

Rapid Response Transcript – Eva Moskowitz

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BOB SAFIAN: That's Eva Moskowitz, CEO of Success Academy, a much-watched charter-school network in New York City. In the U.S., we now face a patchwork of remote learning, in-person experiments, and hybrid models, with heightened fears that classrooms could become virus incubators.

All this has generated unprecedented back-to-school stress this fall, including for parents — and by extension, their employers.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Eva about this because, with Success Academy, Eva has scaled a high-achieving 45-school operation, by deploying unconventional and sometimes controversial methods.

She has an on-the-ground view of the risks, opportunities, and challenges of this moment. And she's not shy about what she thinks we all should do.

Let's listen in.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian and I'm here with Eva Moskowitz, founder and CEO of Success Academy, a charter school network that serves 20,000 kids in New York City. Eva's coming to us today from Manhattan as I ask my questions from my home in nearby Brooklyn. Eva, thanks for joining us.

MOSKOWITZ: Thanks for having me, Bob.

SAFIAN: So you initially hoped that in-person learning could resume right away this fall. That hasn't been possible in New York. How have the first few weeks of school gone? I know you went to three schools this morning.

MOSKOWITZ: It is going great. It is very difficult and challenging. If you can imagine, a kindergartner's first experience of school being on the little rectangular boxes is not the same as being in person. We're a kind of school where we like to hug the kids. We think of schools as building communities of learners, where kids are growing socially and emotionally, as well as academically, and really learning to become leaders at a very young age. Having to do that in two dimensions is certainly not our ideal of school.

Having said that, you got to make the best of the hand you're dealt and you've got to try and create the best hand you can given the circumstances. We were remote last spring. And at that time, everybody was saying, "There is no way the New York city school system is going to close. That's an impossibility." So at the time it looked like a very bold decision, although it is true: two days later, the whole system sort of shut down.

But I was at three schools this morning, three elementary schools. I saw kindergarten classes, first, second, third, and fourth grade. And it was remarkable. Kids were engaged in everything from learning phonics, to debating, read alouds and the meaning of books. They were doing mathematics, using a program called Kami. I was in a breakout room where the students were discussing a pretty challenging math problem. Yesterday I was at our high school where I saw AP art history, AP calculus, AP chemistry, statistics, biology, and there was real teaching and learning going on. And so while it's hard, it can be done.

SAFIAN: How is the 2.0, this experience that you're describing now, different from what you were doing in the spring?

MOSKOWITZ: There are many things we've learned since then. We pivoted with warp speed in the spring. I had been watching and following what was going on in Wuhan. And I remember the World Health Organization refused to call it a pandemic. Everything I was reading from epidemiologists suggested that it was a pandemic.

And I thought to myself, "Gosh, what are we going to do? It's not a question of if it comes to New York, it's more a question of when." But everybody seemed, from the president on down, not really worried about it. And maybe in retrospect, I should have planned even more because I was very worried about it. So 1.0 felt a little bit startup-y, we were trying things, some things worked, other things didn't work. And in order to be successful, I made the judgment that let's try and do fewer things really well rather than stand up our entire school design.

So the 2.0 is really everything. It's virtual field studies, it's art, music, chess, even dance. It is our discovery-oriented science five days a week in elementary school. And the length of the day is more similar to what it would be in real school. We also changed our platform. We were using BlueJeans because, for an office perspective that worked, but you couldn't see all the kids on the screen and you couldn't use the breakout rooms. And instructionally, that is much, much better.

SAFIAN: New York City public schools announced that they would delay their physical opening until September 21st. How do developments like that impact Success Academy? I know many of your schools are housed inside New York City public school buildings, but you operate independently.

MOSKOWITZ: Not everybody actually knows what a charter is and it's a little confusing if you grew up with one kind of school. So there are public district schools and public charter schools, and each state has a different set of laws and regulations governing that. They get different amounts of funding. Generally, the charters get significantly less funding than the districts.

In New York City, we tend to be co-located in underutilized space – we are publicly created, publicly funded, publicly regulated – but we're independent of the management and bureaucracy on the one hand and the labor union contracts on the other. And that gives us an enormous freedom – and I would argue – advantage, because we can actually make decisions working backwards from teaching and learning. And unfortunately, many districts are not high performance organizations, partly because they don't have the freedom to hire, the freedom to train, the freedom to develop, the freedom to let go.

