

K-12 Partnership Report

Simon Youth Foundation

It almost sounds like something you'd hear from a standup comedian - "if kids are skipping school and hanging out at the mall, why not put a school there?" But for Simon Property Group, it was a serious idea that made imminent sense—and over the years they've changed thousands of lives by acting on it.

Simon Property Group is an S&P 500 company and the largest real estate company in the country. They currently own or hold an interest in 386 properties in North America, Europe and Asia, including some of the most prominent mall properties in America. While the company had always been active in the communities in which they operate, they made a focused commitment to education in 1998, inspired by the grassroots efforts of some Simon mall employees seeking to make a difference in the education of at-risk youth.

After seeing the impact of a couple of local programs on reaching youth through mall-driven initiatives, five individuals at Simon Property Group came together to see how they could develop a coordinated, national approach to serving this population. Working nights and weekends, they developed a strategy to leverage unused mall space to house satellite public schools and to then provide those schools with enhanced support. The Simon Youth Foundation (SYF) was created to launch and manage this initiative.

After starting in 1998 with initial locations at Rolling Oaks Mall in San Antonio and Century III Mall in Pittsburgh, SYF currently serves more than 2,500 students through 24 Education Resource Centers (ERCs) located in 11 states, and last year gave out \$1.4 million in scholarships to ERC graduates.

The Public/Private Partnership Model

It all starts with a commitment to make mall space available to local schools interested in setting up a small satellite school to serve students at risk of dropping out. Simon Youth Foundation makes the space available for free to its partner districts, and commits to spending between \$250,000 to \$350,000 to build out the space to make it an appropriate learning environment. Beyond that, SYF also agrees to refresh each site on a five-year schedule (new paint, carpet, etc.), or possibly more often if a visual inspection indicates that there is a need.

School districts are responsible for paying utility expenses, which are generally available at a lower rate given the volume discounts available to a large site such as a mall. District partners are also responsible for any equipment needed at the school, such as desks and computers, though SYF does look for opportunities to contribute resources in those areas when feasible.

Each ERC is staffed completely by the district, including administrators, teachers, counselors and other support personnel. While SYF does not cover the costs

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Where:

Nationwide; currently 24 sites in 11 states

Partner(s):

Simon Youth Foundation, created by Simon Property Group, with school districts across the country. Secondary partners include CVS Pharmacy, numerous postsecondary institutions, and retailers within Simon malls

Challenge:

Helping teens at risk of dropping out of high school to stay in school, earn a high school diploma (not a GED), and pursue postsecondary opportunities

Solution:

Take advantage of empty space in company-owned malls to house satellite schools. Partnering districts provide teachers and equipment and pay utilities; SYF covers rent, builds out the site to make it appropriate for school use, facilitates partnerships with other organizations, provides professional development opportunities, and offers scholarship opportunities to students who graduate from the ERCs

Partner Roles:

Partners like CVS and local retailers offer internship and job shadowing opportunities; postsecondary institutions can match scholarships and help to highlight postsecondary opportunities open to graduating students

Outcomes:

Ninety-one percent of entering seniors graduated; 60% of those went on to some kind of postsecondary institution. Since its founding, SYF has served 14,000 at risk students, 5,000 of whom have graduated from ERCs.

of personnel, it does support staff with professional development opportunities, including hosting them at an annual meeting, where teachers and administrators can share thoughts and ideas, and receive training on working with target populations. The Foundation also gathers and disseminates appropriate research to staff members throughout the year. SYF also offers \$2,000 each year to each ERC as an “enhancement grant,” which provides them the extra funding they need for discretionary purchases such as field trips, extra curricular materials, recognition ceremonies and rewards for achieving students, and other types of initiatives not covered through regular funding channels.

Because the Simon Youth Foundation wishes to strongly emphasize the importance of postsecondary education to this at-risk population, it has made a substantial commitment to providing scholarships and planning assistance to ERC students. Depending on the type of postsecondary education being pursued, SYF will make available from \$1,500 per year for four years for part-time enrollment at a community college to \$7,000 per year for four years for full-time enrollment at a four-year institution. These scholarships, ranging in value over four years from \$6,000 to \$28,000, act as a powerful incentive to students who think that college may not be possible due to financial limitations.

The Foundation is also experimenting with offering a Cost Of College Account (COCA) which provides an additional \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year (again, depending on the type of postsecondary opportunities chosen) to help with the cost of books and other incidentals. Students receiving a COCA are therefore eligible to receive from \$10,000 to \$36,000 in total support from SYF.

