SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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WINGS came into the picture in 1996, before many people were using—or had even heard of—the term "social and emotional learning" (SEL). As we started our work, we encountered plenty of skepticism about the value of social and emotional skills. We've come a long way since those early days, and thankfully for children all over the country, SEL is recognized, valued, and supported by ever-expanding research as an important contributor to behavioral improvements, academic achievement, and overall factors of long-term success.

Over 21 years, we've had many ups and downs, wins and losses. We've tried new things—some that worked and some that didn't. Through it all we have held tight to three core beliefs that have guided our work:

1. SEL starts with a positive culture and climate, and this type of environment doesn't happen by accident. It must be fostered with great intentionality and diligently maintained.
2. SEL is fundamentally a "way" of teaching through your interactions, engagement, and relationships with children. It's not another workbook on a shelf or something to do in addition to teaching. Social and emotional learning takes place when adults' social and emotional skills and practices are developed.
3. And because of number one and two, training and professional development of staff is a top priority.

In the first part of this chapter, we will share our journey as one of the earliest organizations on the scene and provide insights into how we've used these three beliefs to shape our unique

approach to SEL. In part two, we will discuss the turning point that led us down the path of a four-year randomized control trial, and what it means for the field and for our future direction.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND

The Inspiration

In 1995, WINGS founder Ginny Deerin attended a women's leadership conference and heard Johnetta Cole, then president of Atlanta's Spelman College, give a keynote address where she spoke about how girls and women often keep themselves locked up in small birdcages. Deerin recalls Cole urging the audience to envision themselves soaring beyond the cage—"the door is open, it's up to you to fly." During this same time, Deerin began recognizing a set of skills like empathy, individuality, and communication that could have guided her life differently if she had learned them early on. It was then that Deerin made a commitment to helping youth learn these skills. On a yellow legal pad she scribbled a list of the vital skills, using layman's words, and crafted a mission for what she wanted to achieve: "By the time that children are teenagers, they will know how to live joyfully, powerfully, and responsibly." Flying home from the conference, she happened upon a copy of TIME Magazine featuring Daniel Goleman on the cover. Goleman had just written the book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). Inside, Deerin found a list that nearly matched perfectly the one she'd sketched on the legal pad, enumerating the skills of an emotionally intelligent individual. But it was the Emily Dickinson poem "'Hope' is the thing with feathers" that pulled

"Hope" is the thing with feathers
by EMILY DICKINSON

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chillest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of me.

all of these moments together, inspired our name, and distilled Deerin's vision—to help children soar with WINGS (Dickinson, 1983).

And so, in 1996, after consulting educational experts and developing a set of preliminary learning objectives, Deerin launched a one-week summer camp—WINGS for Girls—designed to help girls between the ages of 8 and 12 years old develop their emotional and social intelligence. The camp taught the girls skills like identifying feelings, introspection, self-acceptance, handling stress and releasing tension, personal decision-making, communicating with others, and conflict resolution. Similar to WINGS today, the camp model of one counselor for each small group of girls allowed developing relationships and establishing positive bonds to take center stage. More than 100 girls from diverse backgrounds participated. We quickly realized that one week of camp—even with intentional follow-up—wasn't enough time for us or the girls. Not only that, young boys needed all of the lessons and connections we were instilling in WINGS girls. When summer ended and the superintendent of schools asked for the WINGS model as an out-of-school time (OST) program for a Charleston, South Carolina, elementary school, the WINGS for Kids program was launched.

That program to give youth a comprehensive social and emotional education outside of school time was the start of WINGS for Kids. In the years since, the program has grown and evolved, continuing to develop and test strategies, hone teaching practices, and create new materials. What has never changed is our desire to instill those missing life lessons within a fresh and fun OST program so youth can live joyfully, powerfully, and responsibly.