It's very hard to create a high performance organization. They're also limited in doing things efficiently. Whereas we're always looking for the better, faster, cheaper way to do things so that we can invest more in children and teaching and learning. So not being part of that bureaucracy for most things is pretty helpful. Obviously, with the buildings we are dependent on this big tanker of a bureaucracy. And while I had planned to do hybrid – on campus and remote – at the sort of 11th hour, I couldn't get into my buildings.

And they issued more and more regulations about how it was going to work. They kept piling on guidance. And it's pretty typical of government and big bureaucracies that they issue the guidance the night before. One of the signature elements of a high performance organization, or Success in particular, is that we're planners. Government made that kind of challenging, by issuing a set of regulations at the last minute.

SAFIAN: So as you look to how the rest of this school year unfolds, is your decision about when you go to hybrid or when you start to use those collocated facilities dependent on the public schools?

MOSKOWITZ: I don't think that we can go back on campus until the end of the year. It is not at all clear that the buildings are ready. The regulatory framework is so onerous and difficult to implement that I actually think it would diminish the student experience and the teacher's ability to teach. We would spend so much time with staggered arrivals and dismissals. We wouldn't be able to do recess. We would have to contain the kids. That's not really possible in high school, because every kid has an individualized schedule. We will stay remote until the end of the calendar year. Then we will make a decision based on the public health considerations and the regulatory environment.

SAFIAN: There's always an element of stress to the back to school season for teachers, for parents, for students, always.

MOSKOWITZ: Yes.

SAFIAN: This year, particularly so. Is there anything specific that you've tried to do to address this added measure of stress that's around the community?

MOSKOWITZ: Well, I think there are a lot of things. I mean first of all, just our social and emotional learning component for our scholars is very, very robust. But I think one thing that contributes to the stress, and I'm a parent myself – I'm a mother of three, two of my kids are still school aged and they go to Success Academy. So, I'm pretty familiar with not knowing.

I mean, imagine you're in the district and the mayor is saying, "September 10th, school is going to start." Now it's not starting September 10th. We really try and make decisions with much more lead time. Doesn't mean we never have to pivot, but we've been incredibly transparent with our parents about not only what we're doing, but why we're doing it, so that parents are seeing behind the curtain a little bit about the why.

I think often bureaucracies just don't tell parents that, and so they're trying to figure out, "Why was such a decision made?" That breeds, in my experience, a lack of trust. It doesn't mean you have perfect trust if you tell parents why, because sometimes they

disagree with you. Reasonable people can disagree, but at least you've put forward upfront why you're making the decisions you are. I have found that that takes down the temperature pretty significantly, and the same is true for educators. Imagine being a teacher in the New York City school system and you get regulations. If you're a principal, hundred pages of regulations, that is really challenging. Everybody worked to make the plans, and then it's just upended.

We at Success are bringing our superintendents, bringing our principals, bringing our assistant principals, even teachers, into the conversations so that we are trial ballooning our ideas about whether we go left or right.

SAFIAN: You mentioned parents, and parents find themselves in the front lines in a different way in the remote learning, the distance learning environment. They're facing new burdens, they're feeling like they're having to be educators while they're also trying to hold down their own jobs. How do you approach what the parents' role is in this time?

MOSKOWITZ: Well, our remote learning is very, very different than what I see around the country, including New York City. Remote learning last spring in many districts was a phone call to the kid, or sending the kid worksheets, and then the parent felt an obligation to help their kid with the worksheet. That's not what we do at Success Academy. So, the burden is not on the parent to educate the child. We are doing that, and the child is pretty preoccupied for a full day. We are not expecting parents to become teachers. I think parents have enough on their plate, as a working mother myself. I don't appreciate a second and third job. I mean, obviously at the dinner table and on weekends there are parental obligations, but I don't think it's fair to put that all on the parents.

So, we are educating children the way we would if it were on campus. I was at a school this morning and the mother was on camera doing everything for her kid who was new, and the teacher in a very lovely way said, "Appreciate the help. I want to make sure that your child knows how to turn the mic on and off." This was a kindergartner. "Knows how to submit their math work so that we can all see it, all by himself. I have a great deal of confidence that he can do it. So, let's see. Let me walk your child through how to do it, and I think you're going to be surprised that he can do it."

