



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 24: Post-Secondary Planning for Life After High School](#)

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Nick: Map Academy is an alternative school for students up to 24 years old. Their mission is to re-engage young people by providing the wraparound support they need to thrive. One of the requirements to graduate from Map is a post-secondary plan. Co-founders of the Map Academy, Josh and Rachel, explain why.

Josh: When you really think about high school in a traditional sense [00:00:30] or anywhere really, you think about the end of high school, which is the graduation. There's so much talk around the graduation is on this date and all the requirements need to be met by X date, but really the point of high school is what happens after high school. If you take a step back and look at a global view of school, that's when the free access to public education stops, at the end of grade 12. [00:01:00]

It's supposed to have prepared you to do something after high school, but there's so much attention on this graduation instead of what are the students going to do after graduation. When we think about it a lot, and particularly when we were working in a traditional school district, it's, if graduation was on, say, June 6th of any given year, we would often think, that's great that the student has graduated on June 6th, but what is that student going to do on June 7th?

Here at Map Academy, [00:01:30] we wanted to make sure that we put just as much emphasis on life after high school, as we did on getting that student to graduation. It's definitely been a journey and we've evolved since day one. It's great for us to have the opportunity to share our experience.

Rachel: The post-secondary plan is a graduation requirement here. That's one of the things that we decided early on was that we were going to actually make it a requirement that students have a plan for after graduation [00:02:00] before they leave us and that meaningful, actionable post-secondary plan is part of the fabric of the student's experience here.

Just the existence of that as a requirement helps because it gives them an opportunity and it forces them at the same time, whether they like it or not, to figure out what they're going to do, what they want to do after. In our first couple of graduations, and we're still a baby school.

[00:02:30] We haven't even finished year three.

We probably have somewhere in the vicinity of 25 graduates, probably, total. I think that as we start to have alumni, we started to look at what does post-secondary life look like for our students? It has become really clear that just having a graduation requirement of a post-secondary plan, although

[00:03:00] a drastic improvement over the absence of such a plan, is not enough to prepare students for the type of post-secondary outcomes that we would wish for them.

There's so many complicating factors that go into what happens when students enter the world after high school. That we've really begun to embrace a web of support that can't just stop and **[00:03:30]** the necessity of being absolutely positive that the student is the one driving that plan and that well-meaning adults in an effort to make things better and pave the way are not scaffolding so much that students can't do it on their own.

That's a really tough thing because we have really well-meaning adults. By and large, our students are really **[00:04:00]** deserving of things falling their way for once in their lives, which have been really complicated. It's easy to want to help, and we need to help, but at the same time, if we're not realistic, the students can't sustain the plan that was set-up for them.

Josh: As a self-paced school and a blended asynchronous model, we don't have **[00:04:30]** the-- I don't want to call it a luxury because it's extremely challenging for traditional schools to get students ready for life after high school too, but it's an even more nuanced approach at Map Academy. We don't have a roster of 300 students that are going to be graduating on June 6th. We know that life is going to get in the way of some of our students who we have termed potential grads.

We don't have freshmen sophomore, junior, senior, where we can just meet with the senior class and say, hey, by X date, you need to do your FASFA. By this date, **[00:05:00]** you need to apply for schools. We have students who are potential grads, we have a team of people who are working with them, ensuring that they're still on pace to graduate within the school year.

Making sure that we're doing what we can to get them prepared for life after high school so that not only can they fulfill the requirement of having an actionable post-secondary plan so they can graduate from Map Academy, but also something that's going to be realistic that they're actually going to achieve after **[00:05:30]** high school and be on their way to a successful livable-wage job. That's a really nuanced approach in a self-paced school.

Rachel: Most of the students that find their way to Map Academy do not have a clear sense of future for lots of reasons, certainly not for academic future. Part of the work that has to be done, a lot of our students can't even see a clear path **[00:06:00]** toward a high school diploma. If they can't see a clear path toward a high school diploma, then how are they going to see a clear path toward education after high school or for work or for whatever the career is.

One of the things that we've worked on this year is rolling out success plans, which is a multilayered student-centered document, which asks the student to begin thinking upon enrollment, although for our graduates, where if we're only **[00:06:30]** in our third year and students are already graduating, that means that those students we've had for less than two years of their educational journey. The longer we have students, the better our outcomes will get.