Exclusive Focus on Low-Income Youth

Located in downtown Charleston, Memminger Elementary School was a failing Title I school where 95% of students received free or reduced-price meals. Memminger scored 96.11

out of 100 on the State of South Carolina's Poverty Index, placing it in the bottom 11% of all schools in the state (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d.). What became glaringly obvious from our initial year at Memminger was the lack of opportunities, particularly OST activities, available for low-income children.

Children living in poverty experience trauma at greater rates than their more affluent peers. As a result, they have an average 18-month lag in achievement behind their higher-income counterparts. Chronically elevated levels of stress associated with these circumstances can impact cognitive development and result in diminished executive function and self-regulation skills (van der Kolk, Roth, Pelcovitz, Sunday, & Spinazzola, 2005.) Executive function and self-regulation are important mental processes for planning, focusing attention, remembering instructions, and juggling multiple tasks successfully. Reaching children early on fortifies them with the skills to stay in school and succeed in school—skills that are especially important because the elementary schools we serve feed into high schools that have been labeled by some as "dropout factories" (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). In order to help mitigate some of these challenges, not only did we seek out Title I schools, we intentionally focused on the children in these Title I schools who could benefit the most from WINGS: those who struggled with behavior issues, had failing academics, or lacked adult supervision after school.

From day 1 that first year, we understood the powerful role college students could play as mentors in the lives of WINGS children. Likewise, because we served predominantly African American students, it became crucial we staff the program with role models who resemble our children. WINGS put a stake in the ground and decided to concentrate exclusively on reaching youth attending low-income schools. In doing so we could provide a safe place for them to go after school, and contribute to closing the opportunity gap by exposing them to extracurricular

activities and caring mentors. Most important, we knew we could have meaningful impact by helping youth to develop the skills to be resilient in the context of their environment. We are teaching skills that can radically change how they relate to others and behave in school. We are providing inspiration to do well in school and *stay* in school. We are fostering in them a belief in possibilities—and the hope for a bright future.

PART ONE: THE WINGS MODEL

Positive Culture

We are very intentional about our culture—the culture in the program as well as the culture of our administrative office—and it shows in all that we do: the language we use, the policies we set, the expectations we have of everyone on the team. We call it "WINGSY," and it is woven through every aspect of the organization. Language is an important element of our culture, and we take it to the extreme: we're always "flying high," we're "flappy" to see you, our meetings are "Soar Sessions," our corporate office is called "Soarporate," and we "let our wings out" when we meet new people. We embrace the "fun factor" at all levels of the organization because it's a notable element of our program, as we'll explain shortly. We are very serious about our work but also intentional about making sure to have fun from time to time. Our office (and all of our program offices) are equipped with a "Compliment Corner," a place for staff to praise other staff. We "stop, drop, and roll" when others need a hand or support. If you were to visit our office on a Friday, you would be invited to join us for "Family Lunch," our weekly ritual of gathering around the family table to share a meal together.

The WINGS culture is even more evident at our program sites. When you walk into a WINGS program there is an unmistakable energy; we call it a vibe. Similar to the family environment we foster at Soarporate, in our programs we want our children to feel like WINGS is their home away from home, a place where they belong, and feel safe and wholly cared for.

Culture is critical to creating a climate where SEL can thrive. Our goal is to create a supportive and engaging environment where youth can learn and soar. We do this in three ways:

1. Encouraging youth to become the best version of themselves.
2. Creating a community where everyone is valued.
3. Making learning fun!

Encouraging Youth to Become the Best Version of Themselves

WINGS is a safe place to learn how to take accountability for choices and actions, how to manage emotions, and how to deal with conflict. We help children identify their strengths and weaknesses, feel empowered, and inspired to participate, all while feeling supported and encouraged to be the best version of themselves.

Creating a Community Where Everyone Is Valued

WINGS is a community where all children feel like they belong. A place where children are free to make mistakes and try new things. . We promote decision-making and uniqueness; we listen and pay attention. Our staff models kindness and fosters a deep sense of purpose and inclusiveness within each child.

