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Episode 3: Finding the Right Teachers to Do High School Differently

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

Josh: Where too many kids were dropping out.

Rachel: Were graduating unprepared for life.

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

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

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

Rachel: We designed our own system.

Josh: And created a school our students deserve.

Rachel: My name is Rachel.

Josh: My name is Josh. And this-

Rachel: Is *Education Disruption*. Hey, everybody, this is Rachel.

Josh: And Josh.

Rachel: We're here with episode three of *Education Disruption*. As we **[00:00:30]** approach rapidly, the end of August, and with it the beginning of a new school year, which will for us be our second in our new school's life, we have been spending a lot of time talking about staffing. Staffing is the heart and soul of any organization, and particularly in a school. It is a really, really big focus for us as the leaders of Map Academy. We started last year in our first year with a **[00:01:00]** team of around 16. We're really excited to be entering year two, we've grown to a team of about 25. At full scale, we grow to-

Josh: 32.

Rachel: -32. As you might imagine, as a very different kind of high school, we are looking for different type of staff person.

Josh: When we started off Map Academy, one of the biggest challenges **[00:01:30]** in recruiting staff. Not only did we need to find outside the box thinkers, for this new type of high school that we were trying to design and open, we didn't have a school to show them. That was a really big

challenge prior to year one. It's still a challenge to recruit highly qualified staff to work at our school. We at least have a school to show them now.

Rachel: We just had a plan really. **[00:02:00]** We had a plan, we had a charter, we were approved to be a school. We were recruiting students, but really in a separate silo than we were recruiting staff.

Josh: We had a shoebox office in downtown, where it was all theoretical and a big idea. We would talk to people about it. We'd be like, "No, no, no, we have a school, it's being renovated, it's down the street." It was for those people to really take that leap of faith in our idea was, A, incredibly humbling on **[00:02:30]** our part that these people were leaving their careers to come work for the school that Rachel and I created. At the same time, it was one of those really surreal moments in this journey to opening Map Academy that we were like, "Wow, people are putting their lives and their futures in support of our idea."

Rachel: Finding the right people to do that sometimes feels like that old cliché of needle in a haystack. We've **[00:03:00]** done a lot of work around trying to figure out how to best position ourselves, how to best tell our story in a way that naturally appeals to the type of people that we need to populate this place. As we talked about before, Map Academy is intentionally designed to be a haven for students who have really been underserved in other settings. We often talk about the well-meaning adults in those other settings.

The systems, **[00:03:30]** they really do mean well, but by and large, the students that we built this place for, our students who feel like they've been failed by those systems. It's super important that our adults, every single one of them, from our receptionist, to our nurse, to our outreach people, to our math and science and humanities teachers, to our food service, everybody here has to come with the mindset that they are here to put students at the center. **[00:04:00]** There's really no room, we're a small school, we're a small team. We really believe that our students deserve the very, very best staff that we can provide. The stakes are high, I feel like with staffing.

Josh: One of the things that continues to be, even I think it'll always be a focus of staffing and how we allocate resources to human capital is really the **[00:04:30]** mindset around positive youth development, and is that more important than teaching experience and in a model like Map Academy, and how do you balance that? Because, throughout this journey, we've met. some amazing people, we've met some amazing educators. One thing that we really try to address with potential hires, everybody comes in with that narrative of, I have this favorite student, Johnny, he was really falling behind. I took him under my wing. **[00:05:00]** They have that moment where they think they're awesome at it-

Rachel: The save the world moment.

Josh: -to save the world that we like to call it, the Michelle Pfeiffer effect, and to really explain and vet out and really think with potential hires as we progress through the hiring process, is that it's not just one Johnny, we're talking a school full of students who have opted to leave the traditional setting, because it didn't work for them, and really diving deep, particularly, **[00:05:30]** once we get to the point where we're about to hire somebody in the interest of transparency, going back to these people are taking a leap of faith to come work at Map Academy. We want to be open and honest with them, that it isn't going to be just one of those students.

