



MAP ACADEMY

## **Epidode 1: Opening a High School That Puts Kids First**

### **Education Disruption Podcast**

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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*. Hi, everybody. I'm Rachel.

**Josh:** I'm Josh.

**Rachel:** This is *Education Disruption* episode one. Today, [00:00:30] we actually want to talk about how we did this crazy thing and opened a brand new high school which is a long story. We'll try to share some highlights with you today but I guess to put it in context, this journey took us about six years from idea to doors opening on Map Academy.

**Josh:** Yes, as you can imagine, when it was in the idea stage about six years ago, we always came from a [00:01:00] premise, once you say something out loud, you have to do it. We started saying out loud that we're going to open a school. People looked at us like, "You're going to do what?" We've kept to it. We're going to open a school. At the time, Rachel and I were running alternative programming for a fairly large suburban district in Massachusetts, really frustrated with putting band-aids on problems that needed surgery. [00:01:30] These kids were kind of shoved off to the night school. Yes, we were getting them to a high school diploma but at the end of the day, it wasn't really preparing them for much.

**Rachel:** Yes, really. This is probably true. It's certainly true in the district where we worked. It's true everywhere, I think, that within large, traditional public high schools, even, well-meaning ones which our district was well-meaning, it still is well-meaning but those large systems really don't do a very good job [00:02:00] at honing in on the individual needs of students. For the students that we were working with then and the students that we serve now, they're complex. Their lives are complex. Their past and their presents and their futures, and they really need an environment that can be responsive to those complexities. By and large, big schools have a really hard time doing that.

**Josh:** Like I said, we kept saying we had this idea of opening a school, but we would say it out loud, [00:02:30] and then in front of groups of people, then we started saying it in meetings that the goal here is to open a full school to really do high school differently and to really serve the students that our programs were serving but not adequately, in our opinion. We get to the point of, "Okay, we've told enough people we're going to open a school. Now, how do we actually open a school?" That's really where the story [00:03:00] takes off of Map Academy. At the point, it had no name. It was just an idea in Rachel and I's head that we wanted to open a school. We knew that in order to open a school in Massachusetts, we had to really do some research on exactly that. How do you open a school? We ended up being a charter school. Fast forward six years, we ended up being a charter school. We never went into this thinking like, "Yes, we're going to open a charter school."

[00:03:30] In Massachusetts, it was really the only mechanism after probably six, seven months of research about how do you actually open a school.

**Rachel:** Yes, opening a charter school is really hard. They don't just let you open a school. Before we get too far ahead, it's a hard story to tell sequentially but I think what is really important, is the motivation because it is a crazy hard thing to do to open a school. I think the important part for us has always been [00:04:00] the motivation is that there just aren't a lot of choices. If high school is not working for you, in our region, at least and this is true in a lot of places, there really aren't a lot of choices. What happens when your high school experience is broken? What do you do? In the district context where we used to work, it was a whole bunch of adults trying their hardest to help but as Josh said, it was sticking band-aids on knowing that there had to [00:04:30] be a better way.

Whatever it is, for each student, the story is different, but whether it's being off track because you don't have anywhere to live or because you're working 50 or 60 hours a week to support yourself and your family, or because you have a child of your own or because you have mental health or you've substance abuse issues or you have crazy anxiety every time you set foot in school or you have a history of trauma. I could literally go on and on and on and on.

When those things happen to you and you're 14, 15, [00:05:00] 16, 17, 18 years old, you can only go so long sticking band-aids on before you have to actually push pause and say, what are we doing here and put the kid at the center of the decision-making which was really hard to do in a district where they're always trying to apply the same policies to every student. Those settings are really focused on making things equal when really equal isn't fair. [00:05:30] That's what was the primary motivation that it was impossible to imagine the type of change that we needed? Even in our well-meaning district, it was impossible to imagine being able to accomplish the extent to change that we needed to serve the students.

**Josh:** All those students that Rachel listed, the kids who had some things going on at home, the kids who [00:06:00] experienced some sort of trauma, kids who had dropped out, you take all of those kids, even in a well-meaning district like we came from, that's a lot of kids.

**Rachel:** It's like the margin of error-

**Josh:** It really is.

**Rachel:** -in a big district but the margin of error on a big number is a big number.

**Josh:** Yes, we looked at it like these are a lot of kids.

**Rachel:** Honestly, it doesn't even have to be a lot of kids, really, because every kid [00:06:30] deserves it. One kid is too many but there's way more than one kid. The dots on the map.

**Josh:** Yes, the dots on the map is a big part of the story which led to the name eventually. One of the very first things we did after we brainstormed all those frustrations on a typical system and why they weren't working for this type of student that we served in our program, we came to the point where, like we said, we just needed to open a new [00:07:00] school but one of the very first things we did was say, "Okay, How can we show everyone else?" Rachel and I were living this every day. We were living these stories of students and families. We kept looking at each other like, "This is never going to work. We are going to get this kid a high school diploma but he's probably not going to be ready for much of the job that he has."

