

UrbanPlan at the High School: Frequently Asked Questions

Every teacher who teaches UrbanPlan has asked the same questions you are probably asking yourself now:

- I have little free time for planning and no budget for new units. Can I successfully implement UrbanPlan?
- Will the value of the student takeaway be commensurate with the 15 class hours the program requires?
- Can my students attain the knowledge and skills they need to optimally perform on their standardized, AP and/or IB tests if I incorporate UrbanPlan into my curriculum?

These teachers, including those in some of the country's most demanding high schools, have answered, **"Yes."** Since its introduction in the spring of 2002, UrbanPlan has reached thousands of students in hundreds of classrooms across the country. Significantly, 98% of all teachers who introduce UrbanPlan in their curriculum continue teaching the program. The information below will help you make an informed decision about UrbanPlan's suitability for your classroom.

1. What Is UrbanPlan?

UrbanPlan is a simulation exercise in which students create competing plans to rebuild a fictional urban neighborhood that has been devastated by fire.

The exercise was created by a team of public high school teachers, university professors and land use professionals to teach students about their built environment and how it is shaped by the interplay between the market forces of our economy and the non-market forces of our representative democracy.

UrbanPlan does not promote any one solution to the issues posed by the fictional case scenario. Rather, the exercise introduces some of the key issues facing cities today – including affordable housing, gentrification, sheltering the homeless, food deserts, economic and environmental sustainability and historic preservation – and challenges the students to tackle the issues through intentional design. Students must also consider the city's need to generate the tax revenue required to fund community services and amenities and the developer's need to generate investment returns sufficient to attract the capital necessary to construct the project.

2. What Are the Mission and Learning Objectives of UrbanPlan?

UrbanPlan's mission is to create better communities by elevating the level of discourse among local stakeholders involved in land use decisions. The program does this through the education of tomorrow's voters, neighbors community leaders, public officials and land use professionals about the process and perspectives involved in urban development.

Students who complete UrbanPlan will understand that the built environment does not happen by accident; that every land use decision involves social, economic, political,

environmental and aesthetic tradeoffs; and that our actions as citizens and consumers influence what is built, when it is built and where it is built.

After completing UrbanPlan, students will be able to:

- Articulate a specific vision for a community and identify design elements that support accomplishing that vision;
- Describe the social, economic and political impacts of various land use decisions;
- Use Excel or Google Sheets to create a pro forma projecting the expected financial outcomes of a development proposal;
- Use digital and physical models to depict the scale, density and footprint of proposed development designs;
- Advocate to and on behalf of civic, community and professional organizations regarding land use decisions using industry standard concepts and vocabulary.

3. How Does UrbanPlan Work in the Classroom?

The UrbanPlan curriculum calls for students to form teams to respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the redevelopment of Elmwood, a 5.5 block neighborhood devastated by fire in the fictitious city of Yorktown. Each team member assumes one of five roles: finance director, marketing director, city liaison, neighborhood liaison, or site planner. Their goal is to win the contract to rebuild Elmwood.

The teams draft a statement of their vision for Elmwood; decide on a strategy for addressing the conflicting demands of various community, cultural and commercial organizations; create a pro-forma to test the financial outcomes of their plan; build physical and digital models of their plan; and present their proposal to a mock city council of land use professionals that awards the development contract to the team with the winning proposal.

In addition, over the course of the unit, land use professionals who are trained UrbanPlan volunteers provide feedback several times to the student teams:

- **“Facilitators”** meet with the teams twice to challenge the students via Socratic questioning to think more critically about the UrbanPlan issues and the specific responsibilities of each student’s team role (Financial Analyst, Marketing Director, Site Planner, City Liaison or Neighborhood Liaison).
- **“City Councilmembers”** hear team presentations and question students in a mock city council. After deliberating, the councilmembers give feedback to each student before announcing the winning team.

Moreover, at the teacher’s request, UrbanPlan can provide guest speakers to talk to students about land use careers or current urban development issues, can arrange field trips to nearby development projects, and can provide additional instructional resources to support delving further into topics related to the UrbanPlan curriculum.

4. Can UrbanPlan Be Implemented Virtually?

UrbanPlan launched a virtual delivery option in March 2020. The virtual version works much in the same way as the in-person version, but uses an online meeting platform¹ for team collaboration and meetings with volunteers and digital tools for building models of each team's site plans.

5. Would UrbanPlan Be a Good Fit for My Students?

UrbanPlan was developed originally for economics and AP government classes, but has since been successfully integrated into a wide range of other classes, including human and urban geography, environmental studies, business, architecture and technology classes.

A successful UrbanPlan program requires:

- **Class size of 18-30 students;**
- **Consistently high attendance by every student**– a very low absentee rate is essential to run UrbanPlan. The team cannot function effectively when a member is missing;
- Students who can (and will) read at a 10th grade and above reading level;
- Students who have demonstrated the **maturity to accomplish work independently and in a group.**

6. How Does UrbanPlan Maintain Rigor and Accountability Using Group Projects?

The teachers who developed UrbanPlan designed the curriculum and format to incorporate academic rigor and individual accountability while maximizing the benefits of problem-based learning formats. UrbanPlan includes:

- Standards-based content and high demand on core learning skills to ensure academic rigor;
- Individual and distinct roles and responsibilities for each student member of a team to ensure accountability and prevent any one or two students from carrying a team;
- Rubrics and objective criteria to evaluate each student on their individual class and presentation performance;
- A format in which there is no right answer. Instead, students are evaluated on their ability to explain and defend the implications of each decision they make;
- Individual interactions for each student with practicing land use professionals.

7. What Resources Do the Teacher and/or School Need to Provide?

The Urban Land Institute provides the UrbanPlan curriculum, materials, teacher training and trained volunteers at **no cost** to the teacher or school. The only resources need

¹ UrbanPlan's preferred platform is Zoom but the program can be implemented using other platforms as well.

from the school are the teacher, the students, and student access to a computer and the Internet.

8. What If I Have Questions or Reservations Not Addressed in This Document?

Please reach out to us with any questions, challenges, or reservations. Our primary consideration is your students and helping you decide if UrbanPlan is a good fit in your classroom.

Contact Margit Nahra, Director, UrbanPlan, ULI Washington at margit.nahra@uli.org or 240-605-8735.