MAP ACADEMY

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Episode 23: What the Pandemic Is Teaching Us

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Nick: Welcome back to *Education Disruption*. In this episode, school co-founders, Josh and Rachel, reflect on the impact of the pandemic. On their students, opportunities and challenges presented, as well as some resulting innovations. Because Map Academy was specifically designed to re-engage marginalized students who are off-track or dropped out, we wanted to know what shifts Josh and Rachel are seeing in an education system under this unprecedented strain. **[00:00:30]**

Josh: If you really looked at the data over the years, there's a tremendous amount of students, every year, pandemic or not, that are failing classes. Here at Map Academy, what we wanted to do is we wanted to eliminate that barrier of kids failing classes. They take a course for an entire year, they get to the end of it, and they failed it. What does that tell us as educators? Did we fail as educators, or did the kid fail the class? When we were designing Map Academy, we wanted to create a model in which kids couldn't **[00:01:00]** fail. That true learning had to take place.

Instead of having a time-based approach, where we're telling kids when they have to learn the material by, we created a model that allowed us to have students work at their own pace, so that instead of failing at the end of the class, we could say, "Maybe you just need a little bit more time to learn the material."

Rachel: Sometimes that's a lot more time, and you have to be incredibly patient because there is no magic thing that says, just because we made this competency-based model, students are all of a sudden going to just **[00:01:30]** miraculously be okay, and make amazing progress, and graduate on their timeline. What we have found in year three, whether there's a pandemic or not, is that our academic model is sound, and it provides students an opportunity, but without significant support and reassessment of the progress made toward those goals, they may not be able to fail here, but they can definitely stall. **[00:02:00]**

I think that the pandemic has exacerbated that for some students, and for other students it has actually helped them to accelerate their progress, which has been interesting. We've been hybrid since we reopened in the fall. There's no doubt that there are some students who have found that working fully remotely works for them. I think that there's a lot of reasons for that. Sometimes it's due to social anxiety.

I think sometimes as **[00:02:30]** school leaders, and as adults, we underestimate the amount of work it takes for some students to even make it out of their bed, out of their bedroom, out of their house, into their car, or onto the bus, off the bus, into the school, into the classroom, onto the computer, into the coursework. For students who are paralyzed by anxiety or depression, all of those layers, and I only listed like the obvious ones. There are so **[00:03:00]** many more steps that have to happen, that seem like they should just be second nature. I think that for some students, removing those barriers and saying, for them, that they can't come into school, was freeing.

That's a minority. I think there's more students who actually would be fine with all of that if it was smooth, but there are so many things in their lives that are complicating **[00:03:30]** factors that it's so far from smooth, allowing — Because we have had to provide more opportunities for remote support, it has actually helped some students, whether it's because they're working a lot, or they have a child of their own, or they don't have transportation, or they have a really messed up sleep schedule, or whatever the reason is, that our adding more supports for remote because of the pandemic has helped them.

I think the bigger **[00:04:00]** issue, what we've seen, has been the impact of students not being able to be in school as much because they miss the direct instruction, they miss the community, they miss the connection to a place, but the reality is that there's a lot of students who rely on being here at school in order to be engaged with academics.

Josh: As a school, our academic model itself was well suited to go into a **[00:04:30]** hybrid and a remote model. However, one thing that's been really challenging to replicate is providing wraparound supports to students in a hybrid and remote way. We educate the students who are at the margins, students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, who have already dropped out of high school, who are thinking about dropping out of high school.

To tell the students that they can only come to school one and two days a week or three days a week is really challenging because they rely on the student support **[00:05:00]** services that we have here at Map Academy to get them to the point where they're ready to achieve academically. That's challenging to do with a student. If you use a student, for example, who's on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule. Monday could be all student support services trying to get them prepared to make academic progress.

We get them to a point where they're ready to make academic progress, and they don't come back to school until Wednesday. When they come back, it's challenging to get them back into the groove of making academic progress. **[00:05:30]** We are firm believers that social, emotional supports have to be met before we expect academic progress to be made.

Nick: Most schools in the United States have had to pivot to hybrid schedules. Terms like remote learning and asynchronous learning have become familiar. The Map Academy's model has been asynchronous since the beginning, but their definition of asynchronous looks very different from what we're seeing from other schools during the pandemic.

