



MAP ACADEMY

Education Disruption Podcast/ October 21, 2019

Episode 8: No Letter Grades at This High School | A New Academic Model

educationdisruption.org

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: Created a school our students deserve.

Rachel: My name is Rachel.

Josh: My name's Josh, and this-

Rachel: Is *Education Disruption*.

Josh: Hello, and welcome back to another episode of *Education Disruption*. This is Josh.

Rachel: I'm Rachel.

Josh: We're here today for episode eight, [00:00:30] to talk about the academic model of Map Academy.

Rachel: Yes. Along with everything else that we do differently here, first and foremost, we are a school, we're a high school, and our job is to ensure that our students have the academic skills that they need to be successful, not only in high school but in life after. Our mission is to make sure that students have options when they graduate, and that their path [00:01:00] can be determined, they can be the determiners of their own pathways, which means that we need to make sure that they have solid skills as readers and writers and thinkers and mathematicians and problem solvers.

We've talked a lot, in other episodes, about how we build relationships, and we talked about youth development, and why it's so important to hold kids to high expectations, but we haven't really dug into exactly what the academic model looks like here.

Josh: One thing at Map Academy is, when [00:01:30] Rachel and I were opening Map Academy, we had a really deep dive into the grading system of Map Academy, and the traditional grading system, the antiquated grading system of A, B, C, D, and F. We really took a step back from and thought, what does an A actually represent? What does a B actually represent? All the way down to, what does an F represent? Then you've got this other thing in [00:02:00] there, like a D minus.

Rachel: Yes. In life beyond school, there's really no such thing as letter grades, and in the early years of school, there's really no such thing as letter grades. We don't really talk about letter grades in preschool or primary grades, and then somewhere in like late elementary school and heading into middle school, and then big time by high school. Yes, in college, we start to talk about letter grades, as letter grades being--What they're supposed to be is a representation of skill, but what they [00:02:30] really are is not that, and, or maybe they're that, but it's really hard to tell when we see a grade on a transcript, what that actually represents.

One of the first decisions that we made when we were doing that examination of what our students need from us, is the decision to be a competency-based school. What competency-based means is that instead of moving forward based on letter grades, thereby saying, "Okay, you got a minimum grade of a D." Usually, you move on. [00:03:00] That you will move on based on mastery, and that when you demonstrate competence or mastery in skills, that should be the determining factor of when you move on to different content.

That competency-based decision remains one of the--It was one of the earliest ones that we made, and it is one of the most important ones because that is what allows us to take a step back from a lot of those other things that we've talked about in other episodes, about things that we assume have to be the way they are, when in reality, they're choices. [00:03:30] In a traditional high school, students are scheduled for a full year course of English, a full year of math, a full year of science. Those generally start in September, and they go through June, 180 days' worth of content. It's usually broken up into either trimesters or quarters.

Sometimes there's semester-based classes that are half a year, but a student's schedule, by and large, is seven or eight blocks, or either in one day or in a block [00:04:00] schedule; sometimes it's four classes one day, and four classes the next day, but somewhere between seven and eight courses that last mostly from September to June. The kid enters the course, and they work through content, at the same time, with the same adult, every day or every other day, and at the end, they either get credit or they don't get credit.

Josh: That seven or eight block schedule looks very similar to every other student at that student's [00:04:30] age group. We really took a step back from not only the grading system of the academic model, but also the grade levels, because you can't be a non-time bound school, but still have grade levels.

Rachel: We don't talk about Grade 9, Grade 10, Grade 11, and Grade 12, and we don't talk about letter grades, A, B, C, D, F. We, however, have the same academic requirements as the vast majority of high schools in Massachusetts. We follow, for the [00:05:00] most part, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's

Mass core recommendations. The state does not dictate local graduation requirements, but they make recommendations.

Our students, to graduate from Map Academy, they need the equivalent of four years of English, four years of math, three years of science, three years of history, four exposures to Phys Ed., a bunch of electives, they need to pass all three MCAS exams, which is our state **[00:05:30]** assessment here in Massachusetts, in English, math, and science. Then we have added graduation requirements of students having career development exposure and opportunities, at least two credits in that. They need to have an actionable post-secondary plan, and they need to have a capstone project before they graduate.

Overall, for our academics, what do students have to do in order to graduate from high school? What do they have to learn? They're still learning the same stuff that they would need to learn in any other public high school in Massachusetts. **[00:06:00]** Our courses are all based on the common core, and on Mass curriculum frameworks, just as they would be anywhere else. Our delivery of what the student experience looks like is very different here. We get a lot of students that have struggled. The vast majority of students that we serve have struggled in the past.

