

## RIGOR AND RELATIONSHIPS: STUDENT VOICE DRIVES CHANGE ACROSS SIMON YOUTH ACADEMIES

### ABOUT THE SIMON YOUTH FOUNDATION

Simon Youth Foundation (SYF) is a national nonprofit committed to helping students who are on the verge of dropping out of high school graduate and pursue post-secondary educational opportunities. SYF works toward this mission by partnering with public school districts to launch Simon Youth Academies primarily located in Simon malls. The Academies give students on the verge of dropping out the same education they would receive in a traditional classroom, but in a flexible environment that emphasizes one-on-one learning, personalized support, and small class sizes led by compassionate teachers. In addition, SYF supports its students in their pursuit of post-secondary opportunities through college counseling and its scholarship program.

### WHY STUDENT VOICE?

Student voice is a guiding pillar in the day-to-day operations and long-term planning as the foundation works alongside students who face challenging realities beyond the classroom. In the 2014-15 academic year, the foundation launched its first comprehensive student listening effort through YouthTruth. It now has a regular practice of gathering and acting on student feedback to inform strategy and programmatic changes at both the network and school level.



Headquartered in  
Indianapolis, IN

35 Simon Youth Academies

15 States

17,292 Graduates

24 Public School District  
Partners

90% Graduation rate

Over \$17 million in Simon  
Youth Scholarships to nearly  
5,000 students

*“The student is the reason we exist and what our purpose defines us to. If we can’t hear their voice or know what they want, we become a bunch of well-meaning people who are trying to do something to students and not for students.”*

— Dr. J. Michael Durnil, President and CEO

## STUDENT VOICE AT SIMON YOUTH ACADEMIES

Elevating student voice has long been an integral part of SYF's mission and the YouthTruth survey meaningfully accelerates the foundation's ability to use student voice to inform improvements.

"Through YouthTruth, students tell us what they need, what they're missing, what they're thinking," says Dr. J. Michael Durnil, president and CEO. "With this student insight, we become equipped with an immediate strategy or agenda. With the student input, we can go out and find additional resources and bring them to bear to our academies, to our districts, to our communities. With this data, we're able to better provide support to the most marginalized groups of students."



## NETWORK-WIDE CHANGES



### IMPLEMENTED TRAUMA-INFORMED INSTRUCTION

After gleaning insights about students' realities outside of school, the foundation shifted to a trauma-formed care approach. SYF now offers half- and full-day professional development workshops to staff and partners about supporting students who have experienced trauma. Through a partnership with Hope 4 The Wounded and its founder, Joe Hendershott, SYF will offer its educators the opportunity to complete the National Wounded Student Certificate Program, designed to provide educators and counselors with training to help their students succeed in school and in life. As part of SYF's Annual Pre-Conference, Joe will deliver his two-day training and certificate program to SYF principals, teachers and counselors.



### LAUNCHED GENDER INCLUSIVENESS TRAINING

Student trend data revealed an increase in the proportion of students who identified as a non-binary sex or gender between the 2014-15 and 2016-17 academic years. Equipped with this information about the shifting demographics in the population they serve, the SYF team shares national resources with teachers and is working to align programmatic content to better equip teaching staff to support students who identify as other than male or female.



### INCREASED EMPHASIS ON EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

After the first year of surveying, the foundation learned that serious thoughts about suicide were more common than previously thought and was able to respond. The foundation is focusing on helping staff and teachers respond effectively to student anxiety and mental health.

# SIMON YOUTH FOUNDATION uses feedback to create common language to bolster collaborative improvement

The foundation initially planned to use feedback to better understand and tell the stories of impact students' lives. However, what started as a communications effort quickly became a strategic tool for system-wide improvement.

Beyond articulating impact, SYF finds that YouthTruth data provides an easy way to communicate areas of success and growth to its partners across the country. It creates a common framework – beyond test scores and graduation rates, though equally as rigorous and linked to outcomes – to measure success and identify areas for improvement.

With the help of YouthTruth, the foundation regularly shares student feedback with districts, schools, staff, and even students. The foundation's many partners are then able to engage with the information gleaned from the survey as they collectively work to help students graduate from high school.

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## IN THE WORDS OF A PRINCIPAL

*“The students attend our Academies for a variety of reasons and I feel that their voices are important to hear as leaders striving to meet students' wide-ranging needs. YouthTruth helped me to have guided, specific discussions with my staff. I meet with staff weekly to discuss items of the week and specific student needs, but the survey helped me hone in on specific areas of need and guide discussions with my staff.”*

– Principal Sarah Graham of Simon Youth Academy at Rose Tree Media, PA



# SIMON YOUTH ACADEMY AT ROSE TREE MEDIA uses feedback to gauge and strengthen academic rigor

While the foundation uses data to inform broad practice, each Academy is able to dive into their local set of data. Simon Youth Academy at Rose Tree Media principal Sarah Graham was excited to use feedback in conversation with staff and students. Principal Graham comments, “I took notes as I went through the data and shared with my staff. I then shared and discussed appropriate data with students.”

