



MAP ACADEMY

**Education Disruption Podcast / 10.28.2020**

**[Episode 22: Building the Right Team](#)**

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**Nick:** Welcome back to an all-new episode of *Education Disruption*. In today's episode, we caught up with Map Academy school founders, Josh and Rachel, ahead of the 2020/ 2021 school year. Preparing for this school year was particularly unique for Map Academy, due to new protocols and safety precautions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most important aspects of doing high school differently for Josh and Rachel is building a team of individual staff, teachers, youth development professionals, that are prepared to take on the challenges that Map Academy students face. **[00:00:30]**

In approaching this school year, Josh and Rachel had to completely rethink how they approach the hiring process, professional development, and onboarding. In today's episode, Josh and Rachel will explain to us how they ended up hiring a new group of staff, training them in the nuances of Map Academy, while also providing professional development to their current existing team, ensuring that they'd be able to go forward in the school year with some of the best practices in youth development and teaching that they've learned from previous years. Enjoy the episode.

**Nick:** As the school year is about to start, **[00:01:00]** how many people did you hire and what was the hiring process like during COVID?

**Josh:** We have seven new staff members going into this year, all of which were hired remotely with the exception of one, all the other six were hired remotely during the pandemic. We really only had the opportunity to meet them for about five minutes in person so they could **[00:01:30]** come in and get verified for their I-9 and tax paperwork.

**Rachel:** I have to say, we did get pretty good at Zoom. It was crazy weird at the beginning, but we did get pretty good at it in the end. I think there's some parts of it that I actually liked because it saves time. It's much more efficient, even though everyone in the universe I feel like, has Zoom fatigue at this point. It is in some ways much more efficient to just click into a Zoom, spend a few minutes talking to someone, and see if this has any potential to work out **[00:02:00]** than it is to interrupt a day and sit down for a formal interview that invariably takes at least twice as long as the Zoom.

From a calendaring and logistics perspective, there's some elements of the remote hiring process that we'll probably keep but it was definitely a weird experience at first to hire people remotely.

**Nick:** What were some common positive threads that you saw among the seven that you ended up hiring?

**Rachel:** Young, a lot of them. They're **[00:02:30]** energetic.

**Nick:** Tell me what about being young is appealing, especially for a teacher who works here?

**Rachel:** They're not all. We've actually hired a couple of really experienced people, I don't want to make it seem like... We need both, we need a mix, but one of our learnings is that sometimes when people have a lot of experience in traditional settings, it is particularly hard for them to adjust to being here. I think that's been a learning for us in terms of recruiting and hiring. **[00:03:00]**

We need the knowledge and the experience that comes with having done this work for a while, but if people don't have the right mindsets that experience and knowledge can actually prove to be almost impossible to acclimate to a place as radically different as Map Academy is. We have a mix of experience, but we definitely, I would say overall, skew younger with this group. **[00:03:30]**

**Rachel:** I don't know, part of that is also pandemic I think. Part of that wasn't necessarily intentional, part of that is that it wasn't a time when experienced people were necessarily taking a leap away from their — It's not like I'm going to change jobs right now. People being furloughed or laid off is one thing but people who have been, by and large, in Massachusetts, at least, in the end, there weren't massive teacher layoffs.

Most people who had a job elsewhere were staying put this season, not looking for **[00:04:00]** something new. There were some moments during the process where we were like, "We would have thought we would be getting a lot more applications," and I think in the end a lot of people made the safe move to stay where they were. The people looking were people that were more recent graduates or earlier in their career.

**Josh:** The number one thing that we still look for in people is that entrepreneurial spirit, that being okay in a start-up mode. **[00:04:30]** Because we are going into year three but when you think about public school, a three-year-old public school is still pretty much in start-up mode. Most public schools have been open for hundreds of years so the routines and structures have been getting baked into the model for way too long.

