



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 28: Supporting Students in Recovery With Persistence, Patience, & Understanding](#)

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Maria: [00:00:00] For me, to finish something for once — it's rewarding.

Maxanne: Maria's journey is probably one of the most remarkable ones I've been a part of.

Nick: Welcome back to Education Disruption. Based in Massachusetts, Map is a free alternative high school that reengages students in their education by meeting them where they're at, providing wraparound supports, and a flexible asynchronous schedule. In this episode, we hear an example of the many ways that Map provides supports.

Meet Maria, a founding student at Map. [00:00:30] Like many other Map students, her previous high school experience wasn't working.

Maria: I dropped out at ... I think around 14, it was freshman year. I had already had issues with this school, so I already fought in school. I already was skipping class. And it's not like I wasn't smart, every time I would come to school, I would always nail it, nail it, nail it.

Nick: This is Rachel Babcock, co-founder and co-director of Map Academy. Rachel knew Maria before Map even opened.

Rachel: I [00:01:00] first knew Maria when she was a student in a large public high school that I used to work at, and she was a freshman there. Maria ended up leaving that school, and she briefly was in the evening alternative education program and trying to do credit recovery courses. Because she was missing too much school, because she had so much going on outside of school that she was being denied credits for courses because she wasn't in school often enough, and [00:01:30] she was working a lot. She tried to do the credit recovery program and then eventually fell away from that as well.

Nick: For many students who have to work and attend school, when those things become competing priorities, it can be really easy to fall off track.

Maria: I started working when I was super young, I've always had a job. My dad mostly was like, if you want something, you're going to have to pay for it yourself. It's not like I can just be like, "Hey dad, gimme \$60." [00:02:00] I've always had to work for whatever I needed. Like clothes or food, anything that I have to get, I have to work for.

Rachel: Honestly, the realities of watching what happens to students in traditional public high schools is part of what led to Map Academy being formed, and the issues that Maria was facing then are very much part of that.

Maria: Me and Rachel got really close within those years of me being in freshman year to me dropping out [00:02:30] to me back in night school and her opening this whole school. We know each other from the start of me going into high school.

Maxanne: Maria's journey is probably one of the most remarkable ones I've been a part of.

Nick: This is Maxanne, Wraparound Co-Lead and Social Worker at Map.

Maxanne: I met her that first year here, and Rachel had asked me to meet with her because she was upset and struggling.

Maria: I moved out when I was 16 when I was... I don't even know if I was in school, but I moved out at 16. My dad didn't even notice I [00:03:00] moved out. We don't really talk. Like I would live with him, but it's not like I would be living with anyone. I was going to parties a lot to forget the pain or forget what you went through. The feeling of being numb is huge. This is when I was like 12, 13. I would drink a whole bottle. So it started from there. When you're going to parties, there's other stuff that gets involved.

You meet other people, you meet worse people, you meet different drugs. So [00:03:30] school just was my second choice. One was surviving.

Maxanne: It was really unclear where she was at, but what was clear was that she was in a bad way.

Nick: Luckily, when students do find themselves in a bad way, Map has mechanisms to help. Those mechanisms are oftentimes built because other systems are failing.

Rachel: The issues over time I think definitely deepened, but [00:04:00] they're ones that are really more common than they should be in terms of lack of stable housing, transient housing, conflict between family members leading to instability for youth who are not necessarily at the center of that but just caught in a web — like a domino effect of adults' jobs, the stability of those, the stability of transportation, the stability of [00:04:30] adult relationships, the stability of housing. All the intersection between all of those moving parts leads to a lot of turmoil.

And for different students, it's different variables at different times. It might be housing for a while, and then it's someone's substance use for a while, then someone loses their job, or then someone's car breaks down. For Maria, in particular, those variables all played in at some part. But usually it's like a patchwork of failures of things that cause dominoes to fall, which then make it [00:05:00] less and less likely that student is going to be able to persist with education.

Maria: I never thought that there was a way out. I accepted the fact that my life was just going to be like this forever.

Nick: When a person succumbs to such a feeling of hopelessness, especially at a young age, it opens up the door to things you might otherwise not consider doing — like substance use.

Map students and staff are grappling with the opiate crisis and substance use disorders that are plaguing [00:05:30] communities across the country.

Rachel: It's legitimately an epidemic. The vast majority of the students that we serve have it affecting them in some way, whether it's their own use, or the use of family member, the use of a friend. The degree to which it impacts or interferes with education can vary student by student, but it's definitely something that is part of the equation more often than not. Like everything else, we approach it from a holistic lens and from [00:06:00] a wellness lens around what is in the best interest of the student at this time.

One of the primary considerations when students are using: Their age has a dramatic impact on how much flexibility we have and how we handle it. For students who are over 18, they're legally able to make their own educational decisions and that gives us some kind of ability to navigate the path in a way that we [00:06:30] can't do when students are minors.

