



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 33: Live from SXSW EDU!](#)

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Nick Tetrault: Welcome back to *Education Disruption*. Today, we're going to be sharing with you our first-ever live episode of the podcast. We were lucky enough to be selected to do an episode of *Education Disruption* live from the SXSW EDU Podcast Stage. This episode is titled "Stories From the Margins" and features two Map Academy graduates talking about their experiences in education, the support they received at Map Academy, and where they are now. Along with the students, we're also joined by Map Academy co-founder, Rachel **[00:00:30]** Babcock.

Please enjoy this live episode of *Education Disruption*.

Nick: Hey, everybody. Thanks for joining us today. Welcome to *Education Disruption*. This is actually our first-ever live episode of *Education Disruption*. This is a show, a podcast about doing high school differently, successes and the challenges around doing high school differently. We talk about that through telling stories, telling the stories of students, teachers, and the co-founders of Map Academy, which is an alternative public high **[00:01:00]** school in Massachusetts. Today, I'm joined by Map Academy co-founder, Rachel.

Rachel Babcock: Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming.

Nick: Map Academy graduate, Reggie.

Reggie: Hey, guys.

Nick: And Aja, also a Map Academy graduate.

Aja: Hello.

Nick: Like I said, through telling these stories, it uncovers some of the pitfalls of traditional high school education, and the title of the talk is "Students at the Margins." Some students have success in traditional public high school. Oftentimes, students do **[00:01:30]** not have success in traditional public high school. Through telling these stories, we uncover some of the reasons and some of the systems that are just not working.

That's what we're going to go through today through telling Aja and Reggie's stories and then talking with Rachel about how some of this stuff is implemented and how it works in practice in a relatively new school. It's still a learning process and still iterative. Why don't we start? We're going to start by talking about previous school experience, so before **[00:02:00]** Aja and Reggie came to Map Academy, so why don't we start with Aja? First of all, what year did you graduate from Map Academy?

Aja: 2020.

Nick: 2020. Amazing. What had you looking for an alternative high school?

Aja: Starting in middle school, frankly, I struggled to fit in. I struggled to stay on track, mostly due to mental illness and social pressures. I [00:02:30] went to multiple hospitalizations and such, which threw me off immediately. Then once you come back after you're thrown off in public school, it's next to impossible to catch up because they give no leeway, it's "Do the assignments that are due plus the extras right away."

That was significant. I couldn't get help because I was so focused on passing and my future because [00:03:00] I always have had the want of working in medicine, which you can't do without education, so that never lost sight, but it was definitely tough to stay on track.

Nick: What was the school's attitude towards you coming back from having your education disrupted? What was their attitude about you catching up and getting back on track?

Aja: I had many instances where I went out for a period of time and came back, and every single time, it was, "Let's have this welcome-back meeting" that [00:03:30] they hyped up as "We'll help you. We understand you just went through something serious, we'll help you." The reality was it was "Come back. How can you get in these assignments pretty much this week?"

In these public schools, it was right away, it was not "Get back on track, then do it." It was as if you go away for a week and you're better, and they expect you to just pick up everything and continue to get better. [00:04:00]

Nick: What happens once things start to fall off track like that?

Aja: It's next to impossible to catch up. Between middle and high school public education, it was a constant game of catchup. The only time that I wasn't playing catchup was the first two weeks of my freshman year and then I had an incident happen, and that was my entire high school experience down the drain from one experience, two [00:04:30] weeks into freshman year.

That was me going from a charter to a public school hoping that it would help and be a little more welcome and opening. No, I was two weeks in and I was already off-track and never caught up until I went to Map Academy.

Nick: That's great. Reggie, what year did you graduate from Map Academy?

Reggie: 2021.

Nick: Amazing. What had you looking for an [00:05:00] alternative school?

Reggie: Well, okay. Like Aja, I was also in and out of hospitals. My parents kicked me out when I was 15. I got put into DCF custody. I've always also wanted to work in the medical field, so I needed an education. I went to public school. I always was passing, I didn't have a problem in class, I just had a problem at home. I stopped going to school completely once I got kicked out.

I just didn't know if I would even want to go back to school. I got [00:05:30] offered to go to Map Academy probably in my sophomore year and I said no. I was like, "I don't want to do it. I'm just going to stay dropped out." Last year, it just changed. I was like, "I want to go to school. I want to get my diploma," and I did survive. I don't know.

Nick: Right. Before going to Map Academy, what was going on in your mind around school? Was it just like, it didn't seem possible, or it didn't seem important? What were you thinking about?

Reggie: I just didn't think I could do it because what I want to do after I go to college, I don't want [00:06:00] money. I was like, "Do I even waste my time? Do I find something else?"

Nick: Did you ever talk to previous teachers about this or other adults in life, and what were people saying? What did people have to offer for advice?

Reggie: "Go to class."

Nick: Right. That's really hard when you don't have somewhere to go at night.

Reggie: Yes, exactly. It's tough.

Nick: It is very, very tough. Rachel, having known both of these students and just [00:06:30] hearing their stories right now — If you all don't know, we have lots of episodes featuring lots of different student stories. The photo you see on the TV is like those are all different episodes, all different students with all different stories, but there are lots of commonalities between these stories. What you hear from Aja and Reggie, are those common occurrences also?

Rachel: Yes, I would say it's an epidemic, really, honestly. The reasons for each student in terms of what causes the break [00:07:00] with school, the disconnection for every student, they're individual, but the reality that there are massive numbers of youth and young adults who are disconnected from systems that are supposed to be supporting them in attaining those goals. Reggie and Aja are both perfect examples, and they've always been able to articulate, and I've known Aja from back at that public high school that she was at briefly.

She's always been able to articulate exactly what her goals are, and systems are supposed to support that. [00:07:30] The fact of the matter is that those systems are inflexible, and the policies there are designed to make sure that everyone is treated the same, and therefore, they don't make accommodations based on what students really need. When we set out to found Map Academy, and I can look at those faces over there of those students and countless more, we launched with 130 students in the fall of 2018, and we have grown now to about 220 students almost four [00:08:00] years later.

