Think Forward New England: Profiles of Innovation
Map Academy

Image courtesy of Paul Shnaittacher

Key Lessons

- Competency-based, asynchronous, and blended learning allow for adapting courses to students' individual needs and circumstances.

- Competency-based, asynchronous, and blended learning also enable highly-supportive relationships between students and staff.

- High expectations and highly-supportive relationships reinforce and counterbalance one another.

Key Questions

- What flexibility might schools create to support students who struggle to conform to the systems and processes of conventional instruction?

- What would better foster students' sense that effort leads to progress in school?

- What systems and structures can schools create that enable more caring and supportive relationships between students and staff?

- How can schools ensure that every student's needs and circumstances are known and supported while also holding every student to high expectations?

Introduction

Even for the best educators, meeting **every** student's needs can prove elusive. Most schools operate a rigid system of teacher-led, whole-class instruction that moves at a single pace and is designed for order and efficiency, not adaptability. This system works well enough for students whose lives and way of learning happen to conform to its expectations. But some students don't fit well into the boxes of conventional schooling. And despite the concern and dedication of educators, those students all too often slip through the cracks.

For a student named Virginia,[1] conventional schooling initially worked.[2] She put in the effort to show up on time, follow instructions, complete her assignments, and earned As and Bs in her classes. But when she was 15, her father took his own life, and the grief and trauma understandably affected every aspect of her life. At first, she tried to forge on with school, but she found herself making regular trips to the school nurse's office in tears. Virginia's schooling

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1 Students featured in this profile gave permission for their first names to be used.
2 Virginia's story is documented in "Overcoming Tragedy To Find Success In High School," Education Disruption (podcast), August 13, 2020.

stalled. After receiving treatment at a behavioral health hospital, she was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, anxiety, and depression. Yet when her emotions overwhelmed her at school, teachers would often handle the situation by sending her to a detention room to calm down.

The next school year, Virginia tried her best to rally but unanticipated challenges struck again: two major surgeries caused her to miss a significant amount of class time. With two consecutive years of setbacks, she opted to drop out of school and look for work.

At the age of 22, Virginia supported herself by working at Dunkin' Donuts. The dream of earning a high school diploma seemed to have passed her by. Yet one day at work, she was excited to see two familiar faces come into the store: Rachel Babcock and Josh Charpentier, who had both previously worked for the local school district helping students like Virginia catch up on credits. They had come to invite her to finish her high school diploma at Map Academy, a new charter school they had created for students who were not on track to graduate. As soon as she clocked out of her shift at work that day, Virginia completed the paperwork to enroll in Map Academy. She felt newly optimistic, like her life was about the change.

Map Academy at a glance

- Plymouth, Massachusetts
- Single-site charter school
- Grades 9–12, ages 14–24
- 190 students
  - 8% Black, 20% Hispanic, 8% two+ races, 64% White
  - 47.6% Students with Disabilities
  - 57% Free/Reduced-Price Lunch

A school where students progress in spite of life's hurdles

Virginia's story epitomizes a common shortcoming across K–12 schooling. Students are not uniform inputs into the K–12 education system—yet the system too often treats them that way. Each student comes with distinct assets but also unique obstacles to overcome. Conventional schooling becomes a problem when it marginalizes students whose profiles do not conform to its standard operations. The result of this breakdown is clearly documented: roughly 2.1 million US students drop out of high school each year.[3]

This case study tells the story of a school that confronts that statistic head-on by reversing the dominant relationship between a school and its students. Rather than offering learning experiences that require students to conform their lives to the school, Map Academy offers an education that adapts to the needs and circumstances of its students while maintaining high expectations.

Nearly a decade ago, Babcock and Charpentier led the alternative education program for Plymouth Public Schools. Their charge was clear: make sure students who struggled to succeed in the district's conventional high schools did not slip through the cracks.

Core principles

- Extended learning opportunities (5+ years)
- Place-based learning (5+ years)
- Portfolios and exhibitions of student work (5+ years)
- Social justice focus (5+ years)
- Individual learning paths (3–4 years)

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3 Fast Facts: "Dropout Rates," National Center for Education Statistics website, accessed April 15, 2021.

