

## HOUSING — ARE WE TEACHING DREAMS OR NIGHTMARES?

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The dream of many American students is to one day live in and own a conventional single family detached house. The possession of a conventional single family detached house has long been a social status requirement found among Americans[1,2]. In our society a family's quality of life and economic well-being is measured by the type of housing in which the family lives. The norm states that living in rental housing, particularly large scale multifamily structures, or mobile homes occurs only on a temporary basis or for long term only among low-income groups[2,3].

However, the combination of these housing norms, inflationary land prices and construction costs, increased mortgage rates, and the lack of mortgage funds are turning this dream into a nightmare. Today many middle-income families cannot afford a conventional single family detached house without sacrificing other basic family needs such as food, clothing and health care. The standard conventional single family house in 1984 sold for \$84,000 which with current interest rates resulted in a monthly household income ratio for middle-income families of 3:2.

Normally, as part of most school curricula, home economics and consumer studies teachers have been teaching about selecting, financing and maintaining family housing. In housing lessons the topics discussed involve how to inspect a house for energy efficiency or water drainage before buying, how to apply for a mortgage, how to understand housing terminology used in contracts, and how to close on a purchase. Sometimes, how to read a lease or your rights as a tenant are discussed. Yet, if discussion turns to renting vs. buying, frequently buying emerges as the best choice.

And what about the housing teaching materials used in the classroom? How often are pictures of apartment complexes, townhouses and duplexes included? Or what about illustrations of alternative houses such as manufactured homes, geodesic domes, or earth-sheltered housing? Are they visuals which depict these alternatives in pleasant, inviting settings or as examples of houses facing zoning problems?

Maybe as teachers we should ask ourselves: "Are we helping

students obtain their dream or are we contributing to their housing nightmare? Are we supporting the social norm of ownership of a conventionally single family detached house and discouraging the seeking of viable housing alternatives?"

### HOUSING CURRICULUM AND ATTITUDE STUDY

In May 1981, a mail surey was conducted to examine what aspects of housing teachers were emphasizing in their classes. The sample consisted of Arizona home economics and consumer studies teachers, each who had taught housing.

Two hundred forty-six teachers responded, providing a 71% response rate and representing one-third of all the state's home economics and consumer studies teachers.

The teachers were given a set of housing items which could be taught in the secondary classroom and asked to rank the importance of teaching each item in their allotted class time. The teachers were also asked their opinions about various types of housing and those opinions compared with how the teachers presented various housing items in their lessons.

### FINDINGS

1. Seventy percent believed teaching about buying a conventional single family detached house was more important than teaching about buying other forms of housing such as apartments or townhouses. Only 27% thought that cooperative or condominium investing was an important topic to discuss.
2. Seventy percent believed teaching about the advantages of buying a conventional single family detached house was most important, while 30% believed the disadvantages should be stressed.
3. The importance of teaching about the advantages and disadvantages of renting was split 49% to 46%, respectively.
4. Teachers with negative attitudes toward multifamily housing allocated little or no time for discussing multifamily housing options in their classroom.
5. Fifty-five percent of the teachers believed that the housing structure in which one lives affects that person's behavior and the teachers reflected that belief in their teaching.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

The results of this study indicate that teachers may not be conscious that they are contributing to the housing nightmare. As teachers we may be teaching housing social norms which not only are economically unattainable in today's society, but also norms which contribute to psychological stress.

As home economics and consumer studies teachers, it is necessary that we take a closer look at what we are teaching about housing. Are we sending silent, bias messages to our students?

Teachers need to review materials which they are using in their classroom. How often is a multifamily housing structure pictured in the teaching materials? How often do class discussions focus only on negative aspects of apartment living? When speakers are invited into the classroom are builders and managers of apartments, condominiums and mobile home parks included? If field trips are scheduled are only conventional single family detached houses and construction sites visited? Finally, are successful people who live in townhouses, duplexes, or apartments ever interviewed by the students?

These are questions which teachers need to be asking as they prepare their housing lessons. If as teachers we are not addressing housing alternatives sought and lived in by all social classes, then we are contributing to the students' psychological stress related to housing that today's and tomorrow's families may suffer if they cannot obtain that American Dream — owning a conventional single family detached house.

### REFERENCES

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