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Taking WINGS to new heights



Latavia Fields (from left), Jordan Young, Ericka Grant and Anntwanique Heyward watch ants in an experiment during the James Simons Elementary School WINGS after-school program. BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

Academic-social after-school program expands; subject of university study

BY DIETTE COURRÉGE
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The sidewalk buzzed with excitement as nine elementary school children watched ants swarm food they'd placed there.

They had predicted which pieces would attract the most ants, and they counted and chattered while their experiment unfolded. The activity covered science material required by the state, but it also reinforced another concept: how to have a positive response to a positive situation.

The double-punch of academic plus social and emotional instruction is one reason this after-school program stands out. WINGS for Kids is one of only a handful of programs in the country that focuses on social and emotional education.

"What makes WINGS doubly unique is the setting in which we deliver it — after school," said

Ginny Deerin, the nonprofit's founder and CEO. "It's wonderful because you're meeting two important needs — giving kids an important part of their education and giving kids a safe place to be after school every day."

It's a busy and transitional juncture for the organization that's celebrating its 15th anniversary next year. Deerin plans to step down from her role as CEO in January, and Bridget Laird, who's been with the group for 12 years, will take on Deerin's responsibilities.

The nonprofit also has expanded its reach in Charleston by adding a fourth school to its roster this year. It serves about 450 students, which is a 291 percent increase from its enrollment three years ago.

And because of its reputation, the University of Virginia is using

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What is WINGS?

▶ WINGS for Kids is the only educational nationwide nonprofit of its kind — one that focuses on teaching social and emotional skills to kindergarten through sixth-graders in an after-school setting.

▶ Since it began in 1996, WINGS has served more than 3,100 area children.

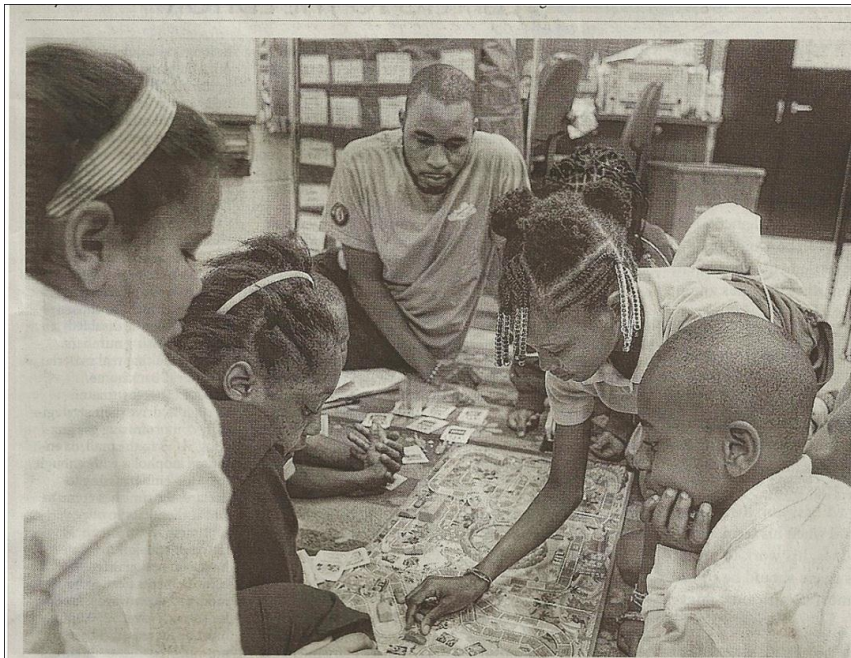
▶ Each WINGS participant receives 130 hours of homework help each year.

▶ WINGS is designed to teach 30 social and emotional learning skills that fall under five core objectives — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

▶ Ninety-six percent of WINGS kids have increased their standardized test scores.

▶ Ninety-eight percent of WINGS kids have received average or better attendance grades in school.

— Source: WINGS for Kids



James Simons Elementary School third-grader Zamani Lyde (center) moves her car up a few spaces as she and other students in her group play the board game "Life" with WINGS Leader Raymond Harris. BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

Taking WINGS to new heights

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WINGS kids in a study aimed at finding some answers on how to close the achievement gap.

New leadership

Deerin, a former marketing and fundraising executive, launched WINGS in 1996 as a summer camp to develop students' social and emotional skills. Although the camp evolved and grew into an after-school program, Deerin's leadership remained a constant.

She keeps up with national research on nonprofits, and she said there's a consensus on the importance of replacing an organization's founder at the right time. Deerin told her group's governing board three years ago that she thought it was about that time, and the board created a succession committee to work through that process. She compared her feelings now to that of parents watching their children leave home.

"I'm very proud and very joyful about it," she said. "It feels good to be doing it right and doing something good for the organization. The love is not going anywhere — WINGS always will be an enormous part of my life, but it's nice to be able to let go."

The board named Laird, the group's executive director, as Deerin's successor, and Laird said she feels good about where

the organization is and what's to come.

"This is our strongest time ever," she said. "(Deerin) would not be leaving if she didn't think we were in a good spot."

Expansion

WINGS serves the most-at-risk students in low-income schools. The program targets those who are struggling with academics, behavior or situations at home, and they are expected to attend WINGS 2½-hour after-school program each day.

WINGS works with students at Chicora, Memminger and North Charleston elementary schools, and it expanded to James Simons Elementary this fall.

District leaders had been wanting to expand to James Simons Elementary because it had a small after-school program that kids attended irregularly. A federal grant awarded this summer enabled WINGS to establish a new site there.

The program costs about \$250,000 per year per school; WINGS raises \$200,000, and the school and district combine to contribute the remaining \$50,000. Students don't pay to participate.

The study

The University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning received a federal grant to study

the relationship between improving fine motor skills and a student's overall cognitive skills, particularly in math.

Researchers think the quality and timing of fine motor skills development may affect the quality and timing of students' cognitive development. Poor, black males entering kindergarten have the biggest fine motor skill deficits, but it's difficult for researchers to gain consistent access to them, said Laura Brock, local project director for the UVA study and an assistant professor at the College of Charleston.

UVA decided to partner with WINGS for the experiment because of its reputation, rigorous program and commitment to working with these kinds of families, she said.

UVA also has written a four-year, \$2.8 million grant proposal to launch a major, scientific study on WINGS programs' effectiveness. It will evaluate the impact it has on children's lives and whether its participants fare better than their classmates, and they'll find out whether they won the grant next year.

Brock said there aren't many well-established nonprofits focusing on social and emotional skills on this scale in such a strategic, thoughtful and organized way.

"That's what really makes them unique nationwide," she said.

Going forward

Although WINGS leaders are interested in the outcome of the study on their effectiveness, Laird said the nonprofit doesn't plan to put its expansion efforts on hold until it's finished. Her long-term vision is for WINGS to be in as many Charleston schools as possible before eventually serving other regions of the country.

For now, it will focus on local students, such as fourth-grader Latavia Fields. Last year, Latavia would leave school to go with her grandmother and do homework and watch TV. This year, she's a part of WINGS, and she said she loves it.

"I can do more fun things," she said. "I can make new friends with people I don't have in my classes."

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