



## 159. Bringing Social Emotional Learning to Classrooms with Bridget Durkan Laird

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**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:24] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin.

We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

So, welcome to today's episode. As always, we are super excited about the conversation that we are about to have. And today, we are going to be talking about a really innovative program that is working super hard to try to bring SEL, Social-Emotional Learning, into sort of the forefront of our thinking as we are talking about school traits formation work.

And so, joining us today is Bridget Laird, who is the Executive Officer for an organization called Wings for Kids. So, Bridget, welcome to the program.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:01:30] Thank you. It's nice to be here.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:32] Excellent. And I want to start out sort of high level helping folks sort of understand what this organization is, Wings for Kids. And just sort of set some of the stage, you're leading the charge to bring that social and emotional skills development, in particular, to kids in elementary schools and working towards really sort of making this a forefront concern that we have. And, actually, today more than ever, we need this.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:01:32] Exactly.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:32] So, give us just a little bit sort of about the origin story, if you will. So, set the context for us for why this organization and when it got started. Because you're not the founder, so share with us a little bit about of the thinking about the crafting of this because it's been around, actually, for a little while now.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:02:22] Yes. So, we're actually 25 years old. And our founder found herself in a place in her life where she felt like she was missing something. She had a great career. She was making good money. She felt success. But there was something on the personal side that she was missing.

She wasn't having trusting relationships. She felt like her empathy skills were off. And she was struggling a bit. And at the time, the book, Emotional Intelligence by Dan Goleman, came out. So, she looked at that book and she was like, "You know what? This is what I'm missing. This emotional intelligence piece."

So, she founded Wings to get kids those skills before they were teenagers so they didn't end up like her. She was 45 years old kind of struggling. And she said, "I'd like to get kids these skills by the time they're teenagers." So, the original mission statement was so that kids could live more joyfully, powerfully, and responsibly. And we really haven't gotten far off of that.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:03:16] No. That's a beautiful thing, right?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:03:19] Right. Like, how not? And so, at the time social-emotional learning really wasn't a thing for kids. It had just kind of started and people knew a little bit about it. But I started just two years in, so I'm coming up on 24 years. And when I joined, I literally remember the first grant we wrote and we didn't get it. And on the top of the page in red ink, it said, "Who cares how a child feels about themselves if they can't read or write?"

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:03:51] My goodness.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:03:51] So, there was no connection from that side. So, you know, 25 years later, clearly, social-emotional learning is in the forefront. But what we've had a chance to do is take that time to build a comprehensive program and do the research behind it so that we're really on a place now, 25 years later, when people are talking about it where we can say, "We have a great program. We have great statistics. And we can help this momentum grow throughout the country."

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:04:17] And we have a track record, right? To your point, you know, we're 20 somewhat years in, we actually understand the ins and outs in sort of dealing with all of this, right?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:04:26] We know how to do this. Right. And, actually, we started in afterschool programs. And the reason that we started an afterschool - well, our very first was camp, and we did that for two summers right before I got there. And we said, "One week is just not long enough." And we decided we needed to reach kids everyday. And that's when we decided afterschool.

In-school, it's really hard to start innovative, creative things. You know, you have a lot working against you trying to get into a classroom. So, afterschool gave that space to be creative, to develop our own program, to have a training program, also to do evaluation. You know, it's a lot easier to do an evaluation in afterschool. So, we took that.

And, really, the only reason we ended up in low income schools - because we're in low income elementary schools - is because kids needed afterschool programming more. It wasn't necessarily that low income kids need social-emotional learning more. It's just that it was a two-fold, we had a great safe place to call home after school and then we brought in the social-emotional learning piece.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:05:31] Right. Right. So, share with our listeners then a little bit about how the work itself happened. So, talk with us a little bit about the nuts and bolts of the program.

Because the reality is, right now in a post-pandemic world, everybody is talking about this. And quite frankly, it's about time. Those who have been in this business for a long time, especially around transformation and innovation, we understand that this goes hand in hand with all student learning, that this whole child sort of thinking. And although folks are starting to have the conversation, it seems to have some sense of urgency for a whole host of unfortunate reasons we didn't have prior to this.

So, now everybody is out there looking. You know, full disclosure and honesty, everybody wants a program that's already working. They don't want to have to reinvent the wheel. And, fortunately, they're looking for such things. So, share with our listeners about exactly sort of how Wings for Kids works.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:06:28] Yeah. So, we have a lot of different pathways now. But our original sort of flagship program is our afterschool program. And we run that in a Title I elementary school, and it's three hours a day, five days a week. And we took all this time to develop it.

