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## Innovative SC learning program expands to Atlanta

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The Associated Press

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. — An innovative after-school program started in South Carolina to help kids control their tempers and make good choices expanded Tuesday to two schools in Atlanta.

WINGS for Kids started in Charleston 16 years ago and organizers say it is the only program teaching emotional skills to children in an after-school setting.



It has served 3,100 children from kindergarten through elementary school in the Charleston area with its two-and-a-half-hour daily program.

This year, WINGS serves about 450 students in four Charleston-area schools and 200 at the S.L. Lewis Elementary School and Heritage Elementary School in the College Park neighborhood of Atlanta.

"We see ourselves as part of the solution to the achievement gap," said Bridget Laird, the CEO of WINGS. "We are a serious prevention program shooting toward improving graduation rates."

The program operates in schools attended by students from lower-income families.

Researchers from Yale University have found that program develops an attachment to school, and local research showed the first group of WINGS students had a 40 percent higher high school graduation rate than students who did not attend and went to similar schools.

This year, researchers from the University of Virginia are to begin a four-year, randomized \$2.8 million study of the program's impact.

The program has been able to expand thanks in part to a \$1 million donation from a board member last year. WINGS is in the midst of a fundraising campaign and is next looking to expand in Charlotte, Baltimore or Jacksonville, Fla.

"What's been the most amazing part of it is that everybody has been very receptive," said Heather Williams, lead program director for the Atlanta Wings program. "The teachers in the schools have spread the word about it, and we didn't have to do a lot of recruiting ourselves because the teachers are behind it and the principals believe in the program and the families and the parents have been coming out to meet us."

The program works to teach students self-awareness, how to manage their emotions, responsible decision-making and relationship skills. It's all summed up in the WINGS creed, which puts the program goals in language children can understand.

The key parts talk about emotions and taking responsibility.

"Life's full of surprises that make me feel different ways. If I can control myself, I will have much better days," says one section. In another, the children recite, "I understand the choices I make should be what's best for me to do, and what happens is on me and not any of you."

With parents busy working, there is less time than in decades past to teach children such skills. People now see it's important, Laird said.

"Fifteen years ago, we would write a grant application and there was a comment on one of them saying who cares about how children care about themselves if they can't do math? They just didn't get it," Laird said. "Now there are movements to get social and emotional learning standards in districts and people are buying in."

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