Rachel: We're taking a leap of faith on them too, on behalf of our students. I think that that's a responsibility that feels very weighty at times. Because it's crucial, and honestly, that youth development part that you talked about, youth development work, people **[00:06:00]** who do it right, it means putting the students at the center, you'll hear us constantly talk about that. Putting students at the center, and building programming and support around what that student needs to become a better version of him or herself. It really is a strength-based approach. It's a very slippery slope to lowering expectations, because we feel badly for students or they come, we know that they have lots **[00:06:30]** of barriers and obstacles.

Vetting that part out, like positive youth development done right means that we hold students to high expectations, while we provide high levels of support, and personal attention, and a gradual release model that prepares them for a change in their trajectory. Not, oh, the teacher or staff members' ego **[00:07:00]** cannot be the primary driving force. That's hard, because this work is hard.

We're definitely looking for people that are somewhat selfless, but also have the strong sense of their own persona, that they understand not to take things personally, that they understand that building these relationships **[00:07:30]** with students is part of their job, and that they are comfortable with the reality that it's not this typical, I'm going to show up at eight o'clock in the morning, and I'm going to teach till 3:00, and I'm going to leave and not think about my job until I show up at eight o'clock the next day. That's not how it works here.

Josh: One really cool thing about starting from scratch, like we did with Map Academy, is that first and foremost, we look for awesome people. We explained that in the interview processes, the first **[00:08:00]** thing we're looking for is awesome people. We're not the school that posts an English teaching position, and we're interviewing 10 English teachers, and at the end of the week, we're going to narrow that down to three, and then we're going to hire one the following week. We keep our positions open, we really look for awesome people.

Rachel: Entrepreneurial people. Most of the people that make their way to us are frustrated in some way by the status quo where they were, but they can't be frustrated to the point of bitterness, they have to be and that's another like who's always like, **[00:08:30]** but when it comes to staffing, we want people that are frustrated, but we want people that are positive about their frustration. They're looking to be all in to doing it better.

Josh: Being okay with different, because it is different. Rachel and I always say that at times, it feels like we're building the plane as we're flying it because it is a brand new school. We're going into year two, but when you think about traditional public schools, some of these public schools **[00:09:00]** have been around for hundreds of years. They have systems that while they may not work for every student, they at least have a system. Staff does find comfort in some systems, whereas our systems are still being built. When you're really trying to create student-centered systems, it can get a little bit messy.

Rachel: I think that's the people that have thrived. As we head into year two, it's been a really amazing feeling **[00:09:30]** to know that we have veterans, they're veterans at Map Academy by a year. Within that year, there's so much institutional memory already, and there's so much experience, and there's so much wisdom already, and so many deep relationships, both staff with each other, and staff with our students and families. It's a really cool feeling to be bringing on a

whole bunch of new people to our team. I've really felt that this summer as we've been hiring **[00:10:00]** and as we've been bringing people in that our returning staff are taking so much ownership over this culture of this thing that we created in terms of welcoming people on board and helping us to set the expectation of what it's to work here and students. I think another thing to talk about that we haven't pointed out so far is that we're really committed to, Josh was referencing early on how hard it was to start this process when we didn't have a school.

We also didn't have students, but we had students from our previous program. **[00:10:30]** Part of our commitment on hiring is we're hiring staff for our students. They're here to serve our students. Students are a part of the hiring process, the hiring process here, we decided pretty early on that the most effective way when someone makes it pass the screen. The first screen we send them a pre-interview questionnaire that gets that mindset and helps us vet out whether or not someone has potential to be a good fit **[00:11:00]** for what we're looking for. Then Josh and I meet with them and really dig into that sense of fit and culture. That first conversation is very much a dialogue in which we're really trying to not only see if we think the person is a potential fit for us, but to have them have a chance to see if Map Academy is a fit for them.

Josh: Which that in itself is drastically different from a traditional hiring process, because usually you don't meet with the school leader or the superintendent **[00:11:30]** until the very end of the hiring process. We flipped that and the first person they meet with is us.

Rachel: That's part of how I think we've been successful in making sure that the people that we hire are a good fit and then they meet with students. In order to work here, staff need to be in front of students. We created that artificially in our first hiring season because **[00:12:00]** we had former students come in and act as interviewers but it's amazing.

