



Atlanta, Georgia

Leaders Give Kids New WINGS

A local leadership group paves the way to bring an afterschool program to disadvantaged youth.



Circle of friends: Students in the WINGS program in Charleston, S.C.

Kids in one of this city's neediest neighborhoods are getting robust afterschool programs because two executives met more than 500 miles from home – and a group of leaders turned that chance meeting into action.

One of those executives runs WINGS, an afterschool program looking to expand beyond its home base of Charleston, S.C. The other co-chairs Atlanta's Ready by 21 Leadership Council, which is working to improve services for children and youth in high-need neighborhoods. Now WINGS is coming to 200 children in one of those neighborhoods.

The process started last October in Washington, at an Urban Institute symposium about helping the social services sector “embrace an outcomes culture.” Making the 530-mile trip from Charleston was Bridget Laird, CEO of WINGS, which provides Social Emotional Learning programs in four Charleston schools. Flying 600 miles from Atlanta was Brad Bryant, executive director of the Georgia Foundation for Public Education and co-chair of Atlanta's Ready by 21 Leadership Council. Bryant says they talked about the symposium, their mutual interest in focusing on outcomes and his days at Presbyterian College in South Carolina – and made “the usual promise that we would keep in touch.”

WINGS focuses on disadvantaged kids who struggle to navigate academics

A week later, Laird fulfilled the promise. She called Bryant to explain that someone had donated \$1 million to WINGS to expand to a second city in the southeast. WINGS, started in 1996, focuses on “disadvantaged kids who struggle to navigate academics, and often can neither comprehend nor manage the difficult circumstances of their lives.”

“I told her Atlanta was the place to be,” Bryant says. Because the Ready by 21 leaders here have “a deep and abiding belief that if we are to make a difference – that quantum leap – we must root out the inequities and injustice where they most deeply reside,” Bryant says. “Our Leadership Council's unanimous support to partner with communities that are labeled ‘dropout factories’ has cemented our resolve.”



Filling Gaps

Soon Laird was in Atlanta, sitting down with Bryant and Jean Walker, vice president of education at the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, the lead organization in the city's Ready by 21 Leadership Council.

To Walker, WINGS fit perfectly with the plans of the council and United Way.

“It filled a gap,” Walker says. “We’re interested in providing support that improves students’ academic performance but also gives them skills to resolve conflicts and become leaders. We were not funding a program that primarily targets social and emotional skill-building at the elementary level.”

Plus, preliminary studies by several universities found that WINGS participants showed better behavior, school attendance and academic achievement than other students. A four-year impact study by the University of Virginia is underway.

For Laird, the strong Ready by 21 coalition in Atlanta was crucial.

– those “dropout factories” to which Bryant referred. Laird was happy to bring WINGS to two elementary schools in one of those neighborhoods, Banneker, in a suburban area southwest of the city.

Best of all, the Ready by 21 leaders had targeted two especially needy neighborhoods as priorities for investments in youth services and supports



Brad Bryant

Bridget Laird

For Laird, the strong Ready by 21 coalition in Atlanta was crucial. “It wasn’t reinventing the wheel,” she says of importing WINGS. “We knew there was support for this. They helped us target the schools that could benefit from us the most.”

The Leadership Council served as a sort of chamber of commerce, providing connections and opening doors for Laird. She met with the state director of the Georgia Afterschool Alliance, the team working on 21st Century Community Learning Center programs and senior leaders at the Fulton County Schools, among others.

The result: With \$75,000 from United Way, WINGS will open this fall in the Heritage and S.L. Lewis Elementary Schools. Last month, WINGS staffers presented the program to faculty members in Atlanta and began the process of recruiting staff and students (grades K-5). Laird says WINGS will choose “the most needy kids based on academics, behavior and family challenges.”

Said Josephine Richmond, principal of S.L. Lewis, “I can’t wait to watch my kids learn these important life skills – and have fun.”

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For more information, visit www.readyby21.org