



Leaders of the Katy community cut the ribbon for the grand opening

Katy Mills Classroom

Simon Youth Academy is helping decrease Katy ISD's already low dropout rate by offering at-risk high school students a familiar place to complete their diploma

Written by Leigh Ann Mitchell | Photography by Dave Rossman

Simon Youth Academy is a non-tuition school for youth who are in jeopardy of dropping out of high school. There are currently 29 locations across 12 states and the Katy Mills Mall branch is under the direct charge of Katy ISD.

Built for Support

According to Jay Kenworthy, the Simon Youth Foundation (SYF) communications director, the academy was originally started by employees of the Simon Property Group when they were looking for ways to support their local community. "They realized that teenagers tended to hang out at the mall, even when they should've been in school," Kenworthy explains. "In talking to local school leaders, SYF realized schools often lack the space and the financial resources to create programs targeting these potential drop outs." The founders of SYF partnered with public school

districts in order to help provide the resources they needed to reach these at-risk students. Since Katy Mills Mall is a large shopping facility nestled within the Katy community, it seemed natural for the academy to be placed there.

Bringing it All Together

Several deciding factors in opening the academy in Katy were determined. SYF needed a public school district that was dedicated in addressing at-risk student needs and one that employed staff that was also committed to their success. Another factor was location. A local shopping mall with available space was a must. Lastly, the academy needed full support from the local community. "From the moment we entered Katy, we've found the remarkable support from all members of the community. Katy has become an ideal city for us," smiles Kenworthy.

The SYF provides ongoing services to their schools. Teachers receive special training to help guide them throughout the school year and students are provided with unique career and civic opportunities. Annual enhancement grants are also offered and scholarships worth up to \$40,000 are available to graduates.

Created for Flexibility

"The Academy students are those who dropped out from a Katy ISD high school campus within the last school year or this current school year," explains Heather DeVries, coordinator for Simon Youth Academy in Katy Mills.

The open-concept classroom setting provides a great learning space for individual and whole-group learning. "Teachers utilize technology via Eno boards, iPads, and laptops to engage students and facilitate learning," explains DeVries. All of the teachers are from Katy ISD and have been trained on how to engage and teach students in this type of setting.

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Flexible class scheduling allows students the opportunity to attend school and take care of out of classroom responsibilities. "Students have the option to attend school either in the morning from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. or from 12 to 4:30 p.m., which allows for a modified school day," DeVries details. "Students are also offered lunch every day from 12 to 12:30 p.m. Potential students will be referred to the Simon Youth Academy via the district's protocols for dropout recovery."

The Katy Community Creates Success

Support from the Katy community is vital. Anyone can help by making donations on the SYF website. Any company or

organization who would like to sponsor the Academy can contact staff to receive details about becoming a sponsor. Academies have a Community Advocacy Council (CAC). "The CAC is a team of local community leaders who are dedicated to the long-term success of the Academy and the students who attend," explains Kenworthy. The council doesn't have any official authority or charge in the operations of the academy, but serves more as a support or advisory board. They make sure that the Academy, the teachers, and students have all the resources they need to run successfully.

Simon Youth Academy has partnered with Katy ISD to help prevent students from dropping out of high school. The team has utilized Katy Mills Mall to provide space, flexibility, and dedicated staff to educate teens so that they meet their graduation requirements and see them succeed. **KM**

LEIGH ANN MITCHELL is a graduate of Texas State University and is a great supporter of education.

What is Simon Youth Academy?

- ▶ A non-profit program that helps students on the verge of dropping out stay in school and complete their diplomas.
- ▶ They have 29 academies in 12 states and partner with local school districts to offer small, flexible classes at the mall.
- ▶ Simon Youth maintains a 90% graduation rate at its academies and has awarded nearly \$16 million in scholarships.



Dr. Hindt, Rebecca Fox, Gregg Goodman, and DJ. Michael Durnil



Community members discuss the new Academy