The demand just keeps rising. I think the reasons why are that students are not at the center in those environments, those environments are built for the masses, and the student is expected to conform and to fit into that environment, versus the student being at the center of their own education and their own path and their own journey. It's fascinating, really, because, for each individual student, the stories vary, but [00:08:30] they all involve failures of systems.

Nick: Right. It seems like one hiccup in the system, whether it's like, "Oh, I have to at least go for a medical issue or something" or like, "Suddenly, I can't get to school," or whatever it is, that just throws the whole thing off.

Rachel: Yes. Even when you earn your credits like Aja did, I remember sitting in a meeting with Aja years ago where she'd passed classes and earned credits, but their policies are actually to deny credits if you miss too many days. She had passed these classes, gotten good [00:09:00] grades in these classes, and was faced with sitting in a meeting in which adults were telling her, "Oops, sorry. I know you got an A in that class. However, you're getting zero credits, and you need to take it again

because your mental health and the barriers that you're facing outside of school made you miss too many days on your way to getting an A in that class," which is completely ridiculous.

Aja: Often, I was medically excused. That was the real crazy piece to me is I had medical documentation, and I was doing out-of-school tutoring and such. Further, I, [00:09:30] between middle school and high school, had IEPs in place that are supposed to be individual plans that help you and make it so you don't have to follow the rigid rules, but despite getting those plans, they never really acknowledge them. It's always some stipulation that you can't get this accommodation for that reason or et cetera.

Rachel: Students and families are faced with having to argue and defend and advocate, which, well, we do want youth to be advocates for their own journeys. They shouldn't have to fight [00:10:00] so hard to get what they deserve to have, to begin with. Families shouldn't have to fight so hard either. That's another hallmark of what's been one of the most magical things about Map Academy is that because we are a public charter school, our enrollment comes from a lottery, and any student and family in Massachusetts is eligible to apply.

Because we're a school of choice and because people can opt in, there's this magical thing that happens with students and families that they feel in control of their own education or their own students' education for, in many cases, [00:10:30] the very first time. By just flipping that power dynamic to putting that education in the hands of the student and family, it really disarms a lot of the mistrust and anger and trauma, honestly, that happens in other educational settings.

Nick: The mistrust and anger towards education, the thing that you have to finish to, I guess, progress in life, as everybody tells us throughout our education, that is terrible, obviously. It sounds like both of you [00:11:00] probably had some animosity or anger or not-so-great feelings towards the traditional school. Do you guys want to talk about that? What were you feeling about school during that time before coming to Map?

Aja: Well, one of my favorite stories is the irony of me lashing out against, specifically, Josh, along with Rachel.

Nick: Josh is the co-founder of Map Academy. He's here. You were lashing out at Josh, but now we like Josh? Interesting.

Reggie: We love Josh.

Aja: I said some very harsh words that in any other situation, [00:11:30] I'd probably be suspended if not expelled. I was not friendly. Josh and Rachel saw through it because it was projected struggles and pain. It was "I'm struggling, I want to succeed, and you have rules in place that you can't help me succeed."

Nick: Did it come from just a place of general mistrust of school and people who worked for schools?

Aja: Yes. I definitely always knew that Rachel [00:12:00] and Josh were different because they wanted to help me. The irony of this has always been to me that I was trying to get into their night school education program. I was a freshman for the third time in a row, just trying to graduate. I thought that night school would be a better fit. I was so far behind that I was not even eligible to join. I want to get my education, but no, you're too far behind.

Rachel: That's why we set out on a crazy journey [00:12:30] to found a new public charter school because that was when Josh and I were directors of alternative programs for the district in which we now run a school. Aja's telling the absolute truth. In order to access an alternative programming in that district, you had to be behind but not too far behind. If everyone knew you were already failing and you were going to be behind but it hadn't caught up yet, you couldn't get into an option that might help you.

If you, like Aja, were considered basically hopeless, there's no way you can get the number of credits [00:13:00] you need to get, then you couldn't get in either. This program was tiny and running this massive waitlist, and that's what set us on this journey to say that something had to be different and that there had to be a better way. Students from that past system, I think, really informed the design of what came to be Map Academy.

Nick: Go ahead.

Aja: Specifically, the pins, that will always stand out to me, how Rachel and Josh took the student-centered approach by having a pin for each student. I think they were color-coded [00:13:30] and whatnot.

Nick: Well, let's talk about that. The name Map Academy, where does it come from?

Rachel: For those of you that didn't know about educational policy or the political dynamic regarding charter schools, if you can imagine, two district administrators, and if anyone knows anything about Massachusetts politics, at the time, there was a massive anti-charter movement in Massachusetts. There was a big ballot question, which was resoundingly defeated, at the same time, we were trying to open Map. [00:14:00]

The only mechanism to start a new school, the charter gives us a ton of autonomy. We were pitching to our school committee and our superintendent that there really needed to be a better way. We took a Map of the town of Plymouth, which is where we were working then and where Map Academy is now and we put red dots on that Map for every student who had dropped out of high school in the last four years.

We put yellow dots on that Map for all of the students who data in the Early Warning Indicator System in Massachusetts can, with eerie [00:14:30] accuracy, predict which students are most likely to fall behind because of their performance with attendance or conduct or grades in middle school. We put a yellow dot for all the students that were flagged as most likely going to struggle to reach their next educational milestone.

We put a green dot for the students who are currently in our program, and there were 398 dots. The Map now hangs in the lobby of Map Academy, and that Map is plastered. Those dots are students like Aja and [00:15:00] students like some of those students who are up there who were already in the system while we were working to found Map Academy. Our pitch was that each of those dots on that Map needed to be put at the center of their own journey and their own story and that instead of the systems being designed by adults for adults, the systems needed to be designed by adults but for students and putting students in each of those. We really embedded that into every aspect of our school.

Nick: It's just a really great visual. **[00:15:30]** You walk into the school and just see this Map with these dots. It's staggering to see how many students are just struggling with education in one town so then you imagine zooming out of that and seeing what it looks like.

Rachel: We're in a region, really. We're not in a big urban area, it's an urban fringe area. We're on the south shore of Massachusetts but midway point between Plymouth, i.e., Mayflower and America's hometown and Plymouth Rock and such. It's really a city that wants to masquerade as a beautiful **[00:16:00]** quaint New England town that is really very urban when you scratch beneath the surface and very, very, very inequitable and massive amounts of systemic racism, really, that is still unfaced in the town, in general.