And if you're looking from the outside, it would just be a fun engaging afterschool program. But what we've done is we found ways to weave social-emotional learning throughout the day. And we do that in a couple ways. We train the staff so they get, like, 40 hours of training before they ever walk in. So, we think it's really important for the adults to understand what social-emotional learning is, be in touch with their own social-emotional skills, and then learn how to then bring it to the kids. So, there's a training component.

And then, the actual curriculum is woven into a variety of different lessons around the five competencies. And the five competencies, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision making. So, we have objective for each of those. But then, we have what we call our Words to Live By, which are those five competencies broken down into kid language, and it's five stanzas sort of poem that the kids say everyday. And then, we use it to bring in our teaching through every aspect of the program.

So, for example for self-management, we teach kids how to focus inward. And we limit distractions. And we use something called our 3Es, your eyes, your ears, and your energy. So, if you're in the afterschool program, you can use that a lot, right? You're on the basketball court, you have the foul line, your eyes are on the hoop. Your eyes aren't looking around to see what your friends are doing. Your energy isn't on yelling at the referee for not making enough good calls. Your energy is on, like, following through, follow through. And your ears are blocking out. Probably, people are saying, "Miss it. Miss it." because that's how basketball is. So, that's just one thing you can bring in.

And you might bring it in homework time. Your eyes are on your paper. Your ears are blocking out your friend, you know, "Can I get that answer? What are you doing? What are you doing?" And your energy is on doing the homework, not bouncing your pencil up and down.

So, there's a variety of different - we have 40 to 50 little things like that that we bring in to the actual day. And we have components. It's very organized. It's a 30-minute community unity, where everyone is together. And then, we have choice times which are activities. And then, academic time.

So, we've built that and we did a full randomized control trial on that program. So, we did with the University of Virginia a whole gamut. It's not easy to do an evaluation like that, and found that we had evidence. So, once we built that and had the evidence, we were able to pullout the pieces from a fidelity study to say what pieces of this program can we pass to other places.

So, we've been able to deliver in-school programs as well and partnerships across the country. And then, we also have a very large partnership with discovery education where they have taken a lot of our stuff, put it into digital format, and then we dispersed it to teachers for free.

So, it's all built on that model of bringing SEL into fun, engaging stuff in an easy way. Because, you know, no one has time, especially teachers, if you're talking about the classroom, there's so much pressure and demands on the teacher. You don't want something that's hard. It's easy. You just bring it in and it's a natural piece of the day.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:10:02] Right. And it's also wonderful, too, that you figured out a way to make it this accessible. So, the notion that this is free for a teacher that wants it or that there's a whole host of other ways that schools, that teachers of afterschool programs can get access to something that's research-based, and we know that it works, and it's got full fidelity. That's huge and you don't see that everyday when new programs, quite frankly, show up in the ecosystem.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:10:30] Right. And I think that's because it's been our mission from day one. So, we are social-emotional learning and that's what we live to do. So, it's not necessarily like a little box that we're trying to check. It's literally what we care about so we want to make sure we can get to as many kids. Because if not, why do we exist if we're not fulfilling that mission.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:10:52] Well, just talk about that a little bit. We'll get into this a little bit more than nuts and bolts. But I know that one of the things that our listeners are curious about is, given all of that, then how are you funded? How do you do this work and make it available for free to the people who need it the most?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:11:09] So, we have a pretty diverse funding stream. We receive about 60 percent public funding in a variety of different sources within that. Then, about 30 percent foundations, and those are local and national. And, also within that is corporate foundations, so a little bit of corporate in there. And then, about 10 percent individuals. And because of that diverse pot, it's not easy to kind of try and figure out the budget every year and figure that all out. But we can do it in a way that we can provide stuff for free. It's a lot of coming together.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:11:46] Yeah. And that's a fabulous [inaudible].

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:11:50] A lot of strategic thinking and a lot of coming together, but, really, that's the way it happens. [Inaudible].

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:11:57] No. And I understand that. I've lived that. You know, managing a nonprofit, I understand all of these components. But I'm super thrilled to hear that you've been able to figure that out.

So, let's talk a little bit now that we've been able to set that aside, because I just knew, I could see everybody sort of in the ethos, their head is spinning, "Wow. How do they do that?" So, let me get that out of the way.