We definitely take a harm reduction mindset. We're not a school that is expecting that our students are not ever going to use substances, or misuse substances.

Nick: For Maria along the way on her journey, she did ultimately end up in detox.

Maria There's been a lot of like things that led up to it. Where do I start? I don't know. So, I got a DUI at age 17, like right after Black Friday. I guess that was [00:07:00] an eye-opener to my parents that I was obviously using. I told my mom first, then my dad. My dad was oblivious with it all.

And so I broke my leg in this car accident. I got a DUI. I broke my tibia, fibia, and femur. That had me pause a little bit, and I was on probation. Once I got off probation, it led out my addiction because I had to stop for a little [00:07:30] bit.

So I moved back ... This is when I was at my mom's house. It just went off. I started trying new drugs. And I got kicked out to my mom's house and I wasn't living at my dad's, so I was homeless. My dad found out that I was using IVs. I had no choice to go into a detox that I had nowhere to go. After I went to detox, it progressed from using every day to not using. My first time being at detox, [00:08:00] I got 90 days and that was the longest I've ever been clean my entire life at that time.

Nick: For Maria, this first detox experience was a positive one.

Maria: That taught me how to make my bed, how to eat three times a meal a day, to communicate and trust females. It was a house of 48 females. Trusting and being around all those females was a huge thing. Opening up with dark [00:08:30] pasts — like abusive relationships that I've been in, family issues. Learning that was insane because I didn't know any better. I didn't know anything like that. I just knew how to use and I couldn't even do that well.

Nick: While Maria did have that success of being clean for 90 days, she did ultimately start using again, and Maxanne and Rachel both noticed.

Maxanne: She became a true drop-in student where we would see her sometimes and then not [00:09:00], but it became apparent as we were seeing her, her substance use had begun again. It was really a cycle of me and Rachel really trying to reach out to her to get her to come in and accept support.

Maria: School was the last thing in my mind, I was dealing with life-or-death things and what my next fix was, what I was doing, where I was living, where I was showering, where I was eating.

Maxanne: She went to detox. Then that was [00:09:30] successful. She was living in a sober house. That was going well, she was doing all the group work.

Maria My boyfriend passed away while I was in there... I don't want to cry... I really thought I was going to stay clean until that happened.

Maxanne: We lost track a little bit because she was very much on this roller coaster of up and downs.

Maria: It was a tough time dealing with death, someone [00:10:00] that's so close to you, like your partner, it's more than your best friend.

Maxanne: I would outreach to her at least weekly, and she did finally come in. She accepted some food, but she declined services so I just continued to outreach to her.

Nick: Oftentimes that is the most Map can do – reach out to a student and offer services.

Rachel: We talk about that a lot here, that it's not our story and it's not our journey and the test has to be that the student is the one that's doing it and we're supporting. We can be there for them, but we can't [00:10:30] persist for them and so sometimes we'll have students that don't come back. They don't because we can't do it for them.

But it's super hard, especially when we have students who are using opiates because they could die and we know they could die. When you see them and they know they're using and you give them the Narcan and they could die before you see them again. They could die, and that's really, really hard and really beyond our ability to just like fix.

Maria: I was just caught up with [00:11:00] the cycle. I was like white-knuckling it, that's what they call it, from being clean to relapsing, being clean to relapsing.

Maxanne: We have a number of young adults who are over 18. They asked for outreach and then they get pretty far, but they can't take that next step. So as professionals, we just have to hold that stance if it's at their own pace and accepting students exactly as they are, exactly where they are.

Rachel: There's times where a web of support, [00:11:30] I think it gets activated – by what resources do we have available to us? First, what people do we have? Some of our students have really supportive people outside that we can activate. Like we have supportive parents or grandparents or friends or boyfriends that we use and we can leverage and then sometimes they don't.

Maxanne: If they continue to decline it and they still come into Map, we'll still work with the students and we still support them.

Maria: What led me to be clean this time was [00:12:00] I got introduced with crystal meth and that ruined my life. I got involved with a lot of terrible people and around May, at the end of May, I almost died. I was ashamed, so I tried to overdose and it was in front of my dad. After that, I got Section 12'd.

Nick: In Massachusetts Section 12 is an emergency restraint and the hospitalization of a person who poses a [00:12:30] risk of serious harm to themselves or others by reason of mental illness.

Maria: I had to start all over, which sucks, but I had to save my life.

Maxanne: I never sent messages like, "You have to go to detox today, or I won't talk to you again." It's always like, "I hope you okay. I just want to make sure you're safe. We're not going to judge you. There's no shame. Come in, and we'll help you with in whatever way we can." I think it's that

balancing act of pushing, but setting [00:13:00] a boundary. Pushing to challenge to that next step, but also you have to follow through on your talk. You have to follow through and be part of the process.