As a three-year-old public school, we are very much still in the start-up mode. We often refer to Map Academy as building a plane while we're flying it. Now we refer to it as, we're flying the **[00:05:00]** plane, it has all the gear it needs, and now we're —

**Rachel:** Fixing it.

**Josh:** We're fixing the plane as we're flying it.

**Rachel:** We're tweaking it. We're tweaking the plane.

**Josh:** We can fly the plane and we could land it if we had to, but we're tweaking some of the parts.

**Rachel:** We're way past emergency landing stage. [chuckles] We have landing gear, it's just we're just upgrading as we go. [chuckles]

**Josh:** We don't have autopilot yet. [chuckles]

**Nick:** Can you articulate a way or some of the things candidates display in having an entrepreneurial mindset? Being okay with that building the plane while you **[00:05:30]** fly it, tweaking the plane while you fly it? What do you catch from people that says they've got it or they might have it?

**Rachel:** Might, it's always a might because you never know until you see them with students.

**Josh:** In one of the, and again during remote hiring, we really had to streamline what types of questions we were going to ask people, and one of the most telling questions that we were asking people was for them to describe a time where somebody gave them some **[00:06:00]** critical feedback and what they did with that critical feedback. People who can come up with a real solid meaningful example, and what they did to adapt from that solid meaningful example, those are the people who have that ability to adapt or have that ability to, hopefully, we'll tell you at the end of the year if they did.

We talk about it a lot with even our returning staff, that the ability to [00:06:30] be coached, to take feedback and not take it personally, don't let your ego get in the way. To really take it as such, to take it as coaching.

**Rachel:** They have to be confident enough, to be vulnerable enough, to acknowledge that learner's stance and that need to grow, which is big. Then for me, the other question that really gets at that is how well they answer the very simple question, "Why Map Academy?" [00:07:00] Usually, we ask that at the end of an interview, and it's weird because there's so much out there about Map Academy now and you can tell when they've just read our website or listened to the podcasts and they're just putting our own words back at us. That's a warning sign of like, "Not going to work."

Then there's the ones where they've clearly understand what kind of school we are and they're able to articulate [00:07:30] why this is the place that they've been searching for. Those are the ones where I get goosebumps sometimes, and I can usually tell from their first cover letter honestly when there's like a thing, and that's very rare. We're hiring seven people, I didn't see that in all seven, but there's this thing that happens sometimes where people can almost feel that this is what they've been looking for.

Then there's a flip side to that, that's almost like a really bad scenario. [00:08:00] Because the flip side to that is that people think that it is but they're coming here for the wrong reasons. That is tricky because this place centers around our students, not our staff. Our staff are amazing, and we can't do it without them, and we're always looking for more great people, but it isn't about filling the needs of our staff.

We take good care of them because we value them and we need them, they're precious to us, but this isn't about them. [00:08:30] There's this, "It's just about me," thing that doesn't work well here. Part of the training, as we bring staff on board, is to relentlessly focus on what the students need from them, which is hard for staff sometimes.

**Nick:** Is there a lens you can describe through which you can tell that a staff seems passionate about the mission, but it is centered on them rather than centered on the [00:09:00] folks they can serve? Is there a red flag that pop up that you can tell that's what's happening?

**Josh:** I think a red flag, to me, is when we have an interview with a potential staff member and they talk about this one student they had. This one student that they did everything they could for and-

**Rachel:** Their favorite.

**Josh:** - they saved that kid. That kid, they saved that kid. Our follow-up question to that is always, "Well, how about if you had a whole school of those kids?" [00:09:30]

**Rachel:** We're not saving, our business isn't to save kids. We're not martyrs, we are providing opportunity for students who have been failed by other systems to settle into a place that lets them do the growing that they deserve to have a chance to do in a supportive way. This is not like some movie where some teacher goes in and saves the world. [00:10:00] This is real. Our job is to provide opportunity for students to do the work of growing. If somebody is coming in with the mindset of a savior complex, or like, "This is revolving around me, I have what these students need," or, "It's filling their bucket," then that's where this —There's a whole archetype around that. There's a whole like savior complex thing that surrounds [00:10:30] this work.

