



Riverside STEM Education Center Project

Delayed Decision-Making and Inconsistent Communication Contributed to Delays, Higher Costs, and Reduced Transparency

Background

Riverside Unified School District (district) is one of California's larger districts, serving 38,000 students across 51 schools. Among its schools is the Riverside STEM Academy (academy), a grade 5–12 program recognized for its academic success but limited by facility deficiencies, safety hazards, and capacity constraints. Since 2013, the district has pursued developing a STEM Education Center (STEM Center) project on the University of California, Riverside (UC Riverside or university) campus to expand STEM opportunities and address enrollment demand. The project has involved public board actions, environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and negotiations with UC Riverside. In 2016, voters approved Measure O, authorizing \$392 million in bonds to repair and upgrade schools and to acquire and construct new school sites and facilities. Although Measure O allows funding for new construction—including the STEM Center—the district's inconsistent communication have raised concerns about transparency, shifting priorities, and incomplete communication about costs.

Key Recommendations

- To ensure clear communication with the board and public, the district should by December 2026 develop a written policy that requires it to maintain and follow a consistent methodology for presenting budgets for board review. That methodology should require the district to do the following:
 - » Ensure that budgets include soft costs, possible increases in project scope, and cost escalation. The policy should also ensure that escalation estimates are updated at least annually.
 - » Review previously established budgets to identify any major changes to maintenance, repair, replacement, and new construction needs for facilities projects, as needed. When it identifies such changes, the district should adjust expected costs and present these estimates publicly to the board.

Key Findings

- The district's and university's progress on the STEM Center stalled in the early planning phases after years of delays arising from multiple site changes, an extended CEQA review, and delayed decision-making.
 - » These delays increased planning and design costs, contributed to the loss of \$6 million in state grant funding, and prevented the project from advancing beyond early planning stages.
 - » UC Riverside had not submitted required CEQA and lease documents to the UC Regents for certification and approval, instead it placed the project on hold for nearly a year before both agencies eventually announced in May 2026 that they are no longer seeking to develop the STEM Center on UC Riverside's campus.
 - » Meanwhile, the district has made limited progress addressing long-recognized facility deficiencies and safety hazards at the existing academy.
- Although the district's process for selecting Measure O projects to receive bond funding complied with the applicable laws and requirements we reviewed, its inconsistent communication regarding key Measure O funding decisions reduced transparency and contributed to public concerns.
 - » District staff provided budgets that did not include key cost components, such as construction escalation, leaving the board and public with an inaccurate understanding of total project costs at various schools, including the STEM Center.
 - » Rising costs from expanded project scopes and construction escalation have limited how many projects the district could complete.