We draw now students from about 30 different towns across the region. Remarkably, despite the fact that charters cause all kinds of angst for people, we **[00:16:30]** have had a lot of support and we've actually had zero opposition all the way from the very beginning to our school. I think that the reason we have no opposition is because, though people aren't necessarily ready to take the plunge and do something about it, there's widespread recognition of what the problem is.

Nick: Before we move on to your experiences at Map and what made Map different, Reggie, I wanted to ask because you mentioned DCF, which is Department Children Families, I know some states call it different things, what happens when you start **[00:17:00]** getting involved with DCF? What even happens not just to school but to life in general? What happens?

Reggie: I was first put in DCF custody when I was three, and I was adopted. I went to a foster home for two months, then I got adopted right away. When I was 15, my mom filed a CRA on me, which is like CINS, I don't know.

Rachel: Child in Need of Supervision.

Reggie: It's basically when you don't like your child, so you give them to a parole officer. **[00:17:30]** They clearly could tell that I didn't feel safe in my home. They sent me to a DCF program, which is in Plymouth. DCF sucks. It's not good. They feed you, but it's not good. They clothe you, but they're ugly. They're not nice. It was not a good time, definitely not. I don't know.

Nick: It's a system that's supposed to be helpful. It's supposed to be good.

Reggie: Oh, yes, for sure. For sure. Well, there are some good people but not many now.

Nick: What are some of the ways that it all **[00:18:00]** falls apart? What are some of the ways that it doesn't work?

Reggie: I was still going to public school when I was in the foster home, and my school was in my town, and it was in Wareham. I don't have a car. No one's going to drive me, so I wasn't going to school.

Nick: It was just impossible.

Reggie: Literally, everything's impossible. You have no freedom.

Nick: Were you ever able to bring that up, either to the foster home or to DCF, in general, and be like, "How am I supposed to do this? How do I even get to school?"

Reggie: Yes. That's not their priority.

Nick: They don't have an answer.

Reggie: They have so many kids. **[00:18:30]** Really, there's a chance that if you see them on the street, they won't know who you are.

Nick: You can hear all the barriers. It's either you're in school, trying to go to school, but one hiccup throws you off course, or you're involved with an agency that's literally supposed to be helping you and it is not. It's unfortunate. Rachel, I wonder, hearing both of those stories, students that haven't been able to come to Map, what ultimately happens even before Map Academy existed?

[00:19:00] What happens to students that don't find an alternative? What do we see happening out there?

Rachel: I'm sure that many in the audience can relate. It's going to be exacerbated by the pandemic, but the fact of the matter is that they just disappear, loudly sometimes with expulsions and punitive discipline that push them out, and perhaps even more often quietly, they just fall off. They just fall off the rules, they stop coming. **[00:19:30]** I think almost always, there's caring adults who are trying their hardest along that way, but they just fall off.

Sometimes it's because they're working a lot, and their work schedule doesn't allow them to go to school, sometimes it's for lack of credit accumulation, sometimes it's systems, sometimes it's lack of transportation. A lot of times, it's substance use, it's mental health, it's barriers that make the rigid high school environment impossible, and then students just fall off, **[00:20:00]** and then the struggle.

We say a lot, unfortunately, the presence of a high school diploma doesn't honestly open a ton of doors in our society, but the absence of it is a crisis. The absence of a high school diploma is a crisis. It isn't enough, and that's one of our priorities as a school, and both Aja and Reggie have connected to their postsecondary goals. They're pursuing higher ed and working toward their goals, which we're insanely proud of them for, but **[00:20:30]** that is also a massive struggle.

Say nothing about not having a high school diploma, even students who do have high school diplomas, to connect to their post-secondary goals really requires things, circumstances to align in sometimes miraculous ways. It almost feels sometimes like it needs a magic wand. When they leave high school without that, most often, the next time they're going to connect to services are going to be through governmental agencies or the criminal justice system, or they're going to **[00:21:00]** forge their way ahead at minimum wage jobs, trying to struggle to support themselves and their families and not engage again with a productive system that is really, truly designed to help them to break that cycle.

Nick: Right. A really important key to that post-secondary education, preparing students for life after high school, we're going to talk about that in a bit because both students on stage graduated Map Academy and are pursuing things, but before we get there, let's talk about finding the way to Map Academy **[00:21:30]** and your all experience at Map Academy when you knew it was different. Aja, how did you find your way to Map Academy? We touched on it a little already.

Aja: Yes. As I said, I was already connected to Rachel and Josh, but the best part is they were in constant communication with me. They told me their ideas pretty much the second they had them, they told me the basics of how they're going to pursue it. They told me their estimated timeline,

and they were very clear to me. I had dropped out at this point. **[00:22:00]** I had already dropped out right around when this idea was really happening.

They were very clear to me. "You dropped out, and you're not guaranteed a spot. We're doing our best. We're hoping the school works out, but don't put your life on hold also." The point is they were in constant communication. They didn't mislead me. They didn't give me any false hope. It was just "This is what we want to do. This is how we're trying to do it. Once we're there, we'll let you know and **[00:22:30]** do our best to offer you an opportunity" because by the time the school opened, I didn't live in Plymouth anymore.

There was that one blip that could have been an issue. Rachel and Josh told me the entire time, "We cannot promise that you are coming to the school. We expect you to, and we will support you regardless." That was the best thing is, as a high school dropout, I knew if I needed anything, **[00:23:00]** I could call Rachel or Josh.

Nick: Still now.

Aja: Yes, that's for later. When I say "call them," I mean if I need help with my license taxes, it's more than, and it's life stuff, it's important stuff, but it's stuff that you don't normally get support about. It's stuff that teachers, educators, administrators brush off and pretty much just tell you to figure it out on your own. It's important stuff that you need to learn how to do it appropriately. **[00:23:30]** They supported me with life and then they supported me to help me get my education one, way or another.

Nick: Right. I imagine that when you entered Map Academy, it probably felt pretty good to be in this new school that's doing things differently, but when did you really realize that it was different? Any anecdote stories when you first got into it, how did you realize, "This really is different"?

