



MAP ACADEMY

## Education Disruption Podcast / 10.8.2020

### [Episode 21: Getting Back to School](#)

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**Nick:** Hello everybody. Welcome back to an all new episode of *Education Disruption*. In today's episode, we sat down with school founders, Josh and Rachel, to talk about the process of reopening during a pandemic, what the planning process has been like, and how they're preparing to support their students during a time where school is going to look a little bit different for everybody.

Josh and Rachel share a lot of great insight about what it was like working with their team during this time, trying to hold a graduation, **[00:00:30]** to celebrate the student successes and how they'll be approaching this new school year. Enjoy the conversation.

**Rachel:** We are about five days away from reopening Map Academy for the first time since- we didn't know it was going to be our last day of school for six months, which was March 13th, 2020. We are now at almost exactly six months, it's Thursday, **[00:01:00]** September 10th. While we did have some students here in person this summer, it will be the first day that we actually are operational as a school, will be Tuesday, September 15th.

**Josh:** I think as much as we've gotten done in the last six months to prepare for opening in September for students, there's still a tremendous amount of stuff left to do. No matter how many hours we work in a day, it feels like we work all day long **[00:01:30]** and there's still a massive amount of things that need to get done. It feels like the to-do list keeps growing, rather than getting shorter.

It's a tough struggle between how much time do we spend on getting prepared to reopen and how much time do we spend on getting prepared to educate kids. Right now it's a tough balance because we need to reopen safely, but we also need to reopen to effectively educate kids who haven't been in school for six months.

**Rachel:** **[00:02:00]** I would say that still, nothing will ever be as hard as it was two years ago, when we opened for the first time ever. I keep saying, as hard as this is, the pandemic has been, it's nothing compared to starting from scratch. I feel- to me at least, and it's been hard. I feel like the pause- but once we get over the original disruption and the shock of the pause, the pause has felt like a gift because we **[00:02:30]** had this time to work on things that we never would've had time to work on.

I agree with Josh, now we're scrambling to get up, literally operational again, but we've become a better school in the six months that we've been closed, which has been really nice. Our founding staff, they now know that-- They started a school with us. They now know that they can do anything.

They've been on site, a key group of them. We just did [00:03:00] a graduation the other day, which we've had to postpone and postpone and postpone again, the morning of the graduation and the normal team of people would have been like, "Oh my God, we're not even ready. There's no way. We can't have a graduation this afternoon. No one even knows what's happening."

No nothing and then all of a sudden, boom, like four hours later, we have this awesome ceremony because people just make stuff happen around here. That has been impacted by the pandemic, but being a founding team of a new school definitely gave us a [00:03:30] leg up on the pandemic.

**Nick:** You've gone through so much together. Do you feel?

**Rachel:** I do.

**Josh:** You feel that real team family aspect, and that's something that kids say too about the family, like aspect, but you can tell among the founding staff, because when you go through so much stuff together, it just--

**Rachel:** Definitely. People just make stuff happen. We have a bunch of new staff around and the other day in graduation, I noticed that because the new staff, we're so excited to have them here, but there's this sense of uncertainty. Our founders, our founding staff is just like, I look and they're like, [00:04:00] dude, they're reading my mind. They're just doing the thing without even needing to be told. It doesn't matter whether they're trying to find a place to put a cake, or whether they're trying to deal with a crisis, they just make it, we just make it happen around here.

**Josh:** I think just when we were closed, the school building was closed for kids to come in, we kept the learning going remotely. We stressed a lot in the episodes that we were focusing on how to reopen as a better school. Now we're [00:04:30] focusing on, okay, we're reopening with a hybrid approach. Now we're focusing on putting systems and structures in place that if we had to close down again, it wouldn't be such a big thing to get the kids to go all remote, or hopefully to get the kids to all come back into school.

We're preparing now to open fully in-person, if we can get to that point, while at the same time, putting systems and structures in place that if we had to go fully remote, students and staff can [00:05:00] really hit the ground running.

