



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 30: When Student-Teacher Relationships are Prioritized, Learners Thrive](#)

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Nick: Welcome back to Education Disruption. Today, we'll hear from both the student and the teacher perspective at Map Academy. For students, Map is a chance to find success in a school that does things differently, and for teachers, it's a chance to take a different approach to high school education. Meet Avia, a special education and history teacher at Map.

Avia: I knew during my student teaching that traditional schools was not where I fit in the best just because I love the one-on-one connections you make with students, **[00:00:30]** but when you have 160 in 42-minute blocks, it's very hard to connect with them. So when I saw that Map had a one-to-one online hybrid model, I was like, "I got to give this a shot." It's just been such a great way to start my teaching career because I feel respected and able to make those one-on-one connections.

Nick: This is Ryan, a student. Ryan tells us about his school experience before finding Map Academy.

Ryan: It was just smoke so that you don't deal with things and then try to avoid getting yelled at **[00:01:00]** for not doing your work and avoiding your work as best you can. I never got suspended, which I'm still proud of, but I got quite a few detentions down to the office, at least weekly. I remember, in middle school, it was daily, like every single day for I think, sixth and seventh grade and then they put me on ADHD medicine, which that just made me like a zombie **[00:01:30]** and depressed. I stopped hanging out with everyone.

My mom has ADHD but mine's pretty severe. My dad, he did not like the idea of ADHD medicine, which at first I was like, "Why wouldn't you let me do that, it's going to help me." Then once I took it I got why he didn't like it. They always knew that school was hard for me. They've always been very supportive, but also like, "School is important, you have to get it done."

Nick: Many students and **[00:02:00]** families can probably relate to this sentiment — "just get it done" — which can really impact a student's motivation and ambitions when some of the markers for success in the system don't necessarily relate to their life goals beyond high school.

Avia: I think too much of this is to get too many kids over a finish line that isn't their finish line, it's the state's finish line. In education, I think we should absolutely know our students as people and as learners because those are two different things. Just like as a teacher, I'm different than the person

I am when I walk [00:02:30] out these doors. My values are the same, but your attitudes, your attributes kind of shine in different ways. Listening to the kids, taking their cue is huge.

Tell me what you're thinking, what you're feeling and as an educator, I'm here to give you options that get you towards the end, but I'm not here to kick you down the road.

Nick: Since traditional schools revolve around this really rigid system, Ryan actually found ways to work that system at his old school.

Ryan: I tried to process at that school where I would get a 68 the whole year [00:03:00] and then at the end of the year, I could skip the final, and then I would get a 59.5, which is the passing D minus grade. I did the bare minimum while being able to pass. I just saw all the ways that it didn't work so I would just do all the things that made it not work and it kind of worked perfectly for me.

At that school, they didn't even have like an exact number on me because I screwed it up so much. They were like, [00:03:30] "Yes, you're going to have to do another three years at least." That's why I wanted to drop out, but I was like, "I can't drop out. There's nothing else for me if I drop out."

Nick: As we've heard from other students' stories, any type of disruption to the traditional model, will throw the student's pathway totally off course. Oftentimes, this makes dropping out seem like the only option.

Ryan: Then I came here. They didn't necessarily say that I could graduate in a year, they were like, "Oh, it might take like two [00:04:00] years." I was like, "That's whatever." Then especially once I got used to it here, I was like, "Stay here for the extra three, I don't care." The other thing that kept me from dropping out was, I did not want to be an adult yet because I'm still 17. I don't even turn 18 until the end of summer. I'm about to start working for the rest of my life, which is kind of stressful, but also relieving because I made it. I think that's what kept me from dropping out. [00:04:30]

Avia: Right away you could tell that he was different in the sense that he knew what was going on and he knew how to do what he wanted to do in it. A big thing was he had a US 1 history class left. He had taken it at his former school and just because of the dynamics, it didn't work out in a credit. We went back and forth from September to I think January, just trying to get him to sit and to maybe talk about history.

At this point, he had also gone remote for a variety of reasons, but again, just another thing we [00:05:00] have to adapt to. He and I agreed to just start with a meeting at 9:00 AM one day, and every day at the end of that meeting, I'd ask him again, "Do you want to meet tomorrow?" It was never an assumption, it was never a force, but it was like, "9:00 AM, Does it work?"

