

Members of the Oak Park Homelessness Coalition were recently invited to hear a presentation about affordable housing options from a group working on a project involving the “tiny house” concept of small units of housing. Three of us were able to attend to hear five students make their presentations.

We visited Menta Academy, a hidden treasure here in Oak Park. This private non-profit high school serving over 50 students from across the area uses a project and team-based approach to education similar to the new approach recently announced in Finland, as an alternative to the usual subject matter silos we are familiar with.

Three teachers, Lindsey Montgomery, Aubrey Thornton & Cara Sullivan, worked with a team of students, each of whom was assigned to design a “tiny house” solution for \$20,000 or less to address the issue of affordable housing. This assignment required the students to research the topic and consider what elements were needed to address the solution, not just housing design, but also the social and even emotional needs of those who might live there. Students also had to design a budget, with all of the research that entailed. Rather than studying subjects in isolation, the students applied their skills across various subjects, including presentation skills to prepare a Powerpoint deck in some cases, to make their case.

The results of this approach were impressive, to say the least. The four of us sat down opposite the five student presenters. Each had built a mock-up of their idea. The original parameters were to design something for \$20,000 or less, but several of them went far beyond the original idea with a much larger budget to address the problem in a broader way.

Each student began by explaining their concept and why they had chosen it. The first student talked about the tradition of military service in his own family and had been drawn to the need for supportive housing for veterans who suffer from PTSD and other effects of their service. He had designed a building that would offer seven studio units and a washer/dryer service area for veterans facing a shared hallway so that these residents would have easy access to build community. He discussed other advantages of the concept, the costs involved and other advantages and then took questions from us.

Another of the students had set aside the idea of housing in favor of the need for a community health center with the full range of services under one roof. She spoke of the need for centralized services in a low-income area where many people depend on public transportation to get to their medical care, and how this alternative simplified the process. The center would include not only general medical care but also pediatrics, mental health and dental services, as well as child care for those visiting the center. Her budget also went far beyond the original project scope with a budget of several million dollars. As she took questions we noted that many people have multiple health needs which can be best addressed when providers can work together to coordinate services.

For these students, this presentation was a final step in their project, learning how to explain their projects to an audience. My first thought was that these students

demonstrated what is possible when students have the opportunity to be treated as contributing members of a team and have a teacher to guide them. They used a full range of skills in research, math, and preparing their presentations that touched on many subjects that they might have studied in isolation in other settings.

My first thought as we talked together was how much they were like the eloquent students who led the March for Our Lives, how poised and well-informed. But these students had a different back-story. Their prior experience in school had prior school experience had not yielded much success for them for various reasons.

Now, in this new setting, they could excel and rethink their futures. Those completing school this spring had post-high school plans, for military service or college.

Menta Academy is five years old in Oak Park with three in the current location. Menta has a network of other locations across Illinois and Arizona. The Oak Park location is unusual, as other locations, including three in Chicago, are in low-income neighborhoods.

The facility design is based on the offices of Google with individual and small group meeting spaces as well as a larger group presentation area. Students are treated like they are employees of a business with assignments and expectations that they would face in an employment setting. This prepares them for the responsibilities and world of work they will face in the future.

I am a strong supporter of public education, but I'm also a new fan of Menta, which is transforming lives. The models of project-based education are worth considering, not just at Menta, but as an alternative to the increasingly test-driven frenzy too often forced on our public school system.

Teresa Powell
Oak Park Village Clerk 2009-2017