**Rachel:** We're checking off boxes. All we do is check off boxes.

**Josh:** We did.

**Rachel:** We are extra well-meaning box checkers.

**Josh:** Correct. We said we really needed to show the [00:07:30] community and show other people how big this problem was because we needed to expand our reach and get it outside of our heads. We literally took a map of Plymouth which is the district that we worked toward the time and we had a green sticky note, a green sticky dot for every student who was currently enrolled in one of our alternative programs, a red sticky dot [00:08:00] for every student who had dropped out in the previous four years, and a yellow sticky dot for every kid who was identified by the state of Massachusetts early warning indicator system as being at high risk of not graduating from high school. We took all those red, yellow, and green sticky dots and placed them at the addresses of each kid on that map. It came down to 398 dots on the map.

**Rachel:** Over the four-year cohort. It was roughly [00:08:30] estimating the number of students that would have dropped out in the previous four years, so what would have been a graduation cohort.

**Josh:** Correct. To us, the 398 dots and the story that we were trying to tell with this map was that it wasn't just 390 dots on a map. That was 390 real kids, 390 real families that, in our opinion, [00:09:00] they didn't want to walk away from high school. They didn't fail high school. The system really failed them. That's really where it took off.

**Rachel:** Because of the clusters too. You could see on the map and that map actually hangs in the lobby now of our school. You can see on that map the layers and the clusters of where the students and families are. It is a system failure. [00:09:30] It started way sooner than high school, but we had to start someplace. We started with high school because that's where we already were working. It

was the students that we know the best. The reality is that that map could go back. You could have thousands of dots on it if you started with kids in preschool, kindergarten, first grade where we know that a lot of times these issues start. For us, that map was the beginning of being able to tell a story [00:10:00] and to demonstrate need and then the momentum--we worked really hard to have the permission, the blessing, I guess I would say of our district because we continued to work for the district through this whole process. That was challenging, but that collaboration was part of why our school was able to be born really because we were very clear about our mission. That map is pretty compelling and [00:10:30] led us to generate, told the story very visually why we needed a better option.

**Josh:** Now, we have this idea of opening a school and we had a mechanism in which we could tell the story of the problem. Now, we get to the point where, okay, well, we're talking about this problem. How are we going to solve it? We can't just say we were going to open a new school, which really made us take a step back and say, "All right, well, [00:11:00] what are the things that a lot of people say the traditional high school system just doesn't work for some kids?" Then it stops at that. When Rachel and I set out to open a new school, we couldn't just stop at that. We had to figure out exactly what wasn't working and what could be done in place so that it could work for students.

**Rachel:** This all happened. Josh and I started working together in 2013 originally. These early years, 2013, 14, 15 [00:11:30] were the beginnings of this idea. In 2016, we formally jelled around the idea of opening a charter school, and in the summer of 2016, after much planning and back and forth and trying to investigate other options in the summer of 2016, we submitted a letter of intent to apply for a charter in the state of Massachusetts and from that summer and we honestly just reached that letter was easy to [00:12:00] write. You just have to basically say, we intend to submit an application to open a charter school. Then by then, it was then after that the onslaught comes because, after that, the charter application process took us--It's basically from the summer of 2016 through the winter of 2017. It condensed into that time. We had to write essentially a book, which was the charter application, defend it, [00:12:30] assemble the board. We still had full-time jobs with the district during this whole time, we had to demonstrate the need. It was just a massive, that's all a whirlwind of a thing that happened, but we survived that gauntlet and in February of 2017, the state of Massachusetts gave us a charter.

**Josh:** I think it's really important to know. That was a quick timeline Rachel just went over.

**Rachel:** I have PTSD from that whole time.

**Josh:** [laughs] [00:13:00] It's really important to note that we were, and I think it's what makes Map such a special place today in 2019 now going into our second year of operation is that we were just two people who saw a problem, set out to fix that problem and opened a school. Obviously, we didn't have any experience opening a school. We literally did everything from scratch. In order to write that application, [00:13:30] our mission was to really do high school differently. What isn't working? What are some of the trends that we see in kids in our current programs, and traditional high school programs, what isn't working for current kids? Well, first of all, the same attendance policy doesn't work for every single kid because, for some kids, life gets in the way, and we knew that our school needed to be able to adapt the students' lives rather than kick them out when they missed too many days or deny them credits because they missed [00:14:00] too many days. That was for sure we needed that.

