

MAKING WAVES AT DCS



DHS Interior Design Students Experience First-Hand the Importance of Accessibility



Dexter High School students in Lauren Williams's Housing & Interior Design course recently spent a class session exploring their school building blindfolded, in rolling chairs, and unable to hear. The lesson? **To experience and understand the critical need for thoughtful ADA-accessible design in their daily surroundings.**

In this course, students are introduced to the concepts of living environments around the world with a focus on the United States, with topics spanning past, present and future housing design. This particular unit focused on the concept of universal design, which is the intentional design of environments so that they can be accessed and used to the greatest extent possible by all people.

As students moved through the high school building, they had to rely on senses other than sight or sound to navigate. Those in rolling chairs had to discover alternate ways to access the building's several floors and use building facilities. As they worked their way through the building, they began to grasp the amount of thought and planning that goes into ensuring a space is accessible to all.

Before heading out into the halls, Interior Design students watched a TED Talk by gerontologist Leacey Brown, who explained how design can enhance or impede a person's ability to act independently. Brown stressed the importance of universal design, citing that one in three homes in the United States has at least one person with a disability. This short video was followed by an interactive class



discussion. As a final product, students reflected on their experience and discussed what went well (or not so well) during the process, their emotions during the exercise, and the importance of universal design when building homes and other spaces.

Senior Nick Brzys shared his observation that, when blindfolded, “how much we needed to rely on people to get anywhere without any prior knowledge of walking sticks or the layout of the school.” CC Short, also a senior, said, “During the experiment of being blindfolded or in a ‘wheelchair’, it was very difficult to do simple tasks. Even when using the elevator, there was a struggle to go over the small incline to get into the elevator, as well as any other slight increases where the wheels would simply stop moving.”

Williams’s students reflected on the importance of being continually mindful of accessibility when designing spaces to allow for the maximum independence of any individual. After experiencing first-hand some of the elements needed to successfully navigate a building, students can utilize this background knowledge when incorporating universal design into future class projects.