Aja: There's the big pieces and then there's the small pieces. I guess we can start with the first week I was in that school. I got into a conflict **[00:24:00]** with somebody where we had a little yelling feud, and in public education, there's no discussion, it's "You guys were belligerent, you're suspended. That's that." Sometimes they'll be like, "Oh, let's do mediation," but it's forced, scripted mediation, whereas Josh and Rachel, it was, "Is this a deeper issue? Is this between you two? Is this because you're struggling at home?"

They solve the issue, they don't resort to punishment. **[00:24:30]** People need consequences for their actions. I'm not going to say that Rachel and Josh let everything slide, but they address it in a constructive way to help prevent it from happening and to resolve the deeper issues because 9 times out of 10, high school conflicts are personal issues, not between people. That was just the small Day 1 piece.

I can go into all the things that make them different that I learned in the two years that I was at that school, **[00:25:00]** but it was Day 1, Week 1. I don't know exactly, but I knew that they meant what they said, and this was different, and I was here for the long haul. I started this school at 18 years old. I wanted no part in going back to high school at 18 years old, but they supported that. They knew I wanted no part in going back to high school, but I wanted my diploma. I wanted to get into medicine, and they were going to make it happen, one way or another.

Nick: I wonder, did that approach of "Let's actually **[00:25:30]** solve the problem that led to this conflict," did that impact the way you handled future conflicts? If you were about to be in some

conflict with another student, did it make you just check yourself real quick and be like, "Why is this about to happen?" that sort of thing?

Aja: 100% because I stress that 9 times out of 10, it's because of other issues and that two people are just stressed out, and it's just like lighting — I don't know what phrase is used, but it's just two people, their own struggles, and **[00:26:00]** they don't-

Nick: Wrong place, wrong time. It's coming to a head.

Aja: Yes, they really make it — Now, my conflict skills are frankly pretty amazing, largely in part to Map because like I said, it started off as me being aggressive towards Josh and Rachel, by the time I started the school, I had fizzled out and said, "I want to succeed," but I was still figuring myself out. They saw it from the beginning to the end, and **[00:26:30]** thanks to them I can confidently say I'm happy where I am in education, mentally.

Nick: We can clap for that. Yes, we can clap for that.

[applause]

Nick: That's amazing. Thank you for sharing that. Reggie, how did you find your way to Map Academy?

Reggie: I never dropped out of school, but I guess I just stopped going for a good year-and-a-half.

Rachel: He's the silent kind.

Reggie: **[00:27:00]** Awkward. I went back. Before that, though, while I was in my programs like DCF, I was still doing schoolwork because when you're in a program, they give you work to do. I was literally sitting in a classroom for eight hours a day, doing my work. One day, I decided, "Well, I'm going to transfer back to school" because I was in the — It's like ALP, so it's like a small classroom, not a lot of people.

It's for people with IEPs like ADHD, all that good stuff. I gave them all the work I did **[00:27:30]** from the programs, and I was like, "This is the work I did. I'm passing it into you guys because you guys said you wanted it, you'll pass me along." I was 17 or 18, supposed to be graduating. They told me I was still a sophomore. I was like, "I'm not staying here." I applied for Map.

I got in, and it was awesome because last year in September, I was really down bad. I didn't really have clothes. I was still homeless. I literally had nothing, and I remember I walked into school. I don't know. **[00:28:00]** I literally had socks on, I literally don't even remember, I was a mess. Literally, they let me shower. They literally did everything. That was when I knew they're real people, you know what I mean? It meant a lot to me. I'll always remember that.

Nick: Yes. Well, that's obviously a moment of realizing how different it is when you can shower or do laundry at a school. Any other little moments, stories, maybe with a teacher or with Josh and Rachel that you were like, "Man, this is different"?

Reggie: Yes. I procrastinate everything, **[00:28:30]** Avia knows. She's a history teacher, and I hate history. I went up to her, I was like, "You're going to print this whole course out right now, and we're doing it today, right here." We did the whole thing, whole class.

Nick: Right. That's great. Was that mind-blowing, that pacing like-

Reggie: Oh, yes, for sure.

Nick: "I can do it. I can just get it done"?

Reggie: Oh, yes, for sure. Yes.

Nick: Rachel, can we talk about that? I want to talk a little bit about the model for people that might not know.

Rachel: Oh, there's so much to unpack in what they just said.

Nick: Yes, for sure. Let's just break down the basis of **[00:29:00]** asynchronous blended model right now, the fact that you can just print out a course or get whatever you need to get done in a day if you need to. Well, that's amazing.

Rachel: They just made it all sound so simple. It kind of is.

[laughter]

Reggie: It is.

Rachel: It's the most beautiful way, but I have to say that it honestly — I'll talk a little bit about some of the technical aspects of it in a minute, but I think what is really remarkable and you've heard Aja talk about it because **[00:29:30]** we knew her before Map was a thing, but the fact of the matter is now that we have the biggest factor in Map's success, and the thing that makes it all possible is that we have managed to —

We call it unicorn hunting because our staff are literally incredible and it has been an amazing journey to recruit the right staff for our school, Map Academy. We haven't always gotten it right. We've learned a lot along the way, but we have grown, we have an incredible, **[00:30:00]** mission-driven team. We're at 32 amazing staff members. We have some here today. I think that with that, we have been able to develop so many systems and so many ways of making sure that people are available to help with all those things, the taxes, the jobs, the transportation-

Reggie: License.

Rachel: The license. I do remember that day, the license, because even just getting your driver's license when you're a homeless young adult and you **[00:30:30]** have been in systems, just getting the documentation that we need to help a student get a license can be a day-long project. It can be a multi-day project. In order for this stuff to happen, we have to have a team that the systems at Map have to be just as flexible so that we can stretch to accommodate whatever any individual day brings.

Flexibility is definitely the key component. That goes along with why we are blended in asynchronous and we're blended in asynchronous by design. It's not a response to COVID.

[00:31:00] It did help us pivot during COVID. It made COVID easier on us, from an instructional perspective because we were already blended and asynchronous, but we knew we needed to be blended and asynchronous, blended, i.e., students need a bricks-and-mortar place. We are very much an in-person school, but our students need to access curriculum digitally or there's no way we can possibly customize, we cannot personalize the student experience if we don't leverage technology.

