



MAP ACADEMY

Episode 9: Running a High School as Co-Leaders

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

Josh Charpentier: Where too many kids were dropping out.

Rachel: Or graduating unprepared for life.

Josh: We found that 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 filled by the system.

Rachel: We designed our own system.

Josh: And created the school with our students deserve.

Rachel: My name is Rachel.

Josh: My name is Josh and this—

Rachel: Is *Education Disruption*.

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

Rachel: I'm Rachel.

Josh: Today we're going to talk about the [00:00:30] co-leadership structure here at Map Academy.

Rachel: One of the many things that is different about this place and about our journey to open a brand new public high school was that very early on in this process, we made a decision that we were going to build our team around a co-leadership model versus the more traditional like executive director and head of school or [00:01:00] superintendent and principal. The reality is that Josh and I serve as co-directors of Map Academy. We're also the co-founders.

Josh: We definitely have our areas of expertise, but at the end of the day, like Rachel said, very early on in this process, we decided that the co-leadership structure was not only the best way to create an innovative high school to truly do high school differently, but also [00:01:30] was a way

that we could really really become I think a powerful force in getting the school open because our strengths and weaknesses really complemented one another.

My strengths around operations and budgeting and Rachel's strengths around teaching and learning. It's really hard to find somebody to do all of those things. Very early on, we decided that why does it have to [00:02:00] be an executive director or a superintendent and a principal? Why can't it just be two people running an organization?

Rachel: There's lots of reasons why that makes sense for us at Map Academy; we are a small school. We now have a staff of 24, but we started as a team of two, as Josh said. Then as we grew though, we knew that part of [00:02:30] our model requires, and we've talked in the past about responsive professional development. We've talked about the type of people that we are hiring and the autonomy that we give our staff. We knew that we didn't want a hierarchical leadership structure. We're too small for it, honestly, and there's no need to have layers after layers, after layers of leadership, it slows things down.

It makes decision-making much harder and quite honestly, the budget of a small school can't sustain that type of structure. When you start to [00:03:00] look at building out an org chart for a new organization and you think about what roles do we really need, and then how is decision-making going to happen.

What we have prioritized is the reality that there's something about having co-leadership, which implies that there is going to have to be a consensus. There's going to have to be decisions are going to have to get made. There's versus one person we knew we didn't want silos. We can't have silos. [00:03:30] We can't have silos between our disciplines. We can't have silos between, we don't have grade levels. We can't have silos of leadership. Budgeting and finance and operations cannot exist in a silo separate from teaching and learning.

Josh: We knew that as a small school, we were going to do what we're asking our staff to do as well. We run the school in a co-leadership structure. If you were to come to Map Academy, Rachel and I share an office [00:04:00] space. We ask staff members to share space. No one is assigned a particular classroom. We really envisioned Map Academy as one big learning environment where everyone works as a team.

We knew very early on that if we could demonstrate that team cohesiveness in the co-leadership structure, that it would trickle down to the teaching, to the support staff, to the clerical staff, [00:04:30] to outside providers. We knew that the co-leadership structure would be the basis to what Map Academy thrived on.

Rachel: It builds in a redundancy too. The other thing about being we're very hands-on leaders, and we always will be. We're a small alternative charter school serving a really high-need student population by design. You can't have this sense of, we knew that [00:05:00] our door to our literal and figurative office always needs to be open. If we can't, we have to have a shared knowledge base so that whoever is closest to a situation has the knowledge that they need in order to deal with that situation. That's true, whether it's a staff situation or a student or a parent or an outside person, or some kind of police situation or a children and families situation.

The other value, one of the most important [00:05:30] values to co-leadership is that it requires-- Our mission is to be interchangeable to our staff, students and families as much as possible. If they

catch me, they get the same answer as if they catch Josh to the extent that that's possible. That basically allows for the fluidity of what happens on a daily basis around here. It means we can things move at a really fast pace and they have to move at a really fast pace. It can't be like, "Oh, Josh isn't here. Wait until he gets back for an answer," [00:06:00] or "Rachel's in a meeting so you need to wait until she gets out." We don't have time for that.

And so the co-leadership model, it basically doubles our capacity to handle situations as they come up. It means that we're stronger because we intentionally make sure that while Josh is doing a lot of things that I don't necessarily focus on, I'm paying attention to them. I'm learning about them. I've learned those buckets. My background is [00:06:30] as a teacher and a literacy coach and not so much on the budgeting and operations, but at this point I know a ton about budgeting operations. I can do budgeting and operations, and Josh is the same way with teaching and learning.

