



MAP ACADEMY

Education Disruption Podcast / 11.3.2021

[Episode 27: Building a Supportive & Resilient School Culture Takes Time](#)

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Nick: Welcome back to *Education Disruption*. Map Academy is an alternative school in Massachusetts that combines high expectations with high supports for marginalized students. Today, we'll hear from some staff members from Map Academy, each in different roles, and we'll talk to them about how they work together to help students find success at a school that is so different.

Meet Steve Sell, he's the Teaching and Learning Co-Lead, and also a humanities teacher at Map.

Steve: My role as the teaching and learning co-lead is to [00:00:30] tend to the teaching and learning that happens here both as somebody who facilitates the teaching and learning but somebody who also tries to help us think about the kind of curriculum we design and all that. That stuff's important. But it's just as important, especially for the students that we serve, that we are tending to the realities of the lives that they're living outside of school and that they're bringing in here.

Shiobhan: When I was looking for the job here—

Nick: That's Shiobhan Sylvia. She's also a humanities teacher at Map.

Shiobhan: When I saw that they didn't have just [00:01:00] guidance counselors — there wasn't two overworked guidance counselors — they're social workers, and they also provide resources for students who they address the actual issues that can really impact a student's learning: housing, food insecurity... just anxiety, anxiety and depression. And the idea of at least they're coming into a space where people love them.

Nick: Shiobhan says she often sees students at Map enter with a lot of negative feelings towards school and a lack of confidence based on their previous school experience.

Shiobhan: [00:01:30] I just love the kids and the school so much, but it's the confidence they lack when you first see them come here, and it's so upsetting because they have literally internalized the idea that they are the bad kid or they don't get it or that they feel ashamed that they don't get it so then they put on that front of being tough. If they've only seen education as something that is telling them they have to do something a certain way or fit in this box and if they don't fit in the box, it's a negative thing...

Mike: [00:02:00] Most kids come in with the same type of serviceable issue related to avoiding.

Nick: That's Mike Balaschi, Wraparound Co-Lead and social worker at Map. He explains that a lot of the underlying issues students are facing often aren't school-related.

Mike: They are trying to distract themselves and stay busy from the underlying issues that take away from their ability to engage with other people in a meaningful relationship or academics or just progress in life.

Steve: I talked to a couple [00:02:30] of staff members. I remember, in particular, talking with Mike and Maxine, who are the student support co-leads and social workers here. It was very clear that they weren't just this person that a student might go talk to at some point in the course of not even a day, but the course of maybe a year, or maybe even multiple years at a school. It was clear that their role was integral to the day-to-day [00:03:00] operations of the school. That right there told me that Map's a different kind of school

Nick: Steve's role is multifaceted. He's supporting staff, helping develop curriculum, and paying close attention to what works best for students at Map.

Steve: One is to help us in designing better curriculum for students. Then another is coaching teachers beyond the curriculum work, trying to find the time to support teachers in a [00:03:30] way that will help them grow to help them with identifying goals that they want to set for themselves. Then a third thing that I think is important to my role as a teaching and learning co-lead is: I have to be cognizant of what is the experience for our students as learners here?

Nick: One thing that's crucial to the student culture is actually the staff culture – finding the right adults to be in the space and engage with the students.

Mike: As we build the student culture, we're also building the staff culture, trying to find staff members that are really [00:04:00] going to be able to be okay with students showing up one day and making a ton of progress and then not showing up the next day and trusting that student support is going to take care of making sure that they come back and the staff has another opportunity to engage with them.

Steve: That I think starts with building strong relationships and leading with those relationships and then leveraging those relationships that you build [00:04:30] to schedule the day in a way that will help get the learning done.

Nick: This can be radically different from traditional schools. Building the strong relationships with students presents a challenge.

Steve: I think it's just like that relationship building takes time. With some students, it takes a long time. It can take months. It might not even happen in the first year. Then with other students, it's going to happen in a 10-minute conversation. But you also then have to be cognizant of the fact that you [00:05:00] can't just push to the side those other students who are not giving you the time of day yet or who are more resistant.

Also, maybe even be accepting that you know what, there might be somebody else in the building, another teacher who's maybe not even in the same content area or discipline as you, that might just be able to reach that student that you're not able to reach right now, and that's okay because there's at least somebody [00:05:30] in this building that's going to be there for that student to get some of that academic work done.

Shiobhan: It's amazing what you can do in a day when students are ready to learn, instead of forcing it on them. This model as a teacher and as a professional and also for these students works really well because they have a lot of one-on-one time. That's just built into the day, that's built into the model here.

Nick: Steve tells us that taking time is crucial for a student's success.

Steve: Time is so important, [00:06:00] and not just for us as adults, but for our students. I think most schools operate under this assumption that students should just show up and do their time. There are so many things that are messed up about that. One of the things that I stop and admire about Map is that we don't operate with time in that same sort of way, or we don't look at time in that same sort of way. We truly let students use time in a way that makes sense [00:06:30] to them, to take their time. We don't rush them. We trust that they're going to figure out in their own time what they need and what's going to help them get there.

Nick: This truly is a team effort. While the student support team is working really hard to eliminate any barriers preventing students from coming to school, the teachers are ready to focus on academics as soon as the students are ready.

Mike: The student support team, that works really hard to get kids here every day. [00:07:00] The staff is expected to not dig into those barriers that caused them to get here. It's not like, "Oh, where have you been?" It's just, "Oh, we're so happy you're here today." There's no judgment about having not come in for a little bit. There's no reacclimating. It's "You're back. Hey, awesome. You're here. Let's do some work."

