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Episode 2: Rethinking the High School Schedule

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Rachel Babcock: [00:00:00] We left traditional public school.

Josh Charpentier: When too many kids were dropping out.

Rachel: Or graduating unprepared for life.

Josh: So we founded a school that puts students at the center.

Rachel: We knew these students and families didn't want to give up.

Josh: Too many students were being failed by the system.

Rachel: So we designed our own system.

Josh: And created a school our students deserved.

Rachel: My name is Rachel.

Josh: My name is Josh, and this—

Rachel: Is *Education Disruption*.

Josh: Hey, what's up? It's Josh.

Rachel: And Rachel.

Josh: Back for another episode of *Education Disruption*. Today we're going to talk about **[00:00:30]** scheduling.

Rachel: How we use time, student time, staff time, and how we try to maximize the potential of scheduling, which is a really big topic.

Josh: In a traditional setting, everyone thinks of a master schedule. For those of you who are administrators out there listening, the master schedule is a bear of a task both operationally **[00:01:00]** and day-to-day. The master schedule is typically the bones of what runs the day in a school. It takes massive amounts of time to set up from an administrative standpoint. It's like one huge puzzle. It drives—

Rachel: Really, it's a bunch of boxes and you put teachers and kids into boxes, really.

Josh: Correct. That is really what it is at the end of the day. It's a bunch of boxes and you put kids and teachers into it, which sounds ridiculous.

Rachel: And attach times to them. Basically, the traditional **[00:01:30]** factory model of education is there for a reason. It's there because it makes things organized and predictable, and it helps people know where everybody's supposed to be, what they're supposed to be doing, how long they're supposed to be doing it for.

Josh: If the goal of high school is to prepare kids for life after high school, does that type of a day actually prepare a kid in 2019 for life after high school?

Rachel: Because there's no bells **[00:02:00]** outside of high school. You don't ever move. In factories, you move maybe. I don't even know if they still do that in factories, but in high schools, you move forward according to the bell, like herding cattle from one place to the next. That was one of the first things that we knew when we set out to open Map Academy.

One of the first things we knew is that that master schedule, not only is it outdated, not only did we know we could do better, but we knew our students needed us to do better because if you're going to talk about students who have lost their way **[00:02:30]** or who have not been successful or have gaps, the last thing they need is to be crammed into boxes.

Josh: At Map Academy, we try to shift the paradigm from that "master schedule" to really thinking about it as how do we use time at Map Academy?

Rachel: For my students at the center. Everything in Map Academy is designed to put the student at the center of their own educational experience. Instead of having us sit down in the **[00:03:00]** spring and block out the master schedule for the following year, which is essentially a replication of the schedule from the previous year, our mission in designing our schedule and thinking about how we use time here at Map Academy was always about putting the student at the center of their own, which meant that we're scheduling for one rather than for many.

Josh: You still do need some mechanism that holds it together.

Rachel: Otherwise there would be chaos.

Josh: Correct. **[00:03:30]** If you can imagine the master schedule as a bunch of boxes like we talked about and having--There's a lot of schools out there that are doing different things, but the great majority of schools, a master schedule is one adult with a group of students. We shifted it from multiple adults with multiple groups of students and created a studio mechanism versus that one adult with a group of students.

Rachel: [00:04:00] Our teachers here at Map Academy are grouped in teams. We call them studios because we like the implication of a studio being a place where creative work is done and where collaboration is happening. Last year we had a humanities studio, a math studio, and a science studio in which teams of teachers work together and students are scheduled to a studio during a block of time rather than to an individual teacher because another thing that's wrong with traditional scheduling **[00:04:30]** in our opinion, is that it goes for 180 days.

In the typical American high school setting, it starts in end of August or September and it goes through June. It's 180 days here in Massachusetts that students are required to attend. A kid gets

scheduled in September and there's really nothing much that gets done about that, except in super extreme situations until June.

Here at Map Academy, we understand that sometimes a candidate getting scheduled to an individual teacher or an individual **[00:05:00]** group of students, maybe it works, maybe it doesn't. I believe, as a former classroom teacher, that there's something super powerful and wonderful about a great relationship between a teacher and a group of students. I used to love that, of having my own classroom and my students in my room, in my domain. That works well. It's a beautiful thing. The problem is it doesn't always work well.