But let's talk a little bit then about some of the nuts and bolts. So, when you think about the opportunity for teachers or schools to be able to adapt this program, again, research-based, high fidelity, can't stress enough that if you're going to choose something, choose something that has all of those components that they will put out there for you to sort of see the fidelity of the work that's happening.

So, how do you then ensure when this work passes into, for example, a classroom teacher that wants to take this on, that they themselves have the fidelity necessary to deliver the program. So, let's talk about the professional development or the training component, I guess, a little bit.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:13:02] I mean, I think that's what's really important. Wings has always been about making sure that fidelity is at the top of the radar and the top priority. And so, we've made a decision that when we partner, when we work with teachers and groups, we partner with people that really want to do this. Like, this is something that is of their interest and not something that said, you know, "You should do this." It's not a grant where you're checking a box. And I think that's first and foremost.

And once you get individuals that are engaged like that, we really coach in a way that helps guide the process. And it took a long time, so, again, we're 25 years old, we're up in our 24th. And we, at first, thought to ourselves, we do it right and this is how we do it. And if everybody doesn't do it this way, then we're not able to work with you.

Then, we realized - this is really about nine years ago - you know what? We have so much to offer and there are a lot of different ways to do things. So, we reevaluated and came back and that's where the professional development training really became a very important piece, because it's the adults that it starts with.

We all know, again, the adults understand it. If they know their own social-emotional skills, it's going to do a much better job getting down to the kids. So, we really developed a professional development training coaching approach when we're with engaged schools, programs, individuals. But, again, we really make sure that we're working with people that are doing this because they really believe in it and not necessarily because someone told them it's what they should be doing.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:14:39] Right. Right. A hundred percent. That makes all the difference in the world. So then, let's talk a little bit about the student perspective. So, what is it that you hear or what does the student experience when they are within the Wings for Kids program? So, share with us a little bit some of those pieces.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:14:39] Yeah. I mean, our kids are going to say, "I have so much fun in Wings. I love Wings. I love the adults that I'm with. I want to go back." And I think that's important for anything. Kids have to like it. I mean, we have gotten to a point where sometimes we forget kids are kids. You're only a kid for so long. It's fun to be a kid.

And so, if you were to ask a kid how they felt, they'd say it was fun and engaging. And a lot of it would be about the environment that's created. "I feel like I can trust the adults that are there. I feel like I can make mistakes and have people support me, rather than make fun of me. I feel like I can be myself. I know my strengths. I know my weaknesses. And I'm willing to put it all out there because the group that I'm with has empathy for me."

So, it's a very supportive trusting environment that's just fun and engaging. And, honestly, sometimes crazy. I mean, we just do crazy fun stuff.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:15:59] Yeah. There's nothing wrong with crazy and fun. So, I'm sort of curious then, because you had mentioned that there's a curriculum. There's this program that sort of runs with that. So, does the curriculum adapt itself to the content or the context of the particular afterschool or in-school program? Or does the curriculum drive the program elements itself?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:16:22] So, we can adapt. So, we have, again, the five competencies and then we have a learning objective. We have several learning objectives under each. And then, we have teaching tips. And we find a way for however the program our classroom is working to integrate that curriculum in a way that's useful for that environment. Rather than having a curriculum that's in a box that's like, "This is what we do. This is week one. This week two." So, we are kind of adaptable in that way.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:16:54] And that makes for a greater success, right? Because one size does not fit all. We are not all the same, the environment, the community, the place, all of those factors. You can play ball.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:16:54] Again, honestly, we learned it. We did try the other way. And, again, this is 10, 11 years ago, it was like, "This is the way it is." And it's almost like running the Chick-fil-A, fries are exactly this way. But we learned like, guess what? You can adapt and still have great outcomes for kids.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:17:29] So, I would assume over the course of a 24 somewhat years here that there's been not just a lot of those sort of things that you've learned that made you think about the way you were going to modify the program or enhance the program elements. But I would assume that somewhere along the way, there were some aha. Some things that you're, like, completely shocked by. Could you share some of those things with our listeners?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:17:56] Yeah. I mean, I think one of the aha's was how important the adults were. Because we always had great adults working for Wings. And when we did our randomized control trial, it shined the light on how important it was for the adult to first buy-in and for the adult to be stable mentor delivering the program in the way that we wanted it to. And it showed in outcome.

So, our randomized control trial had showed, they can sit better academically. They had better behavior. They developed social and emotional skills, especially executive function. And we were finding that one of the key components was that adult relationship. So, that was definitely an aha moment.