Ryan: We wouldn't even do history for 90% of it. I would log on every day to do history with her online and it would just be like, we would sit there and we'd end up talking about random political things. She would sit there and she'd have a conversation with me, even if she didn't agree with what I would say, she'd be like, [00:05:30] "I don't particularly think that but here's my side." I'd be like, "Oh, okay." It was just like talking to someone.

Avia: Some mornings, he came 20 minutes late. Some mornings, he showed me a tour of his room, twice. Some days, we had to look at his granddad through his bedroom window in the front yard. Those are the things we had to do. They were always an hour-long, our meetings, but we always got something done in those hours. So maybe the history only was a half-hour, or 25 minutes, but a

part of getting him to buy into **[00:06:00]** talking about Rosa Parks or the 15th amendment, was acknowledging that he had other things going on in his brain.

Nick: At this point, Ryan started to realize what Avia had known all along. When students and teachers build meaningful connections, learning actually becomes a lot easier. It might take more time, but for Ryan, it was definitely effective.

Ryan: I just started talking to teachers about random things to get them to skip through half of the hour and a half. I would have to get comfortable at a school before I would push the teachers because I had to **[00:06:30]** figure out which ones I could get away with and which ones I couldn't. I was very meticulous with it.

I didn't necessarily push her, but just with the random conversations we would have and stuff, I feel like it maybe felt like I was, but then at a certain point, I realized like, "Oh, she's just as willing in this conversation as I am." Once I realized that she wasn't trying to avoid getting me to talk, then it was like, "I'm just going to do some stuff now."

As my dad calls it, it's about being **[00:07:00]** pleasantly persistent and they really work because they don't have a breaking point here where they just freak out on you. They can understand that there's more than just you not wanting to do work going on.

Nick: For Avia as a teacher, the flexibility of Map allows her to serve each student based on their particular needs.

Avia: Modifications have come in a lot of different ways where it's like we are aware of reading levels, gaps in learning, anxiety on that day, personal situations that are happening outside the school that messes with their ability to focus. There's no one simple **[00:07:30]** modification at Map Academy, but the ability to have that flexibility is really what makes every day happen.

Time is the biggest thing. The only reason why Ryan and I even finished that US History class was because I had the time to embrace his needs, his personality, where I know with my team, and within my school, if I need to give more time to a student or to go into a meeting or a Zoom meeting, I know that the other students in my studio are being taken care of. We're all pulling our weight, and the understanding amongst students and staff is that, **[00:08:00]** we all need to work together to share our resources and to just be patient with each other.

That's because of the school model and my staff, all of that. It's like a perfectly running machine right now.

Ryan: A month in, I kind of just made the switch in my head that it wasn't the same as normal school. I didn't really notice till like three months in that it was working. Then I talked to Rachel the other day. I told her how that happened and she was like, "Yes, we have that process planned out." I was like, "What? You guys got me." **[00:08:30]** It was pretty good.

Once that switch happened, and I was like, "All right, I need to graduate. I'm going to log in every single day." I'd get up every day at 8:30, 10:30, whatever it was and then I started setting meetings up at 8:30 and it was just like, "What the hell are you doing?" It was just an accumulation of all of them, but it was certainly Avia at first.

Nick: We asked Avia how she was able to earn Ryan's trust and get him to engage in his learning.

Avia: It was the [00:09:00] idea of acknowledging what he wanted to talk about, weaving in his interests, and then getting back to the curriculum. Because in reality, we can't force kids to engage with things they don't connect with.

Nick: Avia discovered that Ryan was passionate about the environment, and was able to directly connect that passion to history.

Avia: Ryan is an absolute nature bug. He loves nature, animals, dirt, trees, the whole nine yards.

Ryan: I couldn't imagine wanting to leave it any worse for the next people. I want them to be able to go in the woods and do the same things [00:09:30] and have the same kind of fun that I did.

Avia: A lot of US history is woven into the fact this nation is absolutely beautiful. We have natural resources. We've exploited them in a way that has made our current system and Ryan's very passionate about the issues we're facing today. I was able to weave it back to be like, "This is where it started. This is where the government either overstepped or under stepped or mis-stepped."

