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Episode 5: Disrupting High School Education Requires Patience

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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: 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's Josh.

Rachel: This is *Education Disruption*.

Josh: Hey, what's up, it's Josh and Rachel back for another episode of *Education Disruption*, episode number five, and today we're going to talk about patience **[00:00:30]** and how that relates to running a student-centered school. We were at an event at the JFK Library in Boston a couple of weeks ago, and there was a quote projected on the wall that really resonated with us. We've gone back to it a few times with our staff and with ourselves.

What that quote says is all of this will not be finished in the first 100 days, nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor even perhaps the lifetime on this planet, but let us begin. We often feel that way **[00:01:00]** here at Map Academy, because we really are trying to revolutionize what a high school experience can look like for students whom the traditional system has failed, and that requires a great deal of patience.

Rachel: Last time we talked about the first day of school and how we had prepared for that with our staff and how exciting it was to have students here and the building coming back to life. The reality is that it **[00:01:30]** is quite a process and that it takes a lot of really conscious effort to recognize that things don't happen overnight. They don't have an all-in-one-day and best-laid plans don't just magically morph into everything being exactly the way we want it.

Josh: That's really where, when you're trying to run a student-centered school, and we mentioned this in **[00:02:00]** a previous episode, that temptation to go back to the traditional and how much easier that would be. If you think about it, we talked a lot about the master schedule and what that looks like in a traditional school. The bones of that, of having one adult with one group of kids in one room makes the operation of a school much easier, but it's that exact system that is why it's failing the student population that we're serving.

Rachel: Our answer a lot of times around here is **[00:02:30]** "I'm not sure." Or, "We need to figure that out," and that is a really empowering and sometimes terrifying thing, especially for staff while they're getting used to it. We actually just said at a staff circle – we circle up in the morning to kick off our day. We actually just said this morning, that it is by design.

That a lot of times the answer to our questions are we need to figure that out because if we have everything scripted, we have everything figured out. **[00:03:00]** If there's always a black and white answer to how we do things, then we're not focusing on the students anymore because the students are always going to be in the gray area. To really be student-centered, we just welcomed somewhere in the vicinity of 50 new students last week.

When we combine that with our existing students, there's a lot of gray there. We can't have all the answers until we figure out who we're working with at a bare minimum, we need to **[00:03:30]** figure out what's going on with each of those individual students. There's a lot part of what this place is about being comfortable in that gray area.

Josh: Along with the new students, we also had seven new staff members joining our team. There's a lot to really go off of in this first couple of weeks of school. Something that Rachel and I have talked a lot about lately is the organizational structure of Map Academy **[00:04:00]** and how in most organizations, things tend to flow downhill, where in our organization, things tend to flow uphill. Which is really by design because otherwise, we would lose control of the mission. We would lose control of being that student-centered flexible school.

Rachel: What Josh means by that is that in a lot of places where there is a really hierarchical leadership structure, decisions happen from the top, down. Then **[00:04:30]** they go to the next layer of leadership to implement and bend that late layer of leadership, put some spin on it, and then passes it down to the next layer. Because if you're in a traditional environment, right, you might be a teacher and then you might have a lead teacher of your department and you might have an assistant principal. Then you might have a principal. Then you have an assistant superintendent, you have a superintendent.

All of those layers mean that decision in particular around change tends to come from **[00:05:00]** the top down and it rolls downhill. Therefore, problems tend to get pushed down to someone else to deal with. Questions get directed to someone layers down on the org chart and here, because we don't have that hierarchical structure, we don't have an org chart with all of those layers. That's also by design, but the reality here is that we're much **[00:05:30]** more in tune as leaders with the day-to-day and what's actually happening. A lot of times, as people are dealing with how hard this work is-

Josh: It's a credit.

Rachel: Okay, it's a credit. Alright.

Josh: Pause.

Speaker 3: Hello, my dear, second-grader of the day for Mike, first credit of the year, **[00:06:00]** first credit of high school for you. Look at that, your first high school credits and it's day five. Very nice, good job, Jasmine and Mike, and even lunch doesn't stop us from the credits! Congrats to Jasmine Campania and actually Mike for second credit of the day and [unintelligible 00:06:21] first for Jasmine.

