

WINGS for kids



If you ask Andrew Williams about his past behavior, the sixth-grader at James Simons Elementary School in North Charleston, South Carolina, will tell you that he used to be disrespectful, argumentative, stubborn, and attention-seeking. If you ask him about his behavior today, he'll say that he's kind, caring, understanding and aware of other people's feelings.

In other words, Andrew is learning to live by what the folks at WINGS for kids — an afterschool program that focuses on social and emotional learning — refer to as the “WINGS Creed.”

“WINGS has helped me understand that everything is not about me,” says Andrew. “Once I got here, I had to learn how to accept others — that’s what living the Creed is about.”

Beginning with its first line (“I soar with WINGS. Let me tell you why...”), the WINGS Creed centers on five core competencies of emotional intelligence — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making — and turns these terms into kid-friendly language.

Participants are told that just as one must memorize the ABC’s before learning how to read, one must know and live the Creed in order to become socially and emotionally smart and well-adjusted.

“The Creed goes with you everywhere that you go,” says Cara Mitchell, Andrew’s WINGS Program Director. In addition to reciting the verses every afternoon as the program begins, she explains, “The kids are encouraged to take the Creed home and spread it to their community.”

“I teach social and emotional skills and I use the Creed as the standard,” says Elijah Taylor, Andrew’s WINGS Leader, a senior at the College of Charleston. “Whenever I see an opportunity to teach more wisdom, I take it. If I see a kid being inconsiderate or bullying another kid, I’ll say, ‘That’s not kind and caring ... put yourself in the other person’s shoes.’”

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These kinds of reminders are especially important where there is a lack of parental involvement. “In a high-poverty area such as North Charleston, parents oftentimes are required to hold down two jobs or work late shifts. They don’t always have the opportunities they need to do it themselves,” explains WINGS CEO Bridget Laird. “We’ve got these kids 15 hours per week, 500 hours per year — it’s a place for this kind of teaching to happen.”

“We’re trying to break the cycle of poverty,” Laird continues, pointing to research indicating that developing social and emotional skills increases the chances of graduating high school, and decreases pregnancy and incarceration rates.

“Getting these children at an early age inoculates them to what might happen later on,” Laird says. “We emphasize responsible decision-making because kids in poverty areas are faced with more difficult life decisions at an earlier age than in middle- and higher-income areas. By sixth or seventh grade, they are likely to be approached to sell drugs or to join a gang. With kids from middle- and higher-income families, it’s not in their face every day.”

Improving classroom achievement — and behavior

WINGS, founded in 1996, has grown to include ten elementary schools in South Carolina and Georgia, and is one of the only afterschool programs in the country that focuses exclusively on social and emotional education.

Participants are separated by age into “nests” of ten. Meeting five afternoons a week, the children visit the WINGS Academic Center for help with their studies and take part in many other activities. In addition to documenting higher achievement levels in the classroom, studies show that WINGS participants are less prone to troublemaking.

“The Creed definitely works,” says Cara Mitchell. “Let’s say a boy is walking down the hallway and trips up another kid and I ask him, ‘Did you trip this person?’ He may deny it at first, but then I might ask him to ‘show your ID,’ which means, in the context of the Creed, ‘show me what you just did.’ Usually, the student admits what he or she has done wrong at that point.”

“Every week we teach with a different learning objective,” Mitchell continues, explaining that some of the lessons stick with the kids more than others. “One that kids remember really well teaches them to focus. We use the phrase ‘3E’s’ for eyes, ears and energy.”

“WINGS gives kids the chance to be kids while they’re learning,” adds Mitchell. “Andrew is grouped with kids his own age — they have a lot of peer interaction that isn’t all academic-based. He gets a chance to play lots of games and to work together on a team, and he does a great job with that. Plus he has a leader he looks up to.”

Hooked on WINGS

Andrew looks forward to WINGS every day. “When we’re out at recess and the WINGS Leaders start coming in for the day, the kids get excited, chant their names, give them hugs,” says Andrew’s classroom teacher, Amanda White. “It’s another adult they can have fun with who is not the teacher and not mom.” In their late teens and early twenties, these leaders “can be very positive role models, and that can be so important for these children.”

