



MAP ACADEMY

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Episode 6: Keeping Teachers Informed & Empowered Through Responsive Professional Development

educationdisruption.org

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

Josh Charpentier: 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: 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: Hello. This is Josh.

Rachel: I'm Rachel.

Josh: We are back here for another episode of *Education Disruption*, episode six, on responsive professional **[00:00:30]** development.

Rachel: We've talked so far in this podcast about some of the structures that we've reimagined here at Map Academy and our journey to do high school differently to meet the needs of students that are traditionally underserved in other settings. We've talked about scheduling and we've talked about how we handled the first day. We've talked a lot about our students. We've talked about having patience with our students and staff. Professional **[00:01:00]** development is a foundational element of any school or any workplace probably, but certainly, any school, and is one of the many things that we have reimagined here.

Josh: In a traditional school, professional development is really laid out for the whole year. They have the school calendar and they know exactly what days their professional development

meetings are going to be. Oftentimes, they know exactly what topics each professional development day is going to be on.

Rachel: [00:01:30] It's usually published by now. It would have been worked on, a lot of people put a lot of work into that and a lot of work into assessing what the needs are, and then coming up with a calendar and launching that calendar. It's often very high-quality information. It's certainly important information, but we know that in the type of school that we run here at Map Academy, that our approach to PD like everything else, needs to be centered on the individual and on the moment. [00:02:00] We have adopted a really different approach to PD in terms of making sure that the work that we do with our staff responds to where we're at, at that time.

We have buckets of things that we know are priorities, and we work under goals for the year, overarching goals of what it is we're trying to accomplish. We can talk more about that, but the reality is that on a day-to-day basis, we have to be in tune with what's happening and what's working and [00:02:30] what's not working, and what people need. We've set up some systems and structures to allow us to be responsive.

Josh: We've set aside some time in the calendar as well. Every week, we have at least two hours together as a whole staff. We aim for more than two hours but we have one day a week, Wednesday, where full staff meets for at least two hours a week. Then, also new for this year, we built in one full [00:03:00] day a month, so that we really had time to dive deep into some of those overarching goals that we're trying to do as a school.

Rachel: That means that we release our students early on Wednesdays. They go home at 1:00 so that we can give our staff a break and then convene as a team to work through a wide range of topics. It's really an important part of the culture here. It provides a break in the middle of the week and it allows us to [00:03:30] monitor and assess what's happening and guarantee that we have time to work through that as a staff. This is really hard work; all work in all schools is really hard. In particular, in a new school, serving challenging and complex students, the work's hard. Having a responsive PD model is one really important way that we can make sure that we're staying in tune with what the adults need so that they can continue to serve the students.

Josh: Then, [00:04:00] as we've mentioned in previous episodes, keeping the intention of truly doing high school differently so that our student population feels like school is different for them when they come to Map Academy, but with a different high school experience, we are also creating professional development opportunities for us, for our staff, which at times may not be the typical professional development. It may seem more like a staff meeting when we're all brainstorming the events of the week or, what [00:04:30] we need to do to be responsive to our students because something might have happened in one of those students' lives that is rippling and affecting several students. It's really taking—

Rachel: We don't do a ton of outside PD. Based on what Josh is saying around responding to what our students need and what's going on, it isn't productive for us. At least at this point as a beginning of year two school, it's not productive for us to say that on such and such a date at such and such a time, this provider [00:05:00] is going to come in and talk about X or Y or Z. Even though we know that X and Y and Z need to get talked about, and there are all kinds of great providers that could come in and help us at the moment, that external sense is almost guaranteed to be a disconnect from the pulse of what's happening at that time.

When we're asking so much of our staff to then come in and sit and get that sort of sit and get PD that is often very common, you come in, you sit down and you get it, whether you need it or not, is not really effective for us. **[00:05:30]**

Josh: A good example of that is we're not planning the professional development for December in September. We're planning the professional development for September in September, all connecting back to those overarching goals that we have as an organization. We do have buckets of things that every professional development meeting touches upon, but we're not planning the actual sessions too far in advance, because we want to be responsive.