Making Learning Fun

A WINGS program is ***fun***, and a place where youth are comfortable: they can be loud or messy, laugh, use their imagination, and experience new and different things. Our focus on the "fun factor" is one of the ways we drive school attendance. If you don't attend school, you can't attend WINGS, and our youth don't want to miss WINGS.

Through innovation, growth, and creative activities, WINGS feels nothing like the school day. And we intentionally create this environment in big and little ways: we sit on the floor in

groups, play music, have special handshakes, dance, and sing. Our focus on fun is also why we choose to reinforce and recognize positive behavior more than we correct negative behavior.

This kind of culture doesn't happen on its own, and it takes constant vigilance to maintain it. We carefully monitor culture through site visits and program assessments, but probably the most powerful way we maintain our program culture is through practicing what we preach by following the same guiding principles with our internal leadership and management practices—bringing out staff members' best, ensuring staff feel valued, and as we mentioned, injecting a little fun here and there.

When we establish a relationship with a new school or partner organization, culture is always front of mind. We look for partners who are willing to embrace our culture and understand its importance in producing meaningful outcomes for children.

Comprehensive Curriculum

All learning is social and emotional, and every interaction is a ripe opportunity for social and emotional skill development. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions. Emotional quotient (EQ) is a measure of a person's adequacy in such areas as self-awareness, empathy, and dealing sensitively with other people and their emotions. Old beliefs only emphasized one kind of smart: book smart. Now, after years of research, brain science has shed light on a new perspective: paired together, emotions and intellect are the new smart. EQ is just as important as IQ, if not more so.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and

maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Everything we teach at WINGS is rooted in the five core social and emotional competencies:

1. Self-Awareness (identifying emotions, accurate self-perception, recognizing strengths, self-confidence, self-efficacy)
2. Self-Management (impulse control, stress management, self-discipline)
3. Responsible Decision Making (identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, reflecting)
4. Social Awareness (perspective-taking, empathy, appreciating diversity, respect for other)
5. Relationship Skills (communication, relationship building, teamwork)

We've made these core competencies easy to understand and fun to learn with what we call The Creed. The WINGS Creed provides a common language that is memorable and transferable to any situation or environment. It is our mantra, the epitome of our culture, and the foundation of everything we teach, and it serves as a compass for navigating all aspects of life.

The WINGS Creed

I soar with WINGS. Let me tell you why. I learn lots of skills that help me reach the sky.

I love and accept who I am on the inside and know my emotions are nothing to hide.

Life's full of surprises that make me feel different ways. If I can control myself, I will have much better days.

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.

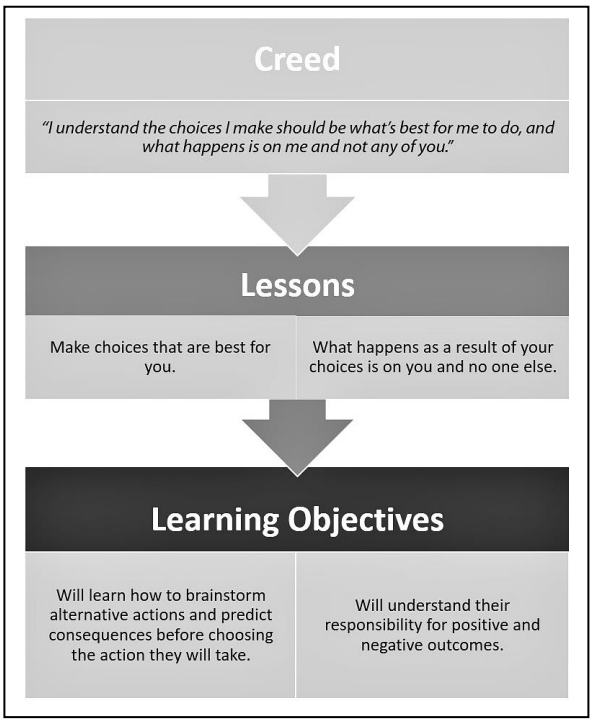
I understand others are unique. I want to learn more about everyone I meet. I want to step into their shoes and see what they are going through.