Because we serve students who've already failed elsewhere, we're always going to have students at the tail end of their high school journey. The success plan is designed to start as soon as the student enrolls with us and to get the student thinking about beginning to set goals and imagine futures for themselves, **[00:07:00]** get them to really probe into interest inventories and looking at if things go well for me, what am I passionate about? What am I interested in?

Most of our students, because they've always experienced so much struggle and failure, both in school and for many of them outside of school, they're not accustomed to looking at a strength-based approach to their own life. They are so focused on deficit-based because they have to, and they're resilient **[00:07:30]** and they're survivors, but they're not looking past the present.

The success plan has been a big part of helping us to start helping students to have a better, more realistic sense of their own goals so that then we can support those goals instead of what typically happens, which is when students don't know adults fill the gap for them in order to check off the box that they have a plan. I think that we know that **[00:08:00]** our students outcomes are better if they enroll in post-secondary education, but the persistence and the number of things that have to fall into place in order for that to actually happen can be overwhelming.

By starting a students sooner on a success plan, we hopefully will be able to address some of those potential pitfalls sooner. For example, I want to be a nurse **[00:08:30]** and so I'm going to enroll in a CNA program and then I'm going to use the CNA to get a job while I go to school. That's a very typical pathway. CNA jobs are incredibly hard. They're emotionally draining. They pay very little. They're easy to get because there's so much turnover and they're perceived to be focused on a career pathway because **[00:09:00]** they're in a healthcare setting.

Unfortunately though, CNA jobs, while they can work for some people are like a black hole for many of our students, because they're so hard and they get paid so little that then to do the coursework that they need to do at a community college level to take pre-nursing courses or to take core courses on top of that minimum wage, incredibly draining job, **[00:09:30]** they give up.

Because the job is really hard, they're not getting paid much, they can't afford their college classes, they don't have time to study and they're trying to pay their bills. All of a sudden this idea that I want to be a nurse becomes lost and mired in this whole reality that has nothing to do with a career path anymore. That's one example of it, but we hear that one a lot that, this is the reality of I'm going to go live on **[00:10:00]** campus at a four-year school, which for many students in other settings is a given that that's just what they're going to do.

That's what their parents did is what their aunts and uncles did is what their grandparents did. You apply to college, you go live in a dorm, and you have a four-year college experience, maybe make some money to contribute toward this but for the most part, your job is to be a student. The reality in post-secondary life today for a student **[00:10:30]** who wants to go to, let's say, a four-year public college is that the array of things that have to happen from the FAFSA, and there is a lot of financial aid out there.

The things that have to happen in terms of meeting deadlines in terms of being able to make your way to navigate the housing process and navigate all of the fees and forms and all of this before you even get to academics, that have to happen meaning that that process **[00:11:00]** is designed by the system for an 18-year-old to have a supportive adult following them every step of the way through that process and making sure because most 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds are not ready to do that on their own.

What for us, we've found that this idea of what does support have to look like in order for post-secondary planning, we set our students up in a well-meaning where we set them up **[00:11:30]** for failure if we don't acknowledge how hard it's going to be.

Nick: We asked how does the Map staff balance supporting student's aspirations, helping them develop a strength-based mindset, and keep them grounded in reality.

Rachel: It's really hard. I think we're getting better at it. I think one of the learnings that we've got is that the biggest thing, and this is definitely still a work in progress and it's hard, the more credit students have on their transcript when they get to us [00:12:00] in some ways, it's good news because they've got a lot of high school done. They come to the door closer to being ready, which on the surface is great. Oh, you only need two more English. Oh, you only need two more math.

The reality for a lot of students who are on pace when they get to us is that those grades are not necessarily reflective of their skill. One of the biggest things that we've learned is the need to be honest with students about where their academics are at. We've started really actively using [00:12:30] this test called the NWA assessment NWA Map, which is a nationally normed test of basically reading and math skill. It can be very eye-opening for students who have grades on their transcript, which would indicate that they got B, C's, even A's in high school courses to then find that their skills, their actual reading and math skills are significantly weaker than their transcript would indicate.