Rachel: It's like classroom teaching, honestly. I've mentioned **[00:06:00]** before that I was a classroom English teacher for a long time. I find that responsive PD is much like responsive classroom teaching. When I was teaching English in middle school, I had an overarching sense of where I wanted to go, but I was not looking at my lesson plans for--like Josh said, I wasn't looking at lesson plans much more than a couple of days ahead.

Even though I had a sense of where I was going, I need to be able to know what's happening in different classes are going different directions and different students are going different directions and **[00:06:30]** that same mentality. Then we're honestly asking our staff to do that with our students. Our instructional model is based on that degree of personalization and to some extent, our PD model is as well. We have three goals for this year based on our experiences last year. We talked before about reflecting and being committed to a learner's stance.

You have to be when you found a new school, but our three goals for this year are to strengthen our instruction. **[00:07:00]** We focused a lot last year on engagement and re-engagement, and that will always be goal number one around here. Goal number one is always going to be engagement and re-engagement, and having students connect with school because if we don't do that, we don't get to goals two, three, four, or 100. Goal number one: engage. We did that last year, pretty much exclusively focusing on that. Then this year, our goal is now that we get engagement, is to work on strengthening our academic progress so **[00:07:30]** that we can help students to fill skill gaps and be more prepared for life after high school.

Josh: The second goal is to track on common measures, which we will probably dedicate a whole episode to in the future, but really breaking down, what does success look like for our students? How can we break students up away from the traditional grade levels that traditional high schools use that expect kids to progress based on what year they were **[00:08:00]** born in? How can we go higher up and look at uncommon measures?

Rachel: Taking a creative approach to data, in that goal is how do we make sure that we're focusing on the right data points in collecting and tracking the right data, in addition, to the traditional data like attendance and course completion rates and all of that stuff, standardized testing scores? We also want to make sure that we're looking at other less commonly measured focus points.

Josh: Those big **[00:08:30]** buckets of goals that are driving our professional development and our staff meetings weekly, allow us to be truly responsive to what's going on in the building in real-time.

Rachel: In doing that, it is very, very likely that we are deciding the exact focus for our time together pretty close to our time together so that we can say, okay, well, this just happened. How are we

[00:09:00] going to place that into the context of what we're talking about? We try to make sure that we have through lines and threads and those overarching goals definitely provide that, but we're not scripting it out in advance. We start all of our staff PD or almost all of it. We try to start all of it with our responses, with a circle.

We use circles as an engagement tool here and as a community building and a way to create connection. **[00:09:30]** We believe very much in that concept of circling up and having everybody have a voice. We do that at the beginning of our staff meetings as a way of checking in with each other and seeing where we're at. We actually added this year, as hard as it is some mornings and the craziness, we actually are circling up as a staff every morning at 8:05. As long as the weather's nice, we've been doing it outside, which is really nice, and we'll have to move it inside when it starts to get cold here in **[00:10:00]** Plymouth. For the time being, we're doing that morning circle, and then we start each Wednesday staff session with a circle.

Josh: In a previous episode, we talked about finding the right teachers for Map Academy and it takes a really special teacher to take part in responsive professional development. If we're coming up with the topics in real-time, oftentimes those topics have come up from very recent events that have taken place and really to come together as a **[00:10:30]** team and really be able to learn from one another those mistakes without feeling like you're being called out is at times a difficult thing to do as our staff is getting bigger.

Rachel: It definitely is. Then there's some things that we really needed to talk through and there are definitely some norms and the best way to set norms--The only way to really set norms is to do it as a whole group. You have to norm, what does this look like? What did it look like before? What does it look like now? What's working. What's not working. **[00:11:00]** That takes a lot of time to hash those things out. In a traditional setting with the hierarchical leadership structures that generally guide everything, those conversations are happening, but they're happening at like one layer of leadership.

