



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 10: Remaining on Mission Even When Things Get Tough](#)

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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*.

Josh: Hello, this is Josh.

Rachel: I'm Rachel.

Josh: We're back here for another episode of *Education Disruption*.

Rachel: [00:00:30] Today, we're going to talk about the constant challenge of remaining on mission.

Josh: The temptation of reverting back to some traditional approaches that would make things much easier.

Rachel: Yes. We've talked a lot in this podcast, and we talk a lot in our daily operations about how we're doing high school differently, we've pushed all boundaries of what high school can be. With that comes **[00:01:00]** a lot of faith and patience because when you're doing things differently there's always a temptation, sometimes justified, to say, "Wait a second, let's just go back to the way we were, go back to something a little more familiar, a little more safe, a little less messy."

Josh: Sure. All of the structures from the state-level [00:01:30] data reporting to master scheduling, to professional development consultants, to outside providers, all of those resources are really geared towards the traditional approach of education. To stay on mission of Map Academy is at times really hard.

Rachel: Our mission at Map Academy is to serve students who have been marginalized, [00:02:00] who have dropped out of, or on the verge of dropping out of other high school settings, which pretty much exclusively way more traditional than the school we have founded here. When you have a mission that is at its very core to serve students who have been unsuccessful or unable to thrive elsewhere, just from the very start, we have a challenge [00:02:30] by design.

Josh: You might be thinking, what are some of the other day-to-day challenges that make it really difficult for us to remain on mission to really do high school differently? One of the biggest ones is, we talked about it in episode two, in how we do a schedule here at Map Academy. We do not have that master schedule that groups kids with one adult in one room, we are a blended asynchronous school that allows students to work at their own pace, but when you're allowing students to work at their own pace you are [00:03:00] removing that organizational structure that so many traditional schools rely on. Essentially to manage kids, to manage behaviors, and to manage adults because there is this expectation that this adult is supposed to be working with this group of kids in this room. Oftentimes, it's even scripted out exactly what lesson they're supposed to be working on.

Rachel: Right, which is really an attempt in the end to force compliance rather than engagement and authentic learning. We know we're on the right [00:03:30] track with our approach, which is much more flexible. We have, as we talked about many times, incorporated flexibility at every turn in our schedule as Josh talked about, in the way that students approach their courses, in the way that adults work with students here, but that flexibility by definition creates some uncertainty for people.

Flexibility doesn't mean lack of structure, but at times it can feel that way in the [00:04:00] moment. It can be challenging to resist the urge to say, "Well, this flexibility feels a little messy, we should add more structure." Because that's the slippery slope toward adding exactly the structures that were counterproductive in the past, and that resulted in kids being marginalized and unsuccessful in other places.

That said, there's that because we need to be flexible enough, but not too flexible. We need to be self-paced, but [00:04:30] also we need to talk about being on pace because if we're truly self-paced and we don't ever talk about having targets, deadlines, and goals, then students don't feel the healthy pressure to make progress. It can be a struggle at those pivot points to remember what it is we're trying to do here.

Josh: The kids will remind us all the time about how they came to our school because it was going to be a different experience, and we really want to stay true to that [00:05:00] mission that we are providing a different experience for kids because it's those traditional schedules, those traditional mindsets that caused that kid to look for another option in the first place. Another example of that is the traditional discipline policies, it is again that forcing of compliance in a traditional environment, whereas there is no discipline action that a school [00:05:30] administrator can take to force compliance on a kid.

Rachel: For example, stopping kids from vaping or to have kids not use language that we would prefer they not be using anywhere or particularly in school. Those are not things that we can punish our way out of, we can't stop vaping by yelling, by suspending, or by giving detentions [00:06:00] but it can be a struggle sometimes because we do need to hold those kids accountable for those things, we need to challenge them to do better, we need to teach.

Those things take time, they take patience, they take stopping everything when I walk into the bathroom and find that there's kids in there that are doing something that I don't want them to be doing, or when we have something brought to our attention that really needs intervention. It's not a simple, "Okay, you're out of here. I'm calling your parent; you need to go home or [00:06:30] you're suspended tomorrow. You have a detention."

It's really a process of engaging that student in a reflective experience that hopefully helps them to do better the next time, but that's time-consuming. When you're juggling a million other things, it could be easy to just revert back to that, and we have to check each other sometimes on that because you can revert back, those traditional policies can feel appealing in the moment, but they don't work, [00:07:00] we know they don't work.

Josh: It is that temptation to go back to the traditional policies and procedures and structures because it would make our lives a lot easier as the founders and co-directors of the school. There are districts where they literally have it outlined on exactly what punishment a student should get for vaping in the bathroom or for swearing when they shouldn't be swearing. They have these scripts already written out and we know, [00:07:30] with everything in the fabric of Map Academy, that isn't the approach we want to take. That's really what allows us to push through that temptation to go back to the traditional way.

Rachel: When you look at that through the lens of the student, I think that's the thing that helps us stay on mission in all of these circumstances, whether it's academics or whether it's behavior and conduct stuff, whether it's culture stuff or staff stuff. The reality is that if you pause, we are [00:08:00] vigilant about this, and it is the foundation of everything that we do is to look at things through the lens of what is best for the student.