Because in the end, [00:13:00] post-secondary education comes down to academic ability. If they can't do the academic coursework, then they're never going to persist. Part of the thing that we've gotten better at is being honest around where our student's academic skill is. I think we're working to continue to encourage our students to do dual enrollment. Ideally, we will get to a point where every student has to do a dual enrollment, English, and Math class before they can graduate from Map Academy, which would mean that they have proven to themselves [00:13:30] and to us, that they have the skills to not need remediation, in Math and English when they graduate from us, which is as close as we will get to a degree of certainty that they're ready for the academic expectations of post-secondary education.

Josh: I think another big part of it also is building trusting relationships with students so that they know that we're coming from a well-meaning place when it comes to their post-secondary plan. A lot of our students have support from outside partnerships that [00:14:00] either we've connected them to, or they were already connected to before they got to Map Academy. Although partnerships are an amazing thing, and we continue to look for more partnerships, sometimes those partnerships aren't giving the students the best advice.

A good example of that is trying to tell a student that school X is a reasonable choice when school X is about \$60,000 a year and it's three hours from Plymouth. Now we as educators, and as [00:14:30] people who went to college know that school X for that student probably isn't the most reasonable choice. Now, we don't want to get in the way of students shooting for the stars but we also want to have reasonable expectations that they don't get their hopes up so much so for school X, that if they don't get into school X, they don't want to go anywhere else.

That's where the building trusting relationships come in so that we can talk to the student and say, "Hey, we know that you're applying to school X. That's a great idea, but just want to make sure you have some other [00:15:00] options as well, because I hope you know that school X is going to be really challenging to get into, to make a choice that might not be realistic even when you graduate. To really have that tough conversation, when other organizations are telling the student that they should do it because it's great for the students to try. Again, I think the trusting relationship of

being able to have that hard conversation with a student has [00:15:30] been instrumental in post-secondary plans.

Rachel: I think the reality of what we learned from the students that have graduated is that community college is a reach. Sustaining community college in 2020, COVID or not, is a reach for many students, because of all of the things that Josh mentioned, around the reality of the things that have to fall into place. I think for some of our students, it's very [00:16:00] easy for them to dismiss the value because it seems so hard and because for many of our students, they never thought they were going to graduate from high school. It's very tempting to see that as the end of the road.

For many of them, it has been for a long time, because they've been out of school, and they gave up. They never thought it was going to happen. Re-engaging, and having a meaningful [00:16:30] completion to their high school experience and getting a diploma, which we have been really successful in being able to help students do can feel like the end, and I'm done. Why would I want to do that anymore.

I think helping our students have a vision for why it is important for them to engage and in order for that vision to work, they have to really know what it is that they want. They have to have, [00:17:00] as Josh said, an honest sense of the strengths and the barriers in order to make a good decision about what they need to do in order to get on a pathway toward a career really, rather than just a job. We've had a lot of students not be able to sustain what we would consider the smallest post-secondary educational step like part-time community college.

Nick: The same systemic problems that lead [00:17:30] many students to Map in the first place are often still barriers when it comes to post-secondary success. Rachel and Josh, explain.

Rachel: There's so many reasons why, everything from costs to housing, to transportation, to community to academic support, all the things that we provide at Map Academy, and they're hard things to provide.

Josh: The sad reality of it is in the year 2021, a high school diploma isn't enough to get a [00:18:00] livable wage job. The absence of a high school diploma is catastrophic to a kid's future. It's we have to always balance that line of, "Yes, we want kids to focus on post-secondary plans. Some doors open after the high school diploma, but it is a fine line." That's where the nuanced approach comes in and that's why we would love for every student to go to school [00:18:30] X.

We also know that we need to provide doors open for students that are a little bit more realistic. That's what we're trying hard to do, so that we know that when a student leaves Map Academy, we set them on a journey to a livable wage job so that they don't have to live check the check, so that they can afford to have their own place to live. They can afford to have reliable transportation so that it starts to turn the corner for them.

Rachel: Which all comes down to the reality of needing to [00:19:00] expose students to what their options are and to the career development part which is another piece that we've been working really hard on and the pandemic definitely has made that part hard. We made a ton of progress last year with experiential learning and providing students with opportunities to get out into the world even small, ranging in size from a one day visit someplace or a couple of hours or a guest speaker all the way working up to an internship or an apprenticeship.