Babcock and Charpentier posted a map of their district on a wall in their office and placed a dot at the home address of every student who: 1) identified as at risk of dropping out according to the Massachusetts Early Warning Indicator System, 2) was already enrolled in an alternative education program, or 3) had dropped out of the system. By the time they were done, the map had 398 dots—each representing a real student who had struggled to conform to the rigid norms of the existing system.

That map was a revelation to the pair. In spite of their passion and dedication—and that of many colleagues—the system was still failing an inordinate number of Plymouth's students. Of the 398 dots, approximately half represented students who had already dropped out. Another quarter were enrolled in alternative programs that might help them clear the minimum bar to a diploma but were not well-equipped to set them up for post-secondary success. They had been following the conventional playbook for supporting at-risk students: enhancing the curriculum, improving staff development, revising student discipline policies. But those efforts weren't working.

For many students, conforming to the system just wasn't compatible with their life circumstances. As Babcock explained, "Whether it's being off track because you don't have anywhere to live, or because you're working 50 or 60 hours a week to support yourself and your family, or because you have a child of your own, or because you have mental health or substance abuse issues, or you have crazy anxiety every time you set foot in school, or you have a history of trauma. . . . When those things happen, you can only go so long sticking Band-Aids on. You have to actually push pause and say, 'What are we doing here?' and put the kid at the center of the decision-making, which was really hard to do in a district where they're always trying to apply the same policies to every student."

Babcock and Charpentier realized that if they really wanted to change the trajectory of students on the margins, they needed a new approach that rethought nearly all the assumptions of conventional schooling. After studying the problem and visiting nontraditional schools across the country, they envisioned a school that would be competency-based, asynchronous, and blended. This instructional model would, in turn, enable teachers to adapt the mode and timing of instruction to students' needs and dedicate more of their attention to building supportive relationships with each of their students. As Charpentier explained, "We know that life is going to get in the way for some of our students. So instead of trying to fight against that, we created a system that allows for that to happen." Born from that vision, Map Academy—named after the map on Babcock and Charpentier's wall—opened its doors to students in fall 2018.

One student, Mari, said Map functions "like a small family. . . . It's a really, really, really welcoming place to be."

For Virginia, Map Academy was a model of schooling that worked where others had failed. The school's adaptable approach to instruction enabled the school's staff to give her the support she needed. She described how "when you feel accepted and understood by teachers, it's easier to talk to them. . . . They make us feel like we're all equal. . . . In regular school, I would never raise my hand because I just felt like I was such an outcast. But here, they don't let anyone feel like an outcast."

This kind of supportive environment was what she needed to put her back on a path to educational success. At Map, "I get to experiment on what I want," Virginia said. "It opens my mind and challenges me more. . . . It helps me find myself as a person in a way too." In spring 2020, Virginia earned her diploma and is now working on plans to get a postsecondary education in computer science or data analysis.

Adjusting in the face of a pandemic

Fast forward to March 2020, and Map Academy—now in the final months of its second year of operation—found itself forced to close its physical facilities just like most other schools around the world. But it was set up to face this challenge better than most. As Charpentier recounted, "We didn't spend a tremendous amount of time setting up our academic model to be reachable outside school because it's already set up that way." Its core tenets of blended, asynchronous learning meant students could continue progressing in their courses from home just as they had at the school building.

Yet Map lost many of its processes for checking in with students and supporting their learning efforts. Map's students relied on its physical campus as a place to tune out distractions, find community, and get help on demand when they needed it.

To fill this void, Map's leaders and staff worked tirelessly through the first few weeks of the pandemic to roll out a virtual approach for checking in with each student. As Babcock explained, "We rely very much on the personal connections that are happening here and in this place. . . . So we needed to figure out some way of creating ... a platform for which shared community could happen, since it couldn't happen here at Map."

Map set up a virtual student center on its website—a one-stop shop where students could access all the resources and supports they needed while learning remotely. The site included tutorial videos on how to navigate the online system and access resources, a Zoom room staffed by teachers Monday through Friday from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm for live support, and ways to request tech support, counseling services, nurse check-ins, copies of materials, and meal delivery.

