



MAP ACADEMY

**Education Disruption Podcast / 8.13.2020**

[Episode 20: Overcoming Tragedy to Find Success in High School](#)

[educationdisruption.org](http://educationdisruption.org)

---

**Nick:** Welcome back to Education Disruption. Map Academy was created for students traditional school failed. At Map, they know students' lives are complicated and that those complications can get in the way of learning. The challenges some Map students face are complex like homelessness, PTSD struggles with mental health, recovering from substance misuse or system involvement, while other students are working to support themselves or their families. Some students have kids of their own.

Map knows that by addressing students' **[00:00:30]** needs first, the academics will follow. Map has a whatever-it-takes approach. They meet the students exactly where they are, every day. Like Virginia, a founding student at Map. Co-founders Rachel and Josh actually found her while she was at work.

**Virginia:** It was wicked busy. I looked out, and I recognize Ms. Babcock I was like, "Hi, how are you?" She was like, "Good. How are you?" and she was with Josh. She was like, "Well, I was wondering if you graduated."

**Nick:** When Map first opened, co-founders Josh **[00:01:00]** and Ms. Babcock, otherwise known as Rachel, reached out to former students who had dropped out by literally looking for them at local restaurants and supermarkets. They reconnected with Virginia during her shift at Dunkin Donuts.

**Virginia:** She was telling me about it, and it sounded the perfect school. It excited me so much that I was just like, "All right. That's it, Megan, I'll be right back. I'm going to sign up." Then when I found out that the fact that at 22, I can get a high school diploma. **[00:01:30]** I was like, "Hell yes, I got to jump on that." Then, afterwards, I literally walked back and the headset order went off and I couldn't even answer it because I started to cry. My friend just held me and I was like, "I'm finally going to have a chance at a future. Because once I get a high school diploma, I can go to college."

I really thought that I was just going to be stuck at dead-end jobs. Now like they're giving me a chance at a future, a chance that I never would have thought I was able to do. **[00:02:00]** It's just incredible.

**Nick:** We asked her Virginia what led to her dropping out.

**Virginia:** My school experience was pretty bad. When my dad killed himself, I was 15. I was crying a lot. I wasn't getting my schoolwork done. They would just be like, "Why are you still--" like they

forgot. It was like, every time I went to the nurse, the nurse would ask me why I'm crying. I would have to tell her every day, there's so many students, you get lost in the crowd. They made me go into Pembroke hospital, and they dope me up on so many medications. [00:02:30] When I went back to school, I stayed back obviously. I had to be a 10th grader again. I passed with A's and B's, I got proficient, almost advanced on MCAS.

I had two surgeries, one on my ear and one on my throat and they lost my doctor's notes. Five times refused to give me credits and out of hearing.

**Maxanne:** Virginia's relationship with school is tragic, really.

**Nick:** That's Maxanne, A wraparound co-leader and social worker at Map

**Maxanne:** I first met [00:03:00] Virginia about two years ago now. She was just remarkable young lady who was focused and just wanting to plow through or her high school credit. Incredibly bright, very talented academically, and super hard worker. Her dad sadly committed suicide. I believe her junior [00:03:30] year of high school. Understandably and naturally, she missed a lot of school because of that. For whatever reasons, the school staff were not able to work with her from a level of compassion and understanding. She subsequently failed her classes.

Then, as she missed more school, was basically told that there was not really a reason for her to return to school, because she wasn't going to be able [00:04:00] to earn a diploma. Instead of taking the steps to say, "Maybe pause, get yourself some help and work through the grief and the tragic loss that you're experiencing," it became very punitive for her. She ultimately dropped out of high school.

**Virginia:** They had this program that they put me into, and it's supposed to be for kids that struggle, but almost every student are like swept under the rug.

**Maxanne:** I think the larger mainstream schools, [00:04:30] they have these expectations and systems set up. If anything happens outside of that box, it's very hard to know how to personalize and manage that.

**Virginia:** They had us on like contract saying that they were going to do counseling with me, that I was on like a half day schedule at one point, and they just still weren't giving me work. I was going insane. I really was.

**Maxanne:** When you look here at large-scale trauma, it's very hard. Sometimes, for the schools who mean well, [00:05:00] to be able to look at their systems and their processes and say, "Actually, we can pause this. We can bend this policy because of this tragic situation." I don't think that many of the schools are as fully versed and equipped and being trauma-informed or trauma-responsive. They work at a place where the academic requirement is the main focus, as opposed to looking at the holistic wholeness of the student in their family.

**Nick:** We asked Maxanne [00:05:30] to help us understand how trauma plays out for students like Virginia.

**Maxanne:** She lost her father, but she also lost her opportunity to complete high school on track. Her coming in and then talking and sharing her story, at her age 21 or 22, when I first met her, I was able to help her to make sense of it, five years on. The impacts that that's had on her and her young adult life, because now she's an adult of legal age [00:06:00] trying to navigate the world. How

those tragedies that happened to her around the loss of her dad, the loss of her high school diploma impacted her ability to move forward in life and where she's at now.

We've talked a lot about the fact that she's going to be 24 and finally getting a diploma. We've done a lot of that backwards work. Many of our students come in with no trauma work at all, I mean, we really backpedal.

**Nick:** Map prioritizes the wellbeing [00:06:30] of each of their students. That's why they have social workers instead of guidance counselors. We asked how this approach is different.