And I also think another aha moment was that piece of figuring out you can integrate this into any environment. And it was kind of the first program that ever came to us that said help us out. And we sort of sat there and said, "What would it look like if it wasn't necessarily us on the ground? How can we do this in finding that we can have some of the same outcomes there?" That was a great aha moment.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:19:16] Yeah. No, I can absolutely imagine. And just sort of from my own work and experience with PAST some similar things, you know, if we can figure out the fidelity around the foundational components of the program and we can train others to deliver the foundational components but with their own flavor, their own ecosystem, their own inputs from their local environment, that they can be extremely successful.

But that's not the way that we collectively, I think, have been trained to think about how you take your idea or your product and you sort of put it to market. It's not really the way the world of business and industry would have you think about that you deliver X, Y, or Z, right?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:19:59] Exactly. And I think that's the piece that you really have to be adaptable with and understand that when you're talking about kids and kid's lives that there's so many differences, there's so many different scenarios and environments and things that you need to adapt to. And if you're looking for true change and you're looking for true impact with kids, that's very different than, again, taking a product to market of a new pen or a new car. You're not necessarily looking for life changing outcomes with that. But when you're talking about life changing outcomes, you need to change your strategy a little bit.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:20:43] Yeah. Absolutely 100 percent. So, how do teacher, schools, or afterschool in formal education programs who would like to be able to incorporate more SEL in the work they're doing, in particular Wings for Kids programming, how do folks get access to that? So, I am in the U.S. I'm in other parts of the world. How do I approach this?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:21:06] Yeah. I mean, honestly, with Wings, we have on our website, which is easy, it's just wingsforkids.org, and there's a bar on there that is learn more about getting more involved with work. And that's got the first step if you really truly wanted to get involved with partnering with Wings. Because they only have a real conversation. It's not like, you know, some sort of error or something. It's like, "Call me up and let's talk about what you want."

And then, the free stuff which you can kind of get a light touch exists on another website, and that's soarwithwings.com, S-O-A-R-withwings.com. And that's the partnership with discovery education. It has all that free stuff.

And those are videos, you know, 25 minute virtual fieldtrip, which, if anybody, the first thing that they wanted to start with in a classroom or in a program, this 25 minute virtual fieldtrip has no adults speaking at all. And some adults on cam are just for the sake of showing. And it is our program in North Charleston, South Carolina, which is one of our locations. And the kids, they are in our Wings program and they walk you through, essentially, how they learned social-emotional learning.

And you show that to the kids in the program or the classroom, and it provides the anchor to then teach those lesson throughout the whole year, the whole day, the whole week, whatever it is you're trying to do. That in itself could be life changing for a classroom. And, again, it's free. And then, it kind of provides an idea of some of the ways that we teach. And we can kind of go from there.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:22:47] I love the fact that it's student-lead. And that the agency that the kids being able to tell the story of their own journey through all of this. You know, that near-peer mentoring, you can't beat it across a wide age brand. Kids get that. They're like, "Ha, this is a kid talking to me. Not an adult talking to me in this video." So, it's meaningful.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:23:08] And it's not scripted either, which a lot of people are like, "How long did that take him?" Like, "Listen, we didn't give the kids anything. We just said talk. You know, they asked some questions, what did you learn today?" And so, that's what's so cool. It's very natural.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:23:21] Yeah. I love that about that. And I've been on the website. I took a look at it so that's a lot of fun.

You know, I also always want to think about and be super mindful as we have these conversations as people are anticipating, not just what's coming, but what can I do with something that I didn't think about.

And I always like to toss that question back at my guests in the sense of saying, you've done this amazing thing and it's working and it's super cool. I mean, we love the fact that you're able to share that with the world. But what are you thinking about next? Because what I have found is, you know, the reach and the highlight on this program, they're super innovative because they've got innovative people wrapped around them and immersed inside of them. And in the fate, people are always thinking about the next kind of thing.

So, in your Wings for Kids as an organization, what are you thinking about? What matters to you right now that is sort of the next sort of body of work that you're engaged in?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:24:21] Yeah. And I mean I think a lot of it is post-COVID. Because the need for social-emotional learning has just skyrocketed and kids have experienced trauma and emotions that we never really thought that they would. So, for us, it's trying to catch up to that and finding the kids that need us. And we've always been looking to reach as many kids as possible.