Rachel: Sorry for that little interruption. If there's a little blip right there, we just had a student earning **[00:06:30]** a credit. One of the really cool things about Map Academy being asynchronous like we've talked about before is that students, when earning their credits, we celebrate them immediately. A student wove her blue credit slip in the window and we stopped; everything around here stops for credits.

We announce them and celebrate them right away, but as far as the idea of being patient goes, as it pertains to leadership, we have as this idea of **[00:07:00]** things not flowing down through layers of leadership here, and the type of organization that we've created relies on Josh and as leaders being in the trenches of what's going on because that's the only way to be responsive to what in the end our students need.

We have, especially at the beginning of a year, a ton of questions from staff. They're especially staff who **[00:07:30]** are coming from traditional environments, they're seeking clarity that sometimes we can provide because sometimes things are clear and we can provide guidance that answers their question. We try to do that as much as we possibly can. Other times, the clarity that people are seeking can only come with time and more knowledge. "We need to figure that out together" is a really common answer around here, and that is both part of the opportunity and the challenge of running a school like this.

Josh: [00:08:00] It's that us being in the trenches with the kids and with the teachers day in and day out, really, in my opinion, makes us more effective leaders and really being able to make organizational decisions on what's best for the kids. Not only are we being a student-centered school when it comes to academics and student support, but our resource allocation is also student-centered. We're not the school that's doing purchase orders and three weeks later, we'll get a big shipment of **[00:08:30]** notebooks in. We would be nimble when making purchases based on what the students need in real-time.

Rachel: It's really interesting because in some ways we talk about patience in some ways we've removed. We're so quick and that what you just talked about and how nimbly we can handle things like decision-making around purchasing, how quickly we can adjust around here. That's almost like a gift just to people who are impatient.

You don't have to wait around for a lot of that stuff. There's a lot of operational **[00:09:00]** stuff that we can be super quick about. That takes forever in other settings. At the same time, this core sense of patience like the fundamental patience that like, I'll order your supplies really quickly. You send me what you want and I'll order it.

It comes on Amazon Prime and it'll be here before you know it. I'm going to ask you to be a lot more patient when it comes to figuring out how we're going to handle X, Y, or Z problem or X, Y, or

Z situation that has to do with **[00:09:30]** what--If it's student-facing, then it's probably something that we're going to have to spend some time really thinking through before we jump on a solution.

We try really hard around here to make sure that our change is intentional and that we're not just changing. It's really tempting. This is an issue with change management. I think no matter what, it's very tempting to just see a problem and fix it, see a problem and fix it, see a problem and fix it. That can lead **[00:10:00]** to a whole people feeling like a pendulum, just swinging back and forth and back and forth, and people don't have a chance to get grounded. We try really hard around here to be very intentional about substantial change to make sure that it isn't going to set us back.

Josh: Yes. Coupled with patience, is this idea of prioritization as an organization and as a staff. How do we prioritize, A, what the students need, B, what the organization needs, **[00:10:30]** C, which things on the to-do list get done first as we're trying to really--Particularly in these first few weeks of school, Rachel and I are trying to be out in the school community as much as we can to drive the organization.

Rachel: Yes, I think a lot of times in this means, and it can be off-putting to people at first, because it can often mean quite literally, I'm not going to answer that question right now. **[00:11:00]** I'm not going to answer that. We're not going to talk about that. It means putting things on the table that are very uncomfortable for people, but when are we going to figure out this math sequence or when are we going to figure out what to do about our next cycle of seminar courses and after these, and are we gonna, and what do you think about this idea for?

Those are all great and there's definitely some dancing around that needs to happen to figure out which of those pathways should we pursue right **[00:11:30]** now. Which of those pathways are really best left until a little bit later in this journey, which in this case is a school year. That part is definitely tricky. There's a lot of power that comes from that. For example, I was talking to a student this morning, who's going to try to graduate in November, but she might not quite make that. She asked when's the next graduation is going to **[00:12:00]** be?