That's what blended means to us. Asynchronous means that students work at their own pace through competency-based [00:31:30] high-quality core academics and that they receive support from their teachers along the way, which means that when Reggie's trying to graduate and he has to finish history because he's been avoiding it and his tracker tells him that he has this left and he has this magical teacher named Avia, they can make a plan, and he can get this done, but it's not "get this done," i.e., credit recovery packets, which is what usually happens in programs where we're just literally checking boxes and not focusing on meaningful learning. [00:32:00]

That is really a priority at Map. The last thing our students need is to be felt like they're pushed along or we're just checking off boxes. We need to move them. We need to support them in moving along, but we need to make sure that we're developing the skills, mindsets that they'll need in order to meet their next set of goals. The fact that we are competency-based, self-paced, and blended and that we have a remarkable team is [00:32:30] really the thing that makes it all happen.

Nick: Right. That competency-based piece, actually making sure they understand-

Rachel: They have to earn it.

Nick: -they sure passed the class, but do they understand [crosstalk]

Rachel: The culture of low expectations is real. For those of you that do alternative ed or have encountered alternative ed, the low expectations in alternative ed from low meaning adults, they are well-meaning adults. The adults in the systems are well-meaning, they care, but by just passing students who are already struggling along [00:33:00] and not making sure that they're learning anything, it's criminal, it is a massive problem.

The students who need us most to get that right are the students we care so much that we're not demanding that they learn, and that is not okay. That is something that we really work on with our staff at Map. It's hard because they do care so deeply, and by caring, those high expectations are a form of love. When we expect you to do these things, we're saying we know you can, and by then sticking by your side [00:33:30] and making you do it, we are giving the gift of students being able to confidently know that they can tackle what comes next.

Aja: Map Academy is probably the only school that I can confidently say I learned from, and I'm now in community college trying to pursue medicine.

Reggie: Same.

Aja: Because of the competency-based aspect, they are an online school, and I completed probably 95% of my schoolwork on paper [00:34:00] because they supported me in the way that I learn best. You have your essays that you have to write. Even if you can't do it, you have your certain things that you have to do if you can't do it, but they'll do their best to give you an alternative assignment that you still learn the same things from.

That was a huge thing for me, like virtual things that are meant for the students to do online. They found something that worked for me and further, stuff [00:34:30] like essays that I would struggle with, have to do enough that I can write one now for college, but otherwise, it was what's the best way to learn the content you need to learn, whether it's make a pamphlet or et cetera.

Nick: How do they figure that out? How do they figure out, "Oh, Aja doesn't work well doing the computer-based stuff, let's print it out"? How do they figure that out?

Aja: I told them.

Reggie: Yes, you got to use your voice.

Aja: [crosstalk] I will say with Map Academy, they do their best to catch on to see what works [00:35:00] for each student, but [unintelligible 00:35:01] It's as simple as that. They give you your voice, or they give you a platform for your voice, I should say, that I felt comfortable saying, "Your style is not working for me. Let's find one that works for me that still gets this same content."

Nick: Reggie, how about for you, asynchronous, blended, all that, how did that work for you?

Reggie: Oh, that was awesome because, one, I don't like going to class and, two, I like to do everything all at once, [00:35:30] so it was honestly my favorite thing to do. I have asynchronous classes right now for my math class. I'm liking that Map is better, though.

Rachel: There's a lot of technology behind all that. We have a learning management system that allows students to see their progress at all times. That's a whole podcast episode in and of itself of finding the technical elements that we needed to make this vision a reality, but the fact of the matter is that students can always see. That's another major [00:36:00] problem in other high school settings.

In particular, for students who have had interrupted educations, they never know what they need. As Reggie's saying, "They told me to do these packets. They told me to do this stuff. I gave it to them, and they said, 'No, that's not the right stuff. Sorry, you got to do this stuff. No, sorry, you didn't do enough of that stuff. I'm going to give you this stuff.'" Students at Map can always see where they are at all times.

They can focus on one credit at a time if they want, we have a lot of students who do do that. They prefer that they just focus on one thing at a time, but they have control of that, too. [00:36:30]

Aja: I think it's really positive that some days you're not in the what to do your English essay, but you can bang out tons of math problems all day. That was the best thing. They told you ahead of time. "These are what you need to work on. We don't really care exactly what you do, it's just you need to get this all done at some point." There are some days that I couldn't write an essay, as simple as that, most days, but then I did everything else, and then they [00:37:00] supported me through getting that essay done.

Further, the alternative assignments and courses and whatnot were huge because, for example, I did a sexual assault training that Rachel was able to help me turn into an elective in English because I did reflection.

Rachel: I think you used it for a wellness credit, and I think you combined it with something else for one of your [crosstalk]

Aja: Some educational side and elective side and it wasn't like [00:37:30] she was doing me a favor. I did a 40-hour training, and I got a certificate. I volunteered for the company. Four years later, I get paid by that company now because of Rachel [crosstalk]

Rachel: No, just because of you, all I did-

Aja: Just because of me.

Rachel: -was make a system, make it possible for you to pursue something that you were passionate about and give you an opportunity to connect that to your high school credential, which everyone should have a right to do. The fact of the matter is that was all [00:38:00] Aja because I didn't find that program, I didn't do that program, I still am not a licensed sexual abuse survivor-

Aja: Advocate. It's just a training.

Rachel: -advocate. That's all you. There's no doubt about the fact that that was a valid experience for you. Why should it be so rare that high schools allow students to earn credits for those type of experiences? It makes no sense that that is so rare. For us, [00:38:30] the systems behind that, we have independent study approval forms. We're working actively on developing our own in-house opportunities for students, but also, it's actually relatively easy to validate a student's external experience with a credit.

Aja: Then, further, they help me with my dual enrollment courses as well. I started college before having my high school diploma, and they were able to count that college course towards my diploma, [00:39:00] which is also now going towards my degree. It's not like I didn't do the work or anything, they're doing me — I don't want to say they're doing me no favors because they are, but that's not the focus, it's I'm getting educated one way or another, and as long as it's proper education, they will support that.

