



MAP ACADEMY

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Episode 4: Cultivating a Positive School Culture on the First Day of School

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

Josh: -where 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 deserve.

Rachel: My name is Rachel.

Josh: My name is Josh. This-

Rachel: -is *Education Disruption*. Hey, welcome back to another episode of *Education Disruption*. I'm Rachel.

Josh: I'm Josh.

Rachel: Today was the first day [00:00:30] of our second year of doing high school differently at Map Academy. Our topic for today is going to talk about the first day of school.

Josh: It was a surreal experience last year opening a school. One thing that Rachel and I have been talking a lot about this past week was at least this year we're not waiting for our certificate of occupancy, because this time last year, it was opening the school for the very first time, and all that goes into [00:01:00] not only opening the school but opening the building. We have this certificate of occupancy all set this year, which was awesome. Just to open a public school for the second year in a row, is an incredibly overwhelming, but awesome experience.

Rachel: I just love having the kids back. I think that our summer was great. We had a lot of students here for summer studio, and we had staff around. There's really nothing like that feeling of [00:01:30] the new beginning of a new school year. I from way back have always loved that. It was really cool to see our new staff, our new students, our returning staff, and students.

The building comes to life at the beginning of a new school year. [crosstalk] When you realize also when you're the one that is orchestrating all of that, I think especially as founders of still a little less new high school, [00:02:00] I think sometimes it goes unnoticed what has to happen behind the scenes in order for all that to happen. Like is the food going to get delivered? Are the buses going to show up? All that stuff.

Josh: [00:02:11] they didn't this afternoon?

Rachel: Is the Wi-Fi going to work? Are we going to have enough computers? Is all that stuff. We got to the last-minute delivery of Chromebooks this morning, which we desperately needed.

Josh: That was very well-timed.

Rachel: The food showed up, and the buses have showed up. It was a really good day. I think that we were [00:02:30] really fortunate to have the summer to do some iteration work and some tweaks to our model. We hired some great new staff. We just came off of a week of staff PD of welcoming and acculturating our new staff to our community. It was great to see that come to life today.

Josh: Definitely. I think one thing that we did over the summer, the student population that we work with, they want to be in school. Sometimes life does get in the way, and they can't be in school, [00:03:00] but they want to be in school. One of the decisions we made over the summer was to keep the building open. We never really closed for the year. We were really trying to become a school, although we can't be 12 months year-round right now. The building is open year-round, and the kids know, and we saw a lot of the kids over the summer. Once the reality sets in that today, August 28th is the first day of school. We have approximately 50 new students [00:03:30] co-mingling in the space with approximately 110 returning students.

Rachel: Those returning students are founding students. There's something very special about that, about coming off of our first year and building a school from the ground up. We were very clear through that whole experience and that was obvious to anyone that was here that we were a new school. We also really empowered our students to be founding students [00:04:00] and their voices have been part of this journey all along.

One of the weird things was as excited as we all were to have our new students come and our returning students come back, as we were working on the preparations for launch, it became very clear to all of us returning staff, that our biggest concern point was around the intersection of our returning students and our new students. Because this beautiful thing has happened with our returning students, they feel ownership and investment and [00:04:30] connected.

Like Josh said, they really want to be here. In the last week or so we were really struggling with how do we validate that without having them feel like their turf has been taken over by these new students and who are these people that are in my building. When you design, like we did, a really student-centered high school experience, the students get really attached to that experience, which is the whole point. We put a lot of thought into how to validate that and also empower them to be leaders and welcoming our new students into the [00:05:00] space.

Josh: Because our founding students from last year, particularly the ones who are with us from day one, those students who--The student population that we work with a lot of times there's some matriculation in the student population. The students who have been with us since day one, they

view this place as almost like their house, and they don't want to share the space with new people, new students, or new staff.

It's really a unique **[00:05:30]** perspective to see as the leaders of this school, we really had to figure out how are we going to address the students. How are we going to talk to all of the students while at the same time not making the new students feel like they weren't welcomed into this community?

Rachel: We put some really careful thought into that. It became very clear that our different constituencies, so to speak, really needed different messaging. We spent some time mingling in the morning and then we orchestrated **[00:06:00]** our day so that we had time with our returning students to validate all of that and to tell them how happy we are to have them back and to tell them about the changes that we've made because we definitely were learning from our first year and we still are.

