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WINGS poised for takeoff



TYRONE WALKER/STAFF

Mallory Dorsey, a WINGS program director, counsels 11-year-old Edward Rollerson of Charleston during training Wednesday. WINGS is an education program that teaches children how to behave, make good decisions and build healthy relationships.

Program that teaches social, emotional skills set to expand

BY DIETTE COURRÉGE
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Kionne Epps, a junior at the College of Charleston, is proud to be a part of WINGS, a Charleston-based nonprofit that teaches children social and emotional skills in an after-school setting.

He is one of the program's 75 leaders who works directly with children during the school year, and he said he always feels as if he is making a difference in their lives.

"It impacts kids positively, and it's something they would not have gotten if not for WINGS," he said.

WINGS is gearing up for a big year. The group is expanding to its first out-of-state site, Atlanta, where it will run programs in two Fulton County schools. This year also marks the launch of a four-year, \$2.8 million study that will scientifically measure the program's impact and effectiveness.

The University of Virginia's Curry School of Education received a federal Institute of Education Sci-

ences grant to evaluate WINGS, and researchers will follow some of the WINGS kindergartners for the next few years. Their results will be compared with similar students on its waiting list.

It's a time of significant growth for WINGS, and Chief Executive Officer Bridget Laird said this has been in the works for years.

The group has grown methodically since starting as a summer camp in 1996, and it served 460 students in four Charleston County elementary schools this past year. The expansion to Atlanta will add about 200 more students to its roster.

"We're feeling ready," Laird said. "It's not something we just decided to do. This is our plan."

She said she doesn't expect the out-of-state sites to affect local programs, other than perhaps feeling momentum and as if they are part of something bigger.

Laird said she would like to

serve more students locally, but the group's staffing model doesn't make it easy. WINGS relies on part-time college students to run its programs, and she said they pretty much have tapped out the available pool. A plethora of colleges was one of the draws of Atlanta, which she estimated has at least 20 colleges.

WINGS hopes to one day be a national organization, but the shorter-term vision is to expand in the Southeast, Laird said. Its immediate three-year plan calls for it to be in at least eight schools, so that could mean more in Atlanta or elsewhere, she said.

The program requires students to attend a structured, 2½-hour, daily program. Students learn 30 social and emotional skills that fall under five core objectives — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills

and responsible decision-making — and the ultimate goal is to improve students' academics and get them to graduate.

WINGS is hosting a training session for its college leaders all week, and it invited WINGS program participants to attend a free summer camp so their leaders can learn how to put that training into practice.

Shanell Ransom, a senior at the College of Charleston, will be working as a WINGS leader for the first time this year. She described the training as intense but said she is ready to start working with students. She believes in its mission, and she said she wants to show children that they can do anything they want.