Nick: As we were talking about the asynchronous thing, reminded of a lot of the stories from previous episodes, it seems like everybody seemed to be like, "Oh, I'm really good at this subject so I could get that [00:39:30] done really fast." What that leaves room for is the subjects that you really struggle with to spend more time on. Instead of being stuck in the class with the thing you're good at with 30 other students and having to wait the whole semester to be done, you just get it out of the way and spend more time on the things that you struggle with. Did either of you find that was your experience?

Reggie: That was the best experience I had, definitely, for sure, for the workload.

Aja: I'll keep saying I struggle with English so much. Everything else, water under the bridge, just checking my boxes, [00:40:00] making sure that I knew the information well and could produce it in a proper way, so I don't go to college and I'm clueless on how to write these things and whatnot. They really make sure that you still learn the stuff that you struggle with, but you're able to excel in your strengths.

Reggie: They make sure you understand it.

Nick: Rachel, at your own pace there's a lot of freedom. What's that adjustment like, especially when a student first starts at [00:40:30] Map Academy?

Rachel: We believe in natural consequences at Map Academy. It's really a core value of ours. When you give students control, you have to be prepared to be patient, because they are not just miraculously ready to start performing at the level that we know that they're capable of performing at. Patience is truly a virtue at Map Academy, and we know that it's entirely possible [00:41:00] for students. There's a lot. We often talk about academic progress in our students as the iceberg metaphor, where there's so much work that has to be done. That's below the surface that we don't see before we start to see the progress. In addition to all of the examples that Reggie and Aja have

shared today, our school is founded on finding ways for students to heal from their past experiences.

The vast majority of students that come to us have experienced significant amounts of [00:41:30] trauma. Very often they're still experiencing trauma at the time that they enroll with us. When we say your math class is self-paced, it could take six months, eight months, a year, maybe longer for a student to touch that math class. Abby's one of our math teachers. She experiences this often. In that time, the student may be engaging in meaningful counseling for the first time. We may be working on housing supports, [00:42:00] we're working on helping the student get a license. We're helping a student to find substance abuse treatment. We're helping a student to – literally the list of things that our wraparound team is doing, we haven't talked about that a whole lot today, but we have incredible teachers and we also have an incredible wraparound team.

We have social workers and community support partners that are really working on piecing together that puzzle. The fact of the matter is they have to do the academic in order to graduate, that's not negotiable. By being self-paced, the class doesn't move on [00:42:30] without them, when they're ready, they can engage. By putting the right supports in place and being patient, and sometimes when – Reggie and Aja both came to us relatively late in their journeys and from a pretty mature stance in terms of being behavioral stuff. We do have students who come to us younger and they're just not ready. By being patient and tolerating, that they literally sat all day on their phone, or they sat all day talking or maybe, and our social movies do a whole bunch of work on helping [00:43:00] them to set goals.

We have an anchor primary person model where an adult in the morning is setting goals with a student and we're working toward the end to increasing the amount of work production and all that stuff behind the scenes, but the fact of the matter is that the natural consequence of effort is progress. The natural consequence of lack of effort is lack of progress. Eventually, they realize that, and eventually they realize that their effort really does lead to progress and the pace accelerates.

By giving them the time and space to figure that out, [00:43:30] they've done a lot of healing along the way and by doing that healing, it drastically increases their chances of success after they leave us, because we can check up the boxes of academics, but if we don't help them heal, then they'll have a diploma and be right back where they started with a high school credential that doesn't allow them to have the skills that they need to, do whatever's next.

Aja: Further to your own pace model, you get your success when it's done, whereas public school, you're just going through the motion for, [00:44:00] whatever, a semester and you finish it and you hope you passed. You're not promised to pass. You hope you pass. Whereas with Map Academy, you see you got your credit and they congratulate you. They really make you feel like you're accomplishing something always.

Rachel: [unintelligible 00:44:19] Why don't you tell about how we do credits, because it's actually another thing that shouldn't be rocket science. How do we do credits?

Reggie: All right, [inaudible 00:44:27]

Rachel: What happens when you get a credit at Map? [crosstalk] [00:44:30] [unintelligible 00:44:30] you gave that history. What happens?

Nick: The set-up is, since its asynchronous, people are getting credits any time of the day, every day. What does it look like, Reggie?

Reggie: When you're in school and you get a credit, you get a slip and then you go to Marisol or you go to someone or Rachel or Josh.

?Kristen: You get it signed.

Reggie: You get it signed.

Rachel: You get it signed, and then you bring it to Marisol.

Reggie: Then they announce your name on a little thing on the speaker and you put it up on the little wall and it has everybody else's credits on it. I don't know. **[00:45:00]** It's really cool because you can see what you're doing and how far you've come from the beginning of the year. I didn't have a lot of credits left, but I think I had four or five up on the wall within a couple days.

Rachel: That's pretty cool. We stop everything for credits in that regard. My effort really literally led to progress. I got this, I'm done. I checked it off. They see their bar and their tracker move when they log in to the LMS, and that class is finished. It's done. It's on their transcript. It turned into a credit and then we program them into their next class, but that **[00:45:30]** stopping... As a leader, we stop for everything. I'd be on Zooms and knock on the door and I'm like, "Hold on," mute myself and announce the credits. It's small, but it is a way of really validating academic progress on a daily basis and celebrating that success.

Reggie: I'm sure it's motivating for peers too, when you hear your friend's name announced, like so and so just earned a credit.

Rachel: You hear cheers of bursting out from wherever in the school, they earn that credit and **[00:46:00]** it's really special.

Aja: The keyword is validating. It really makes a difference when you know your work is helping you move forward.

Reggie: You can see it too.

Nick: Yes, totally. Rachel had mentioned the iceberg of all these issues you have to deal with below the surface and briefly touched on having social workers onsite. I wonder. Well, Rachel, you can talk about the perspective of, it's a little bit different than just guidance counselors. It's straight up **[00:46:30]** social workers.

