

EDUCATION WEEK

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Writing Centers Seek to Unlock Youths' Creativity

By **Liana Heitin**

The idea of going to an after-school tutoring center is undoubtedly groan-inducing for most students. But what if they could enter the workspace through a secret door? And what if that secret door were located in the back of a store that sold supplies for superheroes—capes, truth serum, photon shooters, and invisibility-detection goggles?

A nonprofit organization called **826 National**, co-founded by author Dave Eggers and educator Nínive Calegari, now has eight such tutoring centers in urban areas around the country, each with a unique retail storefront that supports the free programming and is designed to fire up students' imaginations. The centers—all focused on creative writing—offer workshops, one-on-one homework help, field trips, in-school support for teachers, and summer sessions. They're staffed mainly by community volunteers.

The national network, which started with a single center at 826 Valencia Street in San Francisco 12 years ago, now reaches 30,000 students—a majority of whom are from underresourced communities. Partly because of the star power of Mr. Eggers, the author of the best-selling memoir ***A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius***, the network has attracted a steady stream of volunteers and some celebrity attention. It's also continuing to expand across the country, and possibly internationally.

The newest chapter, opened in 2010 in Washington, has quickly ramped up and now serves some 3,300 youths. Organizers of tutoring centers in New Orleans and St. Paul, Minn., are hoping to soon join the network.

Meanwhile, the network is rolling out a new program that combines STEM education with creative writing.

The 826 centers, funded by a mix of public and private grants, donations, events, and retail sales, serve students ages 6 to 18 from nearby public schools on a first-come, first-served basis. In San Francisco, 826 students enter through the **Pirate Supply Store**. In Boston, it's the **Bigfoot Research Institute**, and in Washington, they go in through the **Museum of Unnatural History**. The **Brooklyn store** sells the superhero equipment.

"The notion you've crossed a boundary and entered into another world is a special alchemy they've

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got," said Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, the executive director of the **National Writing Project**, a network that provides writing professional development for teachers but is not formally associated with 826.

'Stealth Education'

Gerald Richards, the CEO of 826 National, said the storefronts contribute to the ability to provide "stealth education."

"Students are coming right from school, and they walk into this space. They touch some eyeballs, they might try on the cape tester, then they walk in the back, and their whole perception shifts," he said. "It's like I'm not going into a tutoring space, I'm going into a different space where volunteers are waiting to work with me."

Several flagship programs run at all 826 sites. One-on-one homework help is held after 3 p.m. almost every school day, the last hour of which is dedicated to writing assistance. During Storytelling and Bookmaking field trips, classes from local schools drop by for two-hour sessions in which they write a story as a group, bind it into a book on-site, and fill out the ending on their own. Individual after-school and summer workshops have playful writing-related themes—for example, cartooning, playwriting, or comedy writing.

And the Young Authors' Book Project connects classrooms with writers and volunteers, who spend a semester helping students craft poems or stories that are then bound into a professionally published book.

Comedian Robin Williams, author Isabel Allende, and filmmaker Spike Jonze, among others, have written the forwards for the student anthologies.

"They're making space for young people to do real writing and carry their writing all the way through the process to publication," said Ms. Eidman-Aadahl. "They endow writing again with the kind of magic that the written word should have."



Volunteers Dina Lassow, second from left, and Annie Lipsitz, right, work with kindergartners Fabiola Lopez, 6, left, and Emerson Serrano, 6, at 826 DC, located in the back of the Museum of Unnatural History in Washington.
—Swikar Patel/Education Week

STEM Initiative

As part of the new 826 program that blends STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) with creative writing, students will do a hands-on science experiment and use it as the inspiration for fiction writing.

In a 2012 pilot, students learned about viral mapping and rates of decay, then wrote stories about a zombie apocalypse. The lesson plans are aligned to both the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards, according to 826.

Unlike with some other national education networks, the 826 model is overall quite nimble, said Mr. Richards. As it is, the centers are founded at the local level and then apply for chapter status.

"We're not going to parachute in and say you need 826," he said. "It has to be locally driven."

That means each chapter puts its own spin on how programs are run.

"As a network of organizations, we're very reflective of the needs and resources in our communities," said Amanda Uhle, the executive director of **826 Michigan**, which is based in Ann

Arbor. "I can't see it being successful if the program were more rigid and allowed for less flexibility."

In Michigan, for example, public transportation is not as abundant as in some of the other places 826 works.

"It's been really obvious since the beginning that many of the students we aim to serve are not able to get to our center," said Ms. Uhle. "So we go to them."

The center bought a car, which it packs full of tutors each day and drives to nearby Ypsilanti. A local cafe owner donates space for the afternoon tutoring sessions.

"In a weird way, that it's a restaurant fits into the model of having an unrelated storefront," said Ms. Uhle.

The group still hosts tutoring in Ann Arbor, behind a robot supply store, but the second tutoring space allows them to reach more students from a less-affluent area.

The 826 workshops and in-school programs differ from place to place as well, generally based on volunteers' experiences and interests. The New York City chapter began a filmwriting workshop because it had volunteers in the industry, said Mr. Richards.

Two years ago, the Washington chapter started a Saturday reading program at a nearby school. Students drop by from 10 a.m. to noon for individualized reading time with an adult.

"We had a huge cohort of volunteers looking for something to do on the weekends," said Joe Callahan, the executive director of 826 DC.

The chapter also tends "to do a lot more poetry than other chapters," said Mr. Callahan. "There happens to be a vibrant poetry scene here in the District."