**Nick:** You're probably very good at spotting it now.

**Rachel:** Well, getting better.

**Josh:** People who have that complex also have the ability to hide it very well.

**Rachel:** Some of them do. Because also, they do mean it. That's the part that's hard sometimes because that's still admirable to want to help others, it's an admirable mindset in a way, it's just not

the kind of school that we are. It's not really compatible [00:11:00] here, it isn't really what we need. Yet at the same time, we need it because we need this selfless like willing to do anything mindset. It's very nuanced.

**Nick:** Now that you've got the seven, what are some of the things you guys are doing? Especially in this time, it's challenging anyway because they haven't quite been students yet. What are you doing to prepare them to really get them ready?

**Rachel:** Because of the construction and the [00:11:30] pandemic, first of all about 60 hours of remote PD via Zoom, which again there's pros to that. It's definitely been hard, and that was mostly not so much pandemic-related but more construction-related because we didn't have this. Because our building has been under renovation we haven't had the space to bring people back. Then there've been just complications like always happen with construction that have made that hard.

As far [00:12:00] as what we're focusing on with them, we're really going back to the basics of youth development and why, and the mindset around what our job is as adults and the environment in which we set up adults for success. One thing that has happened, which has been weird and I'll be very interested to see how it plays out, because our staff got to know each other remotely, they've gotten to know each other from almost like, of course, [00:12:30] from the intellectual way. The conversations have been very elevated and very focused and very professional. Because in Zoom we don't have the downtime or the staff building stuff.

I have a theory that it's actually going to play to our advantage in the end that they've delayed that sometimes cliquy bonding thing that happens that's very superficial at the beginning and there's often a lot of fluffy, [00:13:00] get-to-know-each-other staff stuff, which we haven't really been able to do. At the same time, I think that there's been a really laser focus on the actual staff development. I'd be curious to see how that plays out because that was virus-driven. It's been interesting though because at times it has felt more like a graduate seminar which is interesting.

**Josh:** It gave us the opportunity to spend a lot of time on positive youth development to really let — because some of our returning [00:13:30] staff that needed a refresher on it too really like, "Why does Map Academy exist? What do we do here at Map Academy? It allowed us to take a step back and go back to the basics. As the founders of the school, it allowed us to refine how we deliver that same message from two years ago to now because we've obviously had some learnings too on how we can deliver that message better.

One thing that we did that we always had a plan to do but the pandemic actually forced us to really accelerate the [00:14:00] timeline on it was, we've mentioned in previous episodes that we have a LMS system called the Tracker, that a lot of our curriculum is housed on and that the students use to learn asynchronously. We actually created a positive youth development course in the tracker for teachers to take.

The teachers are getting the experience, not only of the positive youth development and professional development that we want them to have, but they're also getting the experience of taking a course on [00:14:30] the Tracker. So that they realize that it is not an online course, it's just housing the content that is meant to be delivered by the teacher.

**Rachel:** I agree that has been. I think one of our biggest struggles is human capital and talent pipeline development. That's been a topic from the very beginning and it remains to be seen how we did with this hiring class. Hopefully, we're getting better, and better, and better at identifying and figuring out who we need and recruiting the right people, [00:15:00] and messaging who we are to candidates. So that they can decide if we're the right place for them because it's a two-way street.

I do think that a lot of the content that we've had to develop because we've had to do all this hiring remotely and all this training remotely, that we are going to be able to leverage that into — Because we know that we need to get a pipeline, the ability to do things remotely has strengthened our muscles in terms of being able to forecast [00:15:30] out ahead how do we do some of this work to get people ready to succeed at Map Academy while we're also running a school. There's a lot of aspects of that to this pandemic and this hiring season that has allowed us to do some of that institutional work that hopefully will pay off.