Sure enough, little kid, he's barely five years old, did it and had a grin ear to ear that he is technologically savvy. I always joke that children are much more agile at technology. Kids can do this independently. So, every kindergartner has an email address now, and they are logging on by themselves, and they're ready to go.

SAFIAN: Your teachers are providing that IT role as opposed to expecting the parents to do it.

MOSKOWITZ: Absolutely, absolutely. The other thing to understand about our model is that while parents tend to see the classroom and the work that goes on in the classroom, behind that is tremendous intellectual preparation and leadership preparation. What happened in most districts is that nobody was in touch with the teachers. In New York City, they have no data on how many times teachers connected with students. We have attendance. We know exactly what the attendance rate is. Daily, it tends to be above 98%.

If a child doesn't show up on their Zoom, we call and say, "Is everything okay? Is your child sick?", which happens, particularly in the midst of a pandemic. But educational leaders are leading their faculty. There are grade team planning meetings. There are all faculty staff meetings. There are trainings that we do. That preparation behind the scenes is part of the secret of Success Academy's success.

SAFIAN: The population of your students, I think 93% families, children of color, these are often the families that have been hardest hit by COVID-19, both in terms of health risk, as well as economic risk, job losses. How has that impacted the way you operate your network and the choices that you're making?

MOSKOWITZ: I think it's 96%, a little higher than 93%, but also just the socioeconomics is important to understand. We're serving mostly poor children. We have a high percentage of special needs children. We have a high percentage of homeless children, English language learners. The list goes on.

We have had quite a lot of deaths from corona in between March and June. A lot of our parents and guardians have pretty severe health risks. And that's on top of even pre-COVID housing challenges, childcare challenges, et cetera.

It does require a tremendous empathy and flexibility, how do we make it work, but not be rigid around all the obligations and challenges that parents have. And we try and be loving and commonsensical. Maybe there's some fancy schmancy thing that we could be doing, but we have limited resources, and I think love and common sense will get you a very long way to making reasonable accommodations given the state of the world right now.

SAFIAN: You've also had to deal with an environment of rising social action and racial justice protests over the summer. I know you advocated at one point to transfer control of school safety away from the New York City Police Department. What's the role of an educational institution like Success Academy in that area?

MOSKOWITZ: We have a very strong anti-racist agenda. It's the work, right? Our goal is to provide young people with a pipeline to power through education. And we strongly

believe that education is the leading civil rights issue of our time and that we are in a unique position to diversify institutions of higher ed and the larger work world and empower young people to self-determination, which to me is the core work of anti-racism. We see ourselves in the center of that. We didn't have to change our agenda because of the external world. We were anti-racist from the day we opened. Now, that's not to say that there isn't more diversity, equity, and inclusion work that we can do, but at heart, our fundamental mission is anti-racist.

We have formed an inclusion council at the network to really look at workplace environment and to see what else we can do to be more inclusive. We have published our diversity stats. We've always cared about the diversity of our faculty. In fact, we're fairly unusual in that we surpassed the 50% mark of teachers of color when the rest of the nation is at about 18%, but people didn't know that we had done that and so we now publish our diversity stats.

We have a public-facing entity called the Robertson Center and we're hosting a series of conversations on race and education. We've stood up a curriculum advisory council to really bring a broader group of people into the debate about what we study and why we study it and how we can improve that.

I think we discovered in this heightened moment that actually, our own staff didn't realize how diverse our curriculum was, where if you're a seventh grade math teacher, you don't necessarily know what the seventh grade history curriculum is. And I think internally, we probably missed a step in making sure that math and science teachers actually know what the rigorous history and english curriculum is. And so we've taken a number of steps to give more visibility into what we do now, and from there, how we can improve it.

SAFIAN: Many of our listeners in their own businesses are trying to figure out how to improve the diversity of their talent. Do you have any advice for others about how to break through those thresholds?

MOSKOWITZ: I mean, it's really hard and we've worked at it. I wasn't always above 50%. Obviously reaching out to the historically black colleges and universities is one avenue. I think that really doing a lot of unconscious bias training so that people are not having preconceived notions of what excellence looks like. But also part of the problem is frankly the K to 12 and higher education lack of diversity. If you're a business and the powerful public and private universities have very little diversity, that is going to compound itself.