But now it's finding the kids that COVID really impacted and how can we get there. And we have to think about different delivering methods too. Because we can only run so many programs. We run programs in the southeast. We do Atlanta, Charlotte, Columbia, and Charleston in South Carolina. And there's so many more kids that are suffering post-COVID, so looking at new delivery methods.

And we are now really engaging in more digital. So, we have a full learning management system that you can log on and do Wings from an online system and get everything from us that you need. And that is something that we're really are finishing, literally, this week. And pushing out there to help more and more kids in that way. So, the teachers, if we can't get there in person and we can't run a program, how else can we get to kids that really need this post-COVID. And that digital side, I think is really important.

And we learned that with the discovery partnership. We established our discovery partnership. So, it's discovery education which was the Discovery Channel, and now they're in about 60 percent of districts. We established our relationship in 2019 to take Wings's material and get in a new digital format to get to more kids. Well, we didn't realize what was coming. And so, we actually finished up a lot of our resources by about January 2020.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:26:21] About time.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:26:22] Right. So, there was almost, like, two percent, "Oh, how did you know? We didn't know."

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:26:26] Serendipity is amazing, isn't it?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:26:26] Right. And so, we had these goal of, honestly, reaching 1.5 million kids, 500,000 kids a year with a three year project. And when March 2020 came, Discovery had so many teachers in districts saying, "We are in trouble. We need social-emotional learning." And luckily, they were able to say, "Actually, we just created a program here." And so, we've actually reached 4.2 million with that.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:26:55] Wow. Congratulations.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:26:56] Thanks. But that says to me, like, that's what's next. Like, we were able to do that and we want to do it in a way that's impactful, and that's why we've always been grounded in research. So, to me, it's figuring out how to keep that number growing and doing it in an impactful way.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:26:56] Yeah. Absolutely. And figuring out how that scale. Because at some point, that scale was going to be bigger than that, obviously, but also it's going to be global in terms of the way that it works. And so, how do you deal with that? How do you deal with the different cultures, different languages? So, I would argue, it's a fabulous problem for you to have trying to figure out sort of what those next pieces and those next steps are.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:27:47] Yeah, for sure. Always the fun part, and that's why I'm still here. Every year, it's something new figuring out how to grow.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:27:55] Exactly. I always like to close the program by recognizing that folks that are listening to this, they are thinking about a lot of different things and about the way that they would take and approach this. And I guess that one of the things that's super useful as part of this conversation is, in recognizing that this classroom teacher may be all on my own in a particular district, we may be all struggling with these very things, and I'd like to get started and I'd like to reach out, and I can go to all of those resources.

But as an individual instructor, whether it's a formal or informal sort of space, sometimes the getting started is the daunting part. So, what recommendation would you have for our listeners about, you want to go down this road, you want to find out more, and you're willing to roll up your sleeves and do the work, what should somebody be thinking about as they sort of launch themselves on this journey with Wings for Kids?

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:28:51] I mean, I think the first thing is it's not as hard as people think it is. It's really not. And so, setting the mindset of this can be done, this is not going to provide a lot of stress for me. In the end it would help.

So, one of our biggest indicators on our research was the behavior improved. So, if I'm a teacher and there's a lot going on post-COVID, there's emotions, there's behavior of kids that weren't in a classroom for a year, and it's hard to teach when you have all of that going on. Focusing on this piece, the social and emotional side, will actually help control that. And it will help control the emotions within the classroom. So, it's going to make the job easier.

So, I think having that mindset of I can do this and, actually, it's going to make the job easier and my kids are going to benefit. Rather than kind of how am I ever going to fit this in. I think that is the first thing. It's just that mindset shift.

And then, knowing that if you do engage with Wings and reach out, like we've been doing this for this long and we're there to help. And the Words to Live By that I mentioned, one of the things that we say everyday with the kids, one of the big words from that is support. And that's what Wings is about. So, if somebody wants to engage in this, Wings would be supportive. That's a big word that we are. And I can just promise that.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:30:25] I love that very much. And I think that everybody will appreciate knowing that that possibility is out there for them. So, I want to thank you very much, Bridget, for making time out of your day to share what's going on with Wings for Kids. We will make sure to all of our listeners, on the show notes, we will post all the resources that you heard Bridget made reference to. And so, I encourage you, take a look at the program. If it looks like it's going to be a great fit for you, to reach out and get some of that support. So, thank you so much.

**Bridget Durkan Laird:** [00:30:57] Thank you very much.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:31:01] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guest and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.