Graham explored YouthTruth data with students about a number of themes, including data that showed an opportunity to strengthen student relationships. In small groups, students from the Simon Youth Academy hosted students from the local district high school for lunch and chats. To grow these relationships, the Academy began inviting students from the base school to have lunch.

Rose Tree Media staff were also eager to learn how students felt about academic rigor on campus. “We wanted to ensure that staff were being responsive and available to answer questions,” notes Graham. The team learned that students hoped to get more out of each day academically. Guided by the data, teachers began helping students set daily goals. Teachers found that students asked for help more after setting daily goals, and that students felt more prepared to work through problems and challenges in their assignments.



## ROSE TREE MEDIA DISTRICT PROFILE

*6 schools*

*Approximately 3,750 students*

*Located 15 miles west of Philadelphia in Media, Pennsylvania*

*K-12*

## Shared values at Simon Youth Academy at Rose Tree Media:

- Each child has unique learning needs.
- All students can learn and be successful.
- Success in school can be defined in multiple ways.
- Our success requires the collaborative support of the entire community.



# SIMON YOUTH ACADEMY AT CIRCLE CENTRE MALL uses feedback to strengthen relationships

The team at Simon Youth Academy at Circle Centre Mall learned through the YouthTruth data that they had an opportunity to strengthen relationships between teachers and students, as well as between peers. In response to the need, teachers and staff are enhancing their advisory program to create additional space for authentic interactions between staff and students. Staff-to-student advising is a key priority in the academy's strategic planning.

While there was still work to do when it came to how connected students felt to staff, the data also revealed bright spots to be celebrated. Students responded favorably to survey questions about whether they felt like they were a part of their school community, and whether they felt adults at their school were supportive.

"YouthTruth directs us and holds us accountable to what we say we're doing," says Teresa James, Coordinator at Simon Youth Academy at Circle Centre Mall.

- Graduation planning
- Post-graduation planning
- Accelerated online curriculum
- Career exploration
- Small classes
- State of the art classrooms
- Safe and secure learning environment
- Social services resources

## WHAT DOES THE SIMON YOUTH ACADEMY AT CIRCLE CENTRE MALL LOOK LIKE?



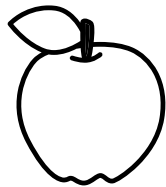
James considers reflecting on feedback to be part of the job. "I am the school leader, so I revisited the data as we were finishing up the year, to get insight into things we had done well, thing to improve upon, and begin some of the planning processes with my staff for next year."

James also feels that student feedback is a valuable way to gain support from shareholders like Circle Centre's community advisory council. "The things we are able to do for students sometimes comes from the support we get," she says, referring to the Academy's advisory council, "[The data] gave people even more of a reason to want to support us."



**ABOUT J. MICHAEL DURNIL, Ph.D.**  
President and CEO, Simon Youth Foundation

Originally from Decatur, Illinois, Durnil took the helm at SYF in 2010. A longtime educator, his professional career includes experience as a university professor and administrator, including more than 15 years at Roosevelt University, where he ultimately served as CEO of the Schaumburg Campus. Upon leaving higher education, Durnil served as Senior Vice President and later Interim President at GLAAD. He holds Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy studies from Loyola University-Chicago, master’s and bachelor’s degrees from Illinois State University, and a post-doctoral certificate in Educational Management from Harvard University. Durnil was named a Fellow of the American Council on Education in 2004.



**ABOUT SARAH GRAHAM**  
Former Principal, Simon Youth Academy at Rose Tree Media

Sarah Graham currently serves as the Assistant Principal of West Chester East High School. She formerly served as the Principal of Simon Youth Academy at Rose Tree Media, prior to which she worked as a school counselor and a special education teacher. She has a Master’s Degree from Virginia Tech and a Bachelor’s Degree from Penn State.






**ABOUT TERESA JAMES**  
Former Coordinator, Simon Youth Academy at Circle Centre Mall

Teresa James served as the program coordinator of Simon Youth Academy at Circle Centre Mall from 2015, when it welcomed its first students, to 2018. James has leveraged her resources and relationships within the community to encourage personal development for her students both in and out of the classroom. Examples of this include securing YMCA memberships for all students and staff and providing weekly workout opportunities; partnering with The Orchard School to participate in team building exercises at the school’s Challenge Course, and instituting a Restorative Practices philosophy to promote positive communication and conflict resolution. James is now an Assistant Principal at Lawrence Central High School in Lawrence, Indiana.


**ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH**

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder perception to help educators accelerate improvements. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with school districts, states, and educational organizations to enhance learning for all students. For a tour of our interactive, online reports, sign up to join a webinar here: [www.youthtruthsurvey.org/getstarted/#webinar](http://www.youthtruthsurvey.org/getstarted/#webinar).

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