

Program helping youngsters handle emotions expands

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — A renowned, innovative after-school program that helps students control their tempers, deal with nerves, take responsibility and make good life choices is going national after receiving a \$1 million donation.

WINGS for Kids started in Charleston 15 years ago and organizers say it's the only program of its kind teaching emotional skills to elementary school children in an after-school setting.

It now operates in four elementary schools, largely in low-income areas of Charleston, and 3,500 students have passed through WINGS since it was founded in 1996.

Now, thanks to the \$1 million donated by a board member and as part of a planned three-year, \$4.5 million fund raising campaign, WINGS is considering several cities for expansion including Charlotte, N.C., Atlanta, Baltimore and Jacksonville, Fla. WINGS hopes to be operating in two or three schools in the city selected by next fall.

The program earlier tried, unsuccessfully, to expand and since then has reworked its expansion plans.

"We have a pretty ambitious plan now we have this groundwork under way," said Bridget Laird, the group's chief executive officer. "In the next five years we hope to be in three more regions and 16 more schools. Were at that tipping point where we are ready to grow fast."

Six years ago, the program had two sites in the District of Columbia, but they were affiliates in which staffers got four hours of WINGS training when the program gives its employees 65 hours.

"We quickly realized we weren't achieving the outcomes we expected," Laird said. "We realized that if we were going to be true and honest and achieve outcomes with the kids, then we had to run the program."

That's what WINGS plans to do with the help of the donation from board member Suzan Zoukis and her husband Stephen, an attorney and real estate developer who moved to Sullivans Island from Atlanta five years ago. She saw what WINGS could do for kids after raising her own son who she said had his own problems.

"He just didn't think the rules applied to him," Zoukis said. "It didn't dawn on us that we had to look our child in the eye and say "No" the way WINGS does. I realized it's not only something children from underprivileged or dysfunctional families may need. Being able to take WINGS to its natural next step I think is really, really, important."

Indeed, Zoukis says that emotional learning should be part of the curriculum at all the nation's schools to help students make sound decisions.

She said it's different growing up now from when she was a child and the choices are tougher.

"There are so many more choices and they certainly don't live in the cloistered environment I grew up in in the '50s," she said. "Back in those days your world was your block and these days your world is the entire world. Kids see so much and they are offered so much good and bad and it's hard, when immediate gratification is all your brain gives you, to know what to do."