

In Focus:

EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Education program subject of \$2.8M study

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Wings, the Charleston-based after-school program, will undergo a \$2.8 million study to measure its impact and effectiveness on the lives of elementary students in January.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Education Department will study the effectiveness of the Charleston-based after-school program.

The study is funded by a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, to the

University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. Bridget Laird, CEO of Wings, said the study will ultimately serve to validate the 15-year-old program.

"It's the pivotal moment for Wings," Laird said. "There aren't many nonprofits out there taking the time and money to see if their programs deliver. It's kind of scary; some programs are doing more harm than good to the kids."

The research grant is the largest sum of money available for this kind of research and guarantees financial support for Wings to undergo the four-year study.

"Data collection requires a significant amount of money and manpower," said Laura Brock, an assistant professor at the College of Charleston and part of the team of scientists who will be evaluating Wings.

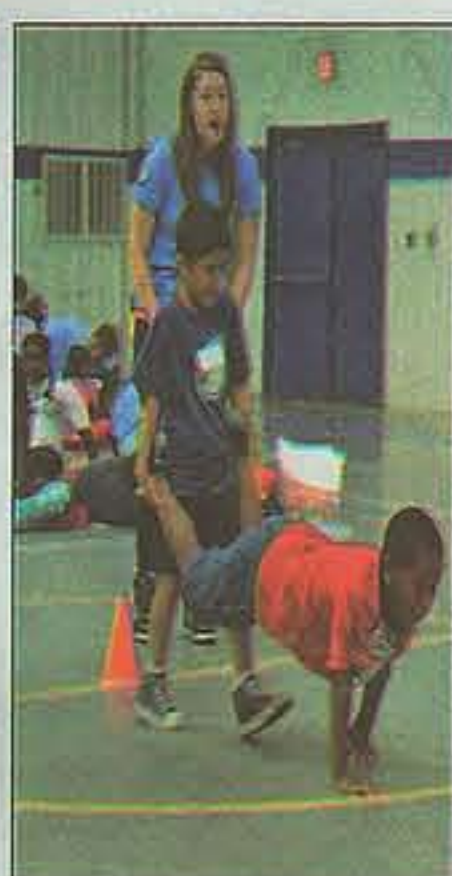
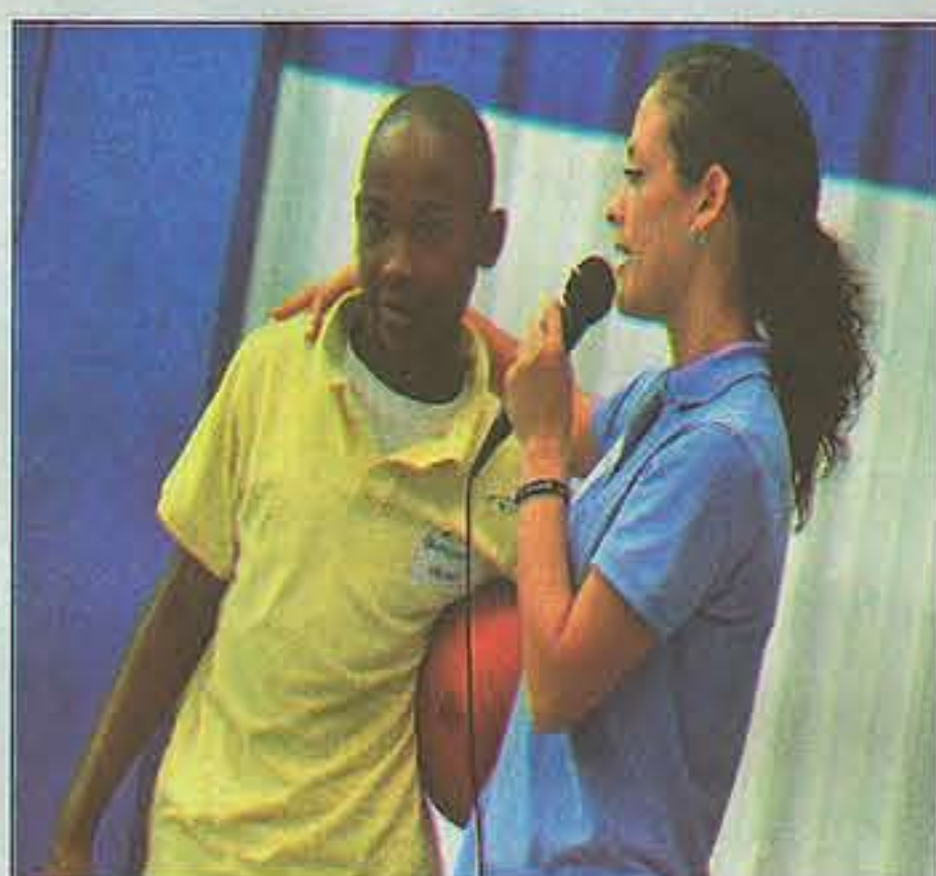
Wings is an after-school program that focuses on teaching social and emotional skills to elementary school children. Ginny Deerin started the program in Charleston in 1996 to give children attending low-performing schools in high-risk neighborhoods what she called the "missing piece of their education."