I said, well, it's definitely going to be June, but it might be March. We might need a graduation in March. The reality is that we might need a graduation in March. If there are students who don't finish by November, that could be done in March, then we'll need to plan a graduation for March. That will be cool and it will be exciting. I don't need to decide today if we're going to have a graduation in March. That's just one example of it. There's a whole bunch of other ones, but if we have a cohort of students that are ready to graduate or could be ready to graduate, **[00:12:30]** then we need to plan a graduation.

Josh: Just the fact of talking about having a graduation in November, potentially March, and having the ability to actually operate and make that happen is the nimbleness that Map Academy needs to remain truly student-centered. With that nimbleness also comes having to take the temperature of the school, essentially every single day. Both the adults in the school and the kids in the school. As we've talked about in previous **[00:13:00]** episodes, our students are walking through the doors of our school every day with very complex lives outside of school, and trying to balance all of those complex lives while remaining a student-centered school at times becomes very difficult.

Rachel: Yes. That can be everything from thinking about how are you using all of the variables that we have? How we're using space, how are we using time? How we're using staff, everything from

how we're doing **[00:13:30]** dismissal in a really operational way. Like we have too many kids going out this door, we need to adjust this because this flow isn't working to how are we scheduling students into seminars, which teachers are going to collaborate together. All of those decisions, what time is lunch gonna be? How are we going to have community meeting, which is a really core element of what we do here? When we have too many students to fit in the space that we used to use for community meeting, **[00:14:00]** how are we going to brainstorm around that so that we can remain true to what we're doing, but also grow?

All of those things require not those layers of hierarchy. We're too small to have all those layers, but if we try to replicate that traditional decision-making structure that happens in public school districts and in public schools, we would take forever to make any one of those little decisions that we just mentioned from a graduation to dismissal **[00:14:30]** time to scheduling, to what time is lunch to what are we going to do about community meeting?

All of those things would take months, potentially years to make some of those decisions. We don't have that time. Our students don't have time to wait, so we built it in. Luckily it was one of the great decisions that we made was to ensure that throughout the chartering process, we built flexibility in as essentially every element that we could put flexible, we put flexible and we **[00:15:00]** use that. We leverage that every day.

Josh: All of those things also require a tremendous amount of patience. Yes, because we may just take one of those small things in the list that Rachel just mentioned, take the dismissal. We may say we're going to dismiss student drivers out of this door, everybody else out of that door, do it for a few days and realize that that was a terrible idea. Maybe we should switch things around, but if you come from that.

If you're a staff member and you come from the mindset that you really need to **[00:15:30]** know which door are the student drivers going out of...that isn't the mindset of a staff member at Map Academy. The mindset of a staff member at Map Academy really needs to be able to flow in the gray area because it is that flexibility that allows students to feel comfortable here to see the staff here feeling uncomfortable at times as well. It makes them feel more part of the community. They actually feel it.

Rachel: [00:16:00] Yes. I think it's what makes students feel like they've found a place that can work for them. As I mentioned before, all the new students that have started as we get to know all of them, all of those layers come out of what didn't work about, where they were before. It's amazing how many times it comes back around to something about somebody not being patient. They're not patient with what time they got to school or how fast they were learning or when they turned in their project by, **[00:16:30]** or how they handled their vaping habit.

I could literally go on and on and on with all of the points at which patience is a choice, a conscious organizational choice to be patient is foundational to positive youth development. It's foundational to this place for sure. As soon as we start removing that, as soon as we start demanding that **[00:17:00]** it happen now on this day or at this time, or this week, or this month, or even this year, we start to lose people. It's just like the master schedule conversation about putting people in boxes. As soon as you start to expect one size fits all, it doesn't work.

Josh: How the founding students know, the returning students know how Map Academy operates, but the new students don't necessarily know exactly how Map Academy operates.