This past year in the District of Columbia, creative-writing students from the SEED School, a residential charter school located in a predominantly African-American and low-income area, spent 16 weeks working with award-winning local poet Kyle G. Dargan to write and edit their own poems. Mr. Dargan, the director of creative writing at American University, came to their classroom once a week to help guide them.

Though reticent at first, the students developed a comfortable working relationship with the poet, who lives in the same part of Washington, and began discussing with him the tensions of living in a poor but quickly changing neighborhood.

"Write toward that anxiety," he told them.

Many students wrote personal reflections on the effects of gentrification and what it feels like to live in a city divided by income brackets and race.

"You have to convince them there are people who want to listen to their perspective," Mr. Dargan said. "Once you break down that barrier, the important stuff will flow out."

The students did a public reading of their poetry, bound into a book titled *Everyone Is Moving, No One in*

Where is 826?

The 826 network of after-school tutoring centers has chapters in eight cities, with plans to expand elsewhere. Each center focuses on creative writing and has a unique store attached that sells bizarre and fantastical goods. Sales from the retail stores support the free programming for students.

826 BOSTON

Opened: 2007 **Serves:** Boston public schools and greater-Boston-area school

Place, at 826 DC in May.

Topher Kandik, who teaches the 9th and 10th grade creative-writing class at the SEED School, said having the book published was a powerful part of the process. "The goal is to make them feel like they belong—that it's not outside the [realm of] possibility that they could be a writer."

Reflecting on her poem in an interview before the public reading, 10th grader Bijion Cooke said, "This doesn't seem like a 10th grade piece. It's better than the work I'd do by myself."

A 'Third Space'

Recent evaluations suggest the 826 chapters are helping students with both confidence and academics. An 826 analysis of test scores and surveys, conducted during the 2011-12 academic year, found that students increased an average of 13 percent in "story composition" skills and 8 percent in "contextual convention" (such as noun-verb agreement and punctuation) on a standardized writing test after participating in 826 programs.

Participants were also more likely to report enjoying writing and feeling proud of their work, the study found. An **external evaluation** of the Young Authors' Book Project in Boston, conducted in 2013, found similar results.

But as some see it, what the 826 chapters do best is give students one-on-one attention, which happens rarely in schools, and set up a "third space"—somewhere that's neither home nor school that provides creative opportunities and inspiration.

"It's a strong Socratic method," said Mr. Richards, 826's CEO. As a volunteer, "you're there to support and to nourish, you're not there so much to teach." At 826, "young people with an interest in writing can go to follow their interest and be with other young people and mentors who also love writing," said Ms. Eidman-Aadahl of the National Writing Project.

However, 826 chapters are "not the mass solution," she said. "They're not everywhere."

In fact, there are many other local initiatives—summer writing camps, after-school writing clubs, library writing centers—without the name recognition that are doing similar work. "They're not so much organized, but in their local communities, people know about them," she said.

Making out-of-school writing opportunities available widely is critical, she added.

"We know in schools the minutes for writing have just diminished in so many places with the

districts **Storefront:** The Greater Boston Bigfoot Research Institute

826 CHICAGO

Opened: 2005 **Serves:** Chicago public schools **Storefront:** The Boring Store

826 DC

Opened: 2010 **Serves:** District of Columbia public schools **Storefront:** The Museum of Unnatural History

826 LA

Opened: 2005 **Serves:** Los Angeles Unified School District **Storefront:** Echo Park Time Travel Mart and Mar Vista Time Travel Mart

826 MICHIGAN

Opened: 2005 **Serves:** Ann Arbor public schools **Storefront:** Liberty Street Robot Supply and Repair Store

826 NYC

Opened: 2004 **Serves:** New York City public schools **Storefront:** Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co.

826 SEATTLE

Opened: 2005 **Serves:** Seattle school district and greater-Seattle-area districts **Storefront:** Greenwood Space Travel Supply Co.

826 VALENCIA

Opened: 2002 **Serves:** San Francisco school district and Oakland school district **Storefront:** Pirate Supply Store

SOURCE: 826 National

emphasis on testing and reading and math," said Ms. Eidman-Aadahl. "When writing shows up, it's much more likely to show up as a form of testing."

Going Global?

While 826 is only located in a few urban areas for now, leaders of the national organization have plans to branch out. Beyond the tutoring spaces in New Orleans and St. Paul, Minn., whose leaders are hoping to get the official 826 imprimatur, centers in Amsterdam, London, and Sydney, Australia, may soon try to make the brand international.

Mr. Richards noted that the organization is also applying for a federal Investing in Innovation grant.

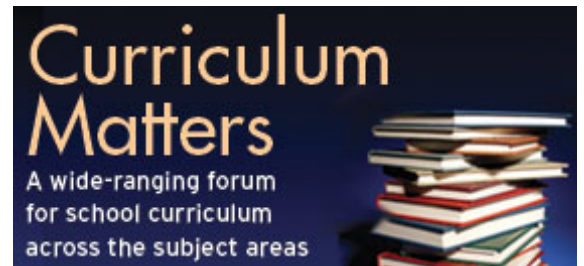
Individual centers are expanding as well. Michigan is considering opening a second storefront in Detroit next year, though Ms. Uhle called that plan "funding dependent." And the Washington chapter is on track to meet a goal of serving 5,000 students—about 10 percent of the public school population—by June 2016. (It currently serves 3,250, up from 2,500 in 2013.)

For Mr. Callahan of 826 DC, expansion is now more critical than ever. In working with students on their assigned homework, "we've noticed less creative writing," he said. "Am I concerned? Personally, yes. But that is why a place like 826 is important. Because after [students] finish their homework, they have an opportunity to write what they wouldn't in the classroom."

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