

# After-school program at church assists kids with school and life

By [Ana Valle-Greene](#)  
Star-News Correspondent

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"Check," says Chris Sims in a clear voice that rings through a room at Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church in Wilmington.

"Mate," answer a group of youngsters.

"Check," he repeats. "Mate," comes the answer again.

That's how the students in the WRAAP after-school enrichment program know it's time to quiet down, said 10-year-old Rahkeis Doughty. The fifth-grader at Freeman Elementary School was working on lowest common denominators recently. "It's not really hard," he said, although sometimes the classwork is difficult.

Sims, a program assistant, has sat in Rahkeis's place. The Laney High School graduate grew up in a tough neighborhood. "Some of my friends went astray," he said recently, as he watched over the students. After-school programs gave him a chance, and more.

"It kept me out of trouble," he said. "We went to Disney World, other places, a lot of experiences I couldn't have had if it wasn't for after-school programs."

This after-school program, which opened September 2007 and now enrolls about 70 students, packs quite a bit into three hours. When students arrive at the church, they dive into homework, then there's cultural enrichment, a hot meal, an academic curriculum, and some free time for games and fun.

Freeman Elementary student Nijaye Hill finds everything fun at WRAAP – the games, eating at Kids' Café and playing outside, even doing homework. "It's easy because I'm in first grade," said the 7-year-old. "I already learn and listen and follow directions."

Meyah Riggins, in fifth grade at Freeman, said the Monday-through-Thursday program helps her with her schoolwork. "And it's fun getting to do activities," she said.

Executive Director Daryl Dockery founded Wilmington Residential Adolescent Achievement Place two years ago to give lower income, low-performing students "a place of purpose, promise, and potential." It's a place for young people to be supervised after school, to work



Staff photo by Paul Stephen  
Amy Edison, an instructor with the Wilmington Residential Adolescent Achievement Place, an after-school program for kids struggling in the classroom, keeps an eye on her students.

on their academics, and to expand their world.

There is no cost to participants, who are generally in first through seventh grade, although high school students can also receive help, such as with SAT preparation.

"I'm an educator at heart," said Adrian Coles, one of the program directors and whose specialty is higher-level math, "I find a lot of enjoyment in (working for the program)."

The academic curriculum is specifically designed for after-school programs "to get them up to speed," Coles said. The aim is not just to have students improve their end-of-grade test scores, but to work above grade level.

Program Director Emily Strittmater organizes lessons in life skills and cultural experiences, such as Spanish vocabulary and music on a recent week.

"(Some students) don't get a chance to be exposed to anything outside their neighborhood," she said.

The life skills curriculum focuses on stress and anger management, conflict resolution, communication, and other topics designed to help students deal with adversity. One program addresses pregnancy prevention. "There's definitely a positive correlation between behavior and achievement," Strittmater said.

Funding comes from the 21st Century Learning grant from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and Technical Assistance for Needy Families, a grant from the Department of Social Services. Community support also comes from partnerships with the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, the school district and other groups.

"Organizations really want to be a part of this," Coles said.

Dockery brings to the program 17 years of experience, during which he has received state honors for best practices and innovation awards in after-school programs. He said a great partnership has been forged with the University of North Carolina Wilmington, whose students in the education and parks and recreation programs serve as volunteers and staff members.

But Rahkeis Doughty is hardly aware of all the forces bringing together this program near his Creekwood neighborhood. He knows what he likes best. "They have good food," Rahkeis said, mentioning ribs, macaroni and cheese, chicken, juice. Also, he said, "there's nice teachers here."

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