But easy access to support wouldn't be enough on its own. Accordingly, the school created a system to ensure no student fell through the cracks. They assigned every teacher to be a case manager for a group of approximately 15 students. Teachers made daily contact with each of their students—over phone calls, text messages, social media, meal delivery, or whatever other means worked—in order to oversee academic progress and monitor engagement.

To coordinate their efforts, Map's team created a shared spreadsheet for tracking all student requests for support and all student-related issues identified by the staff. The spreadsheet flagged each student using a green, yellow, or red color-coded system corresponding to the level of support a student needed. The staff then met multiple times each day to target their efforts based on the spreadsheet.

True to their guiding philosophy, Map's team consistently prioritized the needs of individual students. As Ryan McLaughlin, Map's student services co-lead made clear, "We play it student

by student. So you're just trying to … find the right time to get them engaged. But just making sure, letting them know, that we're always there to support them with whatever they need."

Over the course of the pandemic, Map's staff has played not only a crucial academic support role but helped families navigate telehealth systems, fill out unemployment applications, and continue with substance abuse recovery during a challenging time. Maxanne Wordell, Map's wraparound co-lead, articulated the importance of these efforts: "It feels pretty amazing, in light of such a crisis, the way that this school community has really rallied around our students and their families."

Last summer, new pandemic health guidelines allowed Map to open its building for limited use and by appointment only. Although school was not officially in session, many students came to the campus through the summer to work on their asynchronous courses with the support of Map's team.

When the new school year began last fall, Map opened its building on a hybrid schedule that it has maintained since then. To mitigate health risks, Map put in place procedures to screen students for COVID-19 symptoms when they arrive at school and to limit their contact with others while on campus. With these procedures in place, students can come to the campus two or three days a week, depending on their needs and preferences. As one Map student, Noah, explained, "They keep most of the kids separated. There's always masks and precaution, ventilation is on, all of that stuff."

The hybrid approach has had upsides for Map. Whereas some students want and need the support available through in-person interaction, others thrive at home. As Babcock explained, "We underestimate the amount of work it takes for some students to even make it out the out of their bed, out of their bedroom, out of their house, into their car, or onto the bus, off the bus, into the school, into the classroom, onto the computer into the coursework. For students who are paralyzed by anxiety or depression … removing those barriers … was freeing."

The hybrid schedule also allowed some students to maintain employment at a time when their families' financial stability was tenuous. True to form, throughout the pandemic Map has adapted to the needs of its students rather than requiring them to conform to a school's rigid system.