**Rachel:** We've managed to do that with such a positive attitude around here, honestly, and the context of such intense negativity, and uncertainty, and fear and even conflict and all this horrible climate around reopening schools and the politicization of it all. All of it. Honestly here, we haven't really had any of that drama. All of our teachers are ready to go and be back safely.

They trust that we're going to be safe. They want to see students. [00:05:30] We've had no drama about- we just have to make it happen. It isn't going to feel like regular Map Academy, but at the same time, our students haven't been in school in six months, that's an eternity and we have to just figure it out. Is it going to be the way we would want it to be if there wasn't a virus? No. Do we need to sit around and dwell on how it's going to be so negative? No.

That's been a gift. The climate around reopening schools right now is so [00:06:00] complicated and toxic, and it is complicated no matter what, there's a million details that have to happen.

**Josh:** I think one thing that we did as a small school- and totally understandable, bigger schools don't have the capacity to do this. As we were listening to all the conflict and controversy around schools reopening, both in the- as the spring turned into summer and then summer turned into fall. As you listen to all that controversy, one thing that Rachel and I kept talking about that was really missing was [00:06:30] student and family choice.

One thing that we did at Map Academy was we knew we had to open with a hybrid approach just because of the virus, it wasn't safe to bring everybody back all at once. We wanted to make sure that we could ensure that six feet of social distancing when kids were in school. We're opening

with a hybrid approach. Instead of saying, "This group of kids is coming on Tuesday and Thursday. This group of kids is coming on Monday, Wednesday, Friday," and that's that.

There's no changes to it until four or five weeks from now, whether it works [00:07:00] with your life schedule or not. We know what our student population, whether it be work schedules or parenting their own children, housing security. They had to have some voice into what days they were coming to school. You hear a lot about students- there's a big issue going on right now, the pandemic has been great for kids looking for work.

There's a ton of places that need employees and teenagers are still going to work. We knew that kids weren't going to just all of a sudden leave their jobs to return to school on the days that we said they were going to come to school. We gave students [00:07:30] and families a choice of what days they were going to be coming in, whether it was Tuesdays and Thursdays, or Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

Then we're going to open for an evening option that any student can come in for with an appointment based to start. We try to incorporate flexibility and student choice into all of our options as we've reopened for the fall.

**Rachel:** Definitely a little bit of a leap of faith because there's definitely the reality. What if everybody picks Tuesday, Thursday, or what if everybody picks Monday, Wednesday, Friday, but we were, "You know what, we'll figure it out." If we have that much of an imbalance, then [00:08:00] we'll have to make some adjustment, but we don't-- We try to always take that leap of faith that things are going to work out. In that case, it did.

We have a few more kids that'll be here Monday, Wednesday, Friday, than Tuesday, Thursday. What other places are doing as a response to that is they're saying that they're not offering more than two days a week because in order-- Then they're having this like mandating that one day a week be fully remote, because it's a five day week and you can't break it in half evenly, which is silly because we have a lot of students who would rather be here three days than two.

We have a lot of students who'd rather be here two days [00:08:30] than three. It worked itself out, and it's one example I think of the mindset that we can approach things around here that has a big impact, but it's really a pretty simple decision. The goal in all of our decision making is not only to get open, but stay open. We've taken- it's not characteristic of us to adopt necessarily the rigid things, but the virus is deciding that for us. We have to do those things because otherwise we're just going to end up closed again. [00:09:00] That's not the goal.

**Josh:** Even on the remote days we've changed our staff schedule, so that even when students are on remote days, they're getting face-to-face opportunities with Map Academy staff, which to us seems like common sense. When you see what's going on in the greater landscape of education, it seems a lot of students are left to their own devices on their remote days, or they were getting work when they were in person that's going to be completed when [00:09:30] they were remote.

Our school day for students is 8:30 AM to 3:00 PM, Monday through Friday, obviously. We have a staff- every hour, a different staff member is available remotely for their group of students, so that students who are still learning remotely have access to Map Academy's staff members.