And so one piece of advice, I knew it's a long term strategy, but businesses need to care about K-12. The quality of K-12 sets the table for higher education. Higher education

can't be more diverse if we are not better educating young people. Kindergarten should be rigorous.

When I started Success Academy, and I said I was going to teach physics in kindergarten, everybody said, "You can't do that." And I said, "Watch me." You can teach aerodynamics, you can teach momentum. Kids are actually at the smartest and most agile, I find, the younger they are and we have to stop lowballing kids. And if you teach physics starting in kindergarten, and every year thereafter, kids are going to be able to do mechanical engineering in high school. And when they get to places like MIT or Carnegie Mellon, they're going to be able to handle those hardcore engineering courses. So I just think this country, in general, unfortunately, low balls kids, and particularly low balls Black and Brown kids.

SAFIAN: There's a theme at this moment that like kids are missing out because they're missing school, right? Where do you feel like this particular moment in COVID, like what the long term impact might be?

MOSKOWITZ: Well, I mean, educators, in general, we worry about learning loss. There's something called summer slide, and we worry about that, and it doesn't have to be just academic learning. It's, are children meaningfully engaged? You can learn a lot about life camping or hiking or doing nonacademic things, but you don't want your kid sitting, watching television all day, or playing video games all day. So there is learning that is lost over the summer. We certainly find even over the weekend, when kids come back on Monday, after a long weekend, they're just not as sharp as they were when they're continuously in school building upon the last lesson, building upon the last unit.

But I think this is more serious because it's 90 days and now you're looking at yet another school year. If all the kids were getting an excellent education and then we ran into COVID, I think you could take the attitude, "Well, okay, 80 days in a kid's 13 years, K to 12 education is not going to matter that much."

The problem is that children are often, in large urban district school systems, they're really warehoused, they're not learning that much. And you've got a deeply segregated school system, socioeconomically and racially and ethnically. So we have a real danger of becoming the educational haves and have nots, and I worry very seriously about that problem.

SAFIAN: Do you have any advice for business leaders who are struggling with the decision to reopen their offices? How to think about being remote?

MOSKOWITZ: I think there was a lot of fear that people wouldn't be productive, and it would be hard to manage. We haven't found that. In fact, we have found the opposite.

I'm a little worried about burnout because we're on these Zooms from morning, noon, till night. We have found, at Success Academy, that everybody is working super hard to deliver for kids and families. It's not a loss.

I do think it's a loss on the social and emotional side. Even for adults, it's not as fun to be on this little flat, two dimensional rectangle. And being able to see your colleagues and read the room and all of the social and emotional benefits, it's hard to do that sitting in your apartment all day long. So I think people are a little sadder and not able to engage, but I do think it points to more flexibility in the future.

And by the way, potentially for kids as well. We have kids in our high school who are commuting a pretty serious amount of time. Do you really want kids doing that? Is there another way that we could organize ourselves? So I'm a big fan of trying to make lemonade out of lemons. If something happens, how do we see where the opportunities are? Not just what we've lost, and I think businesses can think about it that way. How could we increase people's quality of life? If you've got workers who are commuting an hour a day, is that necessary? If not, don't make them do it.

SAFIAN: So what's at stake in this moment for Success Academy?

MOSKOWITZ: Oh there's so much at stake. I think being able to do this remote thing, I think if the teachers get discouraged, if the educational leaders get discouraged, if the parents get discouraged, if kids get discouraged, if they're not enjoying school and it's hard, I mean, we are doing our absolute best, but enjoying two dimensionality is hard. I think there will be disaffection, and given it's not only what's going on in school, but given the state of our country and the state of our society and inequality, and sometimes the lack of political leadership, or the lack of public health leadership.

I think people are dispirited, and we're a great country. We've got a lot going for us, and we've got to be optimistic that we can solve our problems. I think we are a little bit the tip of the sphere of that optimism. So if we don't succeed, I think people are going to get discouraged. So we see a moral responsibility, of course, to our kids and families, but it's really a civic responsibility. We've got to get it done in a joyful, empathetic manner because our kids and teachers and leaders represent hope for the country.

MOSKOWITZ: Well, Eva, I want to thank you for sharing your optimism, and your hope, and your passion, and your diligence with us today. Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

MOSKOWITZ: Thanks Bob, for having me.