In terms of funding all of this work—scholarships, professional development, and the ERCs themselves—the Foundation relies on several sources of support. Simon Property Group is a key supporter, and SYF has also benefited from the personal support of several members of the Simon family, both in terms of financial support and a commitment of time (Deborah Simon has served as chair of SYF since its launch). Vendors, contractors, and others have been supportive, and the Foundation also collects revenues at its properties through fountains, penny drops, donations of unused balances on gift cards, and various fundraising events. To avoid any conflicts of interest, SYF avoids soliciting support from its retail tenants.

The Value of Partnerships

In addition to its partnership with school districts to establish and support the ERCs, the Foundation has been active in developing other national and local partnerships to serve ERC students. The primary goal with these partners: provide at-risk students with exposure to work and to college so they understand, and can pursue,

opportunities with both.

One such relationship involves CVS Pharmacy’s Pathway to Pharmacy program, which is gradually being rolled out to two additional ERCs each year. Students have an opportunity to take a paid internship at CVS sites near their schools and learn firsthand about

Education Resource Center Locations

Over the past 10 years, Simon Youth Foundation has launched 24 Education Resource Centers in 11 states. They include:

Arizona

- Metrocenter ERC, Phoenix

California

- The Shops @ Mission Viejo ERC, Mission Viejo
- Westminster Mall, Community Day School, Westminster

Florida

- Indian River Commons ERC, Vero Beach
- Port Charlotte Town Center ERC, Port Charlotte
- The Terrace at The Florida Mall ERC, Orlando

Indiana

- Clark Pleasant Academy, Whiteland
- Edinburgh Premium Outlets ERC, Edinburgh
- Lafayette Square, Pacers Academy High School, Indianapolis
- Union Station, Pacers Academy Middle School, Indianapolis
- University Park Mall, Byrkit High School, Mishawaka
- Washington Square ERC, Indianapolis

Kansas

- Towne East Square ERC, Wichita
- Towne West Square ERC, Wichita
- Workforce Learning Center, Wichita

Louisiana

- Prien Lake Male ERC, Lake Charles

Ohio

- Independence Center ERC, Independence
- Richmond Town Square, North Coast Academy, Cleveland
- Southern Park Mall, Mahoning County Schools ERC, Youngstown

Pennsylvania

- Century III Mall, Phase 4 Learning Center Inc., West Mifflin
- Granite Run Mall ERC, Media

Texas

- Rolling Oaks Mall, Judson Learning Academy, San Antonio
- Sunland Park Mall ERC, El Paso

Washington

- Northgate Mall, Mall Academy/Middle College High School, Seattle

pharmacy careers. And, while SYF does not request funding from retail tenants, it has developed a number of internship and job shadowing initiatives with them, giving students additional opportunities to explore the world of work.

In addition to these workforce awareness and exploration programs, SYF also develops partnerships with postsecondary institutions. Some match SYF scholarships, making it particularly attractive for students to attend, and some offer dual credit opportunities for certain courses that students take at school.

One particularly interesting partnership has been developed at the ERC in Vero Beach, where students participate in a combination dual-credit/job-shadowing program. The ERC, which just opened in 2007, has partnered with Indian River State College to offer dual credit coursework in a marketing class. For the practicum component of the course, students work with the host mall's marketing staff, beginning with work on windows, displays, and advertising, and later moving into serving at hospitality booths and other roles.

To further help students make the transition to higher education, SYF holds Summits at each ERC, where students and their parents can learn about Foundation scholarships and other types of financial aid available from various sources. SYF often partners with local postsecondary institutions who can assist with aid discussions, transition issues and more.

Recruiting New Sites

Initially, the Foundation worked with mall managers to identify targeted communities, and would initiate contact with districts to explain what sort of support it could provide; over time it built an array of materials, including a DVD, that explained what SYF was doing and what kind of impact it could make. Now, rather than recruiting new sites, the Foundation is receiving several inquiries each month, the majority coming in directly

from its website. It appears that the program's success has raised its visibility, attracting more opportunities.

Outcomes to Date

SYF's board of directors ensures that the Foundation is accomplishing its objectives, and in 2005 engaged the Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) to evaluate its work. CEEP reported finding overwhelmingly positive results in its study.

SYF's internal tracking tells a powerful story as well:

- For students who make it to the senior year, 91% graduate with a high school degree.
- The ten-year cumulative average percentage of seniors graduating is 90%.
- More than 14,000 students have been served since the program's founding, and more than 5,000 have graduated. (Note that many students transfer back to their home schools prior to senior year.)
- Sixty percent of graduates go on to some kind of postsecondary learning program.

The results have been particularly impressive in light of the fact that ERCs are intended to serve students who were on the verge of dropping out altogether.

The Future

Despite current economic circumstances, the Simon Youth Foundation's goal is unchanged: to open between two and four new ERCs each year through 2012. SYF is looking for efficiencies, such as selecting sites that need less investment in building out the space, but its plans to reach its goals regardless.

Resource Links

Simon Youth Foundation
www.syf.org