Innovation spotlight: Reshaping school to fit students' lives

As revealed above, Map's instructional model gave it uncommon dexterity for responding to the pandemic and maintaining its ability to serve students. So what are the features of that model?
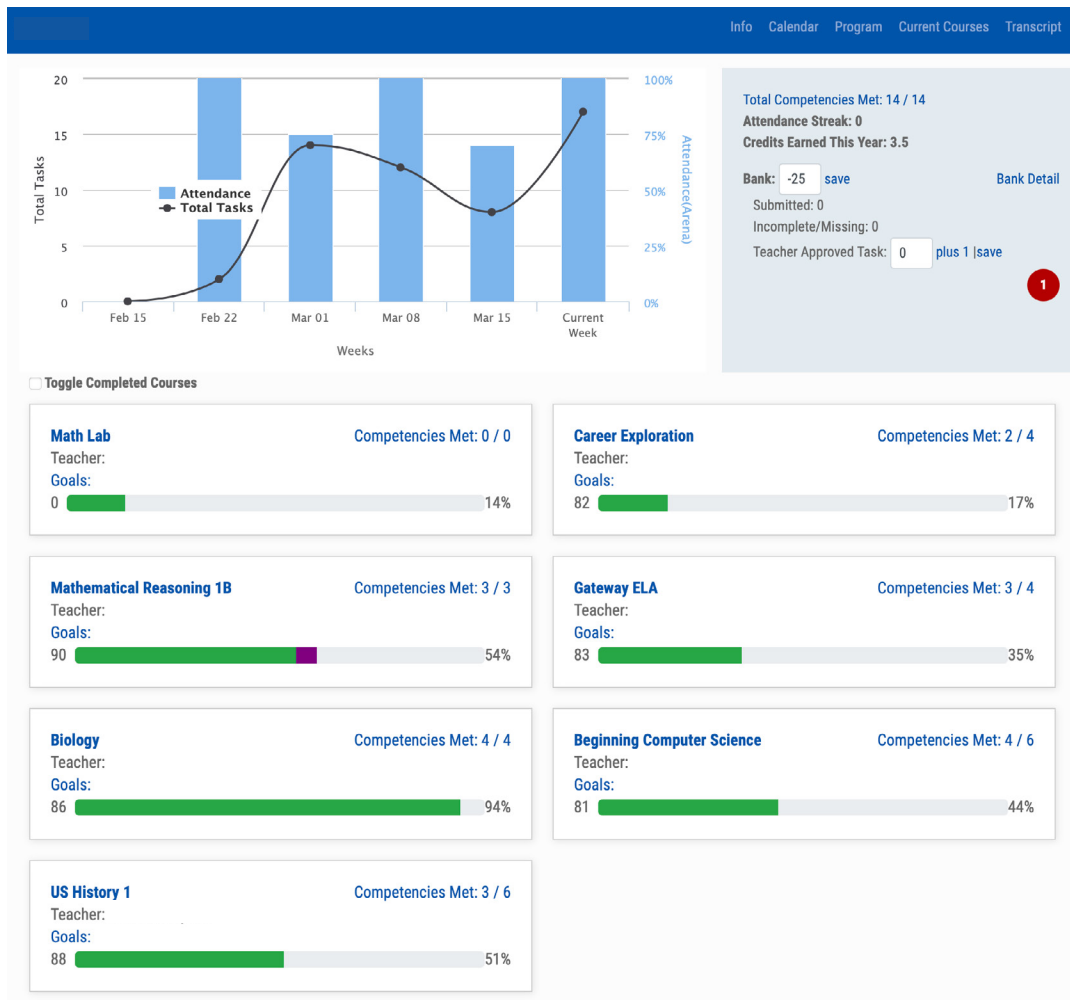
Competency-based learning

From the earliest phases of planning Map Academy, Babcock and Charpentier had a strong conviction that conventional A-F letter grades were a dysfunctional way to measure learning and certify progress. For example, if a student barely passes a course with a D-, it could mean the student mastered 60 percent of the course material or it could mean he mastered 20

percent, but a teacher gave him easy extra credit to pass him along. On the other hand, it could mean that a student had been earning As, but then had a medical or family emergency that caused him to miss the last 40 percent of the class. For all these reasons, letter grades are often poor measures of learning, especially for students who are behind or off track. As Babcock noted, "There's so many different variables that lead into that very subjective mathematical decision that says that a kid is going to pass or fail a class." To add to that problem, students who passed courses with Cs and Ds often lack the prerequisite knowledge and skills needed for their next course, further compounding their difficulties with school.

Map's solution to this problem is competency-based learning. When students log into Map's online system, they can see all the learning tasks required for each of their courses. As they complete those tasks, their teachers rate their work using common rubrics. Teachers also provide detailed feedback on tasks as students push toward mastery. As student Noah explained, "They will send work back to you for revision and give you help on it. But if you do something different, it's never considered wrong."

Map's competency-based learning system motivates students by making progress transparent. At any moment, students can see in Map's online platform exactly where they are at with mastering the competencies for each of their courses (see example below). Map's platform also displays graphs that associate attendance and task completion, thereby showing students "that the natural consequence of their effort is progress," Babcock said.

Competency-based learning helps Map ensure consistent and high expectations for students. As Babcock explained, their approach "is not about lowering the standards, or coming up with different standards for different kids. It is about customizing the experience of how students access that content in a way that meets them where they are and helps them get to where they're going." Students cannot fail at Map; they just continue working on competencies until they reach mastery.