**Rachel:** Learning had to be flexible because the students that we serve with complex needs and histories, and a lot of them have interrupted connections with school and we needed an academic model that was flexible. We needed to be able to meet students where they are academically, fill skill gaps, and also have high expectations to prepare them for life. After we couldn't just have this credit recovery program where we were like dragging kids along [00:14:30] and checking off boxes because that's what happens to these kids. Academically, people feel bad for them. They give them packets of makeup work, or they get a D- and they get pushed on to the next course. They don't know what they're doing and then they graduate and they don't have the skills to pursue further education, even if they wanted to. We knew we had to have a flexible model that would allow us to actually prepare students academically.

**Josh:** Not only a belief that social, emotional [00:15:00] needs had to be met before academic growth is expected but living it day in and day in that—

**Rachel:** Not just lip service.

**Josh:** Yes, not just telling the kids, "Oh, it's going to be okay, honey. Just go back to math class and focus on math. We know that you have mother might've just lost housing and or your sister OD'ed, or your uncle just got arrested [00:15:30] or you got arrested, your brother got kicked out of his house and now he's living on your couch and he hasn't left in three weeks, but put all those things aside for a little bit and go sit in math class, would you? Just get a D-. You'll be okay." Those are the things that we really looked at each other, and we said, we need to fix that. I think those are the types of things that we—

**Rachel:** I think from the very beginning and I think the thing about fixing that, and this is true today as it was in [00:16:00] 2014, when we started this process, I think one of the guiding lights for us has always been that all of the systems. It was intuitive and it's not rocket science, honestly, but it's so rare in American public education. The reality is that the school needs to start with the students and it needs to focus on the individual student. That is literally the through-line from what we were trying to do in the program that we were running for the district, what I used to try to do when I was in a classroom, to now today, fast forward [00:16:30] to entering year two at Map Academy is that it has to be, the system has to accommodate the individual, not the individual accommodating the system and that's really like, it shouldn't be rocket science, but the organizing principles of schools are not based on focusing on the individual. They're based on focusing on groupings in age and when you were born and how long you sit in a seat.

**Josh:** I think that [00:17:00] we've mentioned it a couple of times, we came from a well-meaning district. Our model could not be replicated on a scale of thousands of kids. One thing that we knew for sure was that we had to be a small school. In order to really personalize instruction, we had to be a small school. We wrote our charter so that it was 130 students in year one and we never get bigger than 300 students by year seven if that we really only planned to get as big as 250, [00:17:30] and then look at opening more Map Academies around the state.

**Rachel:** I think everything embedded throughout our charter application, which is basically the plan that you write, that the charter itself is both the process and the end result of the process. Through that whole thing, we tried really hard to embed flexibility, essentially at every layer of that plan. Once you decide to put the student at the center, it really does make everything else [00:18:00] fall into place. That said, the problems, I guess, what we've tried to accomplish is that

each student who finds their way to us at Map Academy knows that they are seen and heard and that their experiences based on their needs. That's been really pretty accurately [00:18:30] successful from what we originally thought we needed to what we are doing now. I think stayed pretty consistent, even though it was an insane amount of work that went in between those two points from idea to reality, now it's easy to look back and say, "Oh yes, we did it." In the trenches of it, it's really fricking hard.

**Josh:** In order to open a really forward-thinking innovative school the temptation to go back to the traditional is [00:19:00] always there because the traditional mechanism in which to do things makes things a lot easier. We knew that we needed to have an asynchronous approach to education. Well, how the hell do you create a master schedule for an asynchronous approach, and then how do you report on the data?

**Rachel:** We didn't even know honestly. When we started, we didn't even know that asynchronous was going to be possible. That's a perfect example of how far we've ended up pushing outside the boundaries because that wasn't even, [00:19:30] that was like, that was 20--We didn't even know asynchronous was going to be possible with 2018.

**Josh:** True and I'm planning it.

**Rachel:** Asynchronous is basically, and it was actually a transformative moment where we realized that we had that option, but asynchronous basically means disconnected from time, like against time. Basically, asynchronous learning means that any time, any place learning, that phrase that gets tossed around is actually a possibility and that's probably [00:20:00] a story for another day, around how we managed to accomplish that, but it's basically flexibility at its max because it allows student learning to be happening, absent from a traditional master schedule that says that you have to be at this class at this time, and then the bell's going to ring and you're going to go to the next class and grades are going to close on this date and the reports are going to come out on this date and you better learn on that timeline or else. Oh, well, sorry, we tried.

**Josh:** [00:20:30] I do want to take a step back. We did, we went over it really quickly, we had this idea, then we had the map to show the problem and then we skipped over. Now we have a school and talked a lot about like the frustrations but there was a lot that happened in between that with it actually costs a lot of money to open a school, which when we had first said it out loud, we weren't even thinking about the money side of it. We were just thinking about the kids who were leaving school and [00:21:00] setting out to solve this problem. We were really fortunate to connect with a local non-profit, who at the time, their mission was very aligned with the mission of what we were trying to do. We ended up connecting with them and, they asked us, "What would you need to bring your idea to a reality?" That's when we were like, "Well, we can actually do this, we actually have [00:21:30] a foundation that is willing to help us with this". It's no longer just Rachel and I, and we looked at each other, we were like, "We don't really know what we need yet."