I am a friend. I support and trust. Working together is a must. Kind and caring I will be. I listen to you. You listen to me.

I soar with WINGS. I just told you why. All of these things are why I fly high.

In order to effectively teach social and emotional skills, you must first possess emotional intelligence. At WINGS, the first expectation of every employee is to live The Creed. We live The Creed in our interactions with one another and in our interactions with the youth in our programs. Reciting The Creed daily, our youth have come up with hand movements and interpretative gestures for each line. The result is a high-energy recitation, similar to a camp song or a rally cry that starts each program day.

The WINGS Creed is made up of seven verses, five of which align directly to each core competency, or skill. Our explicit teaching of these social and emotional skills is done through The Creed and 10 specific social and emotional lessons. Each lesson has a learning objective and a tip or technique to aid in teaching.



While curriculum is an important element for any program, it's how we teach that matters most: 1) We integrate SEL into all program activities. 2) Lessons are reinforced in small teachable moments that occur throughout the day. 3) We model social and emotional skills in the way we engage with youth and interact with our peers.

Integrating SEL Into All Activities

Each week focuses on one or two lessons. These lessons allow staff to use a universal language when teaching children social and emotional skills. Weekly lessons are first introduced during *Community Unity*, which starts each day. As a community, staff and youth discuss the week's lesson, play games, and reflect upon moments when this lesson was in action; recite The Creed; and participate in positive recognition. For example, when the lesson of the week is "accept responsibility for what you do," staff use the teaching tip "Show Your ID." Show your ID encourages young people to own up to things without placing blame by stating what "I did…" to contribute to either the positive or negative outcome. After playing a game, say Telephone, staff guide youth in a discussion with prompting questions like, "Can you show your ID for

something good you were responsible for during the game?" or "Does anyone want to show their ID for blaming others during the game instead of taking responsibility for yourself?"

Academic Center provides homework assistance and the opportunity to further build ELA, STEM, and math competencies, all while staff reinforce The Creed and the weekly social and emotional lessons. Staff might use the"Show Your ID," technique when a child says their teacher didn't give any homework, when in fact the homework was left in the classroom, to encourage accountability. Or a staff member might say "show your ID" to a student who helped her peer with a tricky math problem and provided words of encouragement. It's moments like these that can plant confidence or lessen anxieties, creating space for academic learning to happen.

Enrichment Time exposes our children to extracurricular activities and free play—real-time opportunities to continue capitalizing on The Creed and contemplating the weekly lesson. When youth participate in activities such as soccer or lacrosse, cooking, art, or music, staff have ample occasions to tie in the weekly lesson and The Creed by reflecting on teamwork, participation, creativity, or focus. Continuing the "Show Your ID" example, staff and youth can discuss the role each member of the winning team played, how an individual youth finished his or her art project, or what each member of the dance team accomplished.

The week's lesson culminates in *Wild WINGS*: a celebration of the social and emotional lesson and an opportunity for staff to play and interact together, on the children's level. We intentionally make Wild WINGS high energy, relevant to our children's interests, and packed with new experiences.

Teachable Moments

Teachable moments happen in real time, all the time. Staff look for situations where they can reinforce The Creed or weekly lessons in group or individual settings. When staff capitalize on teachable moments, WINGS youth hear and internalize The Creed—***in real time***—helping to develop their social and emotional skills. Beyond utilizing language from The Creed, staff are encouraged to show thoughtfulness through three approaches:

- Acknowledging behaviors: pointing out the positive socially and emotionally smart behaviors that you want to see happen again.
- Conversation prompts: engaging the child in a conversation that deepens SEL—it can be a question you ask, maybe to reflect or think about something with a different perspective, or it may just be a statement to get the conversation started.
- Assigning tasks: giving the child a task that will help build any of the SE skills.