Rachel: The way we have always used asynchronous here at Map Academy, which means the literal definition of asynchronous as far as learning **[00:06:00]**goes, means that it's not linked to time. It's happening asynchronously, out of sync with other students, out of sync from a student-centered perspective, benefits the student. Asynchronous learning, what it means, that the student is working at their own pace, but they can access teacher support when and how they need it.

Asynchronous learning is the thing that means that we can say that a student never fails a class here at Map Academy.

Asynchronous learning, as it is being done in the pandemic by the vast majority **[00:06:30]** of schools is not asynchronous at all. It means on your own, and you're still subject to the timelines that we set up. On your own, but do by Tuesday at midnight, or on your own but do at Wednesday at noon, or whatever the thing is, it doesn't mean at your own pace with the right support, because schools haven't figured out how to pivot to having student directed self-paced asynchronous **[00:07:00]** learning. The number of students who are falling out of sync with school is massive.

I don't think that it's necessarily limited to the type of students that Map Academy is designed to serve. I think it's across all ages, it's across all social-economic bands. I think some students are going to weather it better because of the nature of their lives overall, being more stable, and because they didn't enter this pandemic with significant skill **[00:07:30]** gaps, and they didn't enter from an even playing field. The pandemic has made everyone off-kilter, but it's been inordinately impacting the type of students that Map Academy is designed to serve.

Josh: Also, I think we're just at the beginning of this issue of more students failing classes. When you think about the beginning of this pandemic, if you think about the end of last school year, think about from March to the end of June, **[00:08:00]** it was schools were scrambling as to, what do we do for students? I think a lot of students just got passed along to the next grade level. Now that those students are in that next grade level, we can't just have global hold backs of every single grade level.

I think we're at the beginning of a secondary issue here with, what about the learning loss? The kids just don't have — They haven't learned the material to progress to the next grade **[00:08:30]** level without failing.

Rachel: Grade levels are arbitrary to begin with. That's where the systemic change comes in because the grade levels are based on age. The grade levels have never been based on learning. I do think that this whole thing is highlighting that per reality that a kid could fail — They could have done no work since March, and they could still have more skill than a student who's two or three grade levels ahead of them in school, or vice versa, or any combination thereof. **[00:09:00]** It could be true in one subject and not another subject.

The reality is that the way that schools are designed to work in the United States, does not accommodate the student at the center of the learning. All of these conversations around what to do, the pandemic has highlighted all of that, but what does a grade level even mean? It doesn't mean anything. A kid could be in 10th grade and reading at the 3rd grade level.

Josh: Well, we hear a lot on **[00:09:30]** social media, and in the news, and in meetings that we have with other school leaders is, when things go back to normal, we'll figure this out and we'll get past this. I think as school leaders of Map Academy, we're trying to think of, what can we do differently to make sure that we're taking advantage of these times where we've essentially changed the entire model of education for the entire United States?

It's a point in **[00:10:00]** time where as a school leader, I should take a step back and think, "Well, wait a second, does school need to take place just in the walls of school? Is there an opportunity here to truly eliminate grade levels, to eliminate failing, to eliminate these attendance

requirements? Can we create a model that's more centered on the student globally versus just in individual pockets like here at Map Academy?"

Rachel: Of course people can. Just because you do it once, doesn't mean that you leave it that way. I think that that, **[00:10:30]** to me, is one of the biggest takeaways of this whole thing is, we're still a baby school. This is only middle of year three of operations, and there's already so much learning about how we can do what we do better. Some of that was our hand being forced by COVID, but the reality is that systems have to be built as webs, and they have to be built flexibly, or else it's hopeless to even think about that type of systemic **[00:11:00]** change.

If they're in the current context in which the change happens so slowly to begin with, that by the time they react, it's already out of date. There's so much planning for the change, and COVID has accelerated that. It would be awesome if some of the quick thinking innovation, I don't know that people are seeing it as innovation, but I think it has potential to be innovation if it's embraced in the right way. **[00:11:30]** It's been seen as crisis control, but in a crisis, you have to move fast, and you have to do the best you can. You can't get the perfect solution, you have to act to the best of your ability, in the moment. Schools, and the world has had to do that.