That learning stance led us to some pretty significant changes in program delivery. Just no changes in terms of our overall mission or philosophy, or the overall feel of the school but some definite changes on our academic **[00:06:30]** programming side. We took some time this morning to have a community meeting with our returning students and staff, and to walk them through all that with the rationale for why we were doing it. While our new students were with our new staff doing some icebreakers and community building stuff. I think that that was really important to have the previous, the transition from where we were to where we're going. We took it on and I think it was really successful.

Josh: It's that new student **[00:07:00]** versus founding student dynamic that as the leaders of the school, along with the staff. It was a work in progress all day long to ensure that our founding students felt basically welcomed home and our new students felt like they were welcome in the home.

Rachel: We had lots of smiles.

Josh: Lot of smiles, lots of laughing.

Rachel: Lots of relationships, renewing relationships, lots of friendships being built. Our space, as we've talked about in previous **[00:07:30]** episodes a little bit, our space is by design, flexible so that it supports our model. Students have a lot of autonomy within that space. Sometimes like everything else, that can be a tension between flexibility and the need for structure. Sometimes that's where the row can be. We're really conscious about having our staff circulate and having our staff prioritize relationship building because that's really the foundation upon which it's all built.

[00:08:00]

It's really amazing to see the sparks that get created when students begin just at that very moment that they start to create what we hope will eventually be trust. I saw so much of that today. The beginnings of conversations of adults sitting down and having meaningful conversations with students that are just the beginning. That doesn't happen in big public high schools. It doesn't happen. Kids go in, and they follow their schedule, and **[00:08:30]** the bells drive them to the next place. I did that for years. I'm a teacher standing in front of the room, and I'm meeting 25, 28 new kids, and 45 minutes later, the bell rings and I meet another 25 or 28 new kids. I used to just focus on trying to learn their names. Now what happened today was actual relationships are being built. I

stood back at lunch and was just looking around at everything that was happening. [00:09:00] It's really kind of remarkable.

Josh: I think we had a lot of new students today. Rachel and I, and a lot of the staff worked really hard to try and learn as many names as we could. That's really important to the kids that we knew.

Rachel: I know them all.

Josh: When I was signing out computers to kids, I knew their name. It meant so much to them that they were seen.

Rachel: It's the beginning of [unintelligible 00:09:26].

Josh: They knew. A kid comes in and I fill out the form for him. "Oh, [00:09:30] here you go." Knowing the person's name to start that relationship is huge because these are the students--Not knowing their name because they are the troublemaker because they're used to people knowing their name in schools because they're the troublemaker or they keep getting sent down to the office. We knew the name because we wanted them to be here. We made them feel like we wanted them to be here and they were seen.

The whole goal for today for day one at Map Academy and we stress this with our staff during professional development last week, was to make it a celebration. [00:10:00] We wanted to celebrate the first day of school. We wanted to flip the script of coming into school and not really wanting to be back to school. We hung streamers, we had a cake.

Rachel: That's totally the opposite of what happens in other settings because it's all about get to structure, get to structure, get to structure. There's certainly, a need for that but if it's structure first and people second, then you're creating a real problem point, especially for young people who [00:10:30] are resistant or have been failed by those strikes.

Josh: That is a tight rope walking that tight rope of at what point do we put more structures into place, but it's really in order to be a truly student-centered school and to put the student at the center of their education and allow them to move at their own pace, which is what our mission is. We need to have that flexibility.

Rachel: It has to be founded on relationships which was my biggest success [00:11:00] of watching today unfold is being able to stand back at times and watch what's happening and see adults and students creating that from the ground up, is a really humbling and magical thing. We had some students here today that haven't been in school in a long time, whether because A, it's been summer. There's this inherent thing and lack of structure and return to structure that happens at the end of summer and B, there's some of our students who [00:11:30] weren't in school because they were basically, unable to go or refusing to go or opting out of going.

Then we have some students who had dropped out one, two, three, four. I mean, we have one student, at least that's been dropped out for like five years. To see that happen, have a community of those young people coming to a place and putting their trust in us to give them a clean slate and a new chance at high school is pretty amazing.

Josh: Just to see the [00:12:00] growth of our current students, because a lot of, weren't open for the summer, but not at, we weren't able to provide transportation so we didn't get to see a lot of our students to see those students. A lot of our students work because they have to work. They

don't work because they just want a couple of extra bucks. They work because they have to work. Just seeing the growth of our current students. I overheard one conversation with a couple of students who they weren't the most mature last year when it came to altercations with other students. **[00:12:30]** One of them was really saying, "You know what, it's a new year. Why don't you just go talk to that person? Why, don't we be there for each other?" To just hear that growth on day one speaks to the volume of the culture that we try to create—

Rachel: Time, that's part two, you have to be comfortable. Like all of our planning, we had new student orientation yesterday and today. Two days in a row, we've given our staff agendas at **[00:13:00]** which right at the top, it says all times fluid because you'd never know exactly what's going to unfold. That's part of the disruption is the getting comfortable with that sense of not necessarily having everything all scripted out, which after years in a traditional public system is definitely an adjustment.