Here at Map Academy, when a student is scheduled, they're scheduled to a studio. **[00:05:30]** That allows us to not have to define student A is going to be with teacher A. It gives us a lot more flexibility. That was really the biggest driving factor behind our schedule and it continues to this day, is to ensure that we're embedding as much flexibility as we possibly can while also providing structure so that our people do know what to expect when they come to work for our teachers and when they come to school for our students.

Josh: [00:06:00] When you put multiple adults with multiple groups of different types of students, we feel that that is preparing students for life after high school much better than blocking them off into a seven-period schedule because in life after high school, you need to be able to collaborate. You need to be able to work things out with teams of people versus just being told where to be **[00:06:30]** at what time, for how long, with what person.

Rachel: Because one size doesn't fit all, and so therefore, as soon as you start to try to hold everybody to the same standard, you immediately start to lose people. We decided early on that, as I said, that we needed to be flexible. We also decided early on that we needed to be competency-based. It has a great impact on our schedule because competency-based education means that students progress when they're ready or when they've demonstrated mastery.

The **[00:07:00]** complicating factor about competency-based progression is that you'll have to be willing to let students move forward at their own pace, because it is really inconsistent with that model that says that traditional master schedule does not play well with competency-based progression. The other piece about it that we knew, putting students at the center, designing the experience for them, letting them move forward as they have mastered content, time is the tricky part **[00:07:30]** because the issue is that it's easy to say, "We're going to let kids do things at their own pace," but how does everybody's individual pace intersect? How do we not have this divergent sense that no one knows where anybody is?

We were very lucky to have a grant-funded planning year after we got chartered. It allowed us to go visit schools. We really had a chance to go see lots of different models of **[00:08:00]** what high school looks like and how people are tackling this problem of scheduling. One of those schools in particular in New York City, they've become a partner of ours and they also serve over-age, under-credited students, they developed an asynchronous blended learning platform, which is a lot of jargon at first, but it's really important because asynchronous means that learning does not have to be tied to time. A as in against time.

Asynchronous means **[00:08:30]** that we can actualize that idea that students can move at their own pace. Blended means that we're having content be housed online and leveraging technology, to mean that anytime any place learning, learning beyond the walls of school is actually possible.

Once we partnered with the school, they're called Bronx Arena and they're pretty amazing, once we discovered, and we were inspired by lots of other things too, but that partnership with **[00:09:00]** Bronx Arena allowed us to leverage a system that will be the glue that would hold our schedule together.

Josh: We've talked a lot about the kids and how our schedule affects the kids, but another really positive response to the schedule was the staff response to it because in a traditional school, in that master schedule, when that one adult is with a group of students for seven periods a day, they really don't **[00:09:30]** have much time to interact with their colleagues.

They may end up being in a staff meeting once a month. They may end up doing some common planning time once in a while, but at the end of the day, they don't really collaborate as much as they could. That's also where the tracker comes in because the tracker, as Rachel mentioned, with the asynchronous learning platform, the tracker allows for tremendous collaboration between the staff as well. **[00:10:00]** It really shifts from the student being scheduled into the class, to the class being scheduled to the student, which seems simple, but from an operational standpoint, that's really hard to achieve.

Rachel: That tracker, that asynchronous blended learning platform, is just that it's a tool. It's the glue to the skeleton scaffold, however you want to think about it. It basically lets us hang all these high-quality courses. We don't use **[00:10:30]** packaged online curriculum. We are using a library of teacher-generated content and continuing to add to that library with new courses.

That tracker basically says, "Okay, there's five kids working on an English class, or a US history class, or a biology class," and those kids could all be at different points. For the teacher and the student, it's as simple as clicking through to different spots, and a teacher working with a student can drill right down to exactly what that student is working on **[00:11:00]** and then move to a new student and drill down to exactly what that student's working on. Our teachers are able to be facilitators at Map Academy and coaches, which is very much philosophically what we know that our students need.

In order to build a schedule around a student, you have to have the adults be able to access the content that they need and be able to see the data that tells them what that student is doing, what they're working on, what their skill gaps are, what their growth areas are. Again, I **[00:11:30]** think our staff response to our schedule, although it's very disorienting at first because we basically blew up our traditional master schedule. The teachers at Map Academy, the day here, the time, everything about it moves differently.