Rachel: Map Academy can't continue to because we're committed to **[00:17:30]** continuous improvement and to constantly iterating and tweaking our model. Even our returners, both staff and students, we've asked them to acclimate to some pretty significant changes in terms of-- Because we know that the changes will make us a better school. The changes that we were largely in terms of schedule, but also in terms of moving to interdisciplinary studios in terms of adding seminar block

.In terms of some really exciting changes that we've **[00:18:00]** made, we're at the same time in these first few weeks of school, asking our returning community to adjust to change or managing that. Then we're also acclimating onboarding students and staff who don't know the way we used to do it. They only know now, and that is really dynamic; it's an exciting place to be. I think it makes us a better school, but it can definitely be navigating amaze a little bit at times as a [00:18:30] leader.

Josh: Yes. It all goes back to that idea of having patience with both the new staff and with the returning staff as everybody adjusts to year two at Map Academy, and how we can really stress to the staff that not everything is going to be done overnight. Not everything is going to be done in the first couple of weeks of school. This is a work in progress that we're with a really complex set of students and trying to make **[00:19:00]** the high school experience intentionally different.

Rachel: So that when it happens and it comes always back to the students just in the last day or so. I had a student afraid that one of our new students miss an intake meeting because she had to work. And then she assumed she had to reapply because she assumed that because she missed that meeting, she lost her spot and there would be no way that we would take away her spot. She doesn't know that because she comes from systems **[00:19:30]** in which that would have meant that she would have missed the deadline, that she would have not shown up for the first day of school.

We would have given up on her. It also comes from that student that we haven't seen in forever, all of a sudden walks through the door and says, is it too late? No, it's not too late. I think that idea of never quite knowing and the patience doesn't mean that everyone, in the end, is going to like get with the program and it's going to be a fairy tale in which it just magically works for everyone. If you don't have patience, you'll never know. **[00:20:00]** You're basically closing the door on progress.

Josh: These students are used to having doors closed on them. Then at Map Academy when we're opening doors for them, it's a strange experience for them because they're not used to it. At times, they'll actually act out because they're not used to somebody opening a door. They're used to somebody closing the door. They're almost like, oh, wait a second. They're just opening the door. They're not going keep this.

They're not going to **[00:20:30]** keep this door open for me. Nobody's ever kept the door open for me. Then once we build a relationship particularly with the new students and that's what I mean by the returning students know how we operate. We've gained the trust and respect of the returning students. We're in the progress of doing that with new students but they're expecting that theoretical door to shut and it's not going to.

Now that we're in the second week of school, some of the students are now turning the corner on that and realizing like whoa, wait a second. **[00:21:00]** This door is actually still open. This school actually meant it. It's awesome to hear new students talking about this school really is different, I love it here. For students, we've seen their academic histories, they didn't say they loved school in

the past. I think that as the school leaders of Map Academy, that should be the number one goal that a kid can walk through the doors of school and say they love it here first and foremost.

Rachel: Then the patience comes because then as it keeps going **[00:21:30]** figuring out what do they need academically, where are their skill gaps, how can we help them learn? How can we develop their competency, prepare them for life after all that endless list of wishes that we have for our students? It all comes with keeping that door open, that door to the patience.

That means that we as leaders have to absorb all of that stuff flowing upward at us – all of those questions, all of those walk out of the office and get bombarded with. Sometimes I can walk 30 feet **[00:22:00]** and feel like I got bombarded with 30 people needing or wanting something but that's the power because in that right there and leading through that is what creates the opportunity to do what we're doing for these students.

Josh: That's been another episode of *Education Disruption*. If you enjoyed the show and have some feedback, please go ahead and leave a rating.

Rachel: Any friends or colleagues of yours in education that you think might be interested, we'd love if you'd share this podcast **[00:22:30]** with them.

Josh: We're both on Twitter and we can be reached @CharpentierJosh and

Rachel: @RachelBabcock.

Josh: We've also put the handles in the description and we'd love to connect over there.

Rachel: To learn more about our school you can visit us at themapacademy.org or check us out on Facebook.

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

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[00:22:58] [END OF AUDIO]