Then it's filtering down to the next layer and then filtering down to the next layer, and three or four layers later, it's getting to the teachers and counselors, and staff who are actually spending their day-to-day with students. The difference here is that our PD **[00:11:30]** professional development is much more inclusive in the sense that it is involving the voices more frequently and deliberately of those who are actually doing the work with students. Which here at Map Academy is everybody, because every adult here is doing the work with students.

Josh: While trying not to go too far into the weeds of any given topic or of any given student situation, because we only have a limited amount of time together as a whole staff.

Rachel: The staff are at different points in their own **[00:12:00]** journeys as educators, as professionals, as human beings. We need to differentiate for our staff much like we do for our students. One other thing that we added this year in an attempt to--We don't have traditional planning time here. It's really pretty impossible in an asynchronous blended learning environment in a year two school. We may get some place down the road where we have a big enough staff and we have a nuanced enough understanding of the flow of the day that we could **[00:12:30]** get to a point where certain teachers have off periods.

We don't have that now. We also don't have "duty periods" where someone says, you must do this at this time. Everything here is much more fluid and we love it that way, but it means that the time

here is harder to create environments. We had to consciously think about creating focus points where we could come together to work on various things. We launched this [00:13:00] fall, a new approach to meetings. We changed our actual teacher workday. Last year our teachers all worked 8:00 to 4:00. Our student day is 8:30 to 3:30. Last year, our teachers all worked 8:00 to 4:00. We changed that this year. It's another thing that would be really weird in another setting but we extended the workday on Tuesdays and Thursdays and then shortened it on Fridays. We created meeting time. Not only do we have our Wednesday PD, [00:13:30] but on Tuesday afternoons, we have an hour block where our studio teams, our interdisciplinary teams meet and they plan and work together to be responsive to what's happening in their studios.

On Thursdays, we have an instructional planning meeting at which we talk specifically instruction. As we get through the year so far, we've been still norming and getting things going. [00:14:00] As we go, that will be the place where course development and review happens, where we do standard setting around what student work looks like and around what demonstrates confidence and holistic scoring and standardized assessment, data analysis, and all that stuff will happen at that time on Thursdays.

Then we also have twice a week team lead meetings at which we do have and recognize the need for a layer of some of our returning [00:14:30] team members to help us to sculpt and shape things that maybe everyone isn't ready or needs to be part of the conversation on. You can definitely get bogged down in the detail of everybody talking through everything.

Josh: Because we're a responsive school and because we are truly innovating in the high school experience, it's a really empowering feeling for a teacher or a staff member to come and work at Map Academy to know that change is [00:15:00] possible. Oftentimes when you're stuck in that traditional setting and you do it year after year after year, it feels like change is impossible. One of the reasons why we really wanted to start this podcast is to demonstrate that change is possible even in an institution that really hasn't fundamentally changed much in the last hundred or so years.

Rachel: We're very fortunate at Map Academy due to our status as a new school and as a charter school, [00:15:30] which gives us all kinds of autonomies. We're very fortunate here that we control pretty much all the variables and that's really, really cool and empowering thing to know that we have control over all the variables. You don't have to have control over them all to create disruption and create change in the variables that you do control. We do talk outside the box about pretty much everything around here because we worked really hard to get to a place where we had a clean slate and where we could [00:16:00] really do it differently. Professional development is the type of thing that could be changed up on its own independent of other variables.

Josh: We view this podcast as a professional development experience for our staff. A lot of times, as you can imagine, starting a new high school, as we mentioned in episode one, we get a lot of questions like, "You did what, you started a new high school?" We've started telling our current staff [00:16:30] members and potential staff members, you should really check out the podcast because it tells a story. It talks about what we thought about when we were rethinking high school. We will continue to tell these stories because it's really helping capture this journey of opening and operating a new, innovative high school.

Rachel: It changes over time. That's true quite literally of everything except the foundational pieces. Again, with PD, we've talked a lot about flexibility [00:17:00] and we will continue to talk a

lot about flexibility. Honestly, in the end, coming down to responding to adult needs and adult development requires flexibility. It means we have to have the flexibility built in to know that we have the flexibility and the time. If you have those, if you can create an intersection of flexibility and time, then really anything's possible. That is something that is very much in action here at Map Academy every day.