Asynchronous learning

Interdependent with Map's competency-based grading approach is the second core tenet of its instructional model: asynchronous learning.

At first, asynchronous learning may seem antithetical to the aims of a school like Map, designed to serve at-risk students who have extra needs for intensive support. When many other schools made an emergency pivot to asynchronous learning at the beginning of the pandemic, their students' learning stalled.

Asynchronous learning is applied very differently at Map, however. In many other schools, day-to-day schedules are asynchronous, but school calendars stay fixed. Students still complete the same lessons in a given week and turn in assignments by common due dates, but they do this using independent learning materials with little support from teachers or classmates. In contrast, asynchronous learning at Map does not mean independent learning: during non-pandemic times Map students attend school in-person daily, with ready support from teachers. Rather, asynchronous learning at Map means students learn at their own pace—out of sync with classmates.

With asynchronous learning, a student's day at Map Academy resembles modern office work: spans of time for self-directed work interspersed with one-on-one meetings and group work. In Map's estimation, placing more onus on students to manage their time better prepares them for adult life. Student Mari explained, "There's a lot more focus on you just doing your work and getting it done then on the way you get it done or when you get it done, which a lot of students here really like."

Nonetheless, Map's students don't work in isolation; they are members of interdisciplinary learning "studios." Each studio typically has a team of five teachers with certifications in math, language arts, science, and humanities that serves approximately 50 students. Students work with their studio teachers in a range of flexible spaces throughout the building on an as-needed basis. These studios help foster relationships and community.

The key benefit of asynchronous learning at Map is that it eliminates failure. As Charpentier explained, "We created a model that allowed us to have students work at their own pace so that instead of failing at the end of the class, we could say, 'Maybe you just need a little bit more time to learn the material.'" As Babcock put it, "If at the end of the year, a student isn't finished with a course, it just waits for them."

Because so much of the responsibility for academic progress falls on students, asynchronous learning can be a risky proposition when working with students who have fallen off track. However at Map, if students don't spend their time on work that helps them progress, teachers work hard to help them re-engage. But there are no punitive consequences for students who are disengaged.

Ultimately, Map relies on students to see progress in their lives as the motivating force behind learning. And as Babcock pointed out, "If you allow for things to be self-paced, and you are believers in natural consequences, then you can always fall back on the result of effort is progress, and the result of lack of effort is lack of progress. . . . When students realize that effort leads to progress, it actually increases their intrinsic motivation pretty dramatically."

Blended learning

Underlying Map's competency-based and asynchronous learning approach is an enabling instructional modality: blended learning—integrating online learning into the educational experiences at brick-and-mortar schools. According to Babcock and Charpentier, it is the glue that holds Map's model together.

The school has an online library of high-quality, teacher-generated courses that students can access anytime and anywhere they have internet access. The online library frees up the bottleneck in conventional instruction: the requirement that students learn primarily through teacher-led group lessons that happen on a fixed pace and schedule.

This serves to shift the role of the teacher in a profound way. According to Map's co-lead of teaching and learning, Steve Sell, "We do more facilitating of learning than direct teaching. As I go through the day, I'm essentially setting a bunch of different appointments with students while also being responsive to student needs happening right in front of me." Before school starts each day, teachers log into the blended learning system to see where each of their students are at in their coursework and plan activities to support students' learning needs. Then, as students arrive at school and begin working on their various asynchronous courses, teachers check in with each of their students to, among other things, help set a daily agenda and goals. As the day progresses, teachers serve as facilitators in both planned and ad hoc ways, such as answering questions or pulling together a few students for a small-group lesson.

Synchronous courses

Map's asynchronous approach is not without tradeoffs. When students learn at their own pace—and primarily through resources and activities they access online—group learning opportunities are somewhat curtailed. Accordingly, in its second year Map began offering students the option to take some of their courses in a synchronous format. As Babcock explained, "We started the synchronous experiences because we wanted students to interact with each other, and dig into discussion and debate and all the things that you can only do when other students are at the same place as you are and talking about the same thing."

