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PEABODY

Peabody Learning Academy holds second commencement celebration

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Ryan Mooney photos

By Ryan Mooney, Globe Correspondent

Held in a mall on a weekday morning, it was a bit unconventional, but it certainly looked and felt like a graduation.

There were balloons, caps with tassels, gowns, and tears in the eyes of proud parents, grandparents, and siblings.

A sense of accomplishment hung in the air as passerby glanced at the 22 students sitting atop a makeshift stage in front of Macy's, between Talbots and J Crew, just a stone's throw from the pretzel stand.

These are students who are now - with the help of the Peabody Learning Academy - receiving official diplomas from the Peabody public school system. Students who were almost lost, so disillusioned with public education that many of them were inching toward dropping out entirely.

"The Peabody Learning Academy has helped some students who have had some troubles, some learning challenges," Peabody Mayor Ted Bettencourt said before the ceremony. "It's helped out a tremendous amount of kids that otherwise may have slipped through the cracks."



Peabody Mayor Edward Bettencourt addresses Peabody learning Academy's 22 graduating students and their families. Seated on the floor from left to right are former Mayor Michael Bonfanti, Peabody High Principal Ed Sapienza, and interim Superintendent Herb Levine.

The Peabody Learning Academy provides a computer-based alternative to the conventional routine of school. Students still attend class every day -- albeit in a 4,000-square-foot room at the Northshore Mall -- and complete the Peabody High School curriculum, but they do so at their own pace, using the NOVANet software program.

Because they complete the same curriculum as their peers at the high school, they receive a real diploma instead of a GED. The program is unorthodox, but it's not the first of its kind. The Simon Youth Foundation - a Simon Property Group charity - supports 23 academies in 13 states, mostly within Simon Malls such as Northshore.

"The whole idea here is to get them to make up coursework, and to be able to pass MCAS, so that they can get a bonafide Peabody High School diploma," said Mark Whiting, general manager of the Northshore Mall.

While attending PLA, students are allowed to take elective courses and play sports at Peabody High, and can even attend the school's commencement ceremony. The school, which opened for the 2010-11 school year, graduated eight students from its inaugural class, seven of who remain enrolled in college.



PLA Student of the Year Joanna Bolanos received a Simon Youth Foundation scholarships worth \$6,000.

Director Seith Bedard and his two instructors -- Raina Siladi and Sarah Murray - - work closely with public school administrators and the Simon Youth Foundation to make it all possible. The Risk and Insurance Management Society contributed a third of the building costs to construct the classroom, which could expand in the near future.

Interim Superintendent Herb Levine was on hand to speak, as was Peabody High Principal Ed Sapienza. SYF and Burton's Grill -- a restaurant in the mall that helps raise funds for the program -- awarded scholarships to eight students.

"You guys have made a series of good choices," Levine said. "I urge you, all of you, to continue to make the right choices in your lives ... you've shown that you will do so already, I know that you will do so in the future. Congratulations, you've worked very hard, we're very proud of you. Congratulations."

"Be very proud of your accomplishments, use this achievement as a launching point towards a successful future," Sapienza said. "Good luck graduates, congratulations parents ... and I want to leave by saying one thing to everyone here: Always be proud to be a Tanner."