Their transcripts are what we call "Swiss cheese transcripts" sometimes, which means that they have pockets of things that they've mastered, and pockets of things that they haven't. When a kid has interrupted school history **[00:06:30]** or interrupted success with school, and they take that 180 days that a typical course lasts, well, if they're struggling for parts of that, then they're missing. They have holes in what they learn. They have gaps in their learning.

Josh: Particularly for the student population that we serve here at Map Academy, even within that Swiss cheese transcript, we see a lot of D minuses. We talk a lot here about, what exactly is a D minus? For the educators out there, **[00:07:00]** when you think about a student who got a D minus, they didn't know almost half of the material.

Rachel: Maybe, or maybe they knew a ton of the material, and they didn't come to school often enough.

Josh: Maybe they are a pain in the class and the teacher didn't really want to deal with them the next year.

Rachel: Yes, or maybe they got an A for the first two quarters, and then something happened. They got sick or they were hospitalized or they stopped coming to school or their life got complicated, and they failed the second two, and the average of an A, plus an F is somewhere in the vicinity **[00:07:30]** of a D. What's the difference between you get a 60%, which is generally the cutoff for a D minus, and a 59.4%, which is an F? That correlation between credit and no credit, and then there's this whole other thing where a kid gets a passing grade, like an A or B, and then they get denied credits because they missed too many days.

So, their attendance went over, but they demonstrated a passing grade, and so there's no credits awarded, which is a whole 'nother subject. **[00:08:00]** The reality is, that those grades on a transcript do not reflect learning because that D minus in geometry could mean any one of those things that we just listed. It could mean that they actually know 60% of a geometry sequence of material, or it could mean that they know 20%, and they did it make up packet at the end of the term, and the teacher felt bad for them and gave them a D minus and pushed them along.

It could mean that the teacher knows they're going to have to teach them again, and they don't want to, or they do want to, or--**[00:08:30]** There are so many different variables that lead into that

very subjective mathematical decision, that says that a kid is going to pass or fail a class. The implications of that are massive at the high school level because the content is hard.

If you take that D minus in geometry, and you say that the kid falls on the side of passing, then they go into their next year and they get moved on to the next math course, and they may or may not have the foundational skills that they need in order to understand that math [00:09:00] class, or on the flip side, they don't get credit for that geometry class, and they have to do the whole thing again. Maybe they don't need to do the whole thing again. That's where the beauty of competency-based education is. It basically removes that idea that a letter grade is what's the determining factor.

We're also, and this part gets a little jargony because there's lots of adjectives to describe our academic model that are not true in other places, but they're really actually not that complicated when you boil them [00:09:30] down. We're competency-based – progress is based on actually being able to do the work, and demonstrate that you can do it. We are also asynchronous, which means we're not linked to time, and we talked about that in our episode about scheduling. That means that we are not saying that that course has to happen at the same timeline for everyone else. It doesn't have to start in September and end in June.

It can be self-paced, and kids can finish it when they finish it, and move on to the next thing, or they can stay with it when they haven't learned it yet until they master it, which is huge. [00:10:00] In order for competency-based education to be implementable at scale, being asynchronous really helps with that. Because if you're going to let kids move at their own pace, you have to have a schedule that supports that.

We're competency-based, we're asynchronous, we are also blended, which means that we, and we talked about this in other episodes, but blended means that we leverage technology to house content online, and high-quality courses, libraries of them, live online, and our students [00:10:30] can access that content, but they do it with real teachers at a real school. We're a brick-and-mortar school, with real live amazing teachers, but our content is housed online.

Josh: With the factory model of traditional education moving based on your birthday, and everything that Rachel described on what does learning look like when you have a D minus, to us made absolutely no sense. We thought that the model that we put forth, that we have here on Map Academy, not only prepares students better [00:11:00] academically to graduate from high school with the skills and experiences needed to be successful for life after high school, but it also gave them the structure in which they can move at their own pace, which is huge in real life.

People in real life move at their own pace after high school. Not necessarily based on what birthday, what year you were born in, or what grade cohort you happen to be in. Students need the ability to move at their own pace, so that they can come up with [00:11:30] the skills to be successful in life, and not just the skills to sit in the back of the classroom, get that D minus and skate by.

Rachel: Or get that F and give up, and drop out. The nature of competency-based, asynchronous, blended learning at Map Academy means that our academic program is much more responsive. It does not mean that every kid is on an individualized curriculum. The curriculum is the same, the standards are the same, the [00:12:00] expectations of what students need in order to graduate, while there's certainly some room for electives and choices of passion-based work, and not every

kid needs to take the same exact science sequence, or the same exact set of English courses, they don't need to read the same exact books.

