

# Inside Education: Poverty at their back doors

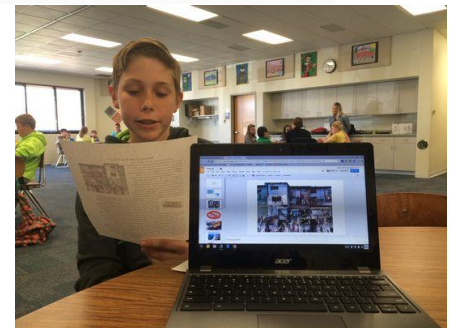


Jen Zettel, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 2:21 p.m. CDT May 9, 2016

MENASHA - Nearly 100 students in the Menasha Joint School District are considered homeless, and many more live in poverty.

Many sixth-graders at Maplewood Middle School weren't aware of that until they researched poverty in the Fox Cities. The project was part of a five-week social studies unit where the students learned about poverty in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. They eventually zoomed in to focus on poverty in Wisconsin and right here in their community.

The widespread impact of poverty and how it affects kids they go to school with — or even their own families — wasn't the most surprising thing they learned. So what shocked them?



(Photo: Jen Zettel  
USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

"That we would let it (poverty) happen and not do anything about it — they're afraid to confront the problem," said Dominic Peterson.

The entire sixth-grade class at Maplewood used data — from the United Way of the Fox Cities' Local Indicators for Excellence (LIFE) Study and other sources — to support whether they felt favelas would one day appear in their community. Favelas are shacks seen in the slums of Brazil. They often lack running water and electricity.

Many of the 12-year-olds felt the Fox Cities are strong enough to significantly reduce poverty, but said we need more action to realize this goal.

Will Nickel said poverty is not something that will fix itself, and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, is an example of that.

"To me this makes as much sense as saying you should ignore cancer to try and see if it will go away," he said.

As part of the project, the students had to share their findings with community members. Several officers from the Menasha Police Department and representatives from local organizations attended the classes on Thursday. I was there, too, and the students' insights blew me away.

When I asked whether they or any of their friends live in poverty, they didn't hold back.

Some of the children said their families don't have the means to make impulse purchases — only necessities — even when it comes to food. Two girls in one group said their families rarely have snacks at home. Their parents can afford to put meals on the table, but nothing extra in between.

We talked about the different forms of homelessness, and how a person living with relatives or friends would fall into that category. One boy piped up and said his family lives with his grandparents, and according to the school district, his family is homeless.

I talk to children a lot (part of the job) and I like to think I understand them a little, but the sixth-graders at Maplewood threw me. They weren't scared or embarrassed.

Many children echoed Dominic Peterson's sentiments. They don't understand why we spend money on bridges or new basketball arenas when people in Wisconsin need access to affordable housing, jobs that pay living wages and more options for public transportation.

It's easy for adults to dismiss their viewpoints. We have the luxury of knowing that industry relies heavily on infrastructure, and the sad reality is some people take advantage of assistance programs.

Instead of taking that path, I took off my grown-up glasses and saw it through their eyes — as something more human and less political. Simply put, no child should go hungry or never know the warmth of his or her own bed.

I don't know how to solve poverty, but I guarantee our future will be brighter if these young people continue to analyze problems facing their community and use their time and talents to solve them.

### **Home school curriculum fair**

The Valley Home Schoolers will hold their annual curriculum fair on Friday (May 13) at Faith Lutheran Church, 601 E. Glendale Ave., Appleton.

A wide variety of curricula will be on display, and parents who use them will be on hand to answer questions.

The free event is open to the public and will run from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Anyone with questions can visit [www.valleyhomeschoolersinc.org](http://www.valleyhomeschoolersinc.org) or contact Karen Anderson at [busymom19@yahoo.com](mailto:busymom19@yahoo.com).

*Jen Zettel: 920-996-7268, or [jzettel@postcrescent.com](mailto:jzettel@postcrescent.com); on Twitter [@jenzettel](https://twitter.com/jenzettel)*