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Certainly Elijah Taylor has been an important role model for Andrew. “Elijah carries himself like the cool kid on campus, but the children still respect him, and he gives them the right direction,” says White. “The kids like to hang out with him — play basketball with him, play games with him — but when it’s time for academics, they can take him seriously.”

Both White and Andrew’s mother, Danielle Ivory, report that Andrew and Elijah seem to function as brothers, perhaps because they have so much in common. “I come from humble beginnings myself,” says Taylor. “I had a single mother who raised four kids.”

Taylor first connected with WINGS at a Charleston job fair. “I stopped at a WINGS table and I thought, ‘Hey, I can do that.’ I see it as something deeper than just a job. The children are our future and I have a chance to make a difference in their lives. It’s my duty to give back to the community.”

“The kids make me happy whenever I see them,” Taylor continues. “Some of them go through so much — some of them will tell me things that it really hurts my heart to hear — but they’re still wearing a smile. It reminds me of my own blessings. You’re supposed to be teaching them, but they end up teaching you.”

Taylor recalls that Andrew immediately stood out. “We butted heads at first. We had a personality clash because we were too much alike. We’re both laid-back but headstrong at the same time. Now we have a special unspoken bond. Sometimes we laugh at things that others wouldn’t catch.”

“He’s like a big brother to me — we’re friends,” says Andrew. “He looks out for us, and he makes sure we’re safe. Sometimes I get in trouble with Mr. Elijah, usually for talking. I like to laugh and sometimes I get caught laughing in class. Usually, it’s because I’m just trying to cheer someone up. I don’t like people to be sad.”

In fact, Andrew is always quick to help others — with homework as well as emotional support, and also in athletics. “If someone needs help with basketball, I help them,” he says. “My friends come to me because they know I’m willing to help ... friends in WINGS and outside of WINGS. I show them how to learn from their mistakes and they actually listen to what I have to say.”

“When my friend Laron was about to be in a fight, I told him he knows better, that his mom raised him better than that,” Andrew recalls. “And so they talked it out instead. And my friend Travis, he broke the P.E. equipment and the teacher said he’d have to pay for it, and I told him to just work hard and he’d be there before he even knew it. And he did it.”

Andrew says the program has taught him about trust. “If you want trust, you have to gain it. It taught me that if you trust somebody, you trust them with everything. If you lose someone’s trust, you have to earn it back.”

“Andrew has a great positive side. He’s a great leader, and a great role model for the other kids,” Taylor says. “If he’s completing a task, the others want to help him. But negative energy can be just as contagious as positive. If Andrew’s not in a good mood, it’s a different story. He’s like a lot of kids — he can be a kid and not listen. If he gets in trouble during school, he’ll come to WINGS upset and a little too emotional.”

“At WINGS we say ‘Our emotions are nothing to hide,’ ” Taylor continues. “A lot of kids come in after they’ve been in a fight or had trouble at home or in school. We just try to

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have a dialogue, try to get to the root of the problem.”

A family affair

Andrew is the younger of two children. His older sister also enrolled in WINGS when she attended elementary school. Their mother, who works at a gas station, reports that Andrew comes home in the evening with his homework finished. “They feed the kids dinner now. It was magnificent when they brought that in. And the WINGS Leaders always work with you. If the weather’s bad and you’re late, they wait for you. They make sure your kids are safe before they push them out the door. And they’re very responsible about being in contact with me about how Andrew is doing.”

Ivory says her son doesn’t want to come home at all most days. “On Fridays I work late and I have someone else pick him up, and he complains to me that they show up too early,” she says, noting that the free program has greatly reduced her child-care costs. “All the WINGS Leaders are awesome. You want your child to be interacting with people like this on a day-to-day basis. And the Creed that they say, Andrew comes home and says that. It’s helping me teach him to be a young man.”

“If your family has been at WINGS that long, it becomes like a family,” says Mitchell. “That’s something we like to create in our nests— we call it ‘creating a family vibe.’ ”

“Honestly,” concludes Ivory, noting that Andrew hopes to become a WINGS Leader himself someday, “with what they’ve done for both my kids, I don’t know what I would have done without them.”