Rachel: Yes. I've known some wonderful guidance counselors in my life, but as a school leader at Map Academy, I'm not per particularly interested in — we don't need guidance counselors. Not because there's anything wrong with guidance counselors, but in general, guidance counselors at a high school level are checking off boxes. They're following policies, they're helping students to get school done. That's great. In a lot of settings that works really beautifully. At Map, because we really look at the whole student and the whole **[00:47:00]** situation, it really needs to be a web, and that's really social work. Social work is really looking at entire systems. It's working with families, it's working with collaterals, and really figuring out what supports do we need to put in place in order to make this work for this student.

That is also something that I think is really rare in high schools, because very often those issues are things that the school is too worried to take on because they can't fix them. We do assume [00:47:30] some liability technically, but we have to try. Our social workers deal with all kinds of things. We could go in a day from and it really does. It's life or death sometimes, not so much in these two cases, but we have students for whom the biggest thing we need is to make sure they always have Narcan and we always have Narcan and that they're safe.

When students are using, the way that we handle [00:48:00] substance use can be life or death sometimes. That takes a social worker to be able to say that they're concerned about a student's well-being, but a suspension is not going to help when a student is using opiates. That makes no sense. It goes everything from that end of the spectrum, all the way to how we're handling student conflicts, how we're handling students with – it's literally any life issue. [00:48:30] That team of people, they really make magic happen every day.

Nick: It's a different dynamic when the students have somebody like that that to talk to.

Aja: It's crazy.

Nick: I'll let everybody know. We are going to have time for a couple questions at the end. If you have questions, we'll save time for that. Either of you want to speak about Maxine having social workers onsite, that relationship at all?

Aja: I personally, I don't know how to wear this don't need them. Everybody needs to talk to a social worker here and there, but I was very much supported outside of school. [00:49:00]

Reggie: Well, Maxine helped me a lot. She showed my birth certificate. She showed me a bunch of things I've been trying to get for years. If I didn't have her, I wouldn't-

Rachel: Steph is on that docket. You got a scholarship for college, as you qualified for a scholarship as called the Moving to College Scholarship, which is for students who have aged out of DCF custody or are homeless or housing insecure at the time that they applied to college, which is fantastic but that scholarship didn't magically [00:49:30] help you transition to college.

Reggie: No, no, no, not at all.

Rachel: There was a lot of work that happened on that too.

Reggie: Especially, and Steph helped me with literally all that. I'm pretty sure she did half my application. I'm not even kidding.

Rachel: Any FAFSA, all that stuff.

Reggie: Oh yes, she did that. She's going to do it again next week actually, shout out staff.

Nick: There's a lot of non-school related, but very important for school things that I think that team helps a lot with. Since we started talking about scholarships and graduation and all that, I do want to take this last segment and talk about [00:50:00] graduation and preparing, since you both have graduated and are doing other things now. Take it away. Who wants to talk about what's going on now? Let's start with preparing for graduation. What did that look like?

Aja: I was pretty much already on my track. I had started at community college. I was doing my advocacy and I'm also a cashier on the side just to get some extra income. I was doing my thing. For me, post-secondary planning was, [00:50:30] again, I don't want to say not necessary, but they

had supported me so much through my education that it had already taken care of itself essentially. I felt very confident. I felt very prepared, and they supported-

Rachel: Well, you had pressed pause, the system had forced you to press pause on your goals. We pushed play and then you just rolled with it.

Aja: Exactly.

Nick: I think it's pretty much embedded into Map that you will have this post-secondary plan [00:51:00] when you leave.

Aja: It's a graduation requirement.

Reggie: You have to.

Nick: You're minded that way, from freshman on.

Aja: The best part is, since I was already on my track, they recognized I don't need to do significant work for my post-secondary credit. It was, you've proven yourself, that that was it.

Rachel: You had your plan. It was an actionable plan, and that is a graduation requirement at Map, that every student and sometimes students stay with us just for that, they'll finish all their academics and they don't have a plan. I see a couple actually up there from previous episodes [00:51:30] where they finished their academics and really just didn't know what's next. Because we hold that post-secondary plan as a graduation requirement, it gives them an opportunity to stay enrolled while they get some of that support to figure out what's going to happen next. They don't just walk across the stage with a diploma to nothing.

Nick: Right. Reggie, what did post-secondary planning look like for you?

Reggie: Like Aja, I didn't really have one because I knew what I wanted to do. They knew that, as soon as I walked in, I told Mike, I was like, "This what I want to do."

Aja: For you, it was more logistic stuff of actually getting [00:52:00] you from your situation to a college dorm, enrolled in classes, set-up and ready to go, because the system does not. There's nobody that really with that when you've been on your own.

Nick: The second you're out the door it's, "Okay, figure it out," but not at Map.

Reggie: No, no, no.

Nick: No. That's great.

Reggie: One of the nurse drove me. She moved me into my dorm.

Rachel: Yes. Nurse Heather took him to college.

Nick: Wow.

Reggie: It was awesome.

Rachel: That's another person, honestly.

Reggie: Heather's awesome.

Rachel: We have a nurse that's just so much more [00:52:30] than a nurse.

Aja: That I helped hire.

Rachel: You did.

Aja: Then even further, this whole post-secondary plan, they ensure that afterwards you're graduated, you have your diploma in your hand, you are no longer on their roster. They're still making sure you're following your plan. Despite blips or whatever, they're just making sure you're still-

Rachel: You're still doing taxes and birth certificates and FASFA forms and all this stuff.

Nick: Right. There's a great episode with Mike, one of the social workers, who mentions how yes, continued support [00:53:00], but do you feel like you're getting continued support, but they're also helping you build towards doing some of these things yourselves as well? It's not just like show up and they'll do it for me. You both mentioned that you're still getting a little bit of support from the team. Right?

Reggie: Yes.

Nick: That's fantastic. Well, we have-

Rachel: You have to get them to do it themselves.

Nick: Yes. We have two good examples of students that had ideas and plans of where to go. What does it look like if a student doesn't have a plan, we're helping them find plans or?

Rachel: Yes, and that is, I think [00:53:30] probably one of a couple, most significant areas of growth for us right now, is working on how we can create more robust pathways for students to find out what's out there for them and then connect to that. Like I said, we're in the middle of year four of operations. We renew our charter next year. Some things about Map are pretty stable, but we're always growing and [00:54:00] iterating at the same time. That idea of what do we do when a student doesn't have those goals or when they still need additional support and how can we continue to connect those dots? Is a scope of work that we're currently working on now. We have a lot of partnerships and such, but we're really looking at trying to make those more explicit and robust.