That's the fundamental part of what makes Map Academy the school that we are is that our decision-making when we are veering off or when we're unsure of what the right answer is, the answer is always what is in the best interest of this student at this time in order for [00:08:30] that student to grow and to become a better version of him or herself? That lens of what do we need to do as adults, what do we need to do as an organization, as a school to help this young person grow? That lens really answers all the questions but it takes vigilance to keep coming back to that idea that this is what we're here for, and this is what we do.

Josh: Providing a truly personalized experience for every single [00:09:00] student, not only doesn't have that traditional structure to it, but we oftentimes talk to our staff a lot about there is no script that we can just hand you that is the answer to this student or the answer to that group of students. I wish there was a script we could hand us staff to say, "Hey, do this and if this doesn't work, then try that." The fact of the matter is that our student population is so complex that the script is forever changing [00:09:30] and that's what makes Map Academy such a special place because the students are anticipating all of us to revert back to that traditional environment. You can see it in the students who have been with us for a little while, who we talked to about as our

founding students, they've built the trust, they know that we're not going to revert back to those traditional structures, policies, and routines but the new students are testing those boundaries because they continue to think that we're just going to revert back to the traditional, and that's not what we're doing here.

Rachel: Right. [00:10:00] Sometimes it will happen. We could honestly take this example from so many different directions but we could take it from the example of the kid who is just ultimately testing. We could probably take an active academic example first and then look at a behavioral example. If you take the example of the kid we've talked about before that's you should just getting pushed along that that just wants to have this go away. Push me on get me to the next thing get me that D minus or we have a blended asynchronous platform [00:10:30] that doesn't allow that.

We have a culture of revision and we're competency-based so a kid starts to submitting work and they just want to click submit and the teacher just keeps putting it back, "No, revise, revise, revise." There's no such thing as failing and grades closing. "Oh, I don't have to try anymore. My average is 22%. I can't possibly pass for the year. I'm done." They can't do that here. They can't escape like that and they have to produce quality work in order to move forward. There's definitely [00:11:00] that patience that we show by helping kids through that part is worth it. The remaining on mission there, I think is held together by the way that we've structured our academic platform because kids literally can't move on until they've mastered content.

Josh: What Rachel just described them for those of you who work in education listening to this will understand that that student who just wanted the D minus or [00:11:30] who was just expecting to fail is used to being told that about four times a year when report cards come out. That is much easier for a teacher and honestly for the student and for the school administrators because the report cards come out, you give them their grade and they deal with it at that time. We're saying no we expect more from you every single day, every single assignment that gets done.

Rachel: We know that you can do it. That's where that youth development that we've talked about throughout this podcast and that we talk about every day here is around we're not doing students any [00:12:00] favors by allowing them to not achieve at high levels for them. Then ultimately at levels that will allow them to be successful beyond high school. That right there is why we have to be so flexible because we can't treat them all the same.

Regular schools, other schools have that same mindset. They want everyone to achieve at high levels but then they want them all to do it at the same time and in the same way and in the same spaces. [00:12:30] Those boxes don't apply here. We took the boxes away because we know and all the research especially with students who have struggled and who have complicated histories and complicated present tenses, they can't do that all in the same way. We can't expect them to. That's the reminder again of why do we need to be so flexible? Why do we need to ensure that we have the ability to meet students where they are? It's because otherwise we're going to fail them [00:13:00] in the same way that they've been failed by other systems.

Josh: On a previous episode, we also talked about the co-leadership structure that not only we share as co-directors but our cabinet shares as co-leads of student support, co-leads of studio, co-leads of special education--in order to really effectively bring out this [00:13:30] model of education, you have to have another person that you can talk to about it, that you can brainstorm

with that you can remind of the “Why?” Because it takes a ton of patience. It takes a ton of reminding of the “why,” because it is incredibly difficult.

Rachel: You sometimes have to tap in and tap out. I think that is another part of how we stay on mission here is because that gets really hard. Josh and I do that, and we are actually training **[00:14:00]** our staff to do the same thing. A behavioral example of why this matters--We had a case, we have them all the time, but kids can be especially when they're learning the way here, they can be really challenging. When they're not used to trusting and they're used to those behavioral systems, and we find them where there's a behavioral issue or something that we need to solve for. They don't necessarily just automatically believe us when we say that we're going to **[00:14:30]** problem-solve this together and lead to their growth.

Sometimes that can be incredibly infuriating and as adults and trying to hold students accountable for the behavior, we sometimes have to take a tag-team approach. We sometimes have to say, “I'm going to push really hard.” Then I'm going to ask you either Josh and I will do it, or we'll have a counselor or one of our outreach people come in and be like, “We just pushed him really hard.” We'll say to the kid, “This can go one or two directions. You messed up. We can do this the easy way and you can be honest and we can talk about this **[00:15:00]** and we can make a plan moving forward, or we can do this the hard way. You cannot be honest or you can not engage in this in a productive way.” We can go through the struggle that direction but either way, we're going to get back around to the learning here.