From trips to the bathroom, walking the hallways, and lining up to transition to the next activity—these moments are rich with opportunities to acknowledge positive behavior, have a social and emotional skills–based conversation, or assign a task that builds social and emotional skills. It can take years of experience for a staff member to learn how to incorporate lessons into these small moments, but with The Creed, staff can infuse these teachable moments quickly and easily because they have a vocabulary to pull from.

Modeling

We believe you can teach more with your attitude and actions than you can with your words alone. In order to effectively teach social and emotional skills, staff must model these skills by using positive body language, making responsible decisions, taking accountability

(showing their ID), and encouraging the display of social and emotional skills in others. Simply put—staff are role models to each other and to WINGS children.

We have a saying, "Let Your WINGS Out," which encourages staff to display, act, and live the lines of The Creed. Are you showing the world your wings by being kind and caring? Are you listening, trusting, and willing to compromise? "Let Your WINGS Out" is a quick way to model positive behavior and have a positive attitude.

One of the most significant concepts we model is to take responsibility for both positive and negative outcomes. Using the technique "Show your ID" one more time, if a staff member has been curt or shown frustration with a child, the staff member can use this as an opportunity to be accountable to the group and admit the mistake: "Hey guys, can I show my ID? I didn't explain things very well and that got us all a little frustrated. Next time I'll make sure to really think through the instructions before we start."

When children hear staff naming emotions to describe how they feel, admitting a weakness and asking for help, or not rattling off excuses but instead taking responsibility, they feel valued and respected. When youth see staff taking a moment to breathe, using their manners, working as a team, or taking the time to listen to them without getting distracted, they feel safe and supported. And these feelings of value and support are not exclusive to our children. When the staff models social and emotional skills with each other, they learn from one another, feel empowered, are challenged, and are filled with new ideas and opportunities.

Training Is a Top Priority

From very early on, we recognized that the staff who interacted with children were the magic-makers, the link from our curriculum to our impact. In order to teach emotional intelligence skills you first have to possess the skills yourself. In our early years, annual staff

training was a camp of its own—a week long and overnight. The training was packed with sessions during the day and group bonding activities in the evenings. This was possible with a staff of only 12. Now, with a full-time staff of 42 and a part-time staff of 108, we can no longer pull off the overnight format. But the overall approach we took in the early years remains at the core of how we conduct annual staff training today. Each year, the full-time staff kicks off the new school year with a full week of training, honing our own social and emotional skills. Over the course of the year, full-time staff come together for quarterly "Soar Sessions"—the time to further the lessons introduced at training.

We invest heavily in recruiting, hiring, and training—especially for the staff who work directly with youth. And our experience has shown that investing in the training and development of staff pays huge dividends for our children. Each summer after full-time training, part-time staff, some of whom are returning from the year before and some of whom are new hires, participate in two full weeks of training—all before the programs even start. Pre-service training includes 80 hours on topics like *Empowering Kids in Poverty*, *Using Behavior Techniques With Empathy,* and *Implementing Social and Emotional Skill Building Through Teachable Moments.* Staff begin to learn how to internalize and then model the five social and emotional skills, with the goal of supporting, engaging, and teaching children.

At the core of our training is empathy: stepping into the shoes of our children. Daily sessions teach staff how to get on their level to enable them to be children. From start to finish, training is hands-on, high-energy, engaging, and inspiring—laying the foundation for the culture and climate of the WINGS program. We intentionally replicate the energy, support, and engagement we want the youth in our programs to experience. Our talented training team provides an experience unlike traditional trainings. New staff feel safe to learn about themselves

and their social and emotional competencies, all while having fun and bonding with team members.

Additional training and professional development happens over the course of the year through ongoing trainings with sessions like *Child Development Levels*, *Kid Play*, *When Consequences Don't Work*, and *Teach by Being a Role Model*. Weekly staff meetings also provide time for program leaders to coach their team and provide constructive and positive feedback in a small group setting. Quarterly staff evaluations determine whether staff members are in fact positive, encouraging, fair, trusting, empathetic, and good listeners, and identifies strengths and weaknesses. Through ongoing feedback and constant coaching, staff continue to learn and grow their own skillset throughout the year, positively impacting their effectiveness as a mentor and role model.

