

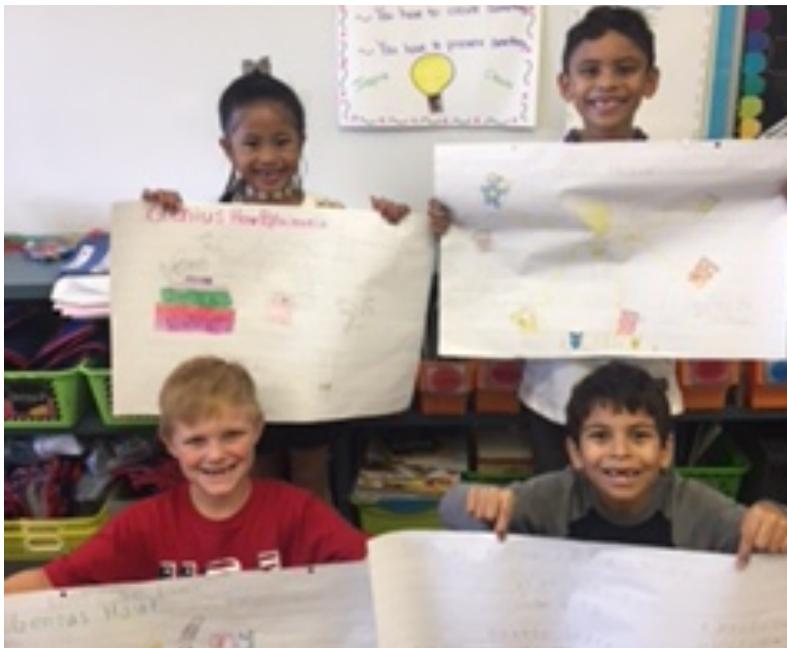
# The Knightspot

A Spotlight on Education in New Milford, New Jersey.

## Creative, Passion-Driven Time Provided for K-12 Students

Over the past two years, the district has begun several programs to incorporate time for student creativity and passion-driven projects. The annual Maker Jam, MakerSpace and a revamped high school schedule all help to provide these opportunities. “We want to promote curiosity, and essentially you do that through some form of creative means,” comments Assistant Superintendent Danielle Shanley. This year, K-8 students will have designated time to pursue an area of study based on an interest or passion of theirs. “We know that children need to think for themselves if they are going to succeed in school and career,” says Shanley. “It’s all about tapping into children as the curious beings they are, instead of only teaching them what is identified in the standards.”

There are already six half-days incorporated into the district calendar for afternoon professional development; now they will be used to provide this passion-driven time for K-8 students. At both the elementary and middle school levels, students



In Miss Stich’s 2nd grade, students watched a video on “[Genius Hour](#)”, then brainstormed their passions and curiosities on 11/6.

completed surveys to share their interests and how they might pursue them. On the half days, time will be devoted to them exploring, researching, tinkering and creating. “We are doing this because we must,” states Shanley. “We know that this is the missing piece in public education. We know there is a need to tap into the passions and desires of students, to educate them beyond the confines of traditional curriculum and course offerings, to help

them make meaning of their learning.”

“Following the elementary schools’ participation in last June’s MakerJam, and reviewing what science and pedagogy tell us about the importance of creativity, the elementary administrators and teachers are looking for new ways for students to engage in self-guided projects,” states B.F. Gibbs Principal, Scott Davies. In both K-5 schools, each classroom will have centers where students can work on research, writing,

art, etc. The centers will take on different purposes depending on the students' learning paths. Projects can be done independently or collaboratively. For example, if a group is interested in marine life, these mornings can be used to research marine life using books or online materials, and a product will be created and shared. There will be no grades given for this work, no rules or guidelines. Students are in complete control of what they explore and create. That said, as always in the classroom, children are expected to be on task and produce a product of value. "Building - in creative time periodically gives young learners opportunities to explore, discover and create," remarks Davies.

At DEOMS, students will work on their exploratory projects during Social Studies and Science blocks on the half days. They will start with a self-generated question and look into possible answers, working collaboratively or independently. Once a question has been formulated and discussed, students will create an action plan of how they would like to pursue this field of study and then do so. "A large portion of our building level PD is based on the book, *Cultivating Curiosity in K-12 Classrooms* by Wendy L. Ostroff," highlights Principal

James DeLalla. "With topics such as promoting exploration, allowing autonomous learning, embracing intrinsic motivation, and supporting questioning, we intend to light the flame of inquiry." He continues, "When students work on their passion-driven projects, the only parameters are their imaginations."

The new high school schedule, implemented this past September, provides numerous opportunities for student creativity. The weekly 84 minute Flex period gives teens time to work independently or collaboratively on a self-determined course of study. In addition there is time to work on projects during Unified Lunch. This unstructured time allows students the freedom to access the incredible maker space in the HS. Another opportunity for passion-projects will begin this year. Academies students are required to develop a "session" they can share or teach to other students during a Flex period. Academies members will select something they love in any area, be it drawing, music, make-up, robotics, etc. The goal is for students to identify a passion of theirs, get to know it really well through research and study, and then share it with their peers. These sessions will be given as options for the entire student body to

attend during Flex periods. Eventually, "sessions" will be an option for all students to conduct.

"There will be different challenges at every level," points out Shanley. "For example Kindergarteners and First Graders who are not proficient readers yet will need more support. Maybe some of their work will be done in groups or as a class, guided by their teacher in the beginning." As with every new program, adjustments and tweaks will be made as needed.

The short session days, ongoing MakerSpace time, annual Maker Jam and new high school schedule all provide meaningful, creative opportunities for students. Through these, New Milford children will hone the skill of thinking for themselves "We use rubrics in school to assess a large part of student work, but there are no rubrics in life beyond school," remarks Shanley. "In order to effectively prepare our students for careers, we need to give them time to show us what they know. and explore what they love."

#### **For Further Inquiry...:**

##### **Books:**

- Krebs, Denise and Gallic Zvi. *The Genius Hour*: Rutledge: 2016.
- Ostroff, Wendy L. *Cultivating Curiosity in K-12 Classrooms*. ASCD: 2016.
- Wagner, Tony and Ted Dintersmith. *Most Likely to Succeed*. Scribner: 2016.

##### **Videos:**

- Adora Svitak. "What Adults Can Learn from Kids."
- Sir Ken Robinson. "Do Schools Kill Creativity??"