

Effectiveness of WINGS to be target of \$2.8 million study

Children taught social, emotional skills

BY DIETTE COURRÉ

dcourre@postandcourier.com

Thursday, July 7, 2011

A Charleston program that teaches children social and emotional skills will be the subject of a four-year, \$2.8 million grant aimed at scientifically measuring its impact and effectiveness.



Photo by Wade Spees

Seven-year-old Lyasia Duggins, a WINGS participant at James Simons Elementary School, flashes a colorful mouthpiece while getting help in the outfield from Charleston Police Department recruit Andrew Gallo during a Wiffle ball game Tuesday at the Charleston Miracle League field.

researcher who studied a school-day program similar to WINGS. Brock since has relocated to Charleston.

When UVa. researchers were looking for an after-school program for a different study, she suggested

WINGS. And when researchers came down to check it out, they decided to write a grant for a more in-depth study.

"WINGS is pretty unique in that it's purely a social and emotional learning program," Brock said. "Some programs in theory focus on character education, but when you see what's happening, it's not how it looked on paper. With WINGS, they're really focused on staff development and adhering to the (program) principles, and you can see that throughout the day and across the school year."

The University of Virginia's Curry School of Education has received a federal Institute of Education Sciences grant to evaluate WINGS, which serves about 460 local children in four after-school programs.

It is significant because it helps to distinguish WINGS as more than an after-school child-care program; WINGS is a social and emotional educational program that happens to occur after school, said Bridget Laird, WINGS chief executive officer.

"We're leading the social and emotional learning movement, and the fact that (the government) is investing so much money in us means we're doing a good job and they're seeing the benefits," she said.

Laura Brock is an assistant professor at the College of Charleston and part of the team of scientists who will be evaluating WINGS, which operates in Memminger, Chicora, North Charleston and James Simons elementary schools.

She helped make the connection between the Charlottesville-based university and the Charleston program. Brock received her Ph.D. from UVa. and worked in its Social Development Lab alongside a

WINGS requires students to attend a structured, 2 1/2-hour, daily program. They learn 30 social and emotional learning skills that fall under five core objectives -- self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

Research has shown that a child's ability to control his behavior is related to his ability later in life to make bigger decisions, but scientists don't know the extent to which those skills can be fostered in children, Brock said.

This study will determine whether students enrolled in a social and emotional program such as WINGS can learn those skills, and whether it makes a meaningful difference in their lives, she said.

Four groups of 15 to 24 incoming WINGS kindergartners will be tracked for three years starting in the fall of 2012. They will be compared to a similar group of students who are on WINGS' waiting list.

For the two years after that, researchers will add new groups of incoming kindergartners to the study while continuing to follow the previous students. They will collect a variety of information through pre- and post-tests; parent, teacher and student interviews; and observations.

Researchers anticipate seeing changes in students' behavior and decision-making, and Brock said that should translate into increased academic achievement.

She said she hopes to see positive results after the first few years of the study, and those could be leveraged into future grant applications to continue following students' progress through high school.

"That's our long-term goal," she said. "We're hoping that it'll be something we can do for several years."

WINGS has been operating since 1996, and its most recent five-year plan included a goal of researching its impact. Many nonprofits don't have the opportunity to undergo this level of evaluation and lack the scientific evidence to prove their efficacy, Laird said.

"There is a shift under way in the nonprofit sector today, with the newest generation of donors and funders increasingly looking to invest in organizations that can prove they are reaching their outcomes," she said. "We know we are delivering the outcomes we set, and we're ready to open our program up for this evaluation."

Reach **Diette Courré** at 937-5546.