Josh: I think [00:17:30] even the idea of professional development being, just to go back to having the podcast, be a professional development experience in itself as well, it doesn't necessarily mean that it has to take place at one time with one group of people. Somebody could go back, a current staff member, future staff member could listen to these episodes at any time and learn what we're trying to do here at Map Academy, which not only saves time and resources so we don't have to continue [00:18:00] to repeat the same thing over and over. It's being flexible in really doing what we said we're going to do, and not just taking an asynchronous approach to professional development, just like we take an asynchronous approach with our kids.

Rachel: It's messy sometimes like everything else. That comes up in almost every episode. I find myself talking about how messy it is because it's messy. We can think we know what's going to happen and then we can pivot and we have to pivot. Sometimes we pivot because we want to, sometimes we pivot because we have [00:18:30] to, and all of a sudden it can feel a little bit of a scramble. That improvisation that happens when you have the flexibility to use your time, the way it makes most sense to use it, that is really, really--Again, it comes back to a very similar philosophy around what good classroom teaching looks like.

I think it's some of our very best staff PD sessions are that get surfaced during that opening circle. It's the same as in a classroom. [00:19:00] How do you know what's happening in a group and you surface it and then you deal with it and you figure out a plan to move forward from it. By including every voice, the beautiful thing about a circle is that it includes every voice or at least it most often includes every voice.

Josh: Going into the staff meetings and the professional development meetings as well, knowing that we don't have everything figured out, there is no playbook for this. If there was a playbook to opening new high schools and doing high school differently for an off-track population, [00:19:30] everybody would be opening new high schools and doing high school differently for the off-track population. There is no playbook to how to effectively open and operate an innovative school for students in which school hasn't worked for in sometimes years.

Rachel: That's a vulnerable place as leaders of a school to be sometimes and you have to get comfortable with vulnerability to create disruption, because disruption by definition means that it's not stable, always along the way. That [00:20:00] idea which is really, I think mind-blowing probably from a traditional perspective that the leaders of a school would sit in a circle with their staff and open the floor essentially. Open the floor to where people are at and then respond to it. It is challenging at times and staff here have to get used to that uncertainty of us saying--And sometimes we say definitively, "No, not doing that." [chuckles] [00:20:30]

Sometimes we go into detail about why, and sometimes we don't have time to go into detail about why it's just, "No, we're not doing that." We try to then circle back around and explain the rationale between why, but most of the time, it's an open-ended question. It's something we can think about

and it's something we can figure out and when we don't know the answer we try super hard to say we don't know the answer.

Josh: The awesome thing now about being in year two is we're having other staff members who-- It's not just Rachel and [00:21:00] I giving rationale about the why. Now we mentioned it in a previous episode that we were beginning the formulation of a leadership team underneath Rachel and I and their voices are being elevated because now they're no longer year one teachers in a brand new school because oftentimes it feels like, as Rachel and I have been working on Map Academy now for six years or so, we're only in [00:21:30] year two. People look to us as if we have everything figured out, but it's great now that we have some people who are in year two with us. I imagine if I could forecast to the future once we have people who have been with us for 5 or 6 years, 10 years.

Rachel: They know what we're going to say.

Josh: Correct.

Rachel: They can answer a lot of those questions from a Map Academy perspective. This is what's going to be the answer which is really nice, because there needs to be some of that.

Josh: That's been another episode of [00:22:00] *Education Disruption*. If you enjoyed the show or have feedback, please go ahead and leave a rating.

Rachel: If you have friends or colleagues in education or work with youth that you think might be interested in our show, it would really mean a lot if you would share this podcast with them.

Josh: We are both on Twitter and I can be reached at @charpentierjosh.

Rachel: I'm @RachelBabcock.

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

Rachel: Thanks so much for listening and we'll be back next week with another episode of *Education Disruption*. [00:22:30]

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[00:22:36] [END OF AUDIO]