**Rachel:** Our model has always been blended. We've always used that idea of technology and being able to learn

[00:10:00] from anywhere. It's always been asynchronous. Students have always been able to work at their own pace, but we've been able to leverage that. As part of our hybrid model, students will have synchronous opportunities to log on and do a class at the same time as other people together with a class. Then they'll also get support, like Josh said, for working at their own pace, even when they're not here.

**Nick:** What is student energy? Could you talk about the staff and the team being whatever it takes, what's the energy you're getting from students?

**Rachel:** [00:10:30] They've wanted to be back from the beginning. I don't think we'll fully understand the depth to which this has impacted our students until they're back here. We've stayed in touch, but it's also been a long time. I think that there's bound to be anxiety around just what it means to put school back, the routines back, the virus, [00:11:00] but they're ready to go.

The vast majority of our students, when we asked, "If you could come back full time, would you come back?" It's something like 70% of our students said, "Yes," they would prefer to come five days a week, full-time. So I don't think- we don't serve a student population that has been able to make a lot of academic progress, predominantly they have not been able to make a lot of academic progress in the time that they've been away from school. They need the [00:11:30] support and the structure and the guidance in the academic- the instruction that they get from being here.

**Josh:** We're hoping to open for full in-person, as soon as possible. We're not planning to stay hybrid for the whole school year. We're hoping that sometime in October or November, we can go back to fully in-person and have everyone come in.

**Rachel:** We have a lot of new students coming in too, something around-- We graduated plus we're [00:12:00] growing still. We're entering year three and we started at 130 students in 2018. Then 160, now we're 190. We actually are a little over enrolled right now because there's a lot of demand and it's hard to assess exactly how many students are going to actually reconnect.

We are actually going to be over 200 students for the first time and we have about 60 or so new students coming in, which is a whole [00:12:30] 'nother thing. One thing to bring back our returning students who know what to expect, but then there's a whole bunch of other students and families who have taken a leap to make a change in the middle of this time of change, which is pretty exciting really, to think about. It's definitely a lot to adjust to.

We have new staff, new students, new space, because in the middle of this whole thing, we've been in a massive renovation. Our landlord has renovated the entire lower level of our building. We're doubling in physical space, which [00:13:00] was planned before the pandemic, but it's another silver lining because if we didn't have that extra space, we wouldn't be able to spread everybody out and be safe. That's definitely been a complicating factor though, to have renovation going on in the middle of all this.

I've missed the kids so much. It's like you get used to- you get normed to it, but it's really not-- A school without kids in it is, it really is-- It's [00:13:30] really, really been hard to-- It's so monotonous, but then all of a sudden the life that comes- and we did a walk through graduation because we- with the gathering limits and such, we couldn't have everybody come in and sit down.

We had 16, I think, students graduate and it was very special to see that happen. It was a really great kickoff to the new school year. [00:14:00] We were trying to graduate in June, but it turned out to be really nice to have it be the week before school starts.

**Josh:** It was cool to have it the week before school starts. I was actually thinking about it during graduation. Obviously during a- our student population graduating high school has been a struggle. It's not just a typical graduation where they get that piece of paper and they move on with their life. Our 16 students who graduated have worked really hard to get that piece of paper and you can see it in the [00:14:30] family. You can see it in the students.

To start the school year and to see, to have our new staff in particular, see the emotion of the students and families during graduation, I don't think there was any better professional development opportunity that we could provide that would show the impact of Map Academy to the new staff members.

**Rachel:** It turned out to be another silver lining. I don't know, maybe- there's been a lot of talk among the staff that it might be something we actually want to keep. Because of the nature of [00:15:00] COVID, we basically did 16 individual diploma ceremonies because we couldn't have them all there. We needed to do the whole- we do a personal tribute, one of our counselors, Mike or Maxanne, read a tribute to the graduate and then Josh- and then usually we do all the tributes and then we grant the diplomas.