Staff are a significant investment—but are 100% what makes the program unique. When you walk into a WINGS program, you feel it through the positive energy, the kid-friendly environment, and the family vibe. That doesn't happen with a program model alone. It's only when the adults have developed their own social and emotional competencies and have internalized the WINGS "way" of teaching that children soar.

PART THREE: INNOVATION DRIVEN BY RESEARCH AND DATA

Early Results

From our beginning, we have been committed to collecting data and engaging in research. In 2005, we were feeling great about the work we were doing on the ground with young people. Yale University conducted preliminary research on our program that showed positive results for a sample of children who participated in the program compared to those who did not participate. The research found greater academic achievement (Ivcevic & Brackett, 2005)

and increased self-esteem and higher satisfaction with school (Ivcevic, Rivers, & Brackett, 2004.) In addition, children were engaged and loved the program, staff and families were raving about it, and the staff were witnessing (and experiencing) life-changing moments every day. Excited about the potential, we were anxious to spread our own WINGS to reach more and more youth.

Our first attempt at growth was a middle-school Leadership Academy. The thought was that this would help us stay with our children for a longer period of time. After two years, we realized that our expertise and strength was elementary school, and that to deliver the most impact, we needed to focus on one thing and do it really well. Our second attempt at growth was through the WINGS Development Partner program. This program was aimed at partnering with others to infuse social and emotional learning into their existing programs. Although the partners enjoyed using the WINGS activities and working with us, we did not feel our work with them was truly impacting children.

From the outside looking in, what we were doing appeared successful. We had eight partners and had even grown across state lines with partnerships in Washington, DC. We also had the positive findings from Yale University. But we were uneasy. The positive outcomes were not necessarily things we had intentionally set out to achieve. We were essentially casting a wide net, trying a lot of things, and then happy that the data indicated that good things were happening as a result of our work. We weren't sure that we could explain exactly *how* we were getting positive results. We were feeling uncertain and not sure how to move forward. We engaged a consultant, who introduced us to the "theory of change" concept and led us through the process of defining our specific theory of change. In order to grow in a meaningful way, it was necessary to first figure out what it was that we were intentionally trying to achieve. What specific impact

did we truly want to have on the youth in the program? How would we measure it? We answered these questions in a four-day intensive session that included board members, senior staff, and direct-service staff. The session was brutal, and forced us to make some very hard decisions. One of the hardest decisions was to step back from the partnership work in order to test and refine our theory of change through our direct-service programs. It was tough to pause on our expansion but we knew if we wanted to be successful in the long run that we needed to take this time to step back and build a strong foundation.

With a theory of change in hand, our next steps were to codify our current program, create a performance management system to track our progress towards our short-term goals, and then expand our direct service to additional schools in our area. Our goal was to open one new school in Charleston per year for the next three years. The intention here was to have enough children in the program for a full-scale evaluation. The evaluation would start with an implementation study to look at the fidelity of our program delivery, and end with an impact study to evaluate the outcomes youth were achieving as a result of participation in WINGS. Essentially, we wanted to know that we were really doing what we claimed to do.

Original Theory of Change

When children get WINGS for two years, they:

- Develop strong social and emotional skills.
- Improve behavior and school attendance in elementary school.

Which leads to:

- Positive behavior and school attachment in middle school.
- A future hope and expectation of graduating from high school and avoiding jail and teenage parenthood.

We documented every piece of our program procedures and training so that each program site could operate in exactly the same way. Deciding what to include in the performance management system was even tougher.

We had two key short-term goals: for youth to know and understand social and emotional skills, and to use them in their everyday lives. Initially we measured their knowledge and understanding of the skills by their ability to recite the WINGS Creed. This later evolved into a more thorough Objective Knowledge Assessment to measure each child's knowledge and comprehension of the learning objectives taught during the preceding period. Initially, to measure how they were using the skills in everyday life, we asked them to provide a meaningful example of using The Creed at home or in the classroom. We would eventually use the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) to capture classroom teacher and staff observations of behavior. Measuring observable behavior has proved to be a more meaningful way to measure outcomes than a child's own perception of their behavior.