Ryan: It's astonishing to me how people don't acknowledge what's going on around them. In my project, I talked about [00:10:00] we're producing like 15 trillion pounds of carbon a year, just from cars, not even factories and stuff on top of that, which is crazy, but I don't think I've ever seen that number before. Nobody's ever put it anywhere. We dump a garbage truck full of plastic in the ocean every minute, no one talks about that. But there are some people trying to fix it, but also nobody's trying to stop it. It's hard to fix something [00:10:30] that's just doing more than you can, but I want to help with that somehow.

Avia: We were able to talk about how society and nature are more interweaved than we ever like to admit as humans, where a lot of the things that we choose to do in history and this day are forced by the limitations of nature and he loved that. He loved the idea that we are not one from our natural world, and he's passionate about people, as much as some high schoolers would say they're not. Again, start from where [00:11:00] he's at, slowly weave it in, and then by the end of the lesson, he's like, tell me more, which is the only thing you can ever ask of the teacher.

Nick: As Avia alluded to earlier, this is all a team effort at the Map. The social workers that provide wraparound supports to students work hand in hand with teachers. We asked Avia what that looks like.

Avia: The support staff at Map academy is I would say essential. It is truly a layer of a school that makes every day just work better because of our support staff, we are able to get kids that emotional support they need in a therapeutic [00:11:30] place, a private place, and with professionals.

I'm a special education teacher. I'm not a social worker. I'm not a therapist. I know I have access to those people here, which is great, but making that boundary early is important where you just tell the kids like I have 20 minutes with you, or I have a meeting. You talk about what you need to talk about. If you're veering towards a conversation where I'm trained to do, I still care about that student, but I know that there's someone else in the building who I can bring them to have them have that more appropriate professional connection with.

And just as a [00:12:00] young teacher, to have someone to either bounce my ideas off or to be like, I have this, can you take a look at it to give me feedback on is really important. From helping with student behaviors or student personal life, all the way up to just like curriculum building, they are

there to just give you feedback in a very non-judgmental way, which is awesome. Here, I am a part of a team of adults who care about each and every student, just as much as I do.

Nick: Our requirement to graduate at the Map is a post-secondary plan for life after high school. We asked Ryan what his **[00:12:30]** plans for the future are now that he's approaching graduation.

Ryan: That's one of the biggest things is like, they make you plan your future. It's not just like, "Oh, what are you going to do? What are you going to do? What are you going to do? Go to college. Go to college. Go to college." It's like, "What do you want to do? Maybe we can help you figure that out," and then they actually do.

I'm going to be going into sales with my dad, selling low-voltage wiring, which is super fun. No, it'll be nice. I think it'll be good because sales, **[00:13:00]** it's on commission, so it's pretty reward-based, which works for me. Then on top of that, it's my dad so I can't really just be like, "Screw you, dude." So I think it'll be good.

I want to do something environmental-wise, maybe volunteering or something. I volunteered with my dad the other day. Then I also want to move to South Carolina. I want a small house, a big yard with a go-kart track. That's my goal.

Nick: We wanted to get Avia and **[00:13:30]** Ryan's thoughts on the upcoming graduation.

Avia: I'm so happy for them. I'm so happy that they have what they deserve. I'm almost going to cry. I'm very emotional. I'm getting text messages from folks who aren't graduating, where they're just like happy about the year. It's amazing to see after this insane year, there's joy, there's progress and there's success.

Joy and success look different to everyone but for our students, mainly it's confidence. It's the idea that with help and with perseverance, **[00:14:00]** they can do literally anything, literally anything in the planet. Not in like that silly, like, "You could be an astronaut!" ... but they could be if they wanted to. In the sense that now they have the tools to problem solve, ask for help, and also circle back here — for the end of the time, all of our alumni have access to us. It's just nice to know that even though they're leaving us, they're never actually gone.

Ryan: It feels weirdly very relieving, but also sad because I would've liked to spend more time here. **[00:14:30]** I'm totally going to come back and visit this place because it saved me a lot of struggle throughout my life.

Nick: Thank you for listening to Education Disruption. We'll be back with more stories from Map Academy. Until then, please subscribe on your favorite podcast platform and give us a rating. This is Nick Tetrault. Our editor is Susie Blair. **[00:15:00]** Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes and this is a Hairpin production.