



EERI Policy Position Statement

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Schools Shall be URM FREE BY 2033

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EERI Policy Position

To keep students, staff, and faculty safe, unreinforced masonry school buildings should be retrofitted, repurposed, or replaced in regions with high and moderate earthquake hazard.

Background

During the early to mid twentieth century school buildings were commonly constructed out of unreinforced masonry (URM). This structural type has inherent, life-threatening vulnerabilities to earthquake ground shaking. URM buildings have collapsed or suffered major damage in numerous earthquakes in the US and throughout the world, leading to many casualties.

In particular, the risk posed by school buildings was brought to public attention in the 1933 Long Beach earthquake in southern California where more than 230 URM school buildings were either destroyed, suffered major damage, or were judged unsafe to occupy following the earthquake. This resulted in legislation eliminating unreinforced masonry schools in California. Since then, many states and communities have identified their URM schools and either retrofitted or replaced them. However, more than 88 years after this earthquake, many school children in the US still attend school in these dangerous buildings.

Needed Actions

Legislatures, school districts, and school boards in regions with high and moderate earthquake hazard should:

1. Raise awareness of dangers of URM school buildings in states and communities with moderate to high seismic risk.
2. Establish programs to identify URM school buildings and prioritize them for retrofit, repurposing or replacement.
3. Establish funding mechanisms, financial assistance, and incentives to finance programs for the retrofit or replacement of URM school buildings.
4. Establish fully-funded programs at the state, regional, or school district levels to set criteria and standards, allocate funding for school retrofit and replacement projects, and ensure quality compliance of all retrofit or replacement projects for schools.
5. Require structural upgrades to or replacement of all actively used URM school buildings in regions with moderate and high seismic hazard by 2033, the 100-year anniversary of the Long Beach Earthquake.

Further considerations for safe schools should include mitigating nonstructural hazards and creating community resilience plans that align and prioritize mitigation efforts.