

Author Dave Eggers talks Detroit visit, inspiring kids

Anna Clark, Detroit Free Press Special Writer 12:14 a.m. EDT November 2, 2014



(Photo: Alessandro Moggi)

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On Tuesday, acclaimed author Dave Eggers will be featured at Wayne State University in a talk titled "Buccaneers, Robots, Yetis and Other Agents of Social Change." Afterward, Detroit community leaders will join the author and cofounder of 826 National — a national network of writing centers that espouses a playful spirit — for a discussion about creative models for civic engagement.

Eggers will stick around Detroit on Wednesday, when he will headline Sweater Weather, an annual benefit for 826michigan, the Ann Arbor-based outpost of 826. The proceeds support 826michigan's in-school residencies at the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, Amelia Earhart Elementary-Middle School and Bunche Preparatory Academy, all in Detroit. The urban residencies mark an expansion of the work of the nonprofit, which pairs volunteers with students ages 6-18 for creative writing and tutoring services.

Eggers, the founder of publisher McSweeney's and the author of award-winning books such as "Zeitoun" and "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," answered questions via e-mail about education in Detroit and social engagement.

QUESTION: Ann Arbor-based 826michigan has expanded its presence in Detroit through in-school residencies. How does the 826 model adapt to different communities and school systems?

ANSWER: 826 Valencia in San Francisco started in 2002, with a focus on addressing the needs of students in that neighborhood, where most of the public-school students are from Spanish-speaking homes. But when other cities began starting 826 centers, their needs were always different, and we were always mindful that each center needed to be shaped around the specific needs of the communities they serve.

So in any given city, 826 works closely with local teachers and parents to make sure we're providing the help they need — as opposed to us trying to map the same services onto every city. If you go to any 826 center, you'll see some commonalities — especially the emphasis on one-on-one tutoring staffed by volunteers, and particular attention toward the written word — but you'll also see incredible specificity and adaptation. 826michigan has always been fantastically nimble and adept at addressing the particular needs of the students of Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor and Detroit, and teachers always tell us how to be most useful.

Q: The in-school residencies are designed to "support teachers in overcrowded classrooms." What does that actually look like? What do volunteers offer that is different from other programs that work throughout the year in Detroit schools, including the [InsideOut Literary Arts Project](#) and [CityYear](#)?

A: All of the work you mention is essential, and we work with CityYear all the time — and also with AmeriCorps and other agencies in other cities. Two of the main things we add to the mix is sheer numbers of volunteers, and a special emphasis on writing and publishing. We have over 10,000 volunteers on our roster nationwide, and those people — all of them adults dedicated to helping fulfill the promise of public education

and to amplifying student voices — well, all those people offer something unique. A given teacher might request 10 volunteers once a week for three months. We can deliver those volunteers, who will assist that educator with, for example, an in-depth student writing project that might be impossible without that level of support. We believe that students struggling with writing benefit from many hours of concentrated one-on-one attention, and teachers have told us for 12 years now that 826 is unique in helping them provide that essential attention to each student's work.

But in all cases, with in-schools programs, the teacher sets the pace and plans the lessons. We're there as the extra hands in the classroom to kneel beside desks and listen to students' ideas and concerns, and to provide that authentic outside audience that can really celebrate and dignify their ideas and illuminate their project-based work.

Q: How has play and humor been essential to the workability of the 826 model?

A: All kids have a sense of humor, often a very strange and sophisticated one, and they respond immediately to any teaching method that acknowledges and uses that humor. All the 826 centers are strange places — the tutoring takes place behind bizarre storefronts full of weird products created by the staff and volunteers. So the kids that come through our doors know that the people who work there are open to unusual approaches to learning.

The kids that come to our centers after school have already been in school up to eight hours, and they usually spend another two-three hours with us, so we have to make the environment loose, fun and anything but sterile. The biggest mistake any educational institution can make is to drain the fun out of learning — to make the process seem like some kind of grind. And of course, where schools are required to teach to the test and where students are under pressure to submit to high-stakes tests, we try to inject a more creative way of thinking. It's no less rigorous, but it's more based on divergent, rather than convergent, notions of learning. There's a place for tests, of course, but if we teach kids that there's only one right answer to every question, we've raised a generation of drones, not the kind of creative people who built this country.

Q: [Emergency management](#), a [state-run school district](#) for low-performing schools (all in Detroit), a charter system with [many holes](#): Michigan, and, especially, Detroit, is at the forefront of major controversies in education policy. What do you think are the most meaningful conversations to be having in education right now?

A: I think the first thing we need to do is recognize what's great about Detroit schools. The last time I was in town, I visited two extraordinary schools — the Boggs School and Amelia Earhart Elementary-Middle School. The Boggs School was started by a dedicated group of teachers and parents working with Grace Lee Boggs, and they've created a really wonderful small school that has everything you'd want in an educational environment: the class sizes are small enough to give kids meaningful attention, the school itself is wonderfully warm and colorful and homey, and there's profound civic engagement; when I was there, there were two or three men from the neighborhood who were volunteering their time, making the school feel like a real locally owned and operated place.