Today, the program serves 460 children at four elementary schools in Charleston County — Memminger, Chicora, North Charleston and James Simons — and has reached out to more than 3,100 children during its lifespan.

The program requires the children to attend a three-hour session daily, the curriculum of which weaves 30 learning objectives into everyday activities to develop self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness and relationship skills.

A first of its kind, Wings focuses wholly on social and emotional skills.

"Researchers have implemented social and emotional programs for a specific length of time, but Wings is the only



Top: Stephanie Orozco (from left), Priscilla Celaya, Treasure Watkins and Amyah Wright listen to WINGS leader Natalie Prioleau during a team-building game.

Bottom left: DaeQuan Weeks stands with Wings program director Stephanie Smith.

Bottom Right: Parker Graham (in red) and Bryan Celaya work together during a team-building relay race. (Photos/Leslie Burden)

program I know of that has social and emotional skills as its priority and has been in operation for this length of time," Brock said. "It is also important to note that Wings takes place after school, so social and emotional learning isn't competing with literacy or math learning, but instead complementing what is learned during the school day."

Brock, who received her doctorate from the University of Virginia, worked in the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the Curry School. She was project coordinator on a study that evaluated a classroom program similar to Wings.

She was the one who suggested that the University of Virginia do a study on Wings.

About the study

The study, the final step in a five-year

flight plan for the program, will consist of a randomized control trial done over a four-year period, including a preliminary year of planning and three years of data collection.

David W. Grissmer and Andrew J. Mashburn, research scientists at the Curry School, will lead the study.

Grissmer and Mashburn and their team will begin refining the design, recruiting children and obtaining parent release forms in January for the evaluations, which will begin at the start of the 2012-2013 school year.

Brock said the College of Charleston will be primarily responsible for data collection over the course of the study.

Researchers will examine incoming Wings kindergartners and will follow them for three years, measuring



Top: Markell Wrighten-Ray jumps rope with Wings leaders Yancy Martin (left) and Mel Boyd.

Right: Treasure Watkins dribbles a ball during a game focused on identifying strengths and weaknesses. (Photos/Leslie Burden)



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such skills as emotion regulation, social problem-solving, social skills, classroom behavior, relationships with others and academic achievement.

"Our intention is to track results during the school day through classroom observations, interviews with teachers and achievement tests, and at home through home visits and interviews with parents," Brock said. "We are more interested in knowing whether the Wings program impacts children's behavior across settings."

These students will then be compared with a control group, a similar group of students who are on the waiting list for Wings.

Overall, more than 300 children will be tracked over the course of the study.

Brock said the study will determine whether students enrolled in a social and emotional education program such as Wings can learn life skills that lead to better decision-making,

which could affect graduation, substance-abuse and teenage pregnancy rates.

"Our goal long term is to be able to follow kindergartners through the formal schooling years," Brock said. "Our aim is to see if participation in Wings is able to improve the lives of children and better prepare them for adulthood."

Grissmer said that social and emotional education could ultimately prove to be the missing piece in a child's overall education.

"The evidence is beginning to point to stronger social and emotional skills as a critically missing part of our national educational policy, which currently focuses almost entirely on academic achievement," Grissmer said.

Brock said that the team expects to see results early on in the study.

"Although we do have long-term goals, we anticipate we would see results after the first year of participation in Wings," Brock said.

And Laird said that results are needed for the program to seek future expansion and receive further funding.

"There is a shift under way in the non-profit sector today, with the newest generation of donors and funders increasing-

ly looking to invest in organizations that can prove they are reaching their outcomes," Laird said. "We know we are delivering the outcomes we set, and we're ready to open our program up for this evaluation and put our money where our mouth is, in order to receive the data needed to prove this."

Above all, however, Laird hopes the impact study can help further more than just the program.

"It's nice to be taken seriously as a social and emotional education program as opposed to just an after-school program," she said. "For us, this is an investment in social and emotional education. We've always been so serious in what we teach; it's just nice to see other people interested in what you do." ■

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