Once teachers get used to it, I think that they will say that they--They have said that it empowers them to do the individualized work that they've always wanted to do, but it's really hard to do when you're standing in front of a class of 25 or 30 kids and you know the bell's going to ring in **[00:12:00]** four minutes, and so you better cram everything in that you need to cram in. If that kid comes back next class and they missed it, you don't have time to go through the 80 minutes of stuff that that kid missed.

That's one of the biggest problems with what happens to students when they fall off track in high school, is that there's no mechanism for catching up if you get behind and there's no mechanism for slowing things down or speeding them up. We get so many students that come to us who are bored to death in traditional environments. Part of it is because they already know stuff **[00:12:30]**

and they're being forced to do it again. Part of it sometimes it's that they've missed school for some very valid reasons and then they come back and they're just given a pack of make-up work and expected to figure out how to do geometry.

That's not how learning works. Our schedule allows us--The mechanisms that we've built into our schedule are designed to try to make it possible for students to never feel as if they are behind. They are right where they're supposed to **[00:13:00]** be. If for some reason they take a break or they decide to work on something else, or they missed time, the pause button is pushed, but then as soon as they push play, they pick up right where they were before.

Josh: If you remember from episode one, we talked a lot about the students that we serve here at Map Academy and the true recognition that we focus on social emotional supports at the basis of everything we do here at Map Academy. Having an asynchronous approach to our academics is **[00:13:30]** foundational in the Map Academy model because we know that life is going to get in the way for some of our students. Instead of trying to fight against that, we created a system in which it allows for that to happen.

Rachel: I actually was just on the phone with a parent this morning. One of the other beautiful things about being asynchronous is that at the end of a school year, for kids not done with a course, it just waits for them or they can work on it through the summer. We've actually been open. We **[00:14:00]** ran summer studios for most of the summer, and our students were able to come in and pick up right where they left off. We had students who started new classes and earned credits this summer.

Part of our schedule is designed to allow students to understand the natural consequence of their effort is progress. When they make progress, we celebrate it right away. We don't have to wait to the end of the quarter, or till report cards come out, or till grades close. When our kids earn credits, they earn them. We stop and celebrate as a school. That's not **[00:14:30]** possible on the traditional schedule. We are, overall, thrilled and really vigilant about continuing to think about time and the way that it's organized. The organizing principle of our school is what our students need. It really is amazing what happens when you free up those resources.

We are super excited that we've made some decisions this summer to continue to evolve and iterate **[00:15:00]** on our schedule. One of those things is that we always knew from the beginning that we wanted to have interdisciplinary studios. Like I mentioned earlier, last year our studios were humanities, math, and science. This year we have seven new staff coming on board next week. We are able, as a result of our hiring, to have interdisciplinary studios. Which means that teams of teachers from science, and math, and English, and history will be working together to support **[00:15:30]** students. Breaking down even more silos.

Instead of having even those silos between science and math, or English, and writing, and math, or science. We're super excited that our studio blocks this year are going to be even more connected and, hopefully, provide even more relevance to students. There's a downside to asynchronous like there's a downside to everything. **[00:16:00]** Part of the downside to being asynchronous is that if students are all at their own pace, we get asked a lot, and with good reason, like, "What about discussion and debate and shared learning experience in collaborative projects," and all of that other stuff that's important besides core academics.

Josh: When we iterated the schedule this time, we knew that we had to allow us space for that without taking away from our asynchronous approach. What we did this year going into year two is we added a seminar block, **[00:16:30]** where we wanted our teachers to teach something that they're passionate about, that the students will be able to tell they're passionate about it. Hopefully, the students will gain some passion in what the teachers are passionate about so that we can really expand our students' horizons into things that they may not have known about before.

In that seminar block, that'll be more of a face-to-face group instruction, while at the same time simultaneously, not forcing kids into that, but rather having them **[00:17:00]** opt into it themselves. Which is also a radical concept from traditional education. There's not much choice in a kid's day in a traditional school. Again, you'll hear that theme of, in every aspect of design for Map Academy, we're trying to purposefully create experiences that are going to better prepare our kids for life.