Once they've been here a bit, they know that we're serious and they know that we mean that and those conversations are about behavior are incredibly often incredibly rich. We often uncover things that are really the underlying causes of what's happening and what is going on. Why did this incident just happen? Why did you have that **[00:15:30]** physical altercation? Or why did you come to school under the influence? Or why did you--And I could go on and on and on about all of the things that happened in this high school and every other one, but we can also have that kid that's like, “No, not talking, I didn't do it. You can't make me.” Those are tough ones.

We tap in and tap out on those a lot of like someone else come in. Very often when we do that and someone takes the like hard approach and then we follow it up with quieter moment with a social worker **[00:16:00]** or with one of us, the kid will we'll get there. The kid will be like, “Okay, maybe they really do mean it. Maybe I really should be listening and trusting.” That's where the teaching comes in. That's where it's all about the mission but it is easier to just be like, “This kid's being a jerk. He's not listening. I've spent half an hour on this. He's not admitting, we know you did it. You're not telling us.” It's easier to just suspend. It's easier to just say, “You're out, three-day suspension. Talk about it next week.” Or easier to just call the police or whatever **[00:16:30]** the case may be. It feels easier sometimes to just do that but it's not in the best interest of the kid because we don't get growth that way.

Josh: It's really hard to do that now that we're not an alternative program that a lot of districts have; we're a full school. We have 160 students. We have 25 staff members to have this consistent theme of doing high school differently. Keeping **[00:17:00]** everybody on the same page is incredibly difficult.

Rachel: Then a student thing will happen. I think there's a couple of ways that we go about having ourselves stay on mission. I think being grounded in the students--We've talked before about

having a flat leadership structure and being really hands-on as leaders. I personally don't think there's any other way to do this work well than to really be understanding. Josh and I can't be in the details, in the weeds of every little thing that happens around here [00:17:30] but in order to be responsive and in order to constantly remain on mission we need to be connected to the end-users of what we do here, that's our students.

That's one thing I think is to have everybody be grounded in that and a student thing will happen. We had an incident recently where it was actually, it was not a school day, it was a professional development day. A major student situation happened that day in which a student reached out to us as the place of safety and [00:18:00] everything stops in those moments. It was a really important and really emergent situation that required us to pivot and say, "Okay, what matters here? What matters here this minute in the here and now is this student." That really helps. We also circle, we've talked about circles before, we circle as a staff in the morning, every day at 8:05.

[00:18:30] We circle about what's happened in that day, what's going on. Then we circle every week at the beginning of our Wednesday afternoon staff time, we circle. One of our social workers leads us through that. We share as a staff. We talk about challenging topics. We celebrate, we shout out wins and we problem-solve struggles. I think that that helps us to stay grounded. We do a lot of work in those circles and sharing work with individual students and in [00:19:00] calling out progress with students. I think that helps us remember what we're doing.

Josh: Shifting gears to other things that make staying on mission and as a personalized blended asynchronous school is state data reporting. State data reporting isn't exactly set up for a blended asynchronous approach. We're continuously bumping up against "that isn't how we do things here." [00:19:30] We're trying to take an innovative approach, but I can see why particularly bigger school districts don't have the ability to innovate as nimbly as we can. They could take some aspects of our model but in order to truly personalize education the way that we're personalizing education here at Map Academy, it just doesn't fit into box.

Rachel: You have to be all in and you have to be able to control the variables, I think, so which we're very fortunate to be able to do here. I think in the end, [00:20:00] as we wind down this conversation about remaining on mission, I think that the thing that allows--We have this incredible opportunity because we built something from scratch and because we do control the variables here in ways that allow us to have the opportunity to not be stuck in that place that feels impossible to make change. [00:20:30]

There's definitely those moments where there's kids off task, there's not enough work getting done. Take all that furniture out, all the soft seating needs to go. We need to create more structure in the day. We need to do XYZ. In the end when you pause for a moment and you think about it, the students will tell us and they tell us the way that they have are succeeding here [00:21:00] that what they need is something different. Our mission is to do high school differently to serve students that haven't been able to thrive.

Josh: Believe it or not this is our 10th episode of *Education Disruption* and the final episode of our first season.

Rachel: The purpose of these first 10 episodes has been to outline our foundational approach to the way we do high school differently here at Map Academy.

Josh: We're going to take a little break from the podcast now as the holidays are approaching but we will be returning **[00:21:30]** for season two real soon.

Rachel: If you know anybody in education interested in doing high school differently, please share these first 10 episodes. We really want this podcast to be a tool for anybody on a similar mission. We really encourage you to check out our website for what's happening here at Map Academy.

Josh: We're both on Twitter. You can reach us, I'm @charpentierjosh.

Rachel: I'm @rachelbabcock.

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

Rachel: To learn more about our school you can always visit our website at **[00:22:00]** themapacademy.org or check us out Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

Josh: We'll be back next season with all-new episodes of *Education Disruption*.

[00:22:18] [END OF AUDIO]