**Nick:** I think the round table which was for all staff, not just new staff, is really important. Can you tell me the thinking behind that? Just for the listeners, just paint them a picture of what actually went down? [00:16:00]

**Rachel:** We did a lot of work around understanding our students as complex human beings and not pigeon-holing one piece of their story or thinking we understand based on one variable. Honestly, we've used a lot of episodes of Education Disruption in the profiles that we did through this podcast on some of our graduates. Those stories have become a really integral [00:16:30] part of our staff development because we have students that are telling their stories and we used those as part of our training.

What we want our new staff to understand is that while our students have experienced really big things, traumatic things, they've had all kinds of challenges, those challenges are not the end. They're not, that's just the thing. [00:17:00] Especially too with trauma. It's been hard because we had to delay the start of school but we invited all of our graduates, our recent ones and our previous ones to come in for a round table or a session basically with the goal of having new staff hear from graduates how Map Academy worked for them, what was different about this place?

Max San, one of our social workers, and Steff, our Pathways coordinator, [00:17:30] did a bunch of outreach to get them to come in. Then we facilitated a conversation around what is it about this, how we do things here at Map so that our new staff can hear from the students themselves. Then it's also a big boost to our returning staff to get to hear the students say how much they matter.

**Josh:** When you think about educational or professional development, you Google educational professional development, there's a million consultants out there who will do [00:18:00] professional development for schools, but rarely are they recent graduates of high school. When you really think about it, people who know the most about preparing teachers for high school are kids who just graduated from high school.

Those are the ones that we as the adults are trying to teach the teachers how to teach the kids when the kids could teach the teachers probably better. To at least explain to them what they need to be successful [00:18:30] in high school.

**Rachel:** Nothing is scripted here, and yet sometimes it feels like it must be scripted. I feel that sometimes when I listen to the podcast episodes because I'm not in the interviews with the students, and I listen to them and I'm like, "Jeez, that sounds like we like scripted that." We don't. It was the same with the round table. We just got a bunch of kids and students, young adults, and we put them there. It doesn't even occur to us to tell them what to say or, and I've been in other settings where there's like [00:19:00] a student panel and there's always a prep session of like — It's basically the kids are so prepped that they're essentially spoonfed.

Essentially the kids are picked, the one they pick, the ones that are going to not say anything too radical. They're going to pick the ones that are going to like tow the party line so to speak of whatever it is they're supposed to be talking about. We don't. There's like literally zero of that here. [00:19:30] They could say anything they want. The staff too, no one gets told around here what they can and cannot say or talk about. The students nail it every time.

**Josh:** We don't have a script for anything around here. I think that's what makes Map Academy such a special place to be. Especially now as we're preparing to open for year three, people talk about responsive PD and providing the professional development that is most [00:20:00] needed at that point in time. We're doing like responsive PD to the day, we're doing what we need today because it's real-time what we need to do to get our staff prepared.

**Rachel:** Weirdly, I don't know much talk there generally is about responsive PD in other places but there's been a ton of it now, responds to PD about the pandemic. Like, "Why do we need to rethink all this? We're going to add 10 days at the beginning of the school year, and we need extra time." It's just to plan for COVID. [00:20:30] Which we do need time to plan for COVID. COVID is an entity in and of itself that has tentacles that affects everything.

Will those 60 something hours of PD that we ended up having this year, the vast majority of it, we have an outline of all things we want to talk about. Generally speaking, the plan for what we're going to do tomorrow is informed by what we did today. We're not getting too far ahead of ourselves in terms of scripting out because maybe [00:21:00] it changes over the course of time. That's definitely true of a lot of things around here, that it's not set in stone.

Some of these students we've known, Josh and I have known them for six or seven years now. For me, some of the most powerful ones are some of our older students whose journeys are really winding. We had a couple of students graduate this year at 24, which is... They [00:21:30] bumped up to the end of the age because they're at diplomas. Our charter lets us grant diplomas up through age 24.

