

SOFIA CENTER



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FROM THE SOFIA CENTER

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What Is Possible? FedEx Days in Bosque's Middle School Invite Innovation and Good Work

In life and in education I love the question, “What is possible?” On a small scale, it is what we should ask when we get the rare gift of an unscheduled Saturday. Where could we go? What might we discover? What trail haven’t we hiked? What poem needs to be written? I love imagining all the ways I could create an extraordinary day – an *experience* – even if I end up deciding to stay home and putter around the house. On a large scale, the question invites us to set aside all that we take as given, as *just the way it is*. Honestly asking ourselves what is possible sets the mind free in ways that we don’t often allow, ways that can create cognitive or emotional dissonance, ways that might even shake our foundation. For educators, it is the question we should ask ourselves every day. It is also the question we should be asking our students.

And yet, most of us don’t. Not because we don’t want to or because we aren’t willing to step into the wilderness of the question. We don’t ask what is possible because daily life in schools is already overflowing with complexity and challenge. Teachers hit the ground running early in the morning, and after planning meaningful classes; grading a pile of essays (say, 85 papers x 15 minutes each); tending to a student in tears; participating in a faculty meeting; and returning emails and phone calls – well, it can feel like everything possible has already happened. I can imagine even the most committed teacher saying, “Are you kidding? *Nothing* more is possible!”

Three years ago, I posed this question to the middle school faculty. In fact, we planned a whole professional development day around it. And here’s what you should know about the amazing teachers at Bosque. No one asked, “Are you kidding?” No one suggested that I was asking a ridiculous question or expecting too much. Instead, the faculty stepped willingly into the empty space of possibility, stretched their limbs, and began generating excellent work and innovative ideas. Let me backtrack and share some of the inspiration for the professional development day I was scheming.

At an annual conference of the National Association of Independent Schools, I had heard Tina Seelig speak about creativity and innovation. Dr. Seelig is the Executive Director of the Stanford Technology Ventures Program at Stanford’s School of Engineering. She was sharing the wildly innovative projects she was doing with her students, and I was struck by the fact that she was assigning projects whose outcomes she couldn’t predict. In other words, she was asking, “What is possible?” I was hooked. At the same time, a group of us here on campus was reading *Drive* by Daniel Pink. Pink was describing companies that give their employees a day each month or so to work on any project of their choosing, as long as the project is something new, not something they were already endeavoring to do. An Australian company, Atlassian, had made these days a central part of their company culture and started calling them FedEx Days because the idea was to deliver results in 24 hours – express, overnight

delivery! Once Pink described the Atlassian model in *Drive*, the idea of FedEx Days spread like wildfire in more creative companies.

When I planned what later became known as our first FedEx Day, I wasn't calling it that or even thinking of it in those terms. I was thinking instead of a day of innovation. I was sending emails to the faculty that were inspired by Seelig's work, including questions like "How would you create value with a stack of Post-its?" – the same question Seelig had asked her engineering students and that had gone viral around the globe. Here were my parameters for the upcoming professional development day:

Imagine what is possible here at Bosque that we aren't currently doing. Think freely and wildly, without regard for limitations. We'll deal with those later. Generate ideas; share them with colleagues; work collaboratively. Tell me what you need for support.

While there were certainly questions – "You mean I can work on anything? What if it's something that has nothing to do with my class? Are you sure this is ok?" – these morphed quickly into, "I have this great idea and am looking for others to work with. Is anyone interested in a cross-curricular, large-scale project? Why don't we design a garden for our school?"

And we were off!

With the help of our facilities team, we transformed the middle school building into a creative work space for adults – complete with big arm chairs gathered from student spaces across campus, coffee tables, lamps, and rugs spread throughout the common spaces and classrooms. I gathered laptops, butcher paper, markers, and other tools for creating and documenting. We made sure we were stockpiled with delicious snacks and good coffee. I filled vases with flowers and spread them around the work spaces. I had help! When the faculty arrived in the morning to warm breakfast served on tables covered with beautiful table cloths, their delight was palpable. We began the day by watching a TedTalk by Sir Ken Robinson that had just come out, and very quickly we settled into small groups in the inviting spaces throughout the building, delving into our work.

Three years later, we have just held our fourth professional development day that follows this model. Somewhere early on, we all started calling these FedEx Days, and it stuck. Unlike the folks at Atlassian and FedEx, we don't get a full twenty-four hours to deliver, but the spirit is the same. After working all day, we gather at the end of the day to share our innovations, our designs, and our big ideas.

Our FedEx Days have yielded rich and meaningful work. The two large-scale mosaic murals installed on campus were created by seventh graders through a cross-curricular project designed on a FedEx Day. Our three-year study of gender and grades emerged as a result of two teachers partnering on a FedEx Day. The designs for our school garden were created in a recent FedEx Day (upper school students joined this design group). The sixth-grade cross-curricular project on empathy was designed during a FedEx Day. The first vision for the Sofia Center came to life through reflective conversation on a FedEx Day. The entire art department had a mini-retreat as part of a FedEx Day. And there have been many other topics and projects.

It's true that not every FedEx Day group ends up manifesting a new major project, and that is part of what makes the whole thing work. Companies that believe in FedEx Days don't expect every single team of employees to come up with the next major innovation, but they know that if they don't give their employees time to create, the major innovations will never occur. I also believe strongly that there is value in the shared exploration and conversation, the dissecting of challenges, and the discussion of why something may or may not matter in the education of young people.

Teachers choose to teach for many reasons. The ones I know love young people, are passionate about their subject matter, and believe in the transformative power of learning. They also choose to teach because they have not given up on the world and they can imagine making a difference in it. When schools don't create the space in which teachers are set free to imagine and create, it is the students who suffer most. If we don't offer educators the time and support to work collaboratively toward a shared goal of their own design, we've failed to honor the very knowledge and experience we expect teachers to have.

One of my favorite essays is by education philosopher Maxine Greene, and it is titled "Teaching As Possibility: A Light in Dark Times." Toward the end of the essay, she writes: *It [teaching as possibility] is a matter of awakening and empowering today's young people to name, to reflect, to imagine, and to act with more and more concrete responsibility in an increasingly multifarious world.* Her words remind us why we must always have the courage to ask of ourselves and our students: "What is possible?"