



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 32: Establishing Boundaries to Balance Life, Work, & Academics](#)

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Nick: Welcome back to *Education Disruption*, where we're following the journey of Map Academy, an alternative high school in Massachusetts. Map re-engages students that have been failed by systems meant to support them. By providing wraparound supports and their flexible asynchronous learning model, Map connects students to the opportunities and resources they deserve, students like Sophia.

Sophia: Hi. I'm Sophia, I'm 17, and I go to Map Academy. I found my way to **[00:00:30]** Map through my friend and she said that it would be a good fit because I dropped out twice. She wanted me to get my diploma, so she said to come here.

Nick: Map knows students have full, complicated lives. Sophia has had a lot of upheaval, turmoil, and responsibility in her life. She told us she had to grow up fast.

Sophia: My mom was a drug addict. She was in and out of rehab. DCF was all over the place with us. I ended up going to live with my friend because my dad was like, "Mm, I don't have enough room in my **[00:01:00]** house for you. Can't have you." So I was like, "Okay." He put me with another foster family, but they were my neighbors at the time, so I was just like, "It's fine." Me and one of the kids were actually really good friends. It was actually pretty okay, but at the same time, it was that mental factor, like, "Why would you take me from my family?" Not even them taking me, it's more or less my dad, which is why me and him don't have that good a relationship.

Ever since then, after my mom got sober, **[00:01:30]** me, my brothers, we all were still taking care of each other, making sure we all were fine. But a couple of them ended up living with my dad, and it was me, my older brother, and my younger brother who decided to stay with my mom. Ever since then, he's just turned into my own kid. I don't even know how to describe it other than that.

My mom's definitely still a mom. She's a great mom. We work alongside together to have him have the childhood that I couldn't have or my older sister couldn't **[00:02:00]** have because we were stuck trying to grow up so fast to be there for everyone else.

Nick: Sophia's experience at her previous school was very challenging and she wasn't getting the mental health support that she needed.

Sophia: My ninth-grade year, they finally diagnosed me because I was literally not okay. I wasn't medicated at all, I wasn't seeing anybody. Because I didn't have the diagnosis, if that's the word for

it, they were just like, "We can't help you. I don't know what you guys want me to do." It was bad because I don't really like huge groups of people and they [00:02:30] would force you to sit in a class of 20-plus kids. In the cafeteria, there's 300-plus kids. There was just fights, arguments, problematic kids that it just was not for me. I just couldn't... I would go walk around and then I'd get suspended for walking around because I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing.

Nick: We asked Sophia if she had a plan when she dropped out.

Sophia: I didn't really have a plan. I was just like, "This is not for me. I'm not getting the help I need. I'm not doing my schoolwork. I'm just continuously [00:03:00] leaving." If I go back and look at my transcript, there was probably over 50 suspensions, between walking out, walking out of class. They would just suspend you for the littlest things.

Nick: After Sophia left school, she got a job, and she works a lot.

Sophia: I'm a CNA. I work roughly 60-ish hours a week while coming to school. It does get a lot, but it's doable now that I've come up with a set schedule and set plan for here. My [00:03:30] schedule would be Monday I'm here in the morning, and then I go to work 3:00 PM to 10:00 PM. Then Tuesday same thing, come here in the morning and then go to work 3:00 PM to 10:00 PM. Then Wednesday's my double, which is 8:00 AM to 10:00 PM. Then Thursday I'm here in the morning and then it's 3:00 PM to 10:00 PM, but at my other job — I have two jobs, I'm a host on Thursdays, but that's it.

Nick: We wanted to know what the transition back to school was like after making the decision to go to Map.

Sophia: I definitely didn't have a good start here, but then after feeling it, [00:04:00] coming in every here and there, slowly transitioning myself was definitely better for me, and getting to know the teachers more and understanding that if I just want to be alone, I can sit in my own little corner like I do and just do my work and leave. I think it's great.

Mike: Sophia, when she started here, she was 17 years old with the mind of a 32-year-old, just the way she went about life and was very independent.

Nick: Meet Mike Balaschi, Wraparound Co-Lead and Social Worker at Map Academy.

Mike: With Sophia, she's very [00:04:30] put together. She was holding a full-time job, was coming to school, right off the bat was really pushing boundaries and testing limits.

Sophia: This was so long ago, I feel like, but it was probably only right when I started. One of the counselors here, I ended up taking all my anger out on her and I was like, "I don't want to fucking be here anymore. I'm so done. I hate you. I don't want to talk to you ever again. Get out of my face." I was just not having it. Then after letting it go for a little bit and then just realizing I was [00:05:00] really in the wrong, I was like, "Okay, well, she's not that bad. She's here to help me. She understands now what I went through, what I was dealing with." I was like, "Okay." When I got out of my head and was like, "Listen, these people are here to help me not hurt me," it was fine. I was totally okay with it.

Nick: Mike says even when students show a lot of resistance to Map's combination of high expectations and support, strong consistent boundaries can be very effective for students.

Mike: I don't know if she's ever [00:05:30] had somebody that set those boundaries and then stood by her. I think she responded really well to supportive, unconditional guidance, and sometimes that starts with a bunch of no's and then gaining trust and being able to allow her to make her own decisions.

Sophia: Mike's pretty cool. He's a cool guy. He definitely knows everything I've gone through. He knows the anger factor, [00:06:00] the anxious factor. He knows how they all play out. He's not prepared for it because I've never taken it out on him. He knows. He understands a lot. He helps me out a lot. He's very understanding.

Mike: For a lot of the older students, they come back, and they've already been out there in the real world without a diploma, and they know it sucks and they're ready to get it and go forward. Whereas some of the students that are your 16, 17, 18-year-olds, they go through that with us. We have to set those boundaries versus life naturally [00:06:30] doing that for a lot of the older students. That's probably one of the most challenging parts about the job.

