



## IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. J. MICHAEL DURNIL, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF SIMON YOUTH FOUNDATION

YouthTruth sat down with Simon Youth Foundation (SYF) President and CEO Dr. J. Michael Durnil to talk about practices of feedback and the role of student voice for both foundation effectiveness and school improvement.

Headquartered in Indianapolis, IN, SYF champions a national network of Simon Youth Academies built in partnership with districts and public schools that strive to make learning accessible to students who may struggle in a traditional classroom.

Dr. Durnil speaks to the foundation’s efforts to maintain cultures of improvement and transparency, and articulates the value SYF has found in engaging with stakeholder feedback.



J. Michael Durnil, Ph.D.,  
President and CEO, Simon  
Youth Foundation



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I literally ran away and joined the circus, and worked for the entertainment industry for a couple of years. There, I worked with others interested in social justice and advocacy, but did not feel connected enough to what I really wanted to do. It was around that time that I was given the opportunity to join the Simon Youth Foundation.

**YouthTruth:** Can you tell me a little bit about how you found your way to the Simon Youth Foundation?

**J. Michael Durnil:** It’s great to look back on your career and make sense out of it. Now seven years after joining SYF, I can easily say my prior experiences influenced my journey here. I was in student services in higher education, where I spent most of my professional career. I eventually retired from the university setting after serving as campus president of Roosevelt University in Chicago.

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My personal pathway is not very different than a lot of our students. I’m a first-generation college student. My father dropped out of school in the 8th grade to help his family during World War II, and my mother graduated high school, but that’s as far as she got. I grew up in a family in which education was important. But I did not

necessarily have the role models or the background. All of that adds up to who I am today, and why I'm here at Simon Youth. I wouldn't have gotten here if not for the action and activity of education of itself.

**YT: In what ways does stakeholder voice matter to you?**

**JMD:** Social justice has been the overarching theme in my personal career. Student advocacy at its highest level is a form of social justice. My own research agenda has circled around issues of cultural advocacy.

Student voice matters to me because the student is our customer. 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.

**YT: How does stakeholder voice matter to staff and leaders at SYF?**

**JMD:** As a foundation, we sit in a unique space within the education community, the corporate world, and the philanthropic sector. That's a very sacred space. And we have to bring something unique to the table. We know the work of the foundation is to engage the disenfranchised. The students who we work with are often on the margins, and it is so critical to hear what they need and make sure that we can advocate for what they need. Listening to each student helps us fulfill our mission of reaching students where they are and help them across that graduation stage.

**YT: What aspects of your work at the foundation have been informed by student feedback?**

**JMD:** We measured everything in higher education, sometimes twice. But the foundation had not really done comprehensive non-academic measurement. That sets up bizarre relationship with a partner district, so I was hard pressed to find something that would help us articulate the work that we were doing. That's when we stumbled upon YouthTruth. When we found YouthTruth, I was thrilled to find a research-based survey with a national comparative dataset that could measure the other stuff beyond graduation rates. Now, gathering and acting on student feedback are a constant for us.

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This data helps us communicate our impact with our donors, our community partners, our school district partners, our teachers, and ultimately, with our students. The YouthTruth survey has given us a common language to talk about what makes us unique, what are the outcomes of the work we do, where the donor dollars go, and how those investments impact students' lives directly.

**YT: How does feedback data — and that common language of student feedback — inform the SYF mission, strategy planning, and day-to-day work in the Academies?**

**JMD:** In response to the data, we've taken a very deliberate two-pronged approach. There is the roll-up of all of our survey data across the academies throughout the country that informs our work at the highest level. YouthTruth also creates reports representing a Academy-specific data that is used by Academies and that we

share with our partner districts. By participating in YouthTruth, we bring new and rich data to districts that adds value to our partnership. The big themes that the survey measures are things like student engagement, academic rigor, school culture, or peer relationships and belonging — these are very identifiable and help us create that common language. I can then sit in front of my board, or a donor, a partner superintendent, and talk about where we're above the national norm, where we're below, why we're below, and what that tells us. YouthTruth then becomes a gateway for us to explore new opportunities.