Some of our new staff needs time to adjust to that. It's incredibly liberating **[00:13:30]** to know that if it's not working, we're going to change course. We can change course at a second's notice which is a very empowering and sometimes nerve-wracking thing because there's, it would be nice to have things fully scripted out, down to the minute. It doesn't really work with our model to have an approach that's rigid like that.

Josh: I think at the end of the day, here we are at the end of our first day of school of 2019, we had approximately, **[00:14:00]** 150 -- what people would call "at risk" or "off track" -- those students together in one small building. We had more smiles, laughter and hugs enjoy than any negative experiences, swearing, it was an amazing first day of school at Map Academy for year two. The space was **[00:14:30]** tight. We do have some challenges with the space and the current building that we're in. It's small for the amount of people we have in it, not just students, but staff as well. Rachel and I started talking about how can we expand our space sooner rather than later.

Rachel: There's a plan for that. There is a plan. That's not the stuff you can leave to chance that stuff is like that. There's always that balance of the things that can be left unscripted. Then in the background, there's always these other **[00:15:00]** logistical threads that just have to keep moving forward and where there's zero room for that type of ambiguity. How many Chromebooks do we need and when do we need them and what has to happen with the buses and the food and the space and all of that stuff that is behind the scenes.

That's a really interesting thing. I think that we could explore at another time around the duality of, in so many ways, there's so much structure that has to go into creating an environment that has **[00:15:30]** less structure, it's that the structures that in other places are forced down and everyone's feeling them here, they're running like are under and around it. There's a lot of work that goes into creating.

Josh: Yes, like space management. We talked about it in previous episodes, particularly in episode one in how Rachel and I had just two people who opened a school, but the organizational, **[00:16:00]** the umbrella organization of Map Academy that Rachel and I run day to day that Rachel and I manage along with the school is, is essentially a full-time job in itself, like payroll and benefits, Chromebook watering, and space management and the lease of the transcripts. It's just things like when you work for our district, they have other people doing **[00:16:30]** whole departments that just people take it for granted that it just gets done. Rachel, and I, why we couldn't have scripted it

any better today. We knew going into today, we were about 15 computers show up. Now, keep in mind, we are a one-to-one school.

They were ordered a long time ago, but they were, they were delayed. In Chromebooks, as you can imagine at the start of school, every school in the area is getting Chromebooks. We had a small backup plan **[00:17:00]** and then like 8:30 AM... here comes the delivery with 50 more Chromebooks. That has happened to us a lot. We talked about it a lot throughout the journey of Map Academy is just stars aligning to make this mission work.

Rachel: You got to be able to roll with it. You got to know that the backup plan is going to get made when the backup plan needs to get made.

Josh: Have a staff.

Rachel: That's the brilliant part.

Josh: Have a staff of people who have that same **[00:17:30]** mindset.

Rachel: We hired seven new team members who start their first official day at Map Academy today.

Josh: There is no playbook for this.

Rachel: We're getting better at finding the right people. They were getting people getting better at finding the disruptors. It's really about that. It's about finding the people that are really frustrated with the status quo and have the courage to say that there's got to be a better way.

Josh: We would love to keep talking, but it is our first day of school. **[00:18:00]** We do have a staff meeting coming up with squeezing this in, on the, in a break between kids leaving and staff meeting.

Rachel: With that, it's been another episode of *Education Disruption*. If you enjoy the show or have feedback, please go ahead and leave a rating.

Josh: If you have friends or colleagues in education that you think may be interested in our show, it would mean a lot to us if you'd share the podcast with them.

Rachel: We're both on Twitter and you can reach me @RachelBabcock.

Josh: And @CharpentierJosh.

Rachel: We **[00:18:30]** put our handles in the description. We'd love to connect with you over there to learn more about Map Academy. You can visit our website, themapacademy.org, or check out Map Academy on Facebook.

Josh: Thanks so much for listening and we'll be back next week with another episode of *Education Disruption*. **[00:18:50]**

[00:18:51] [END OF AUDIO]