**Rachel:** We're still kind of clueless at that point of whether we could actually do it.

**Josh:** Yes, I knew we could do it. I was a hundred percent sure we could do it.

**Rachel:** Yes. You can't be the doubting type and open the school.

**Josh:** We took a couple of weeks to think about it. One of the very first things [00:22:00] we thought of to open a school was to create a website because in 2019 if you have a website, you almost already exist. We needed someone to--

**Rachel:** You skipped the part about how we couldn't accept the grant because we didn't have a place to put the money, because we, which is the part you don't even think about. Because at the time we had no legal entity, we had nothing, we worked for the district still. The first thing [00:22:30] we needed was to set up a non-profit, which actually costs quite a bit of money to set up a non-profit. It was one of the early things we learned in this journey that we now know a lot about that you never knew you were going to have to know, but setting up a non-profit so that we could accept the money and then we could spend it on a website.

**Josh:** Correct? Yes. A lot of these and a trend that I think you'll notice in our podcast is we talk a lot about how hard this is and how hard it is to open and operate a new [00:23:00] innovative school. You almost feel like it shouldn't be this hard, but it continues to be this hard.

**Rachel:** Because somebody does it or so few people do it.

**Josh:** We always talk about how it's the founders club. I don't know if there's actually a club but like the mindset of a founder of--

**Rachel:** There's not a club. We should start one.

**Josh:** We should start one, we should start a club. If you're a [00:23:30] founder and you are listening and you want to be part of the club, shoot me an email.

**Rachel:** Founders don't have time for clubs.

**Josh:** The founder's mindset of this idea that you're always working.

**Rachel:** Well, no, that you're going to do it, that is possible. You just said it, we had no reason to believe we were going to succeed at this. It was a crazy idea to start a brand new public high school for the type of students that we serve. It was a crazy idea, a charter [00:24:00] school of all things, but you have to just believe you have to put your blinders on and just believe that you can do it.

**Josh:** Say it out loud.

**Rachel:** Say it out loud, over and over and over and over again. Yes, I agree. Then eventually, it's cool to sit down and think about where we were, the reality is that it's still a crazy journey. I don't think it will ever stop being a crazy journey, but I was just thinking the other day, what a difference [00:24:30] a year makes, two years, we could go back incrementally, but a year ago at this time, our building wasn't ready. We were still recruiting students. We were still recruiting staff. Now we have a school, we have a summer program running. We have more staff coming on board.

**Josh:** A podcast.

**Rachel:** We're beginning a podcast. We have graduated our first eight students. We have all these stories to tell and more stories every day. The crazy, amazing part of this [00:25:00] whole thing is that the students and families and staff that have found their way to Map Academy, it's a really special place already. It's only been a year.

**Josh:** Yes. It's only been a year operational. Rachel and I, Map has been open to us for at least three years.

**Rachel:** It's like that diagram of the iceberg, with the mountain and almost all of it is under the surface of the water and you can't see it. I definitely think that there's that thing about starting a school, **[00:25:30]** it's this massive mountain, but a ton of it remains under the surface or unseen and people don't realize, but the cool part now is that we have this identity that's like visible and functional and it's really cool.

**Josh:** It is cool. Especially now that, we're an operational school and it does get a little confusing when people say, "Oh, what do you do?" You're like, "Oh, I've opened the charter school."

**Rachel:** I just say I run a school.

**Josh:** I've got to the point where I say, I'm the principal.

**Rachel:** **[00:26:00]** I just say I run a school. You can't really capture what we do. Then we can sit down and talk about this and talk about our origin story for a few minutes and then go back into the trenches of what we're doing. We're still a small team. I think the beautiful part about opening a new school is that you really do get to, make things up, but sometimes we're building the plane as we're flying it. At the same time, we're never going to go back to that system in which change felt impossible. Change is definitely possible. This **[00:26:30]** afternoon after we finish this, we're going to go meet with our staff about revamping our schedule for next year and making better use of time in year two, and iterating on what we learned from year one, and that's pretty cool.

**Josh:** Definitely. Thanks for joining us. Thanks for listening in, on our very first podcast of Education Disruption. Listening to our story about how we founded Map Academy Charter School.

**Rachel:** Doing high school differently.

**Josh:** If you want to hear more about our school, our website is [www.themapacademy.org](http://www.themapacademy.org).

**Rachel:** **[00:27:00]** Thanks for listening. See you next time.

**[00:27:35] [END OF AUDIO]**