They need to have the same exact skills, or at least a minimum threshold of skills in order to be competent learners for whatever they choose after high school. Here, at Map Academy, [00:12:30] personalization is not about, and it comes back to that youth development, personalization is not about lowering the standards, it's not about coming up with different standards for different kids. It is, however, about customizing the experience of how students access that content in a way that meets them where they are and helps them get to where they're going.

We have set in place as many flexible structures as we can, in terms of how we use time, and how we use staffing, to [00:13:00] ensure that our kids are getting the academic attention that they need in order to fill any gaps that they have, and then build upon the foundation that they need in order to move forward.

Josh: That being competent, and proving that they're competent in the material, we have conversations with students all the time that, they get angry because they have to prove that they know the material.

Rachel: They just want that D minus and move on sometimes.

Josh: Students will say, "Listen, I [00:13:30] just want to do what I can to pass the class." We're trying to reverse that. We're trying to flip the script of saying, "No, it's not just about getting the passing of the class, you actually need these skills to be successful in life."

Rachel: The only way that competency-based, high-quality competency-based education can happen is if you have a culture of revision, because most of us don't do our best work the first time. At least not at something hard. In life beyond school, when something matters to us, [00:14:00] we work hard at it, and we naturally revise. Humans are natural revisers. Because we need to revise in order to get things better, in order to achieve our desired effect. Students instinctively know that, and young children understand that because they'll keep trying and trying and trying at something until they figure it out, because that's the nature of authentic learning.

In schools, too often, that's not the case because you sit down, you take a test, and you get a grade on it, and you move on. The culture of revision is a really important part of our academic model here. [00:14:30] We use a competency-based tracking system, which we've talked about in the past. It's that blended platform that basically everything hangs on, or a lot of core academic experiences hang on. Within that, there is a culture in which if an assignment does not yet meet the standards, the teacher will flag it as needing revision, and then they will leave feedback for the students because that's how we learn.

We learn by getting feedback on our attempts, either our own self-feedback or feedback from an external evaluator or external [00:15:00] source that helps us know what it is we need to do in order to get better. That's part of the academic model here, too.

Josh: We think that that blended learning aspect of our model is not only important because it's the glue that holds the competency-based and asynchronous model together, but it's also teaching kids tech skills necessary to thrive in 2019 and beyond. If you can't adequately use a computer, in 2019, your employability goes way down. Every [00:15:30] job out there requires some sort of technological capability at this point.

Rachel: You know what, honestly, in the state of the Internet, and the way that we can access knowledge, there are so many high-quality online learning experiences that are the future at a post-secondary level and beyond, that you can learn something because you're interested in it, and you want to learn it. What we [00:16:00] try to do here is make sure that each student is enrolled in the courses that they need to move them forward. Then when they finish a course, they get a credit and they move on. Blended learning – note – is very much a different kind of teaching, because it's not sitting in front of the computer.

There are online schools where you log in, and it doesn't matter where you are, and there's online courses, and that works really well for some content for some people, where you can log on to a course, and your instructor is virtual, or maybe there isn't really an instructor at all, you're moving through [00:16:30] lessons like a Khan Academy model, where you're moving through. There's so much value to that, and there's a lot of high-quality stuff out there, but that's not our school. Our school is blended, which means that our teachers need to facilitate in a very different type of academic model.

We talk a lot about blended learning facilitation modes, and that can include everything from one-on-one work, to conferencing, to mini-lessons, to small-group instruction, to whole-class instruction. All of those modes [00:17:00] prepare students, as Josh was saying, for the type of things that they need to do in life beyond school. That is something that we worked really hard to embed in our academic model.

Josh: That is something that's really hard to roll out at scale, on a whole school level. We have iterated on our schedule a little bit to really, really come off of the computer, and have face-to-face experiences at certain points throughout the day. It's a fine [00:17:30] balance because we really want to maintain that asynchronous and self-paced approach, which is really where the tracker and where the blended learning leveraging helps us.

Rachel: It is a tightrope because we definitely want our students interacting with each other, and there's so much value in discussion, and debate, and collaboration, and group projects, and all of those things. At the same time, and we do have those things here, and it's one of our main focuses in year two, is to add more [00:18:00] of those, and to systematize the way in which we provide those opportunities as a menu of options for students.

If you think about what we've talked about, about our student population and how complex they are, and how many external barriers interfere with sometimes just the sheer act of coming to school, then say nothing about being able to concentrate once they're here, about sorting through all of those other things. At the same time, we've also talked about the importance of youth development, meaning that no matter what's happening, [00:18:30] no matter what barriers there are, we don't make excuses for those. We provide support for those, in order to enable students to move beyond them.