Amelia Earhart is a bilingual school, and is much bigger — they've got a huge new facility — but again, there were electric things happening there. The teachers I met were inspired, and the students I met were some of the most eloquent and poised kids I've seen in 12 years. We sat around a table in the library and they read their creative writing, and we were all in tears — their work was extraordinarily candid and mature and moving. I felt like I was seeing the future of the country, and that future was magnificent.

But because you asked about the issues in education generally, I'll get on my soapbox

and say what we've been saying for a decade or so, and that's that if we want the best schools, we need the best teachers. And to attract and keep the best teachers — like those at Boggs and Earhart — we need to treat them like the creative professionals they are, and we need to compensate them in such a way that they can plan a career, raise a family, and live with dignity and honor. Right now almost 50% of teachers leave within their first five years, and that's not a sustainable model for any government service, or any business for that matter. The cofounder of 826 National, Ninive Calegari, started a project called the Teacher Salary Project to discuss the issue of teacher retention, and we made a documentary, "American Teacher," that goes into detail on the subject.

Q: 826 is in its second decade. What are your great hopes for how it will evolve?

A: Right now we're trying to go deeper in the cities where the centers are located. In San Francisco, we just added a new satellite location in Horace Mann Elementary down the street, and we're hoping to open a second full location in the Tenderloin neighborhood. So in San Francisco, we'll have five locations by the end of 2015, and that allows us to get closer to meeting the requests of the teachers and parents. In Michigan, Amanda Uhle and her team have expanded deep into Ypsilanti —D'Real Graham runs a great after-school program in a restaurant, Beezy's Café on Washington Street — and the 826michigan team in Detroit has pioneered so many great writing programs in five or six different neighborhoods' classrooms and library branches. We're looking forward to 826michigan establishing a location of their own in the city, complete with a robot retail store, in the near future.

So there's always the effort to go deeper in the existing cities. But there are always new cities who have applied for membership in the network. Right now, New Orleans and Minneapolis both have very strong programs whose missions are aligned with ours, and we're hoping that we can partner with them soon.

Q: Anything else you'd like to add?

A: When I visited the Boggs School, I met some of the young student writers, and they read their work to me and Amanda Uhle and some other guests. Their stories were really great — very funny and very wry — and later the staff at 826michigan sent me a chapbook of the students' work. It was one of the funniest and most original student collections I'd ever read. So I decided to give a try at illustrating the stories, and the result is a book, "Where Is It Coming From?" It'll be for sale at Source Booksellers on Cass Avenue in Detroit and through the Literati Bookstore website, as well as other bookstores, and all the proceeds will go to 826michigan and the Boggs School. I still laugh every time I read the kids' stories, but maybe that's just my sense of humor.

'Buccaneers, Robots, Yetis and Other Agents of Social Change'

Dave Eggers lecture and discussion as part of Richard C. Van Dusen Urban Leadership Forum

6 p.m. Tue. (doors at 5:30 p.m.)

Wayne State University's Community Arts Auditorium

450 Reuther Mall, Detroit.

The event is free and open to the public, and will be followed by a reception. RSVP at <http://bit.ly/wsueggers>.

Sweater Weather

826michigan fund-raiser with Dave Eggers

7 p.m. Wed.

Eight and Sand

3901 Christopher, Hamtramck

\$100 for dinner (by chef Brad Greenhill of Righteous Rojo and Katoi), \$200 with pre-dinner reception (includes cocktails by Two James)

<http://sweaterweather.brownpapertickets.com>

Dave Eggers' other roles

Among the long list of roles held by author Dave Eggers is the editorship of the "Best American Nonrequired Reading" series — an eclectic annual anthology that collects the most intriguing ephemera to be published anywhere in the previous year. Rather than choose pieces by himself, however, he partners with students in the writing labs of two nonprofits — 826 Michigan and California-based 826 Valencia.

But after 12 years, there's change afoot for the 2014 edition.

"The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2014," published in October, is edited for the first time by Daniel Handler, otherwise known as Lemony Snicket. Under his alter ego, Handler wrote "A Series of Unfortunate Events," the popular young adult book series. But young people at the 826 writing centers are still given the chance to work as editors on the widely selling anthology, which features nonfiction, fiction, poetry, interviews, comics and more by some of the best contemporary writers. The 2014 edition includes work by Zadie Smith, Kathryn Davis, Nathaniel Rich and V.V. Ganeshanathan (who until recently taught at the University of Michigan).

826 Michigan is already at work preparing next year's anthology. Its "Best American Nonrequired Reading" editorial board [meets](#) Tuesday evenings at its Ann Arbor storefront, the Liberty Street Robot Supply and Repair Store. Teenagers ages 14 to 18 read up to three pieces of writing each week from magazines, literary journals, blogs and zines. Each piece is put up to a lively discussion and vote to determine the best ones. There are no prerequisites for participation. Two MFA students in the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program facilitate the group, and volunteers are welcome.