Now we have a whole bunch of our students who absolutely love to be part of that, and they're really good at it and they have really good instincts about who's going to fit in here. There's definitely a vibe of, and if you talk to staff, they'll tell you that those are some of the most meaningful interviews that they've ever had in terms of students and we don't script it. It's not like the kids go in with a list of questions like in other settings **[00:12:30]** where there might be a token student at the table, but there's this list of highly scripted questions. Our interviews are very unscripted.

Josh: Often we're looking for the students as the adult to coming in.

Rachel: Yes, we are. Then they come in and sit down and we're basically just asking them for their gut reaction and their feeling about like, how does this person's vibe? And then we watch how the potential candidate interacts with students.

Josh: We talked about it last episode getting our kids those experiences and skills that really help them life after high school **[00:13:00]** and taking part in a professional interview is an incredible skill for a high school kid to be exposed to. All right.

Rachel: I think another thing that is really fundamental to how we do things around here actually had its origins before we even realized what its implications would be and that is the idea that Josh and I are co-leads, we're co-founders, we're co-directors, we have been very, very clear **[00:13:30]** about that from the beginning. We think it makes us stronger as leaders, we think it makes our organization stronger and we're committed to that. That's probably a topic for a whole another

episode in terms of co-leadership and why we think that's so important, but it's very much embedded in what we want from all of our staff. We did not have co-leads last year of various teams here, but we are entering year two with co-leads of our student support wraparound team and co-leads **[00:14:00]** of special education and our studio team, we'll be co-leads when we finish fully staffing that up, but the beauty of co-leads is that it allows us to create balance and it forces collaboration.

Sometimes, again, like Josh was referencing about things being messy. It can be messy when you force a collaboration because in order to move forward, you have to get to consensus, but **[00:14:30]** it leads to a stronger decision-making process when the system requires that people collaborate. That's also true in our learning studios. As we talked about in our scheduling episode, we don't assign students and teachers to individual blocks. Our teachers work together in studio teams and this year they're going to be working in interdisciplinary studio teams, which again provides all kinds of layers for collaboration **[00:15:00]** and it ensures that students are the focus and that adults are working to serve students.

Josh: Yes, I think Rachel said it perfectly, some of the things that we do around here at Map Academy, it just seems like the norm for us, but it's really outside the box thinking what Rachel said with finished fully staffing. If you think about a traditional school, they wouldn't go into a year not finished staffing. **[00:15:30]** They would hire a person, put them in that spot, whether it's the right person or not.

We've all been in interviews in traditional settings where we're like, "Eh, not sure if that's really going to work out, [crosstalk] but we need a person in there. Let's just give them a chance." Not here. Here, our resources are too valuable. Our investment in human capital of what humans we want in front of our students, we will leave a position open. One thing that we also do **[00:16:00]** around here at Map Academy that I think is really entrepreneurial and exposes kids to other skills is maybe there are some awesome people who can't commit to working full-time, maybe there is a person who could come in one day a week who could do something really cool with kids.

Maybe it's somebody who has experience with YouTube and music design and the visual arts, kids are really into that. Kids want to know how to YouTube, kids want to know how to make videos, but you know what? **[00:16:30]** We're not going to get a YouTuber to come work here full-time right now, they're making more outside of education than they would inside, but we can get somebody to come here one day a week and work with kids.

Rachel: We had some really good luck with that last year in one particular situation, which has then inspired us to think more really drill down on creating time in our schedule for those types of flexible staffing opportunities. We are really committed to trying to do--It's 2019 **[00:17:00]** so just like we're have a blended asynchronous learning platform so learning can happen to any place and at any time. We try to apply that same innovative spirit to everything around here, including staffing.

Our hires are not all--We need people who know how to teach. We need people know their content. Our students deserve nothing less than highly qualified math and science and English and history teachers and social workers **[00:17:30]** that are the very best at what they do, but that doesn't mean that everybody that comes to Map Academy needs to come from the traditional teacher preparation nor administrator or social work preparation pathways.