Nick: Even though Map's model allows for flexibility, particularly for students like Sophia, when that flexibility isn't contributing to the success of the student, the boundaries that Map sets have to change.

Mike: She felt like she could come in later and leave earlier based on her work schedule. We like to give kids the benefit of the doubt right off the bat until they prove us wrong and then we'll need to reel things in a [00:07:00] little bit. We said, "Hey, you know what? This is where you're coming in at. You want to be able to leave early. You want to be able to come in later and work full time. Great. You still need to get your work done."

As the time went on and the work wasn't getting done and she wasn't really being efficient when she was here in regards to the academics, we stepped in and said, "If you're going to be here, you're going to be up in the North Studio." That was away from her friends. She couldn't socialize as much. She pushed back on that, refused to [00:07:30] do work and come in a decent amount. But the natural consequence of that for a student, they're going to push the graduation date out further and further. I think for Sophia, she's bright enough that she saw that happening and it was like, "You know what? Fine. I'll engage in some work." With those realizations that she's able to come to on her own with some supportive guidance, she quickly turned around and gained back that freedom and flexibility to come in and get work done. She treated it like a [00:08:00] job rather than a social hour.

Once that clicked for her, she already had the advocating down. She was advocating for herself, coming in, "Where's this teacher? I want to do this today." We have to instill that in a lot of other kids, but she had that just from her general work ethic. It was more, for her, a different type of maturity. She's so mature over here in the work world and can put on that mask, but over here socially, she really wanted to get that fix and it wasn't being done in a [00:08:30] healthy way. Once she cleaned that up a little bit, she was able to prioritize academics a little more.

Sophia: I still am a little bit in my old ways. I like to be by myself. I don't really like to talk if I'm upset. If I'm ever not in my good spot, I will just go talk to Mike, be like, "Hey, I'm not having a good mental day, but I'll be there tomorrow."

Mike: We're trying to develop that intrinsic motivation, so kids make the right decisions, the positive decisions, on their own. I think for Sophia, [00:09:00] she really needed to make better decisions for the long term, was really just trying to get by each day on a surface level to prove to people that she could something, that she could balance those things – to prove to her dad, to prove to teachers, to prove to peers that she was so mature and grounded. She has a lot of those qualities, but it wasn't sustainable.

Sophia: I definitely feel like I'm known as me. I feel like I'm not like everyone. Most people who I talk to, I see, are definitely like, "Oh, that's Sophia. It's good to see you're here instead of roaming the halls." [chuckles]

Nick: Mike explains that though a counselor can help students work through many external problems, the social workers at Map also help students recognize when they can take personal accountability for the issues that they're facing.

Mike: Sometimes as social workers, we need to allow them to reflect on the realization of how much of a role they're playing. If they don't want to see that, then I'm not [00:10:00] just going to sit here and let you vent all day. That's not what counseling is. There's got to be some accountability. Sometimes you tell them how it is, and they may not want to come in as much. We may say something along the lines of like, "Well, until you do this, we can't really keep going forward with this." For Sophia, that's like, "Until you decide that you're going to demand that people treat you better in a work setting, no one is going to treat you [00:10:30] better in a work setting." That's really what it came down to.

Sophia: Everyone has that one teacher that just will constantly help you, be there for you. You trust them so much. Just that's how I am with Mike. If I was having a serious problem, I would probably be like, "I'm going to talk to Mike or I'm leaving." [laughs]

Nick: We wanted to know what Sophia's plans are after she graduates.

Sophia: After high school, I want to be a school counselor and a travel nurse. I would be going to community college for two years, [00:11:00] and then transition into psychology and nursing and whatnot, and then going from there. I would want to be like a counselor during the day and then a nurse at night, I guess.

Nick: We wondered if she feels her experiences have given her any special insight.

Sophia: Yeah, it's definitely like... I understand a lot. It's not even like I just have my little brother coming to me about advice. I have some of his friends. I have, for instance, my foster family's kids coming to me. They know to come talk to me. They know I've [00:11:30] been through a lot. They know that I can give pretty decent advice. It's definitely what I've been through, so I understand what kids can go through and what the outcome can be and what I can do to change. I think it's pretty cool. [chuckles]

Nick: We asked what Sophia might say to her younger self if she asked her for advice.

Sophia: I would probably cry. [chuckles] I would definitely cry. I would definitely be like, "I'm so sorry you're going through that," but I would definitely be like, "You're welcome with open arms. You're going to be [00:12:00] fine. Everything's going to be fine." I would definitely try my best to be there for little me. [chuckles]

Mike: Actually, I'm super proud of her. She changed her schedule dramatically so that she wasn't working nearly as much and was able to find some work, life, school balance. She's doing a lot better of recognizing when she burns out and trying not to burn the candle at both ends, especially as of late, which is good.

Nick: Since Sophia potentially wants to pursue the career of a counselor, we asked **[00:12:30]** her what advice she would give herself if she was the counselor.

Sophia: Be patient, because I definitely know that there's a ton of different kids, a ton of different mental illnesses to deal with. I definitely know just to be patient. Take your time with them. They might not trust you right away. I definitely know that. Once you get talking and make sure that they're comfortable with you, they'll open up. Just give it time.

Nick: [00:13:00] We'd like to thank Sophia for her honesty, courage, and for sharing her story. We'll be back soon with another episode of *Education Disruption*. Until then, please subscribe and give us a rating on your podcasting platform of choice. This is Nick Tetrault. Our Editor is Susie Blair. Our Executive Producer is Kristen Hughes, and this is a Hairpin production.