Josh: I think at its most simplest form as a co-leadership structure, as the co-directors and the co-founders of the school, quite simply there is too much for one person to do, [00:07:00] to open and operate a brand new school. It really allows not only for the day-to-day operations, but just to know that there's another person who is carrying the equal weight and equal authority in the organization. Because it does get heavy. It's heavy, it's a stressful job to create open and operate a new public [00:07:30] school.

Rachel: In traditional education leadership situations and recruiting or leadership, it's hard to find that person is someone an instructional leader, or are they more of an operational leader. It's hard sometimes because to really be good, we need to run not only a school. We our school leaders, whereas basically in a typical setting, we would be what would be co-principals. Were co-principals of the day-to-day operations of a [00:08:00] high school. That means we're dealing with everything from student issues to staffing issues, to operational issues, to building issues too.

We're also co-leaders. We're essentially also co-superintendents, because as a charter school, we don't have an umbrella organization. We are both the umbrella organization and the school. We're essentially co-superintendents and also co-principals versus one of us being the superintendent and our executive [00:08:30] director, as it often is in charter schools and one of us being the principal or head of school, which just that hierarchy right there would have made things so much harder. We, by definition now, we definitely don't always agree.

In fact, we, I don't think that it's possible or even healthy for co-leaders to always agree, especially in a situation that's as hard as this one is, but we have to figure it out. It's not like [00:09:00] one person is going to be the final rule. The consensus is that we have to figure it out and we make better decisions, I think, because of that reality that it isn't that one of us is in charge and the other one is reporting to. I don't think that it wouldn't have worked.

Josh: No, it definitely comes the co-leadership absolutely comes with some challenges too. Not only when it comes to--if there's a disagreement and how do we work through those disagreements. One of the other challenges is to just throw it out--There is the gender difference [00:09:30] between Rachel and I. It's certainly a real thing. There are people who will who come to me thinking that I would be the person in charge of something simply because they expect the male co-director to be the one who's in charge.

Rachel: Or conversely, right, to come to me with something that would be more apt to some problem that would be more stereotypically assumed [00:10:00] to be something that a female might be. There's definitely a role for that. I think that the gender dynamics, I agree with Josh, you can't really underestimate the extent to which that's possible. We play that to our advantage. There's certainly situations in which that matters. That could be said a lot of things, the instruction versus operations. Which one of those is more important. Neither, they're both important. You can't have an effective school without both.

I [00:10:30] think that the code thing is really part of that. I think it does. It's hard sometimes for people at first to understand. It's very intuitive and there's actually a lot of research that shows that co-leadership is good for organizations. We actually replicated it this year, which is year two for us. We elevated some of our founding staff into co-leadership roles. This is something that evolved.

We knew from the beginning that we were going to have co-leadership [00:11:00] at the top of our org chart. We hadn't really imagined that the power of having that extend to the layer below us are we call them team leads. They're essentially like a cabinet that we use. We elevated people into those and those are co-leads too. There's redundancy and team at each of those.

Josh: Yes. I think that it's just [00:11:30] to have another person to not only run ideas by but to check you along the way.

Rachel: We have co-leads of, oh, I was just going to say who the co-leads are because we have co-leads of our student support team. We have two social workers who co-lead our wraparound services and we have co-leads of special ed and student services. We have co-leads of our academics in our studio [00:12:00] side and those positions for my team. Like Josh said, it is definitely not only carrying the weight of how hard this is but having a built-in sounding board and having built-in problem-solving along the way.

Josh: Yes. Also as we reflected on year one, it gave us a much-needed layer underneath us, because as Rachel mentioned earlier, we are essentially co-principals and co-superintendents.

[00:12:30] A lot of times things would make their way to us. It would really be things that didn't necessarily need to make it all the way.

If you think about a traditional environment, things don't necessarily need to reach all the way to the superintendent. They could have been dealt with at a lower tier of administration. When we're the co-founders and the co-directors and essentially the co-superintendents of the organization, we were dealing with everything.

Rachel: Yes.

Josh: That [00:13:00] layer of co-leads underneath us is really meant for it to help the staff too. The feedback that we've gotten from our staff is that it's beneficial to them so that they don't have to come to us for everything.

Rachel: Well, and it creates distributed leadership too, which is the goal of an organization. Our plan eventually has always been to scale. We are a small school that will always stay a small school. We know there's tremendous need for the [00:13:30] type of work that we're doing. It's certainly not just our community that needs this.

