

AFTER SCHOOL SUPERHEROES

RON BERNAS FEBRUARY 2017

When 826 Michigan cut the ribbon on its new facility in Eastern Market on October 5, Detroit had another high-profile option for students to participate in fun programming that enhances education.

826 Michigan is part of the 826 National, a nonprofit organization founded in 2002 to provide creative writing and tutoring centers in major U.S. cities. The organization is the brainchild of acclaimed author Dave Eggers and educator Nínive Calegari and it's helping students in seven U.S. cities, including Detroit, strengthen their writing skills and more.

Programs like 826 are designed to ensure students have access to after-school education or activities that may not be available in their schools. Extracurriculars are often the first things cut when schools and districts face budget woes.

Researchers say cutting this type of programming is not in the best interests of the students, as studies show that students at all grade levels who participate in extracurriculars – from sports to performing arts to volunteering in the community – are more likely to show up for class, stay engaged in their education and earn better grades.

Sandra Terry-Martin sees these and other results at Detroit Merit Academy where she has been principal since 2002. Each year, teachers and administrators at the K-8 charter school on the city's far east side host some 10 to 15 after-school clubs in which 100 to 200 students participate. Most are free, but some are offered for a fee by outside companies.

"Our teachers volunteer to offer clubs in their interests and we have things from crafting to yoga to healthy cooking," Terry-Martin said. The goal is to help students develop skills they may not have an opportunity to do at home. "In the healthy cooking club they can take what they learn back to their family."

There is a learning aspect in all the activities: Students in the movie club are asked to write reflections about what they have seen.

“What the teachers really like is the opportunity to get to really know the kids in a different setting,” she said. “And for students to build connections to adults outside of a classroom setting.”

It’s that connection that 826 believes is so important.

Amanda Uhle is the executive director of 826 Michigan. She says the new Eastern Market facility will be a hub for the Ann Arbor-based organization to expand its free programming throughout metro Detroit. Though focused on writing, the organization’s volunteers act as tutors and mentors to students.

“Our goal is to support students with one-on-one attention,” she said. “Young people are hungry for this attention and in many schools, they just don’t have that. Many of them don’t receive it all the time at home, either. Working closely with these young people makes them more successful in their schoolwork.”

And there’s the writing. 826 hosts free evening and weekend writing workshops to help students become more comfortable and creative with their writing. 826’s “Drop-in Writing” programs currently offered in Detroit libraries provide students with writing prompts, and volunteers offer feedback on student work. The students also learn how to critique the work of others and grow comfortable expressing their views.

“Writing is essential,” Uhle said. “It is not a means to an end. It is something that is important in everything we do. We see such emotional growth in the students, it’s really amazing.”

826 programs are free; the program is funded by grants, donations and proceeds from retail stores associated with each center, which sell toys and games designed to get kids thinking and being creative. The Eastern Market site will be host to the Detroit Robot Factory.

As public schools continue to make cuts to curriculum and programming, Detroit has seen several independent after-school programs rise to the occasion of diversifying local youths' education. Here are a couple of other notable options:

YOUTHVILLE

Youthville is another organization that offers programming to students. Though Youthville has been around for many years, its offerings were recently taken over by Don Bosco Hall, whose mission is to provide "supportive human services to enhance the quality of youth." Youthville programming is offered after school at its New Center facility. The offerings are subjects that aren't always found in public schools, said Program Director Linda Huff.

"The kids really like anything with computer animation," Huff said, with one of the most popular classes being Superhero Comics, in which students design their own superhero and use computer animation to bring a story about him or her to life.

Drone creation is also a big draw. In it, students learn through online videos how drones are made, then get hands-on practice at Youthville.

Beat Making class introduces students to the history of music then lets them explore their own voice through creating their own sounds. A state-of-the-art television studio introduces students to the world both in front of and behind the camera.

"We have a journalism program, but not everyone wants to be in front of a camera," Huff said. "So students learn about production, which is also useful and could spark an interest that might become a career."

Performing arts is offered at Youthville by the highly respected Mosaic Youth Theater of Detroit. Tutoring and study areas are available to students each day.

"What we offer is a way for kids to explore something they might be interested in," Huff said. "And provide them with a safe place to be after school."

DOWNTOWN BOXING GYM

Downtown Boxing Gym is another place for students to work on academics, but also on themselves as a whole.

“It’s a little bit of a misnomer,” said Carolyn Geck, development director for the gym. “The Downtown Boxing Gym is more of an academic program that uses aspects of many sports – not just boxing – to help them explore the tenets associated with sports. They learn about determination, perseverance, relationships with peers and coaches and becoming part of a team. We also talk to them about treating their bodies right and being healthy.”

Recent enrichment opportunities included participating in a mock trial; a Lego Robotics program; Wayne State University’s Warrior STEAM program where they explored science, technology, engineering, arts and math; and community volunteering.

All the programming is free, but there is a long waiting list: “It’s a wonderful and tragic problem to have,” Geck said. “But we’re working on it.”

Extracurricular programming can be found at major institutions like the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and the Detroit Historical Museum, too.

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