At the same time, that means that, if we go back to that example of a geometry class that starts in September and ends in June, if the teacher is the one delivering the content to a group of students at a set time, and the kid misses it, which is what happens in other places, what is that kid supposed to do to learn? What is that teacher [00:19:00] supposed to do, to help that student who have missed that class to catch up on that content? When you're talking about high-level courses

that provide rigorous academic experiences, and then you offer them at only one time, that's where it goes down around to that Swiss cheese thing.

I missed that lesson in geometry because--What if there's a valid reason why they missed it? What if they missed it because they're sick, or they have mental health stuff, or they were caring for a family member, or they missed **[00:19:30]** the bus and no one can drive them, or they have substance abuse? I could go on that list. Again, that endless list of reasons why sometimes it's hard for students to engage the way we want them to, or wish that they would. They missed that lesson. Maybe they missed two or three or four or five. Maybe they missed two weeks. Maybe they miss a month.

What are they supposed to do? What is the teacher supposed to do when a kid has missed that content, and then they come back in, and they don't have time to reteach that? That's **[00:20:00]** where the blended asynchronous thing is so important, and that's why competency-based is so important. Sometimes when kids first get here, and they're craving that "move on" thing that Josh was talking about; they'll just submit work. Those go through the motions like they used to. The equivalent of writing a couple of words on a worksheet and passing it in, we have that here.

Picking C on a multiple choice test all the way through, figuring that the odds are you might--The equivalent here is to just click submit on tasks. The teacher, there's some acclimation that has to happen around the recognition **[00:20:30]** that, "Okay, you can't just click submit on a task. You actually have to do the work. You actually have to demonstrate competence in order to move on."

It does lead to some frustration at the beginning, but we're big believers here that frustration is healthy because that frustration, if funneled correctly, and if it's frustration around learning, that kids are developing resilience by working through that frustration, and by learning that they actually have to learn.

Josh: That's why we have got to episode eight, and it's the first time we've really delved into the academic model of Map Academy because for the student population that **[00:21:00]** we serve, we can't get to the academics unless we do the PYD. Unless we train the staff in a responsive way that they can roll out this method. Unless we can build the trust in the students, that they can trust us enough that they don't just have to hit submit so that they can get to the next lesson. That we actually care about them enough so that they prove that they know the materials, so that they can be successful in life.

Rachel: Yes. Kids will say things like, I just had a kid to say to me this morning, I was helping him, because as we've said before, **[00:21:30]** Josh and I are both really hands-on leaders. I've said before that I'm a classroom teacher by blood and by practice, forever, even though I don't teach so much anymore, but I was working on a task with a student today. It was a history course and he was off task when I encountered him, and I was trying to get him back on task, but through that I was working with him on this task.

He said to me, he's like, "You know what, I've never done this much schoolwork in my life till I came here. I used to just sit in the back of the class **[00:22:00]** and bother the teacher until they left me alone. Now, I have to do all of this work." He said, he's like, "People get frustrated with me that I'm not earning credits fast enough, but I'm doing more work than I've ever done in my life." That is a 16-year-old, and he's telling the complete truth. He is. He is working harder. We are asking students to work harder.

It is, again, I don't think an episode of this podcast goes by where we don't talk about it being messy, because it is messy. If you allow [00:22:30] for things to be self-paced, and you are believers in natural consequences, then you can always fall back on, the result of effort is progress, and the result of lack of effort is lack of progress. In that regard--Progress also can be measured in lots of uncommon ways. It's not always just the grade that represents the process and the progress.

The kid that can reflect after [00:23:00] a year, he's a returning student and he's been here now heading into his second year, that he can reflect on that and understand that, "I'm actually having to work in order to learn," is something that just doesn't happen if you allow kids to sit in the back row, and get D minuses, and get passed on to the next grade.

Josh: We have a firm belief, here at Map Academy, that that model of learning prepares students for life much [00:23:30] better than progressing a student based on what year they were born in.

Rachel: Yes. The persistence with difficult tasks is--The persistence through difficult academic content is really our goal. It feels very, very different here.

Josh: Intentionally.

Rachel: Yes.

Josh: That's been another episode of *Education Disruption*.

Rachel: If you enjoyed the show, or have feedback, please, as always, go ahead and leave a rating.

Josh: If you have colleagues in education that you think might be interested in listening [00:24:00] to our journey, please feel free to share the podcast with them.

Rachel: Yes. We're both on Twitter. You can reach out to us there, and you can learn more about our school at themapacademy.org, or check us out on Facebook or Instagram.

Josh: Thanks so much for listening.

Rachel: We'll be back next week with another episode of *Education Disruption*.

[00:24:25] [END OF AUDIO]