We don't have a lot of students at that upper end of the bracket but the determination that it takes for our student who has been out of school for that long. When they get to be that age and they're working on their diplomas is because they've been out of school for four or five, six years. It's not that they were like actively enrolled in school that whole time, they're returning back after long absences [00:22:00] from high school to get this done.

There were a couple of students who said, "You helped the pride in — I got my diploma, not a GED." There's nothing wrong with a GED. There's a reason why an equivalency test as an alternate path, but it's not the same as a diploma, and our students know that. Those are the moments for me, some of them. I happened right after the day after graduation and I was really emotional [00:22:30] the night before graduation, and listening to them again the next day talking about that, it's really very special.

**Nick:** What do you think some of the main takeaways for staff, old and new who are coming out of that?

**Rachel:** It's always a little tricky because you never know with the new staff. I sometimes sit and I look and I think, "I hope they realize this isn't magic." Because this isn't magic. It's the students who did the work at end, like they did it. I wonder about that because [00:23:00] I do think just sometimes there's just the high of the takeaway of how amazing this all is. It could be perceived almost like a caricature of it and I said the next day, "They're not always happy endings."

I think that our returning staff, the people that really get it, feel the poignancy of the layers that come along with a moment like that. Because the diploma, in the end, [00:23:30] it's just a diploma, it doesn't take away all of the struggle. Many of the graduates talked about that like, "Just because they graduate doesn't mean," and we make them graduate with a plan, they have a post-secondary plan, but it doesn't always turn out the way they want. There's barriers, and a lot of the struggles that our students have faced leading up to their time at Map and through Map and then they're still there beyond Map.

Housing insecurity doesn't go away, mental health struggles don't go away, substance use struggles [00:24:00] don't go away, domestic violence doesn't go away. Like there's just so many

layers of things that just don't... they don't just go away. I think that the staff really get it in those moments part of what makes, and the students too, what makes it so powerful is the knowledge that despite all of those things they were able to achieve the milestone. They are able to articulate how they've grown as a result of their time here with us. To me, the moments of the rawness of it is what I hope people are taking away. **[00:24:30]**

**Josh:** We did some student scenarios, some of our difficult scenarios, and explained a little background on the student, what the crisis situation was, and how we as a staff handled it. Like everything else in Map Academy, we do handle crisis with the student at the center, but there is crisis. We said it to the staff that if we ever stopped having altercations here, if we ever stopped having kids coming to school high, if we ever stopped having kids refusing to do work, **[00:25:00]** then we are way off mission.

The point of Map Academy is to recruit the students who do struggle in education and to explain to staff that, like Rachel said, it's not a Disney story up until graduation. It's a winding road with lots of speed bumps in the way. We are trying to reinforce to staff that this is about the students, it's not about your ego, it's not about our ego as the founders, **[00:25:30]** it's not about saving kids.

This is about getting the kids that are on a winding bumpy path into a path that can create some stability and in a program at Map Academy that provides the opportunity for a kid to grow. It is not an easy thing to do and it's not a switch that can just be flipped on and all of a sudden, the kid is "Fixed" or ready to learn. It's hard work what we do here at Map Academy. **[00:26:00]** One of the biggest things we try to do is to just show the staff how hard we as the founders of the school work so that they understand that—

**Rachel:** It's relentless, its relentless work.

**Josh:** It is.

**Rachel:** So we're a week out. We're going to open, we're going to launch, and then we'll see. We'll see who has what it takes to deal with the relentless nature of the trenches of it really. Not in a bad way, it's just a lot. It's a leap of faith.

[music]

**Nick: [00:26:30]** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Education Disruption. If you want to find out more about Map Academy, a free public charter high school located in Plymouth, Massachusetts, head to the [mapacademy.org](http://mapacademy.org). My name is Nick Tetrault. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes and this has been a Hairpin Production.

**[00:26:58] [END OF AUDIO]**