Nick: Right. All the things that we talk about today, we talk about throughout all these different stories and all these different episodes in the podcast. It's so much to capture in one hour.

Rachel: We're still building. Yes, it's so much. We used to say at the beginning, [00:54:30] we literally were flying the plane before it was built because when you launch a brand new public high school with 130 alternative adolescents and young adults and an entire new team of people, we literally were building the plane. We were flying over the ocean with a quarter-built plane, but we made it. Our plane's built now, but we're still always looking to do it better and to grow. In that way, we're a lab school that is always [00:55:00] checking ourselves on what's working and what we can continue to do better.

Nick: I'll tell you a few other ways you can connect with Map. We have very cool website and stuff, but anybody who does have questions, if y'all just want to come up, maybe here to the first row, I'll pass my mic to you all for anybody who has questions. Just to let you know, we have the podcast, of course and there's these really cool stickers that are over there on the counter, kiss cut stickers, they got QR codes. They'll link you not just to the podcast, but also to this really cool archive that's been built. You want to just briefly mention [00:55:30] what that was?

Rachel: Yes, we need to give a shoutout our Hairpin team, they're here. Nick works for Hairpin, and also collaborates with us but Hairpin Communications has been helping us do this work from the very beginning, helped us with our branding and still with the storytelling. The education disruption is a repository that's a website that we built. We get asked a lot about how we did this, and it's definitely been a journey. That education disruption site has transcripts of all of our podcasts, but also a lot of articles and case studies **[00:56:00]** that have been written about us, and is something that we will continue to grow as we keep learning. It's a great learning site.

Nick: Yes, totally. Lots of resources. One of the reasons we do this podcast and all this, is to share to get some of the practices out there. It's iterative, but try to just share what's working, hopefully. Any questions from the audience? Come on up. I'll pass you my mic.

?Bob: No, because you're going to have to answer.

Rachel: Oh, true. That's right. **[00:56:30]**

Audience Member 1: Thank you. You mentioned the attendance as part of the grading system was a barrier. Have you done anything else different with the grading systems? Would you call your grades mastery or competence-based? Can you expand that at all?

Rachel: Yes, they're completely competency-based. Students progress based on competency, and then our LMS does translate that to a grade at the end of the course. Students are really assessed **[00:57:00]** at three competency levels, learning, functional, and nuanced. We do for transcript purposes, just flip that to a grade. The grade is really... it essentially means that no student can get less than a B really because that is really an after for on the grade piece.

As far as just traditional metrics, accountability metrics like attendance, and credit accumulation, all that stuff. **[00:57:30]** that's a whole another piece. Our school is really designed so that students can engage in-person and they can also engage remotely. We track that, we track engagement, even if they're not physically present in the building. As far as students' coursework goes, they're assigned to courses. They work through them at their own pace. They work with their teachers when they get to the end, they finish their capstone, they get the credit. Then it gets flipped into a grade automatically by the LMS at the end for the transcript. **[00:58:00]**

Nick: One or two quick ones, if anybody's here or I'll give-

Audience Member 2: What's your LMS and how do you meet that technology need of your asynchronous learners?

Rachel: Part of it's easy. We just have lots and lots of Chromebooks and we give them out and we don't charge any replacement fees, and we just absorb the cost of making sure that we always have plenty. We don't make students pay for insurance and all that stuff. We have lots of hotspots, **[00:58:30]** whether it's grant-funded or not. We just really invest in making sure that we have all the stuff that we need to have students be able to access. The LMS question is harder. We were really lucky in our journey, we had a grant-funded planning year and we were able to visit schools across the country.

We ended up very fortuitously partnering with an amazing alternative school in the Bronx called Bronx Arena. They built their own competency-based LMS, and we were able to get our own instance of that **[00:59:00]** and then grow from there. Happy to answer more questions about that. It's a partnership that made us not have to build our own LMS.

Nick: Any one final question? Anybody. That's okay because all your questions will be answered if you go check out the podcast and the website and there's the podcast and there's the Map Academy website, which has video interviews with students, staff. We're always tying it back to practices, right? It's still- **[00:59:30]**

Reggie: Oh, wait, one more thing. The furniture at Map is awesome. The layout of Map Academy is not like a high school. It is —

Aja: They have wobble chairs.

Reggie: They have chairs like —

Nick: Couches.

Rachel: That is actually something that we didn't talk about at all and is a huge part of it. It doesn't feel like a traditional high school. Again, we were really, really fortunate. We had a vision, we worked really hard at it and we have been very fortunate to have philanthropic support that allowed us to launch something that doesn't **[01:00:00]** feel like an afterthought alternative high school, but feels like a really special modern workplace, kind of, but it is. It elevated the entire experience for our students. It's something that I know we're ending, but our students, they often get the worst of the systems and they deserve the best. I think in a nutshell, that's what we've tried to do, is build a place that makes them feel special and seen and heard, and there you have it.

Nick: Aja and Reggie, thank you so much for sharing those stories with us.

Reggie: **[01:00:30]** Thank you.

Aja: Thank you for having us.

Nick: Thanks, Rachel.

Audience: [applause]

Nick: I also have to just quickly thank — My name is Nick Tetrault. I'm part of a creative agency, a creative collective called Hairpin that does this communication stuff that the podcast wouldn't be possible without. The bigger team, Kristen and Bob, are here, and Susie Blair, our editor is back home.

Rachel: The best unicorn team ever.

Nick: Thanks.

Reggie: Thank you, guys.

[background music]

Nick: Thank you so much for listening to this live episode of *Education Disruption*. We want to especially thank Aja and Reggie for their time in participating in this **[01:01:00]** episode and sharing their stories, as well as SXSW EDU for inviting us to the conference.

To find out more about Map Academy, you can head to the mapacademy.org, or you can check out educationdisruption.org for a full archive of media about the school. My name is Nick Tetrault. Our editor is Susie Blair. Our executive producer is Kristen Hughes, and this is a Hairpin production.

[music]