We do the- "I hereby attest that you've met all the requirements for graduation," and the official like pomp and circumstance language. Usually you say that once and they all rise [00:15:30] and we say it, and then they do their diplomas. But this time we had to say that 16 times, but it's something so powerful. We have this new staircase in the middle of our building and the family and the student walked down the stairs in this.

The family was standing right- watching it as this, almost like a private- and it was so intensely personal and the language isn't that exciting really, but them reading it-- It was very, very moving [00:16:00] to do that separately, and maybe a keeper.

**Nick:** It's always getting described as like a silver lining. Every time you guys come up with like a great idea or a great way to do stuff, but it also seems like it's just embedded that no matter what the situation, you guys are going to make the best of it, make it the best thing it possibly could. Maybe through the lens of graduation and through the lens of reopening, can you just talk about the organizational philosophy around, this is what we have to do, [00:16:30] let's figure out the best way to do it.

Maybe also talk about communicating that to your team, your new people, your founding staff, what is it like to be maintaining that headspace throughout all these challenges?

**Josh:** We operate in a mode called no flies mode where you don't sit still long enough so flies can land on you. We try to keep an optimistic approach throughout everything. There's been a lot of things during COVID-19 that are out of our control. Instead of [00:17:00] moping around and saying, "Oh, we can't do that. We can't do this." We try to find the best of it. We try to make it work.

It seems like what we're doing-- We've always done three or four full-time jobs at Map Academy as the co-directors, but it seems now we're doing about 10 full-time jobs. I think we can go from ordering PPE to picking a carpet tile, to figuring out what the hybrid schedule is going to be like to how we're going to do graduation. I think [00:17:30] the philosophy of the organization is to always make the best decision for the kids and the families.

**Rachel:** I think that the part about it that keeps me going and keeps that optimism in me is the student is the- everything literally runs through the lens of what's best for the students that we serve. If that's the lens, then there isn't an option other than to figure it out [00:18:00] because either we're going to figure it out and we're going to do what the student needs us to do, or the collective needs us to do, or we're going to fail them.

When that's the choice, it's kind of, all right, figure it out then. I think that we- coming back to the idea that- and it's not for everybody around here, but we've had an opportunity to do a whole hiring season. We had to do a hiring season without being an operational school. [00:18:30] Yet we have an amazing group of new people, but the ones that at this point are keeping this place moving is heading into year three. We now actually have institutional memory.

It's a short memory, because it's still only two years, but we now actually have it. We definitely didn't obviously have it in year one. We were brand new. Last year we were still too young to really have it. It was not settling, but heading- in this pandemic and then heading into year three, I feel like we [00:19:00] actually are beginning to have an institutional core thing, a vibe and a memory enough and a way we do things, a Map way.

That's not just a Josh and Rachel way, but this is how we do it, and I can know that stuff is happening and I don't even know what's happening and it's gone- but I trust it's going to be right.

**Josh:** I think one more cool thing about graduation, we were talking about it during a staff meeting the other day. **[00:19:30]** For those of you who don't know, the origin story of Map Academy is back in 2015, 2016 when Rachel and I were coming up with the idea of opening a school for students who are off track for success, we actually gave a presentation on a map. On that map had red dots for kids who had dropped out of high school.

Over the past three graduations that we've had, red dots that were on that map have actually graduated from high school. To go back to the origin story of Map Academy, **[00:20:00]** to have those students that we opened this place for, to actually graduate from high school is a surreal feeling. We actually talked about, we should put stars over the red dots because they made it and they graduated.

**Nick:** Map Academy is a free public charter high school located in Plymouth, Massachusetts. If you want to hear more from Josh and Rachel explaining their philosophy behind the school and their process of opening this school, you can check out previous episodes of this podcast. We not only have **[00:20:30]** conversations between Josh and Rachel, but also interviews with staff and students, and we'll have more coming in future episodes.

Be sure to subscribe to the podcast, leave it a rating, and recommend it to a friend who might also be interested. My name is Nick Tetrault. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes, and this has been another episode of *Education Disruption*.

**[00:20:52] [END OF AUDIO]**