**Maxanne:** It's very unique. We really work with the student and their family offering them intensive- - we call wraparound supports. We look at offering them social, emotional wellbeing and then a little bit of case management, if necessary, helping the student, as they become [00:07:00] young adults, and transitioning into young adult services, making appropriate referrals and helping them really guide their way into their next steps into the community. We also are able to work with them, support their family as well, which is very different from what the guidance counselor would do at a traditional high school.

**Virginia:** They look at me like I'm normal. I was diagnosed with Asperger's, and panic, and depression. Even my psychology teacher, [00:07:30] when I was having a panic attack, she kicked me out of class and made me go to P4, where you have to sit and you get detention, like in-school detention. Here, if you have that, they bring you outside. They let you get fresh air. They give you space. They're just supporting you so much better here, no matter who you are and what you need.

**Nick:** We wondered how the wraparound support approach works.

**Maxanne:** It's crucial. If a student's not in a place of wellness and feeling settled [00:08:00] and stable in their emotional wellbeing, they're never going to make academic progress, no matter what provisions you put in place or accommodations or the best teacher in the world is not going to be able to teach someone if they don't feel emotionally able to enter into the school or to take on the new information. We work very closely with our academic team. We have a team of leads who we share appropriate information. We don't share the student's full [00:08:30] story.

We'll share with them if they are having a personal struggle and maybe they have to pause for a moment on their education versus if they're in a position to be pushed and challenged, generally move forward academically.

**Nick:** Some students who have been failed by traditional schools can internalize that failure as their own. That can take time to unravel.

**Maxanne:** We use some phrases very often here that we're a place of no shame that you come as you are. We'll work with you exactly where you're at in your journey. [00:09:00]

**Virginia:** We're all like came from the same boat, where we struggled in traditional high school. That like their peers, we all have the same struggles that we been through, so we relate to each other more. Everyone cares about how we're all feeling, students and staff. We all come together as a whole.

**Maxanne:** I think because we have that blanket outlook, it takes time, but the students [00:09:30] slowly are able to shed those layers of shame or embarrassment. Then they get to meet other students who are similar to them. Everyone's story is different, but they all come to us. Having not

been successful in high school, and the older students tend to cohort together, and they really support and bond each other.

**Virginia:** Because when you feel accepted and understood by teachers. It's easier to talk to them.

**[00:10:00]** When I was in regular high school, I had such a hard time going and talking to the teacher. But because they make us feel like we're all equal that it's just like talking to our normal student. It's more comfortable. I'm not afraid to go and ask. I'm not afraid to talk about what's on my mind or raise my hand. In regular school I would never raise my hand because I just felt like I was such an outcast but here, they don't let anyone feel like an outcast. **[00:10:30]**

**Nick:** We asked Virginia what about the Map model works better for her.

**Virginia:** I get to experiment on what I want. It opens my mind and challenges me more. It helps me find myself as a person in a way too.

**Nick:** The impact isn't just a parent while the students are at the school, but it extends beyond, once they graduate and progress on with life.

**Maxanne:** They come in really almost like a shell of themselves. Once they're here **[00:11:00]** and connected, they end up being able to graduate with a really robust support network in place and a plan that's practical. He sees other graduates come back in. They can always call us. They can always pop in for a session. It's not that once she graduates, she's off in the world and never to be seen here again, she'll be in Map alone. That will be its own special cohort.

**Virginia:** The fact that I can be in the school at the age of 24 is incredible.

**Maxanne:** These students have grown **[00:11:30]** so much, especially in this group of grads. Just going back to Virginia, she's able to voice that what happened to her wasn't her fault, but it wasn't okay. It wasn't the way it should have happened, and that she deserves a diploma, that she's smart. That she has the capacity to go to college. She's an ideal student in a way because she wants this. She was ready to work with us, the teachers and the support staff to really take those steps that she **[00:12:00]** needed to take that next jump in life.

**Nick:** Like many others graduating during a pandemic, it's added a layer of complication, but Virginia has a pretty good idea of what direction she'd like to head.

**Virginia:** I saw that I needed one more science credit, and I was like, "computer science, that sounds interesting." Then I found out how much I liked coding. There's medical coding, there's data analysis coding which-- NASA uses data analysis. That's actually how they take pictures of planets. There's video game coding, **[00:12:30]** which I want to do. I want to be able to make my own video game. That's honestly one of my goals is to be able to make my own video game.

**Nick:** Map Academy is a free public charter high school in Plymouth, Massachusetts, that believes, with the right support, all students can succeed. Thank you for listening to Education Disruption. If you enjoyed these episodes, it would mean a lot to us, if you could leave us a rating but also share with your friends who might be interested in **[00:13:00]** hearing these stories whether they're in non-profit, the charter school world, education in general, or they're just interested in hearing the stories of the students at Map and a high school that does things differently. Thank you so much for listening. This is Nick Tetrault. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes, and this is a Hairpin production.

**Josh:** Hello, this is Josh, co-founder of Map Academy. If you or someone you know works in education or youth development and wants to make a difference, check out our website **[00:13:30]** at [themapacademy.org](https://themapacademy.org) for current openings, a staff referral program, and a form you can use, if there isn't a listing that matches what you do. We need talented teachers and youth development professionals that are ready to do high school differently and be there for students who need them the most. Thanks for listening.