Current Theory of Change

When children get WINGS for two years, they:

- Develop strong social and emotional skills.
- Improve behavior and school attendance in elementary school.

Which leads to:

- Positive behavior and strong attachment to school in middle school.
- A future hope and expectation of high school graduation.

This current version shows our continuous evolution and refinement based on learnings from research and data.

Our approach to performance management has come a long way. Getting to where we are today is based on a continuous learning process. Initially we tracked every data point we could come up with. While we took this "capture everything" approach for a couple of years, it eventually proved too cumbersome and too scattered to be meaningful. It was also extraordinarily time consuming and resulted in an overwhelming amount of data to interpret. Learning and adapting is an operational value we are proud of, so we continuously refine our goals and key measures, along with our approach to performance management.

Along the way we've also learned that measuring SEL is not an easy thing to do. Fortunately, as we have evolved so has the field of SEL; helpful new field-tested tools, such as the DESSA, continue to emerge. In addition, we've learned to focus our performance measurement on the things we are intentionally trying to impact—social and emotional development, behavior, and school attendance. We've stopped trying to capture data that fall outside the scope of our theory of change. For example, our theory of change does not specifically include academic achievement. There is a growing base of research that supports the link between well-developed social and emotional skills and improved academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011.) While we know that academic improvements are a benefit of the work that we do, and our program has academic components, our specific goals are to develop social and emotional skills, improve behavior, and improve school attendance. While it's not easy, having a focused theory of change helps us stay true to what we are trying to accomplish and avoid the trap of trying to be all things to all people.

Randomized Control Trial

Once the program model was fully codified, we developed our performance management system, and grew to a total of four schools in Charleston serving over 450 children, we were ready to begin a formal impact evaluation. Fortunately, we had established a relationship with the University of Virginia when one of their research teams used our program for a small study on the use of a fine motor skill intervention. Dr. David Grissmer led the fine motor skills study and was eager to dive deeper into evaluating the WINGS program after seeing it in action several times. Grissmer and his team wrote and received an Institute of Education Science grant from the U.S. Department of Education to conduct a full randomized control trial (RCT) of the program. About two years into the study, WINGS received a Social Innovation Fund grant from the Edna

McConnell Clark foundation to expand the scope of the project by adding an implementation study. A team of researchers at the University of Virginia, College of Charleston, and Portland State worked together to complete the impact and implementation aspects of the study.

The study was aimed at using our theory of change and testing whether or not we were in fact having an effect on children's social and emotional skills and behavior. The study was a four-site, three-cohort, block-randomized control trial, in which entering kindergartners were randomly assigned by gender to 24 implementation blocks: child-level random assignment to WINGS or to the control group was determined by gender within each school and within each of three entering cohorts of eligible kindergartners whose parents or guardians had applied for enrollment in the program. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, including child assessments, teacher observations during the school day, parent or guardian interviews, and fidelity observations.

Preliminary results show that children randomized into WINGS have statistically significant ($p < .05$) or marginally significant ($p < .10$) positive effects on ten important measures of teacher-rated classroom behavior and individual tests of children's developmental and academic skills. Multiple teacher-rated measures show a broad pattern of reduced negative behavior and improved quality of the relationship with teachers. The significant or marginally significant measures include executive function, naming vocabulary, letter-word ID, and improved classroom behavior (closeness, less hyperactivity and bullying, and self regulation).

