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This After-School Program Uses Social-Emotional Learning to Help Students Soar

By Marva Hinton on April 13, 2016 6:50 AM | No comments

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A South Carolina-based after-school program that focuses on social and emotional learning is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.

When **WINGS for kids** started in 1996, social and emotional learning wasn't exactly top of mind in the education world.



"When we first began the program, it was very evident that people were not educated in this field," said **WINGS CEO Bridget Laird**, who started with the program in 1998 and became CEO in 2011. "When we wrote grants for the program, I can remember specifically one that got rejected that had in red pen at the top of the grant, 'Who cares how a child feels about themselves if they can't read or write?'"

But schools were interested in the program even if social and emotional learning wasn't the selling point.

"They appreciated that we were a free after-school program and that we were going to do things after school in the building to help the kids stay out of trouble," said Laird. "The social and emotional learning piece was second or third on their list."

Fast-forward to 2016, and all of that has changed.

"Now they want a social and emotional learning program," said Laird. "They're willing to look at ways to even incorporate that into their school day because they see the positive changes that happen in WINGS."

Kindergarten kids saying the Creed.wmv  



*Video: WINGS students recite the **WINGS Creed** daily.*

Studies conducted by the University of Virginia and the College of Charleston found that students who took part in WINGS for two or more years had considerably higher math and reading scores, better grades, and better attendance records than their classmates.

WINGS receives funding from a mix of public and private sources, including **The Wallace Foundation** and federal 21st Century Community

Learning Center grants.

WINGS bills itself as the only U.S. organization to exclusively focus on providing social and emotional education within after-school programs. Today it operates in nine Title I elementary schools, including four in South Carolina, four in Georgia, and one in North Carolina, and has plans to expand next year.

WINGS Structure

In each school, 120-150 kids participate. That averages to be about 40 percent of the student body. The first slots go to students who have been identified by their principal and guidance counselor as having challenges related to academics, behavior, and family background. The rest of the slots are then allocated on a first-come, first-serve basis.

A program director with a college degree oversees each site. College students known as WINGSLeaders work with the program part-time and lead the kids after receiving 40 hours of training beforehand and 25 hours of on-the-job training. They follow a curriculum that includes **30 learning objectives related to social and emotional learning**. For example, one week students might concentrate on learning how to focus and limit distractions.

Each day, the students participate in WINGS for three hours after school. They recite the WINGS Creed. They spend part of their time working in small groups on one of the learning objectives, another part of the day is spent on activities of their choosing such as dance, chess or playing sports, and at the end of the day, they work on academics of the principal's choosing, which is usually homework. Before heading home, the kids eat dinner together.

A weekly learning objective is incorporated into everything the kids do that week. So while teaching them how to play a sport, the WINGSLeaders will emphasize the importance of concentration to scoring a goal. While helping the kids with homework, they will stress how important it is to focus on the material in front of them.

"It's a very structured, organized day," said Laird. "By using the foundation of the objectives, the creed, and the training, we're working the social and emotional learning into a traditional after-school program."

And, it seems to be working. Laird says her staff definitely notices a difference in the kids who've been through the program.

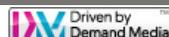
"We definitely don't claim that social-emotional learning eliminates all behavior problems, but it helps kids manage their own behavior, learn from their mistakes, take responsibility, and make better decisions the next time," said Laird.

Photo: A WINGSLeader at Heritage Elementary School in College Park, Ga., talks with a young student. (Sean Randall)

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