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Great way to end 2024, begin 2025

By Joe Nathan

Dec. 19 was a terrific, historic day for Minnesota students and families. For the first time, the Minnesota Housing agency awarded \$99,999 each to two school districts to create programs in which students learn construction skills as they build homes for low-income or Minnesotans experiencing homelessness. Even better news: Given strong, bipartisan support for this idea, Minnesota Housing has budgeted \$500,000 for five or more public schools to do the same thing. Grants will be awarded in the first half of 2025.

The program is expanding because it makes so much sense. Minnesota Housing Commissioner Jennifer Leimaile Ho told me: “When I travel around the state, I hear the same challenge everywhere: it’s hard to attract employees when there isn’t enough affordable housing. To tackle this, we need bold and creative solutions, and this program is an incredible step forward.”

She continued, “We’re thrilled that both the Fairmont Area Schools and the Martin County West School District were selected today! We are excited to see the positive impact this program will have in their communities. The overwhelming interest has been amazing, and we’re so happy to announce that we’ll be opening an RFP (Request for Proposals) in January 2025 to grow this program even further.”

When I contacted Cori Reynolds, superintendent of Martin County West Public Schools, she responded, “Wow!”

The 2023 Legislature agreed with a broad, bi-partisan alliance that included the Center for School Change, where I work, educators, physicians, economic development professionals, advocates for people experiencing homelessness and young people themselves.

One young person, an immigrant to the U.S., Hser Pwe, told legislators about his experience learning construction skills. After participating in a home building project at GAP, a small alternative public school in St Paul, he “found a job in floor covering and I joined the union. I still work there now; it has been a great eight years for me. I found a career I love, and I make over \$44/hour. I have worked my way up to being a foreman.”

Another GAP graduate, Aung Myo Way, testified that he spent 15 years in a Thailand refugee camp: “My life was so hard. I was living in a wooden box that was hardly bigger than a doghouse. We barely had enough food; we always ate every last grain of rice and any insect or animal we could find. However, after coming to the U.S. and participating in the GAP home construction program, today I make more than \$40/hour as



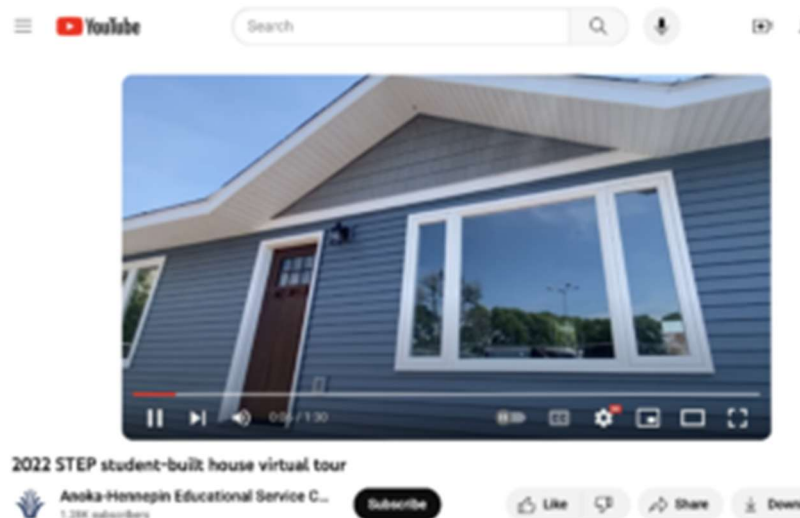
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a journeyman, and I own my own home.”

Not all participants in these programs will have such dramatic stories. Several years ago, I visited a Forest Lake Public School home construction program. One student told me that before joining the program, he disliked and often skipped school. But “since they call this school, I’m here every day. I love it.”

Another young woman from a suburban district was able to participate in a similar program run by a group of districts. She told me “school means a lot more now. I love learning and working with my hands.”

Our Center has written six case studies about current Minnesota high school construction programs. This includes an Anoka-Hennepin home construction program that’s 20-plus years old. They are [found here](#).



Anoka-Hennepin STEP students built this home

Minnesota Housing plans to release the request for proposals on Jan. 6. It will also hold a free statewide Zoom meeting to discuss the grants, tentatively scheduled for Jan 23. Nira Ly, Minnesota Housing’s community lending team supervisor, told me [that information will be available here](#).

State Rep. Mike Howard of Richfield told me that when the Legislature approved these funds in 2023, “this was one of my favorite parts of our housing bill.” Rep. Matt Norris of Blaine believes it won bipartisan support because it’s a “win-win-win: Win for students, win for people seeking housing, and win for the construction industry that needs more employees.”

So the historic grants awarded on Dec. 19, and the grants to be given out next year truly are great ways to end 2024 and begin 2025.

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