



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 29: When Students Feel Safe at School, Academic Progress Will Follow](#)

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Nick: Welcome back to an all-new *Education Disruption*. Today's story is about acceptance. High school is a time of self-discovery for many students, and throughout that process, students experiment and priorities shift – all while they're expected to decide what they want to do for the rest of their lives. But for many students, the rigidity of the typical high school experience doesn't leave room for much experimentation, let alone bumps in the road. In fact, one or two bumps **[00:00:30]** in the road are enough to throw a student totally off course in their high school journey. That was Jenna's experience.

Jenna: My name is Jenna Morey. I'm 18 years old and I'm a Map Academy graduate.

Nick: Jenna struggled with anxiety and depression from a young age.

Jenna: I was very anxious as a child. I was afraid of water at three years old, don't know why. Then in fourth grade, I actually developed depression really bad and I started a medication. After that, **[00:01:00]** I was completely fine until sixth grade, I started getting depressed again. It didn't really stop until now honestly, but I think a lot of it was because I was in that school system, and I felt like I had to be standard to everyone else. I just had to fit in with everyone and be someone I'm not.

Nick: While struggling with these issues, Jenna's fellow students weren't so kind.

Jenna: It was just hard to feel like I had to fit into a certain group. Often, the groups rejected me **[00:01:30]** and told me my anxiety was too much or it was embarrassing. Feeling that, it was the worst feeling ever. Not having anyone to turn to, it was awful.

Nick: For Jenna, the situation was so debilitating she ended up missing a lot of school. And when you miss a lot of school, many schools don't really have a mechanism to help you catch up, because your classes continue on as your makeup work piles up. Couple that with the lack of mental health supports at many schools, and you end up with a situation where it **[00:02:00]** becomes so defeating that students ultimately opt for alternative programs. But Jenna says her teachers didn't want her to leave.

Jenna: It must look bad for them if someone leaves. I don't know why they were so like, "You need to stay here. You need to do the normal path." They really didn't want me to leave but at the same time they also didn't help me out. How did you expect me to stay there if I wasn't okay? They weren't giving me any extensions or I literally missed **[00:02:30]** a whole week of school and after

that, I didn't get any of my work done and none of my teachers cared. None of them checked up on me, none of them told me like, "Hey, you have some assignments due." It was a free for all.

Nick: Ultimately, Jenna needed a change. Like many students seeking an alternative, she tried night school.

Jenna: I was not learning anything. I literally took the same English class four times in a row with the same exact papers every single time. I literally wasn't learning anything, and I was afraid that I was going to go out into the world dumb and not be able [00:03:00] to get into a college.

Nick: But eventually, Jenna found Map.

Jenna: As soon as I walked in, I knew that I was meant to be here.

Nick: Jenna told us from her first meeting with school founder Rachel Babcock, she knew it was different.

Jenna: It just got wicked, wicked emotional. We went into a little bit about my past, and it was just really emotional, and we all just started crying. But it was very welcoming. My other school wouldn't do that – if I was talking about my problems, they would just be like, "Suck it up." They were really understanding here and they really wanted to know [00:03:30] more about me and everything that I've been through.

Nick: Also, unlike her old school, Jenna was surprised to find out how flexible Map was.

Jenna: It's never like, "You need to get your work done," it's kind of like, "You go at your own pace." If you miss a week, they're going to be like, "Hey, what's going on?" but they're not going to disown you and tell you you're not doing enough.

Nick: Some students have a hard time adjusting to that freedom, usually because they have to learn how to better manage their time. For Jenna, this new freedom meant she was actually [00:04:00] taking on too much work.

Jenna: Honestly, at first, it was hard because I'm someone that's very go-getter like, I want to finish before everyone. I just set very high standards for myself so, I really wanted to graduate a year early than I was supposed to. At first, having that thing – work at my own pace – I was doing way too much.

Mike: She started off really strong.

Nick: That's Mike Balaschi, a social worker at Map Academy.

Mike: Did a ton of work but as [00:04:30] things started to get a little more challenging, we started to see some of that anxiety and depression that she had talked about and not wanting to let anyone down.

Nick: Luckily, Map makes social-emotional learning a priority, so Jenna's mental health in relation to her learning came first. Mike says he sees this in students all the time.

Mike: You fall behind in your assignments, you start to avoid school and you get a bunch of makeup work that you're supposed to be doing at the same time as your current work, and you just meltdown and don't [00:05:00] want to do anything at all.

Jenna: I met Mike Balaschi last year and I didn't really get to talk to him until this year. I wanted a new psychiatrist really bad and he was the first person I went to. After that, he made sure to talk to me at least once every week. He always had such great advice, and he always knew how to calm me down from a panic attack.

Nick: For Jenna, just having a person like that at school made all the difference.

Jenna: If you felt a certain way at a public school like if you felt like you were going to start crying or something, they would just be like **[00:05:30]** "Suck it up. You're not going home, you're not talking to anyone, just sit there and cry." Here it's like, "Oh, you're not doing well? Go see Mike. Maybe go take a walk." You have so many options.

Mike: If you're not happy with who you are or you don't even know who you are and you're trying to figure that out, you got to be able to do that safely here in order to be able to retain information and learn and grow. When I heard that I was like, "I'm all in on this place from **[00:06:00]** day one." So Jenna is the prime example of that, I think. She came in under the impression of needing to live up to certain expectations not only academically but socially.