Those types of experiences are crucial and one of the things [00:19:30] I most look forward to being post-pandemic, because while a lot of the things are being offered virtually they're just not the same. We've been so focused on trying to help students with wraparound supports and academic supports that career development and experiential stuff has really had to go to the edges during this time. The key to developing the clarity that students need to make that happen is in having them have a passion for a dream that they then [00:20:00] can make happen. The only way to provide that to students who have had hopeless experiences with education is to provide them exposure. I think that coupled with the experiential stuff, the success planning, and the realistic scaffolded support, but making sure that the student is at the center of what's going on always.

That is the key I think to it. In order for them to understand, we have to open the world to [00:20:30] them. When you're just trying to survive, you don't see the potential. I think that deficit of hope and vision is one of the biggest things in the students, that we see the students on the margins have a lack of vision and it's not their fault.

It's not that they don't have the capacity for vision, it's that they have not had the circumstances, which have allowed them the [00:21:00] freedom to dream about a better future. That's what education should provide. That's what we need to keep trying to provide, is that vision

Nick: We wanted to know what are the signs that a student has turned the corner and is starting to believe in the future.

Rachel: Turning the corner toward future planning comes from making academic progress on their coursework and seeing their credits accumulate. As their [00:21:30] credits accumulate and in their tracker, their bars get closer to complete and they start to fill their academic requirements, they start to be ready to talk about what's going to happen next. I think there's something that definitely comes from getting traction academically that makes on our J-curve.

Nick: Quick definition here, the J-curve Rachel is referring to is a graph Map uses to plot a student's level of engagement. It runs from phase zero, meaning no engagement to phase four, full [00:22:00] engagement.

Rachel: It's like a phase four student who's made enough academic progress that they have some momentum toward graduation and then thereby what's happening after graduation. I think that's the sweet spot for post-secondary planning is when they believe that it's a certainty that they're going to graduate from high school and then they're ready to start talking about and thinking about what happens.

I think this happens more and more with the students that we have for longer and [00:22:30] as we grow as a school and we have more longevity with students, ideally, their graduation would never be in doubt. You want to get to a place where they never are questioning whether they're going to graduate. Thereby, automatically thinking about life after high school because they believe there's going to be a future after high school. The longer window you have where the student feels that their future is [00:23:00] positive and certain, the better post-secondary plan you can help them create.

Our goal is to widen the length of time that they feel success and that they feel that their future is a variable that they can control. The longer that runway is, the better their chances of traction.

Nick: While there are no easy solutions, one idea that Josh and Rachel have is to add a year after graduation in which students [00:23:30] have completed their academic requirements. This time would be support to make an actionable plan and next steps for life after high school, be it college or career. Josh explains.

Josh: I would love to see education get to a point where a student could graduate from high school, but have a post-grad year connected to high school. Currently, there is no mechanism in which to do that, which is basically just tied to [00:24:00] funding.

If there was a way that we could code a kid as a high school graduate, so they could get into a college, whether it's a community college or school X. We could keep them enrolled as a high school student so that we could provide the support. We have trusting relationships. We have the supports in-house. If we could find a way, and it really just boils down to money. If we could find a way to keep that student "enrolled for [00:24:30] a post-grad year", I think we would see tremendous results for the student population. That Map Academy serves.

Rachel: There are organizations out there that are doing that, but their mission is to support students in making it through Harvard or making it through in equalizing the playing field for academically gifted students so that they can persist in high-quality post-secondary pathways. If you are a student who's really talented academically and [00:25:00] you are low income or you have had a challenging life, there are definitely organizations out there whose mission is to mentor those students. That's different than our students who maybe don't have that academic pedigree.

They have all the challenges and all the gaps. I think the work is more complex and it's more risky because it isn't [00:25:30] necessarily going to be accomplished in a year. It isn't necessarily going to be accomplished in the way that we would all prefer it to be accomplished. We have to have varying degrees of what success looks like.

Josh: Even if you pass it on to another organization, that new organization doesn't have the trusting relationship that we have spent years, in some cases, developing with the student. I think that the success we would see with having a post-grad year with our [00:26:00] student population, in particular, the dividend would pay off tremendously for society.

Nick: Thank you for listening to another episode of *Education Disruption*. Map Academy is a free public alternative high school in Plymouth, Massachusetts, that reconnect students to opportunities and their education. If you enjoyed this episode, subscribe for more and let us know what you thought by writing a review and giving the show a rating. My name is Nick Tetrault. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes, and this is [00:26:30] a Hairpin production.

[00:26:40] [END OF AUDIO]