Synchronous courses also allow students and teachers to engage together in topics for which they may discover shared interests and passions. As Charpentier explained, "We want teachers to teach something that they're passionate about ... and hopefully, the students will gain some passion in what the teachers are passionate about, so that we can expand our students' horizons into things that they may not have known about before."

Nonetheless, Map's approach to synchronous courses still preserves its ability to adapt to the needs of students who often struggle with rigid attendance and pacing requirements. The courses are entirely optional, and students can take as few or as many synchronous courses as they deem appropriate. Second, if at any time a student falls behind or finds the synchronous format is not working for them, they can switch over to an asynchronous version of the course—either to catch up and ultimately rejoin their classmates, or to finish out the course asynchronously.

Supportive relationships

The technical details of Map's approaches—competency-based, asynchronous, and blended — are easily its most visible distinctions. But the real power in these approaches comes not from what they accomplish on their own, but from what they enable together: stronger relationships between students and educators.

Asynchronous learning means students' learning does not depend on their compliance with whole-group instructional plans. Thus, it breaks down one of the fundamental power dynamics in conventional instruction: the necessity for teachers to manage student behavior in order to maintain control of classroom activity. Blended learning means teachers don't carry the load of personally providing all content instruction—it expands teachers' capacity. The student-directed nature of Map's model allows students to own more of the responsibility for their academic progress. Therefore, teachers rely less on contrived extrinsic motivators and can focus on tapping into students' intrinsic motivation.

Even with these tectonic shifts in the nature of student-adult relationships, Map puts in place extra safeguards to ensure supportive relationships. Every student at Map has a "primary adult" who checks in one-on-one with them at the beginning and end of each day. Those relationships are key to allowing Map to identify and help students work through the individual issues that may be derailing their learning progress. As Sell explained, "We try to meet kids where they are. And that's what makes kids want to come each day. It makes them feel like they can open up if they need to, if there's difficult things going on in their life."

Students can feel the difference. One student, Sabrina, explained, "When I went to Map Academy the first time, I thought of it like a therapeutic school. . . . It's just very different from a regular school, and it just feels more comfortable to be in a nice little community and that all the teachers are really welcoming. . . . It was kind of like a home feeling. I guess they treat you like an adult and normal human beings. They don't just see you as a student, they see you as someone that is trying to learn and just needs help getting through high school."

Babcock pointed out that balancing relationships with high expectations can be challenging. "It's the hardest part of our work: that tension between care for the student and high expectations." Sometimes, sympathy and care for students can tempt educators to lower their expectations out of a desire to help remove barriers to success. But in the bigger scheme of things, Map knows that lowering its expectations ultimately decreases the likelihood that its students will be prepared for the opportunities and challenges beyond school. Map's competency-based system stands as a check and balance to this tendency—ensuring that students meet uniform academic standards in order to earn their diplomas.

As Babcock explained, "The heart of all of this is really about finding a way to pair high-quality personal relationships with high expectations. That's the capital upon which a school like ours runs. Relationships by themselves aren't enough, and high expectations aren't enough either. You can have all the high expectations in the world, and if you don't have the relationship, the kid will never meet them. And you can have all the positive relationships in the world. But if you don't have high expectations, a kid's never gonna grow."

Conclusion

Map's exceptional student population and its charter school status may make it a bit of an outlier in the broader K–12 landscape. Nonetheless, for schools interested in making their systems and structures more responsive to students' needs and interests, Map Academy offers a powerful example of what's possible. Educators who want to embark on this path might start by reflecting on questions like these:

1. What flexibility might schools create to support students who struggle to conform to the systems and processes of conventional instruction?

2. What would better foster students' sense that effort leads to progress in school?

3. What systems and structures can schools create that enable more caring and supportive relationships between students and staff?

4. How can schools ensure that every student's needs and circumstances are known and supported while also holding every student to high expectations?

About the Author

Thomas Arnett is a senior research fellow for the Clayton Christensen Institute. His work focuses on using the Theory of Disruptive Innovation to study innovative instructional models and their potential to scale student-centered learning in K–12 education. He also studies demand for innovative resources and practices across the K–12 education system using the Jobs to Be Done Theory.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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