Rachel: While half of our teachers will be teaching seminar during that mid-morning block, **[00:17:30]** half of our teachers will not. Those seminars will be time-based just in the sense that we do want our students to come together and to work through content. There's so much value in that collaborative approach to learning. It can be isolating for students who already feel isolated to always be working on their own thing. The beautiful thing about designing, moving away from that master schedule that **[00:18:00]** chops time, and teachers, and students up into little boxes, is that it's much easier to make adjustments to our schedule.

For us, because we imagine our time blocks being largely open-ended and our staffing being pretty much flexible, we can iterate much more nimbly. We can make changes much more easily than in a schedule in which everybody is driven by these really precise divisions of time and space. **[00:18:30]** I think space is actually another thing we should probably talk about because our schedule is possible because of the way we designed our building.

Josh: We created our building in a manner in which--We were very fortunate to have a local businessman who helped us get established in a facility. We've really, instead of having one classroom with a door, maybe a window looking to the outside, we really opened it up. We tried to make it look a lot **[00:19:00]** more like a multimedia center on a college campus. Lots of open space, interior windows, so sightlines could be expanded so that it would feel like you were all together in one place.

Rachel: Defined spaces. It's not like open floor plan. It's open, but we have enough definition spaces. It's not one big--It's not like '70s open classroom style.

Josh: Another thing too that--If you were to walk into Map Academy, we always tell people that if you were to walk into Map Academy, we hope you feel you're not walking into **[00:19:30]** a high school. We really wanted students and families, when they walked into Map Academy, to feel like it was going to be different.

Rachel: Our space supports the flexibility of our schedule because our teachers are not assigned to stay in a space and supervise this group of students until the bell rings. Our teachers are able to move fluidly through our space, which allows them to support our student needs, because the building is designed the way that it's designed. Honestly, it's a renovation. We basically got it what was an office building, **[00:20:00]** and essentially got rid of the double-loaded corridor concept and created open spaces.

Our classrooms are largely around the perimeter and then there's a lot of collaborative space in the center, which allows for our teachers to be really in that coaching role. Our teachers, they have a lot more freedom and they have a lot more autonomy. They have a lot more flexibility and they're way better able to meet student needs during the day.

Josh: Within the space itself, **[00:20:30]** we have a variety of seating. We have standing desks, we have couches, we have soft seating. We have rolly chairs. We have stools.

Rachel: Which **[unintelligible 00:20:43]** threatens to take away all the time.

Josh: The soft seating once in a while.

Rachel: Because it's hard. It takes a lot of mindset shift to get your brain around the fact that you have to be comfortable in order to blow things up and start from scratch, or **[00:21:00]** to really change the way things have been traditionally done. You have to be comfortable with the gray area and you have to be comfortable with a little bit of uncertainty and a little bit of chaos at times.

Josh: As you can imagine, for those of you, again, who are administrators out there listening, from a reporting standpoint, the model that we just described doesn't necessarily fit into the reporting that states and other agencies might be **[00:21:30]** looking for, which is probably a story for another day.

Rachel: It's a little complicated.

Josh: That's the reason why I believe that some people don't go as far as they can in innovation, is because they're bound by that. They try to fit back into that hole that would be much easier if we reverted back to a traditional schedule of seven periods a day-

Rachel: We were uncomfortable in those routines.

Josh: -with one teacher, one adult that makes reporting much easier.

Rachel: It means that a lot of kids who don't fit in the boxes become **[00:22:00]** margin of error. Essentially, that's the reality for many students, is that the system does not allow them to have to be seen really. As we are looking ahead to year two, we're welcoming staff back next week and then students with them after that. We'll continue to focus on how we can best maximize the time that we have with our students and staff, and **[00:22:30]** continue to provide them a range of really exciting learning opportunities that prepare them for life after high school.

Josh: That's been another episode of *Education Disruption*. If you enjoyed the show and have some feedback, please go ahead and leave us a rating. If you have any friends or colleagues in education that you think might be interested in our show, it would really mean a lot to us if you would share this podcast with them.

Rachel: Josh and I are both on Twitter. You can reach me @RachelBabcock and Josh at—

Josh: @charpentierjosh.

Rachel: Our handles are also in the description. We'd love to connect **[00:23:00]** with you there. To learn more about our school, you can visit themapacademy.org or, actually, our Facebook page also has a lot of really good active content of what's going on every day around here. Thanks so much for listening and hope you tune in next time.

[music]

[00:23:20] [END OF AUDIO]