There's lots of other ways that people's experience can be an invaluable part of our team and that's starting to happen more and more. One of our new staff members is coming to us from a non-profit that she started and running experiential STEM opportunities. One of our staff members is coming **[00:18:00]** to us as the education director of a regional community theater. One of our staff members came to us from higher ed in which she was a student advisor, and they all have really unique skill sets that they can bring to our team and thereby our students.

Josh: I think as we grow as an organization and as we expand our staff, as Rachel mentioned earlier, we do grow to 32 **[00:18:30]** staff members that's if we don't add any more as we grow. I think that we really have to think about what does that look like from an organizational standpoint, particularly for Rachel and I, as we are committed to remaining part of the day-to-day operations here at Map Academy, as we elevate to a higher level so that we can ensure organizational sustainability. It's really--**[00:19:00]**

Rachel: And eventually scale.

Josh: And eventually scale, that is the goal. It's, how does that decision making happen? We mentioned in the first episode, Rachel and I are just two people who opened a school and we're learning a ton about the organizational sustainability, the back end of things, but that is what building the plane as we're flying.

Rachel: That's actually really, I think the best part about why the people that have found their way to us **[00:19:30]** and become such key parts of this place is the best moments in staffing conversations are when people say things like, I can't believe this place really exists, or I've always wanted to do this, they get the opportunity that they have to join us in inventing something new and that is really tragically rare in our **[00:20:00]** public education system, I think, that opportunity. I often think to my days as a classroom teacher, I was a middle school English teacher and high school English teacher. I loved that ability to invent in my own classroom domain.

Beyond that, a lot of times the traditional system doesn't really allow for a lot of that autonomy. Our staff, especially once they've acclimated and develop the relationships with students, they have tremendous autonomy. I find myself **[00:20:30]** lately looking around and realizing that all these great things are happening that I didn't even know about until they already got going.

That is so cool because when you're just starting out and you're a two person team and you're trying to climb this seemingly insurmountable mountain of opening a new school, it seems impossible that you will get to that point where you have a team of people that are mission aligned and along **[00:21:00]** for the ride. We have that now. It makes it sound easy, because it doesn't always work out. It's not like it's a fairy tale and every person that we hire turns out to be a great hire. That's an episode for another day.

Josh: We would be remiss not to mention the fact that, as the founders of the school, as the day-to-day operators of the school, Rachel and I, **[00:21:30]** we often say we're like the 7-Eleven of education, that we're open 24/7. We literally work every single day. Very rarely are we "off-the-clock" and really trying to take a step back from that and have a realistic expectation with our staff that, there are often times when Rachel and I might be at school on a Saturday. We're like, "Why isn't anybody else here?" We're like, "Wait a second. We need to take a step back. That's an unrealistic **[00:22:00]** expectation to think that everybody's going to be here every minute that we are," but we do have some people now.

Rachel: That's the founder's thing.

Josh: It is, it's that founder's syndrome that you can't--It's an unrealistic expectation to think that everybody's going to be here every minute that we are, but at the same time as we grow as we think about the organizational evolution, those are the people that we're hoping will rise to the surface and take on bigger roles at Map Academy. **[00:22:30]**

Rachel: We're heading into year two and tomorrow actually is our first day of staff PD. We have some absolutely, incredible people coming back and some incredible people joining us. I'm really excited to see where that leads for our students. I think with that, we'll probably get back to getting ready to launch year two. That's been another episode of *Education Disruption*. If you enjoy the show or have feedback, please go ahead and leave a rating. **[00:23:00]**

Please, if you have friends or colleagues in education, you think might be interested in our show, it would mean a lot if you'd share this podcast with them.

Josh: We are both on Twitter and you can reach us @RachelBabcock and @CharpentierJosh. We've also put the handles in the description and we'd love to connect over there. To learn more about the school, feel free to visit themapacademy.org or check out the Map Academy Facebook page.

Rachel: Thanks so much for listening and we'll be back next week with another episode of *Education Disruption*. **[00:23:30]**

[00:23:34] [END OF AUDIO]