So many different places have all these barriers and boxes that kids just find themselves fitting into. In today's society, I think gender is a massive discussion. At **[00:06:30]** Map, I really like to encourage students to not feel like they need to put a tag on anything. Come in and be yourself. You're growing, you're figuring out who you are. Things are going to change, and you don't need to label or categorize or do anything of that sort. Whatever you're comfortable with that day, we're going to roll with. I think Jenna did such a good job of embracing that culture and that attracted so many different peers to her that she may not have known before Map Academy. **[00:07:00]**

Nick: Mike explained that from the moment they opened Map Academy, this culture of acceptance for any student that walked through the door, this sense of community, was stressed as a top priority.

Mike: Pretty much day one, Rachel says to the whole staff, "This is a brand new school. Not to put academics aside because that is the core of what we're doing here and it's the most important thing at the end of the day, but if we **[00:07:30]** don't build the right culture in this first year or two then we're setting ourselves up for failure." Part of that culture is being able to be flexible with the academics. Our mission is to create opportunities for kids to be successful long-term, and at the end of the day, contribute to society in a healthy appropriate way. If you're just giving a kid a diploma, **[00:08:00]** you're not giving them the tool to do that. For Jenna, being able to try out a few things and not be judged I think really allowed her to grow.

Nick: Eventually, Jenna got the confidence to try a dual enrollment course so she could earn some college credit before graduating high school.

Jenna: Honestly, after that dual enrollment class, I didn't think I was going to pass it and I got a B. That was one thing I was like, "Wow, I'm smarter than I thought I was."

Mike: You always had **[00:08:30]** the ability to make academic progress. It was really about being comfortable enough in a certain setting to do that and the culture that we've built here really allows kids to engage that way.

Jenna: Also, seeing my transcript finally, that was crazy too because I don't remember doing well in high school at all. I have one C and that's my lowest grade on my high school transcript, so that was

definitely very crazy to me. **[00:09:00]** I didn't think that I did well, so that was kind of an eye-opener to me. Then when I did the post-secondary presentation, everyone in there was like, "You're just so you're so good." They were like, "You're just so smart," and these things that I have to say are important and no one's ever told me that, so that felt really good to hear. I never thought I was going to graduate and if I did, I thought I was just going to get my GED and have an awkward graduation.

Nick: Of course, Jenna did graduate, and Maps support doesn't stop. But **[00:09:30]** it does shift to help empower the students to take on bigger challenges.

Mike: The whole college piece is extremely overwhelming – to do that as an 18, 19-year-old kid like figure out FAFSA and financial aid and your schedule and in a remote world of a pandemic. So we're helping very analytically with those things more so than like in-depth type of counseling. Of course, we're here for that but we don't want them to feel like they **[00:10:00]** can't do that problem-solving work, do that stuff on their own. We're never going to leave anybody hanging, but let's test that first and really push back a little bit and make sure that they can do it on their own. They tend to step up and live up to the occasion, at least so far in our experience, because we've worked so hard to try to set them up to be able to do that.

We had two weeks off and then kids re-engaged for a little bit for their first week. Jenna reached out to me kind of **[00:10:30]** worried, had a deadline that she needed to figure out financial aid for college. That's not exactly my forte. I did what I could and problem-solve with her. I was like, "I think I'll all be in school tomorrow. Come in, we'll figure it out." She came in the next day and we were working through and she went in and checked and she was like, "Oh, I didn't realize that I tried a couple different things yesterday and now, it's **[00:11:00]** saying that I'm all set, so I'm all set." I was like, "Oh, that's great. Good work." She thought that she needed us and I was like, "You can do this. Try a couple things and if it's not well, we'll sit down and problem-solve together tomorrow." Rather than just sit back and panic or worry, she dove in and tried to figure it out and was able to work through it on her own.

Nick: Now, instead of fearing how other people perceive her, Jenna is making decisions **[00:11:30]** that make her happy.

Jenna: I feel like when you're in public school... like you said earlier, you have to settle. They're like, "You need to go to college. You need to know what you want to do right now." Every single person that I know for my old school is dreading the next four years. I'm like, "Why would you be dreading it? It's obviously not what you want to do if you're dreading it. You need to figure out what makes you happy." Obviously, that does not make them happy, and I feel like most kids should have schools like Map because it shouldn't be like that. You shouldn't feel like you have to settle **[00:12:00]** the second you're out of high school. It does begin your life, but you don't need to know what you want to do right then. You still have the rest of your life to figure that out. You could figure it out when you're 40 for all I care, you know, as long as you're happy.

Nick: Jenna attributes much of this new outlook on the accepting culture at Map Academy.

Jenna: Everyone's here for the same exact reason. We're all here for the same goal. We just want to graduate, but we also want to be happy while we graduate and have a good experience in high school instead of thinking back to your high **[00:12:30]** school experience and thinking, "Wow, I

hated high school. High school was awful." I would look back on high school now and be like, "Wow, I had such a great time at Map."

Nick: Thanks so much for listening to another episode of *Education Disruption*. If you enjoyed this episode, please make sure you subscribe to the podcast feed and leave us a rating. We have more students' stories with key insight from Map Academy staff on the way.

To learn more about Map Academy, head to themapacademy.org **[00:13:00]** where you can see videos of students or just learn more about the Map model. My name is Nick Tetrault. Our editor is Susie Blair. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes. And this is a Hairpin Production. **[00:13:20]**