

PROFILE

WINGS

What they are doing:

WINGS is a school-based after-school program that strives to teach elementary school kids how to behave well, make good decisions, and build healthy relationships. To achieve this goal, WINGS has developed a unique social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum that helps kids learn life lessons they need to succeed and be happy. WINGS believes that kids who commit to attending the daily three-hour sessions 80 percent of the time over two years will develop strong social and emotional competencies that improve behavior and school attendance and lead to improved behavioral and academic outcomes in later grades as well. The organization currently serves over 1,200 students across 10 sites in Charleston and Lake City, South Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; and Charlotte, North Carolina.

WINGS focuses on the five competencies defined by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#)—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The curriculum splits these competencies into 30 objectives, one for each week of the program. Over the course of a week, students will experience these objectives through games or exercises, and they will be reinforced during other activities or homework time. For example, one objective (part of self-management) is “focusing inward and limiting distractions.” During “community unity” time, students participate in a game that teaches them how to focus inward: close your eyes and imagine you can see your heart beating. Open your eyes and still try to see it beating. Then, during a WINGS Works’ playground project, such as raking leaves, the WINGS leader reminds the group of what it looks like to complete a job by limiting distractions (only having to rake the leaves once), versus succumbing to distractions and having to rake the same area twice. The curriculum and the accompanying activities are clearly defined and codified across the WINGS network to ensure consistency and quality. Initial studies have shown that students enrolled



A WINGS leader works with a group of elementary school children during one of its after-school programs.

in WINGS demonstrate significantly higher math and reading scores, grades, and school attendance when compared to non-WINGS students.

To lead the program, WINGS prepares college-age students to be WINGSLeaders. They receive 40 hours of training in SEL at the start of each school year and receive feedback and mentoring each week over the course of the year. Each WINGSLeader takes charge of a small group of kids, called a nest. The WINGSLeaders are supported by an on-site program director with at least two years of WINGS experience and a peace manager who is trained to handle student conflicts. The program director is accountable for ensuring quality training and development.

WINGS' staffing model supports alignment of the after-school program's objectives with what students experience in their classrooms during the school day. Program directors are based at the WINGS school site during the school day, which allows them to interact with teachers and school leaders to build their support for the program. The program administrator may collaborate with teachers to jointly develop plans to support students struggling with their social and emotional goals, (e.g., those that may have had multiple behavioral incidents in a given week). WINGS also requests that teachers rate students' SEL competencies using the [Devereux Student Strengths Assessment \(DESSA\)](#) three times per year. This same assessment tool is used during after-school time. Program directors discuss results with teachers and collaborate to identify what additional supports students in the behavioral "red zone" might require, as well as how to continue to support students who are strengthening their SEL skills. Through this process, teachers and WINGS staff may jointly develop a set of strategies that can be applied both in-school and after school to support those students.

WINGS also works to weave its SEL language into the school fabric and supports the creation of a climate that is conducive to the development of social and emotional behaviors and competencies. WINGS shares its weekly SEL objectives by directly emailing teachers and posting them where teachers can reference them throughout the school day. Teachers are encouraged to use WINGS language to remind students of the SEL competencies they should be building. For example, WINGS uses the phrase "show your ID" to encourage students to own up to their actions and not make excuses. In some schools teachers also have started using this language in discussing personal accountability with students. This use of shared language and concepts makes it easier for teachers and WINGSLeaders to reinforce the SEL competencies that both seek to develop in students.

School district partnerships are critical to the success of WINGS. Support from district leadership leads to numerous benefits, including financial contributions to the program, and greater support from principals and teachers.

WINGS also is pursuing rigorous research to validate its model. And it is experimenting with ideas to greatly expand the number of students who participate in the program.

What they are learning:

- **School district buy-in is critical.** District endorsement means more than financial support for WINGS. With district support, principals see the program as important and will buy in at the site level. And support from principals is critical for the alignment that WINGS seeks to build between classroom teachers and after-school program staff.
- **Investment in training pays off.** The time spent training and mentoring WINGSLeaders is a key to the program's success.

This profile is one of a series of profiles on organizations focused on developing effective learners.

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