Josh: I think one really good example of that is this idea of hybrid learning, and students learning from home. I think that when you work with students who have had attendance issues in the past, and **[00:12:00]** you really talk to students who have had attendance issues in the past, if you really boil it down, a student who doesn't have reliable transportation at home, or access to reliable transportation at home, their only opportunity to get to school is approximately a minute and a half time period in their bus stop.

Oftentimes, it's even less than a minute and a half window, where a student can get on a bus and get a ride to school. If a student who doesn't have **[00:12:30]** reliable transportation misses that time period, whether it's they overslept, they weren't ready, it was snowing out and it took them a little longer to walk to the bus stop, the reasons are endless. If they miss that one and a half minute time period of that bus, and that only ride to school, they've lost their opportunity for a school day.

I think that we should all take a step back and say, "Well, wait a second, if we're basically doing a whole year of hybrid learning, why can't we continue that model so that if a kid did miss a bus, they could still have **[00:13:00]** what's considered a school day from home. I would like to see the hybrid model stay as an option for schools because there's endless reasons why students cannot physically get to school.

Rachel: It has to be a flexible hybrid model though, because otherwise, the hybrid model is just being used to create new barriers that are what's leading to all these students failing classes. That's like our version of hybrid. **[00:13:30]** In our version of hybrid, we never judge when the student walks through the door, we just want them to walk through the door. There's no shame attached to walking in late, and there's no shame attached to leaving early, and there's no shame attached to missing a day because our learning is truly focused on the student.

If you're still going to put timelines and deadlines and attendance policies on top of the hybrid, then what about that kid who doesn't want to turn their camera on, on the Zoom call because they can't? They're marked absent **[00:14:00]** because the teacher didn't see them.

Nick: Now that the rollout of vaccines for the virus has begun, we wondered how they're thinking about a post COVID future.

Rachel: I think that us getting better at continuing to offer more, and different types of learning experiences. I think that the case management system that we've developed during the pandemic will stay, in terms of having somebody overseeing the overall academic experience of students. I think that we've done a lot of work, **[00:14:30]** during this pandemic, around making sure that our courses are, and we have a lot more work to do, but making sure that academically, students are scheduled into the right level of challenge, and accommodating skill deficits that students often are very good at trying to mask.

Being able to look at the multiple reasons **[00:15:00]** why students are getting stuck, on an academic basis. Recognizing that, although all the wraparound supports that we provide are fundamental to getting students to engage or re-engage, usually, with their education, if we stop that wraparound, and don't put enough emphasis on academics, in the end, it's impossible to change the trajectory. **[00:15:30]** I think that COVID has forced us to see that reality.

That in the end, it's academic progress that pushes students closer to their diplomas, and getting that high school credential, with skills behind it, and having a meaningful plan for after high school is the thing that has the greatest chance of changing their future.

Josh: I think another thing that I think about a lot when it comes to post **[00:16:00]** COVID school, I think that it has been overwhelmingly amazing for kids to be able to go outside during the day. Whether it's for a class, whether it's to take this new thing called a mask break, kids should have that ability to go outside for fresh air. We had the opportunity to install access points outside, so that we could set up some outdoor classrooms. They should have that ability, particularly in high school because we should trust high school kids enough to go outside and come back in.

Rachel: As I reflect on 2020 **[00:16:30]** coming to a close and entering 2021, approaching a year of this pandemic education in the next couple of months, I think that there's no doubt that it's had a tremendous impact on us as a school. I think it's made us a better school. I think that there's a lot of recovery that needs to happen as things recalibrate, but I really think that there's also a lot of opportunity. I know that at Map Academy, we're committed to continuing to do that **[00:17:00]** work on evolving, and becoming better, and I really think there's a lot of opportunity for other schools and systems to do the same.

I hope there are others who are committed to trying to find ways to not just survive this pandemic, but actually learn to thrive in ways that can make us better once everyone is vaccinated, and hopefully, this pandemic world is behind us.

[music] **[00:17:30]**

Nick: Thank you for listening to another episode of *Education Disruption*. Map Academy is an alternative school in Plymouth, Massachusetts, that reconnect students to opportunities, and their education. If you enjoyed the show, subscribe for more episodes, and feel free to leave us a review and give the podcast a rating. My name is Nick Tetrault. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes, and this is a Hairpin production.

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