housing.

The district has a mix of housing options, ranging from one-bedroom apartments to five-bedroom homes. Another option is debuting soon: tiny homes built by students.

The Aspen district is part of an educational cooperative that organized the opportunity for high schoolers in the area to learn construction skills by building houses that are no more than 300 square feet. The district spent \$65,000 on the parts for the home, so Baugh thought, why not let an employee move in when it’s finished?

The students are nearly done with their first home, and then they’ll start on a second.

“They truly are small,” Baugh said. “It’s great for one person if you’re young and unattached. Otherwise, it would be super cozy. ... It’s a good interim solution until a larger unit will open up.”

The district has also used money from a voter-approved bond to purchase housing units. Sometimes, community members will sell the units to the district at cost, Baugh said.

The district is considering acquiring a few acres of land to build a “teacher village” apartment complex, Baugh said, and there are early conversations with the local hospital about a potential joint housing project.

Still, there are some downsides to workforce housing, Baugh said. He oversees the housing department, which blurs some of the lines between an employer and an employee.

“You wind up knowing more about some of your staff than you want to know,” Baugh said. “I wind up knowing when a tenant, one of our staff members, has too many dogs. ... [I] wind up knowing when someone isn’t a good roommate.”

But given the housing market, workforce housing is still the best option, he said: “The problem for us and most districts is you can’t get teacher salaries to the point where they could buy houses in Aspen.”

The Eagle County district in Colorado looks for multiple solutions to housing crisis

Last year, Philip Qualman, the superintendent of the Eagle County school district that encompasses several Colorado ski towns, including Vail, sent a letter to every homeowner in the county. Did they have any space for a district staff member?

The community responded, offering 200 rental units, ranging from condos, townhouses, to spare bedrooms. Not all were affordable or conveniently located, but the district ended up matching 30 or 40 units with employees, Qualman said.

The effort was indicative of the intense need for affordable housing in the district. Housing prices are a primary reason why the district struggles with persistent staff shortages, Qualman said.

To help meet the need, the Eagle County district is constructing a 37-unit apartment building for its employees. There are already 10 educators living there, with the remaining units scheduled for completion in the spring.

Qualman said the district received 150 applicants for the 37 units. Half the units were reserved for current employees of the district, a quarter was reserved for new hires, and the remaining ones were saved for international hires, another way the district is filling teacher vacancies. (The units for international teachers will be fully furnished.)

The project was paid for through certificates of participation instead of a voter-approved bond. That means the district put up some of their existing property as collateral. The rental revenue is expected to pay off the loan in about two decades, and then future revenue will be put toward other housing projects, Qualman said.

The rental rates are based on a 30 percent debt-to-income ratio. A first-year teacher who makes \$50,500 will pay \$1,250 a month in rent and utilities, Qualman said. That amount will increase proportionally as teachers move up the salary schedule.

Eagle County schools is now planning two additional housing projects that will together add up to about 150 units. While many of those units will be rentals, others will be homes constructed by Habitat for Humanity—offering district employees a path to home ownership.

Those newer projects will be paid for by a \$100 million bond that voters approved last month.

“This will be a constant challenge for district leaders here” until there’s enough housing available for 80 to 90 percent of the district’s staff, Qualman said.

“I didn’t get into being a superintendent to be a property developer,” he added. “But that’s what the job has turned into.”



Madeline Will

Senior Staff Writer, Education Week

Madeline Will is a reporter for Education Week who covers the teaching profession.

Reprints, Photocopies and Licensing of Content

All content on Education Week's websites is protected by copyright. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source. For additional print copies, or for permission for other uses of the content, visit www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content or email reprints@educationweek.org and include information on how you would like to use the content. Want to seamlessly share more EdWeek content with your colleagues? Contact us today at pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html to learn about how group online subscriptions can complement professional learning in your district or organization.



Copyright © 2024 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved.