

The Knightspot

A Spotlight on Education in New Milford, NJ.

New Milford Embraces Creative Vision for Learning in 2016



NMHS Academy students at work on FedEx Day, October 6.

A spark of change in education has been lit across the globe. We live in an age of education for the masses, driven by highly standardized curriculum and testing. But what if students are provided the chance to determine some of their own learning? What if they have time at school to wonder, to explore, to follow a passion?

The New Milford School District is one of many who has begun to incorporate these opportunities for its students. “As standardized testing takes a front seat in education, children, even at very young ages, become preoccupied with having the correct answers,” comments Assistant Superintendent,

Danielle Shanley. “As students grow and test more, failure becomes something to fear, instead of an opportunity from which to learn.” Through several new programs, students now have the time to ask questions, explore possibilities, and ultimately take an active role in their learning.

Largely influenced by British author and international educational adviser, Sir Ken Robinson, the movement highlights the change needed from, as Robinson puts it, “the fast food model of education” to a more organic one that provides ample opportunities for creativity. “Creativity is as important as literacy,” he says,

“And we should treat it with the same status.”

Another inspiration for the movement is a business model used by Google known as the 80/20 model. Eighty percent of the time employees do work assigned to them, and twenty percent of the time they can pursue self-directed work that is innovative and meaningful and has value to the company. A group of NMHS Academy students visited Google in NYC last school year and not only learned about this approach, but saw Google’s incorporation of play into the work environment. Employees have access to ping-pong tables, scooters, Lego and much more throughout their workday.

The approach has been adapted to education partly through a book called *The Genius Hour: Fostering Passion, Wonder and Inquiry in the Classroom*, by Denise Krebs and Gallit Zvi. They explain how to give children the time to pursue a path of learning they determine themselves. Students are required to do three things: question, research and share. As a result, they are intrinsically motivated leading them to a more meaningful learning experience.

Yet another inspiration is something called “FedEx Day” which was adapted from the company FedEx. Employees there periodically have a day to

investigate something that has value for themselves, the employees or the company. In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Dan Pink explains the nature of these days which the NMHS Academies adopted because of the self-directed approach to learning they cultivate. A FedEx day invites children to think about questions like, “What do I want to learn this year? What do I want to see? Where do I want to go? What is my passion?”

When this idea was shared with Academy students last year, one of them suggested NMHS Academies students do a FedEx Day. So, last school year they participated in the first one. Students researched and explored plans and goals for how to answer, accomplish or learn about their inquiries. These FedEx days will continue to occur at the beginning of each school year. with this year’s recently on October 6. Some ideas students came up with that day include an art project created by all HS students to be displayed in front of school to unify the student body, an invitation to speakers and a panel discussion to heighten awareness of the refugee crisis in America, a plan to raise money to equip all playgrounds in town with play spaces for children with disabilities and more.

One of the varied results of last year’s FedEx days was the “Maker Jam”. Last June, all high school students along with eighth grade future Academy students were invited to participate. All participants received the theme of The Future and then spent the day using any medium they chose to create their interpretation of the theme. Requirements were that each project had a title and was on

display at 3:00. Students created a multitude of diverse projects such as a post-it storyboard, a computer program, a futuristic costume sewn on site, a futuristic superhero, a song and the list goes on. The prize at the end of the day: hearing others’ comments about your creation and therefore, intrinsic rewards.



Gibbs students create inventions using electronic building blocks.

At the elementary level, students participate in the Global Cardboard Challenge this month. This event is one of the outcomes of a short documentary film by Nirvana Mullick that went viral in 2012. Entitled “Caine’s Arcade”, the film highlights the then nine year old Caine Monroy who created an arcade out of cardboard and everyday objects. Once the film became a phenomenon, visitors

from all over went to California to play at Caine’s Arcade and the concept exploded into, among other things, the Global Cardboard Challenge. At Berkley and Gibbs, students are creating their own original works out of cardboard.

MakerSpace is another district addition that provides

students the opportunity to explore their own passions, collaborate with peers and problem-solve. “Creative thinking develops quality problem solvers,” says Shanley. “Collaboration in problem solving is necessary. When students are little, they collaborate, but when they are older we say do it yourselves. Adults don’t work like that; adults confer and collaborate.”



Berkley 5th graders planning their Cardboard Challenge Creations.

Therefore each Media Center in the four schools has an area designated for where children have numerous mediums they can use to create, explore, play and tinker. Using manipulatives such as Legos, tablets, fabric etc., they participate in Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics or STEAM. They engage in creative, higher-order problem solving through design, construction and collaboration. No two MakerSpaces are the same; they are each a unique physical and virtual place for children to invent, create and make.

At the high school and middle school levels, students

use MakerSpace during free time at lunch or during the day. At the elementary levels, students can sign up to use it at recess at

certain times during the year. In addition, all elementary classes explore MakerSpace during their scheduled library time each week. Furthermore, MakerSpace is appearing in individual classrooms where students can utilize it more frequently.

So in an age of increasingly intense pressure for children to do “what counts”, get “good grades in school” and “get into the right college”, New Milford is aiming for a balance. Standardized curriculum and tests are not disappearing, but districts can add opportunities for creative thinking, innovation, and pursuing passions amidst the sea of generalized education. “That’s where the learning happens.” according to Shanley, “Out of respect for the learners and what they need to be active participants in an ever-changing, interconnected global world, we have committed ourselves to creating more opportunities for all students to tinker, play, create, imagine, explore and collaborate. It’s time we start asking, ‘What are your gifts? What are your passions? HOW are you smart?’ We believe creative schools foster a love of learning and prepare our graduates for the real challenges of the twenty-first century.”

References and for Further Reading:

Videos:

Imagination Foundation. “Caine’s Arcade 2: From a Movie to a Movement.”

Kesler, Chris. “What is Genius Hour?”

Robinson, Sir Ken. “Do Schools Kill Creativity?”

Wolfe, Rachel. “Losing Ourselves.”

Books: Pink, Daniel H. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us.* Riverbed Hardcover: 2009.

Krebs, Denise and Gallic Zvi. *The Genius Hour: Fostering Passion, Wonder and Inquiry in the Classroom.* Routledge: 2016.