**YT: What have you seen in the data, and what did you change as a result?**

**JMD:** You know, I keep our YouthTruth data in a binder on my desk. I'm constantly engaging with our data and finding inspiration to strategically bring curricular and programmatic resources to our teachers. There are elements of insight from our YouthTruth data that come up every time I address a group. In fact, the data came up in a staff meeting today in the context of reflecting on how we're delivering services.

We've definitely seen some bright spots. I have been thrilled to share about school culture ratings; in SYF Academies, students rate their experience of school culture near the 90th percentile. Students in are telling us that their experience of respect and fairness at the Academies is higher than almost 90 percent of students at other high schools across the country!

School culture is common vernacular that people understand. YouthTruth gives us a way to talk with a wide range of people, including our students, about what it's like in our Academies.

YouthTruth has also informed the agenda for strategic and tactical changes. With help from

YouthTruth's partnership team, we examined responses across themes to create an agenda of resources to provide to our teachers and students. We saw resource needs around socio-emotional learning (SEL), attempted suicide, mental health, and student anxiety. With this data, we were able to bring together national resources to help our teachers.

Through YouthTruth, students tell us what they need, what they're missing, what they're thinking. With this student insight, I become equipped with an immediate strategy or agenda. With the student input, I can go out and find additional resources and bring them to bear to our academies, to our districts, to our communities.

For example, between 2015 and 2017, we saw an increase in the proportion of students who identify as a non-binary sex or gender. Equipped with this information about our shifting demographics, we immediately started looking for quality gender inclusiveness resources to share with our teachers.

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Also, the reason we implemented trauma-informed care was also because of our YouthTruth results. With the issues we saw, I had to find some high quality content to deliver. That's how our relationship started with Joe Hendershott and Hope 4 the Wounded. This year, at our preconference, Joe came in and did

a certification for teachers to understand trauma informed care as an education model. We've also taken Joe as an expert in residence — as we've onboarded new schools, we've offered professional development with Joe as an incredible resource to the partner districts.

**YT: What advice do you have for other leaders — in education or philanthropy — interested in gathering feedback from students or stakeholders?**

**JMD:** Get the feedback and use it. People help to support what they create. We are a national organization doing work in local communities. When we go into new communities, there is a period of questioning about who we are, why are we there, and what do you we to do. We try to be really sensitive that we don't go in waving our brand flags.

YouthTruth data takes my bias out of the equation. I have this conversation with philanthropic friends and education leaders often — we have to understand our biases. YouthTruth allows the foundation to get its “bias” from students instead.

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My advice is to get quality feedback then connect that feedback with other data sources to tackle the big issues in front of you. Or use the feedback to identify emerging issues and get out ahead of them.

**YT: What else?**

**JMD:** So, I think I want to close by sharing that I am continuously surprised by the meaningful unintended outcomes of having YouthTruth

data. We initially signed up to use YouthTruth to validate our investments. I wanted to be able to turn to my board and say: I have data that proves your dollars are going to good use. That's now probably reason number twenty in the list of benefits that the SYF/YT partnership brings. Now, our first priority is to use the feedback we gather through the YouthTruth survey to better serve our students and meet their needs.

YouthTruth allows us to better support groups of students who are often the most marginalized. The data amplifies the voices and needs of students who want to do well and for whom there is limited support. Hearing their voices directly produces a really easy roadmap to say where we have opportunities to improve the experiences for these kids. The key is to listen and learn, and to let student know you've heard them. ■



#### ABOUT SIMON YOUTH FOUNDATION

In partnership with local public school districts, SYF builds high schools called Simon Youth Academies, through which students at risk of dropping out receive the personalized support needed to earn their diplomas. Primarily located in Simon Malls, Simon Youth Academies make learning accessible to students who struggle to connect with material in a traditional classroom or school because of homelessness, bullying, serious illness, parenthood, supporting their families, or other challenging personal circumstances. Since its inception, SYF has maintained a 90% graduation rate at its 35 Simon Youth Academies in 15 states, helping more than 17,000 students graduate

#### 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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