



# POLICY BRIEF

## Planning for Kids: Educating and Engaging Elementary School Students in Urban Planning and Urban Design

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### ISSUE

Urban planning as a topic of discussion is often left to adults who appear to have more agency in changing the world around them than youth. Still, movements to include youth participation in the planning process have increased over time, and programs exist that are helping children gain both the knowledge and skills to advocate for the world that they want to see in the future. One such program is at Rosewood STEM Magnet of Urban Planning and Urban Design, an elementary school in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The k-5 school officially began operations as an urban planning-focused magnet during the 2018-19 school year.

Rosewood is unique at the elementary school level in its commitment to incorporate urban planning throughout its curriculum. However, most of the teachers do not have a background in urban planning. The purpose of this project is to support Rosewood by understanding the current challenges of the program and recommending resources based on interviews with practitioners, professionals, and others who have worked with youth and planning.

### APPROACH

The research largely consisted of two phases of interviews. During Phase I, six teachers participated in

an hourlong focus group at Rosewood to explain the current goals, strengths, and challenges of the urban planning program. During Phase II, individual semi-structured interviews were held with five teachers and planning professionals who have led activities engaging youth in urban planning. In addition to the interviews, both a literature review and a survey of urban planning-related media for children were conducted to identify the resources already available to the public and to understand the current state of children's involvement in urban planning.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The teachers at Rosewood identified challenges that fell into five main themes: vocabulary, social justice, connectivity, resources, and curriculum ([Figure 1](#)). Specific challenges included knowing the right words to accurately explain urban planning issues, understanding how to incorporate more complex topics, such as gentrification, into the classroom, connecting urban planning to state standards, finding a database of resources to use for lessons, and streamlining a curriculum that builds upon itself each grade level.

Analyzing the methods of different planning education and engagement models led to five general approaches for introducing urban planning to elementary school children: ground urban planning in students' lived

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Many issues children deal with on a regular basis, such as long bus rides to school or a lack of places to play in their neighborhood, are urban planning issues.
- By building an understanding of urban planning at a young age, children can apply that knowledge to advocate for how they envision the cities and neighborhoods of the future.

Figure 1. Main themes identified by Rosewood teachers



experiences, allow for the flexible integration of planning concepts, stimulate comprehension through hands-on projects, collaborate to build a network of support, and introduce “big issue topics” that enlighten but don’t overwhelm.

Other key findings:

- Starting classroom lessons with reflection and the sharing of personal experiences grounds planning concepts into something more relatable and helps build feelings of empathy among students.
- Urban planning does not need to be forced and integrated into every lesson plan for students to take away planning concepts.
- Children can surprise with their ingenuity in trying to find answers to big questions such as how to plan for climate change.
- A network of partnerships can be valuable in realizing common goals and sharing knowledge and resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Develop a Resource Toolkit*

A resource toolkit that includes a vocabulary set, a list of organizations with experience connecting children with planning, and a catalog of media resources makes it easier for teachers who currently have to find a way to integrate urban planning into the curriculum on their own.

### *Invest in Teacher Education and Collaboration*

Time during professional development sessions should be dedicated for collaboration to build a curriculum that makes sense across grade levels so that each teacher understands what is being learned in other grades and how the larger curriculum builds upon itself. Developing relationships with external organizations can also help to support programs.

### *Explore Teaching Pedagogies that Engage Students*

A pedagogy that first grounds the curriculum in a student’s lived experience can help develop a child’s understanding of space and connect their experiences so they understand why learning about space can be important. Pedagogies that are largely project-based and allow students to be hands-on can support visual and spatial thinking at a young age.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Nuval, A. (2019). *Planning for kids: Educating and engaging elementary school students in urban planning and urban design*. (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: [https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/2019-capstone\\_nuval\\_planning-for-kids/](https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/2019-capstone_nuval_planning-for-kids/)