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It's Been More Than A Year Since LAUSD Pledged To Green Schools. But There's Still No Finalized Plan In Place

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Beachy Avenue Elementary is located in the San Fernando Valley, one of the hottest areas in Los Angeles County. The campus is almost 80% asphalt, according to L.A. Unified's Greening Index.

(Aaricka Washington / LAist)

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Third grader Lenny Rodriguez enjoys playing and reading in his school's yard, but it can get extremely hot outside.

"Sometimes, I've experienced heat waves. My feet were burning even when I had my shoes on," Rodriguez says. "The playground is missing some shade."

A dire need

Rodriguez's school, Beachy Avenue Elementary, is in Arleta, near Pacoima and Panorama City. The temperature in these neighborhoods can hit highs well over 100 degrees during different parts of the year. The asphalt in the San Fernando Valley has registered 142 degrees on its surface. But schools all over the Los Angeles Unified School District are feeling the effects of rising heat.

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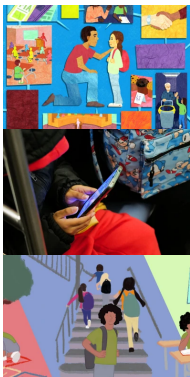
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The pandemic interrupted school for three years. How long will it take to fix the damage?

And that hot weather could stretch further into the school year, says V. Kelly Turner, associate professor of urban planning and geography at UCLA and associate director

of the Luskin Center for Innovation.

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“That's just going to be how it is in the future,” Turner says.

Turner and her colleagues have studied extreme heat and the role design plays in how people experience it. They found that “schools are some of the hottest places in communities” as a result of how they’ve been built.

Campuses all over the district, from West Hollywood to Watts, are asphalt jungles, and fixing it, says Turner, is “not just as simple as putting up trees.”

The indoors are a problem too: Many schools still lack air conditioning.

Turner says it's important to think about schools as community resources, especially for kids who come from historically disinvested and disadvantaged communities.

“If kids live in a home without air conditioning or a cool place to go on hot days, then come to school, which also lacks cooling inside and shade outside, their core body temperatures are never getting down to safe levels,” Turner explains. “That's going to cause them to have difficulty concentrating ... and it's going to be very, very hard for a child to learn in that context.”

It's not a nice-to-have. That's not what we're going for. What we're going for is that we're creating environments for students to thrive.

— Robin Mark, Trust for Public Land

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Research shows that heat can negatively impact students' ability to learn, which results in lower academic performance. Conversely, other studies have found that

students benefit from time spent in green spaces and that exposure to nature can help kids focus better.

The demand for cooler schools

Parent groups and climate advocates have been trying to bring attention to this issue for years — and many say action has been a long time in coming.

Robin Mark, the L.A. program director for Trust for Public Land, says it's important for people to understand that greening schools is not a landscaping project, it's about school infrastructure that supports student learning, well-being and climate resilience.

“It’s not a nice-to-have,” Mark says, “It’s not really cool that the yard is so pretty. That’s not what we’re going for. What we’re going for is that we’re creating environments for students to thrive.”



First graders at Brainard Elementary demonstrate the very lengthy process of lining up, socially distanced, outside.
(Kyle Stokes / LAist)

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The district's efforts so far

Last year LAUSD took a big step forward in addressing concerns. In June 2022, district officials allocated \$58 million to outdoor education initiatives, including greening. A few months later, then-LAUSD board president Kelly Gonez authored a resolution calling for Superintendent Alberto Carvalho to develop a plan to ensure school campuses are at least 30% green by 2035.

But Gonez says she is still waiting. The plan was supposed to be given to the board in February.

"We need a systemic approach from the district," Gonez says. "Not to do this in a piecemeal fashion, because we know that's far from sufficient. It requires a really significant transformation in most cases because of the way the playgrounds have been set up. It's not aligned to the 21st century environment our kids live in."

According to a district spokesperson, the Green Schoolyards For All Plan will be given to the board members in the coming weeks. It will include a prioritized list of the highest-need schools.