It probably was about a two-week period of me every day in touch with her in some way where she finally messaged and said she was going, you know, could I set it up to make sure that it was set up, and I did.

Rachel: The ones that are really hard are where it's entrenched substance dependency [00:13:30] and addiction that you can't just wave a magic wand and have someone who has substance use disorder, not have it anymore. We were in it for the long haul. We don't send students automatically home so we have students who will be here and they're under the influence and the first thing we do is have them checked by our nurse and do an overall wellness check. We have sections of the building that are set aside so that we can not have to immediately send students home, but they can't be in circulation either. They can't be [00:14:00] encountering other students. Some of our students with the most significant substance use ... there's also a lot of shame, but they feel cared for here.

Maria: I just thought I didn't ever have a future when I was using. I'd never really processed on like I can be someone and being in an NA —

Nick: NA is Narcotics Anonymous, a 12-step program for people with substance use disorder.

Maria: — they showed me a lot. Just because you have an addiction doesn't mean you can't be someone.

Maxanne: I think for [00:14:30] her, it was that acknowledgment that we weren't giving up on her, that she was reaching out enough to ask support, but wasn't quite ready to take it. Map wasn't giving up on her just because she wasn't taking the support on that day.

Nick: And Map is there to support these students and not give up on them, even in the most difficult situations. Oftentimes situations that are beyond their control.

Rachel: Where there's trauma caused by adults in a childhood slip into [00:15:00] adolescent and young adult choices that they bear their responsibility for is a really tricky thing with someone like Maria. That's particularly true with substance use because there's so many factors. The story starts so young for many of these students and things that are completely not their fault. That's very true for Maria. But then 17, 18, 19 years old, the ownership of those decisions has to, in the end, become the individual's responsibility.

And Maria made some really bad decisions along the way, which she talks about. Then she [00:15:30] got herself back on track and we were really fortunate to be witness to that and to be able to support her in that and to be able to help her to like, change her own story.

Maria: Honestly, the support that I have with Rachel, Maxanne, and Josh, they've seen me go through this because it's not like I just didn't go to school. I did come back to school, but I would come back really messed up. I'd come back, bust out some work and then disappear. They would see me coming in and out all the time. [00:16:00] They saw me through my surgeries. They saw me through my life issue. They never forgot about me.

Nick: Maxanne, Rachel, and Josh — the other co-director and co-founder of Map Academy — never did give up on Maria, because they wanted her to get her high school diploma, and they knew she could.

Maria: I always wanted to complete something for myself. I've always wanted to complete high school, and it's just that life was always in the way. Instead of just like, "Damn, I should've paid attention," or being so hard on myself for not completing high school, **[00:16:30]** I still have that chance to do it.

Nick: Six months later, we got a chance to catch up with Maria a day before her high school graduation.

Maria: For me to finish something for once it's rewarding. I just want to be stable. I just want a simple life that I can just pay my bills and have extra money to do what I can do, like vacation or do that. I just want time for myself, take care of myself, which I've never done before. Just get shit done. **[00:17:00]** Something just clicked, especially being clean for over a year, year and a half.

Rachel: Maria's persistence is remarkable actually and there are definitely some white-knuckle moments, but she wanted it. She wanted it from when she was really young, and she deserved it. She deserved to make it, she deserved to have her diploma. She would have had it if her life hadn't been so chaotic at an early age. She's a student that's academically capable **[00:17:30]**, she was a student that liked school.

Maxanne: Maria is a very capable student academically and her life situations caused her to not be able to finish high school on track. She earned this and she worked for it so hard. Her graduation from high school is a diploma, but it marks her entering into, what I think, is her adult world. This diploma and graduating sober, and then being able to set goals for her own adult life, **[00:18:00]** she sees it as a turning point for her. It's not just a new adventure for fun that she's going to, but she sees it as a new start. It's like her life beginning now — like, Maria's life for what Maria wants.

Maria: I'm moving to Florida. I'm getting out of here. [chuckles]. Even if I'm going to struggle a little bit for temporary, that's totally fine. I've struggled out here too. I slept outside before so out there is nothing. **[00:18:30]** I know I'm going to do well. I'll never forget Rachel or Josh or Maxanne. I will just not ever forget them because they helped me out through so much. Having that — someone that supports and cares, even if, how many times I fell on or how many times I messed up. Thank you for always being on my side and never leaving me.

Nick: Thank you for listening to another episode of *Education Disruption*. We'd like to thank Maria **[00:19:00]** for her generosity and for her sharing her story with us. We'll be back with more stories from Map Academy. Until then please subscribe and give us a rating on your podcast platform of choice. My name is Nick Tetrault. Our editor is Susie Blair. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes, and this is a Hairpin production.

[00:19:39] [END OF AUDIO]