Steve: If the student needs to step away for a few weeks from coming to school or doing work, [00:07:30] they can jump right back in exactly where they left off because it's asynchronous, and we're still going to be here for them. If I'm like the teacher assigned to that course whenever the student comes back, I can just re-engage with them when they're ready to re-engage.

Nick: The asynchronous model can be a real challenge for teachers that are used to working in a more traditional environment.

Steve: There are very few places that have a model like this, where students can really learn [00:08:00] truly asynchronously, anytime, anywhere. I think that can be a hard adjustment for teachers coming in. What that leads to is having to learn how to almost schedule opportunities to work with students in a way that's more authentic. Experiencing that as a teacher was definitely unique for me because I was used to, as a teacher for many years, being locked into a really rigid schedule. [00:08:30]

It's like my whole day is planned for me. Not just my whole day, that day turns into an entire school year. It's like before I know it, it's like I've basically done the same thing every day for however many years as a teacher. It was clear on the first day that no one day would ever be the same. I think that's what's really great about working here. I think that's what schools should be for all kids.

Nick: Where other schools might be more rigid, [00:09:00] Map has the flexibility to problem-solve and improve their model as they go.

Shiobhan: Here, if something's not working, you just have a talk about it and our weekly meeting, and they're like, "All right, let's just try this instead. Let's brainstorm what could work. What's better?"

What could be better? What's the actual result we want?" The students are the customers — and the customers are not always right, but it would be great for them to have a great experience, right?

Nick: That means the whole team is involved in developing the curriculum.

Steve: When we look at curriculum [00:09:30] at the end of the summer, some of the new curriculum, it's not just going to be teachers that look at it, it's all support staff. Everybody has their eyes on it. We all have blind spots. When we're putting curriculum together, as much as we try, we can never see all of the potential things that are out there that our students might be bringing in that might get in the way of them engaging in the work.

Nick: For Map's staff the priority is always the student, which comes with the nuance [00:10:00] of building strong relationships but also setting clear boundaries.

Shiobhan: You just have to really be optimistic and student-centered. You have to. Instead of the trainings that you get or in grad school and in traditional school about making sure classrooms are student-centered, it's the actual relationship with the student. That's what student-centered. Validating, understanding where they're coming from, but also having to remind the students of boundaries, because this is not a traditional school.

Nick: As you can imagine, that nuance can be challenging [00:10:30] for both students and staff.

Mike: Yes, that is challenging, but we enjoy that challenge because that's where the true growth is. Not that we enjoy to see their struggle, but setting those boundaries is what promotes the most growth. We're trying to develop that intrinsic motivation so kids make those decisions, the right decisions, the positive decisions on their own.

Nick: In this model, there's no room [00:11:00] for saviors.

Shiobhan: It's not our story. We are like a player in a story. We are a pitstop in it. They need to feel uncomfortable. They need to struggle, because out of that being uncomfortable and out of struggling, that's when you do your problem-solving, that's when you grow strong as a person, you find what you're able to do, you become more brave. And if you're a saver, you're stealing that growth from the students, and that's not okay. At [00:11:30] the end of the day, it's not about you.

Nick: When teachers are met with difficult situations, Steve is there to support and help them find the best approach to help the student — but not necessarily save them.

Steve: I definitely want to make sure that in my role, as a coach, that I'm, first and foremost, making space for teachers to process that stuff, because I think that's an important step. If they have somebody that they can share like, "Hey, this happened today," [00:12:00] or "This student said this," or "They said this, what do I do?" just play out different scenarios, I think that can create opportunities for teachers to reflect on what's the best approach for a student versus gravitating towards sometimes what the instinct might be, which is to try to fix the problem for the kid and be the savior. 99.9% of the time, that's done with the best of intentions, but the impact is not best for the student, oftentimes.

Mike: We work so hard to find people that aren't coming from a place of that savior complex. I think everybody at Map Academy does such an amazing job as a team, and we've worked on it over the years. But knowing that when that student leaves my office and they had to set that boundary, as long as they're safe — [00:13:00] knowing that the same message is going to be sent

across the board makes me realize that it's not that it's well worth it. It's not as challenging because it's going to come around eventually. I can trust the process here with the teachers.

Nick: Ultimately, the trust that the team has in each other as professionals actually translates to an overall trusting environment, where now the students are trusting the staff — creating an environment where everyone feels safe [00:13:30] and that they belong. Steve says he noticed this right away at Map.

Steve: The sense of belonging that a lot of kids have here, it's hard not to notice. I've been in a lot of different schools in different roles, and I know how hard that is to do. When I first talked with Josh and Rachel, that it was a perfect fit for me and that the kind of community they had already established and that they were looking to grow was one that I felt like I would belong in. [00:14:00]

Nick: You don't often hear traditional high schools talk much about love when it comes to their community. But for Map, cultivating that culture of belonging and acceptance is crucial to the work.

Shiobhan: Being reminded that you're loved is super important. It's that love and sense of security. It's like the school, we're here for you.

Nick: Thanks for listening to another episode of *Education Disruption*. We'll be back soon with more [00:14:30] stories from Map Academy. Until then, please subscribe and give us a rating on your podcast platform of choice. You can find more about Map Academy by visiting themapacademy.org. This is Nick Tetrault. Our editor is Susie Blair. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes. And this is a Hairpin production.

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