Since the pledge to green schools, district officials say they've met with stakeholders and experts, updated their data systems to include a pollution indicator and surveyed 349 people about what they think should be prioritized.

District officials say that there have been various greening projects underway that include modernizing campuses, creating school gardens and planting new trees. But the reality is that it will take a lot of money and a lot of time to reach the goals outlined by the Green Schoolyards initiative.

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The funding challenge

More than 600 LAUSD campuses do not meet that 30% threshold. Even if the district prioritizes elementary schools, as promised, more than 200 of those campuses are less than 10% green. And some of the schools require infrastructure upgrades before greening can even happen.

We need a systemic approach from the district. It requires a really significant transformation in most cases because of the way the playgrounds have been set up. It's not aligned to the 21st century environment our kids live in.

— LAUSD board member Kelly Gonez

LAUSD secured \$400 million from Measure RR to modernize schools, including green efforts, and collected \$100 million in other funds.

Funding has also come through partnerships with nonprofit groups and state grants, but it's nowhere near enough. District officials say it's going to take an additional \$4 billion to ensure all schools have enough green space and students are kept cool.

Officials say additional funding might have to come from another bond, which will require voter buy-in.

But even if LAUSD had all the money it needed, it would take decades to complete all of these projects. During a recent school board meeting, member Nick Melvoin estimated it could take up to 15 years to green the top 50 highest-need campuses, based on a district calculation that it would take about three to four years to update around a half-dozen schools.

"We are by no means mission accomplished," Mark says. "There's a lot of learning on all of our sides about what we can do on a school campus, so that everybody's needs are being met, particularly the students and the teachers."

'Cool' pavement v. trees

While district officials have yet to provide the school board with a final plan for how they will achieve these green goals, some advocates have already questioned how the money is being spent.

For example, some of the ongoing bond investments include \$300 million for "playground and campus exterior upgrades" that include the use of "cool pavement" coating that is designed to bring down surface temperatures. But parent advocates like Angelenos for Green Schools co-founder Aleigh Lewis argues that natural spaces should be prioritized.

She says understands the need for pavement for sports and other play but believes trees, grass and other natural surfaces should be prioritized over repaving surfaces with a reflective coating.

“You have all this money and you could do so much more for every school and cool them down,” Lewis says.

A community survey shared with the LAUSD school board in mid-October showed that stakeholders, including parents, teachers and students, want to prioritize trees and shade structures over other cooling efforts.

Gonez says there is room for all of it. Some schools have asked for the specialized cool pavement as part of much needed repaving but she agrees that the district “can't just do that alone.”

One small step to a greener school yard

Beachy Avenue Elementary, where Lenny Rodriguez goes to school, now has a new “reading garden” where students can sit outside in a cool, natural space. There are two blue circular platforms with a stretch of grass in between, and new trees that, once they are full grown, will offer shade for students.



Beachy Avenue Elementary's new reading garden is one of the first initiatives toward greening the school to meet the district's 30% goal by 2035.

(Aaricka Washington / LAist)

"I think this project is really helping our schools get better with shade on global warming," Rodriguez says. "So, overall, I think this is a good thing for us in this district. We're going to grow up with it."

But that garden was five years in the making, notes Beachy Principal Lisa Dachs-Ornelas. She says she called on Gonez, her district board member, to help secure more than \$100,000 for the reading garden.

And, still, there's so much more that needs to be done. According to the district's Greening Index, Beachy is almost 80% asphalt.

"It is very hot out here and the kids sometimes don't play," says Dachs-Ornelas.

"They'll go under a shade and then they'll just socialize with a friend because it's too

hot to play kickball on the asphalt.”

Gonez acknowledges the district is coming late to the climate crisis. Though some LAUSD schools might have been able to add a garden or plant some trees, green campuses haven't been a district priority, she says, largely due to other issues officials had to handle: overcrowding, aging facilities and the pandemic.

But now that there is some collective attention on the issue from the state and local officials, Gonez emphasizes: “I think we need to do more, and I think we need to do more faster.”

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