As you think about scaling, and you think about the staff development, as we've talked about in previous episodes, but the learning curve for helping people understand the youth development

and understand the blended asynchronous learning, understand the trajectory that students go through and the trauma, and how to prepare marginalized students to [00:14:00] have really positive outcomes, post-high school. That's a lot.

Distributing that leadership and creating opportunities for staff to figure things out and then lead others is the only way we'll ever get the critical mass of capacity that we need in order to have more Map Academies, which is eventually the goal because our vision is to serve more students. [00:14:30] The co-leadership piece is a part of that too. You can't have all the knowledge resting with one person and then expect the organization to be viable long-term. There's a real power in ensuring that the structures force people not to be a silo of knowledge.

Josh: As a small school, as we've talked about throughout this podcast, with the [00:15:00] dedication to getting students prepared for life after high school, they see the co-founders and co-directors working through challenges together. They see the co-leads working through challenges together. They see the studio teachers working through challenges together and to show young adults, the staff working together, which you don't necessarily see in a traditional high school.

You normally see one teacher [00:15:30] in front of a classroom. They move on to another classroom with another teacher. It's really rare. They add in a high school experience, you get to see multiple staff members working together through challenges.

Rachel: Yes. We should not neglect to emphasize that it's hard. You don't get to consensus easily if you're doing important and difficult things, which we are. [00:16:00] We're tackling that every day. I think that the modeling of that is really important. I think that there's something very powerful about--If we were starting from scratch, we're essentially a startup. We've talked about that before is which means that it's like an entrepreneurial thing.

That means we talk a lot about failing forward. We talk a lot about not having everything figured out, building the plane as we're flying it, all of those metaphors. That mean we don't have this [00:16:30] all figured out. We're in almost month three of our second year of operations. The co-leadership part is very much part of that. Thinking outside the box and recognizing that no one person has all of the answers and that no one person can do this by him or herself. We are better as a team. That hierarchy doesn't really work.

Sometimes we have to play around with it because there's certain [00:17:00] situations where we have to consciously decide who's going to play good cop, bad cop, or who's going to, depending on the situation, who's going to be for certain situations, someone has to back off or push into a situation. Again, if there's interchangeability, it makes things a lot more flexible day to day. We have a practice that we ask all of our staff and people to copy both of us on emails and [00:17:30] someone may be seeming to lead the charge on something.

Then the other one of us is reading and up to speed. If there's a need to step in, or we don't have to spend a lot of time catching each other up. We've learned to be really that's part of why we share an office. It's part of why we have a co-directors at the Map Academy email address so that we stay up to speed on things as they happen, instead of having to sit down and reconstruct [00:18:00] entire things so that the other person knows what's going on. We work hard at not having silos.

Josh: Not just the operations of the school and all the challenges that that entails, there's this other aspect of co-leadership structure where there's the inevitable bad day where this feels impossible.

To have another person who's there to pick you up, who understands the weight. I think Rachel and I do a really good job of picking one in picking each other up when [00:18:30] it does feel impossible, because there are days where it feels impossible.

Rachel: Super cool to see our team leads doing that for each other too, which would happen, I guess, naturally anyway. There's so many dynamics that happen in terms of traditional reporting structures or, "Is this person my supervisor, do I report to them, are they going to evaluate me?" That idea that we've created these [00:19:00] relationships in our leadership, in everybody.

A lot of times in leadership, you don't have that. It's always a direct hierarchical line, like a classroom teacher's supervised by the assistant principal, and the assistant principal is supervised by the principal. The principal is supervised by the assistant superintendent and the assistant superintendent is supervised by the superintendent. Where is that [00:19:30] partnership with those layers? I think we've shrunken that down, which it works really well for us.

I think it's funny because like I said earlier, there's a lot of research that shows that organizations would be stronger with co-leads. In schools, it's super rare. I think like everything else, we've discovered that works really, really well for a school like ours.

Josh: All right. That's been another episode of *Education Disruption*. [00:20:00] If you enjoyed the show or have feedback, please go ahead and leave us a rating.

Rachel: If you have friends or colleagues that you think might be interested in our show, it means a lot to us if you'd share this podcast with them. We're both on Twitter. I'm @RachelBabcock.

Josh: I'm @CharpentierJosh.

Rachel: To learn more about our school, you can visit our website at themapacademy.org or check us out on Facebook or Instagram. Thanks so much for listening. We'll be back next week with another episode of—

Josh: *Education Disruption*.

[00:20:39] [END OF AUDIO]