10 Questions the RCT Study Set Out to Answer

1. Does assignment to WINGS have a positive impact on children's person-centered competencies?
2. Does assignment to WINGS have a positive impact on children's relationships and behaviors in the classroom and at home, and if so, what mediates this effect?
3. Does assignment to WINGS have a positive impact on children's school outcomes (social and academic), and if so, what mediates this effect?
4. What are the impacts of WINGS on children's person-centered competencies, relationships and behaviors, and school outcomes after 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years?
5. Does assignment to WINGS impact the social school outcomes to a greater or lesser extent than academic school outcomes?
6. Does the impact of WINGS on children's person-centered competencies, relationships and behaviors, and school outcomes after 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years vary for children with different characteristics?
7. Does the impact of WINGS on children's person-centered competencies, relationships and behaviors, and school outcomes vary across the different sites within which random assignment was conducted?
8. Is variation in the impacts of assignment to WINGS related to children's attendance and engagement in the program?
9. Do the effects of assignment to WINGS vary across implementation blocks, and if so, is this variation related to implementation fidelity?
10. What are the family characteristics and home experiences of all children in the study and the out-of-school time experiences of children who are not randomly assigned to WINGS?

Lessons Learned

Results aside, some of our most important learning has come from challenges related to conducting a randomized control trial within a low-income demographic—challenges related to transiency rates, dosage, and disparity in how schools measure behavioral issues.

Disparity in School Behavior Data

There is no consistent standard among schools for defining what constitutes a behavior referral, and great disparity in what kind of information is tracked at the school level. Some elementary schools maintain school behavior grades while others do not. Additionally, depending on what data the school tracks, in some cases behavior-related data were considered health information and therefore subject to privacy considerations.

High Transiency Rates

Children in low-income households move frequently, which made it difficult for the researchers to track them over the entire study period. As a result, we now evaluate school attendance prior to WINGS enrollment, targeting students who have been present for multiple years.

Dosage

A condition of enrollment in the WINGS program is to attend every day. Children who do not maintain full-time attendance are dismissed from the program, allowing a child on the waitlist to fill the full-time spot. To maintain the integrity of the study, we made exceptions and allowed children assigned to WINGS as part of the study to stay in the program even if they were not meeting our attendance requirements. However, only children who received the minimum dosage of 100 days were factored into results, and since not all original participants maintained full-time attendance, preliminary results indicate the power of the study was diminished based on the number of qualifying children.

The implementation study also provided valuable lessons about the quality of our program and ways in which we could improve on the model. As a result of the study we made small but important changes to the program. For example, some activities have been modified or are being developed to address the needs of different ages of children in the program. We have also started pairing staff for some program components as a way to provide additional support to them.

Finally, to address the high transiency rate of children entering the program at different points during the school year, we reorganized our learning objectives and teaching sequence to accommodate both new children entering the program and the children who started the program at the beginning of the year.

We are committed to quality and impact. While the RCT methodology is rigorous and the challenges mentioned made it an imperfect process, it did help advance our efforts to deliver the highest quality program possible and to produce meaningful outcomes for the children we serve. We look forward to sharing the final results of the research and contributing to the growing evidence base in the field. We also believe our lessons learned can be of value to others, by inspiring others to utilize what we've learned and, equally as important, highlighting areas that would benefit from additional or deeper study via future research projects.

Future Direction

The intensity with which we train front-line staff, as we've shared here, and the many years we've had to hone our approach provide a strong foundation for our next phase of learning—testing and evaluating training methods to effectively foster adult social and emotional skill development. We plan to work with other out-of-school time programs, nonprofits, and school districts by providing training and technical assistance around integrating social and emotional learning. As we further this work we will be gathering and analyzing data to

contribute to best practices in professional development as it relates to teaching children social and emotional skills. By continuing to share what we're learning, our hope is that others will benefit from our experience and use our lessons learned to create meaningful impact for more children.

CONCLUSION

Social and emotional learning is important work—life-changing work. Creating a culture where social and emotional learning can thrive, modeling social and emotional skills and teaching in a way that is supportive and engaging, and always learning is the WINGS way of accomplishing this. We firmly believe that SEL can't be reduced to a checklist of things to teach; it is an ongoing process of adults leading by example in small and big ways—again, and again, and again. Only when we as adults build and enhance our own skills can we better create a supportive and engaging environment where children can learn and soar.

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