

Centering Student Voices



NATIONAL
YOUTH WRITING

Centering Student Voices



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YOUTH WRITING



For proof of our impact, we point you to the work of our student authors.

When students build confidence with their words, ideas, and storytelling, it's a sign that they are ready to take on the future with creativity and purpose.

In these pages, you'll find a few highlights selected from the thousands of stories published in the 826 Network every year. **These young authors inspire us every day; we hope they'll inspire you, too.**

Every story
represents a
unique student
experience.



LHIAM'S STORY

Exploring a world of imaginary friends.

IF, an animated film released in May 2024, tells the story of a girl who discovers that she can see everyone's imaginary friends. Inspired by the film, Paramount Pictures collaborated with 826 National to publish three books of youth writing, called Big Books of IFs, featuring students' stories about their imaginary friends.

Lhiam Rosa, a fifth-grade student with 826NYC, interviewed John Krasinski as part of the film's press junket.

Lhiam Rosa, a ten-year-old student with 826NYC, not only published his story in the "Big Book of IFs"—he got to interview **John Krasinski** about his new animated film.



**“[My kids] think they
have to leave behind
all their childhood,
and that’s not true.
So I wrote a movie
that said, ‘That magical
world that you guys
created, that’s the world
you can live in, always.
You can always
go back.’”**

JOHN KRASINSKI

in conversation with 826NYC student Lhiam Rosa

CODE

My IF’s name is Code (he/him, they/them). He looks like a scorpion but in cyborg form. He has a regular poison tail like all scorpions, three-fingered hands for claws, robotic legs, and a partially robotic body. He has a hardworking personality and he is skillful. He also hates giving up.

Lhiam Rosa

Published in *Big Book of IFs*

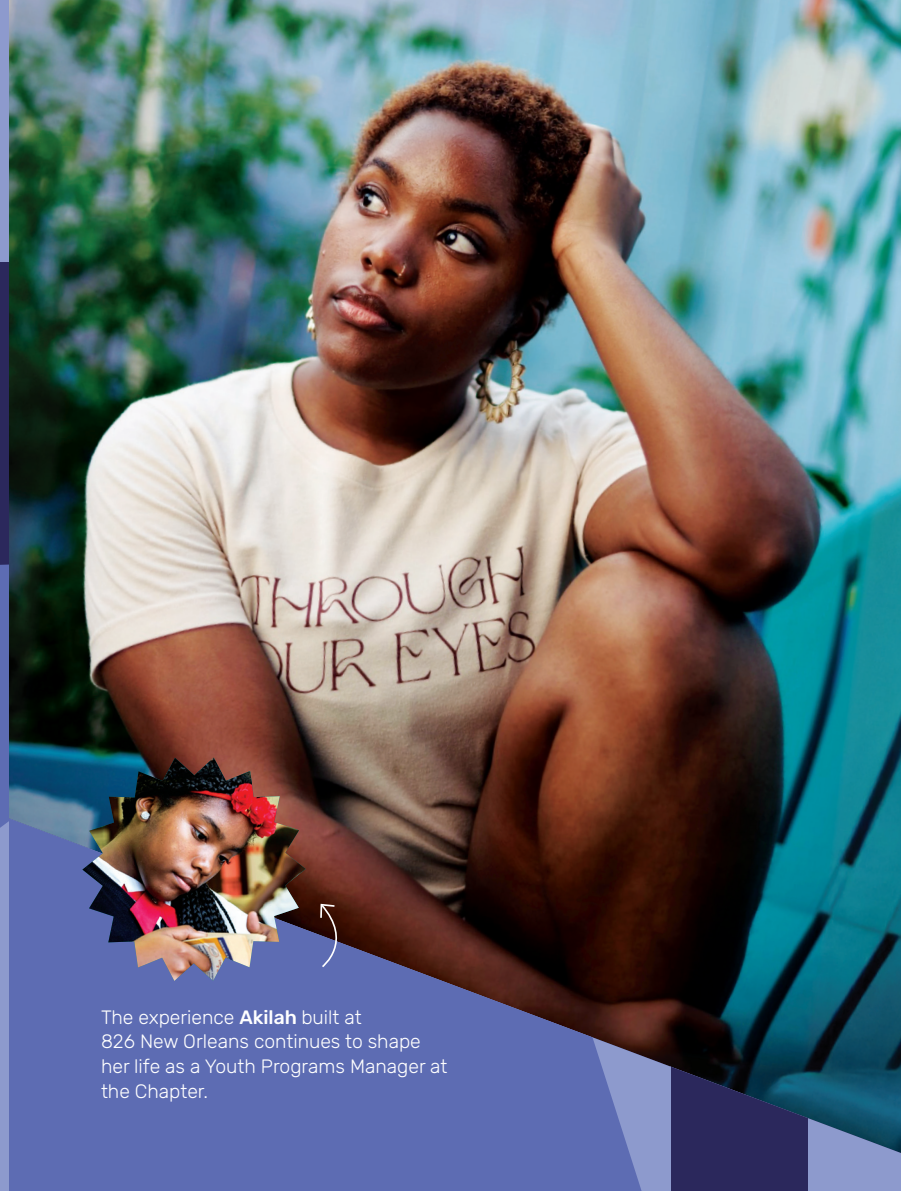
AKILAH'S STORY

Maintaining lifelong connections.

Akilah Toney joined 826 New Orleans when she was 11 years old at the urging of her parents. The experience quickly transformed from an obligation into a passion.

Over her years in the program, Akilah explored her interest in poetry, participated in recitals and book release parties, and, as a high schooler, became an 826 volunteer to teach poetry to younger students.

Today Akilah is Youth Programs Manager at 826 New Orleans. She continues sharing the joy of writing with youth and is a published writer, spoken word artist, dancer, teaching artist, and digital creator. Akilah has officially returned to her writing home to support young writers and uplift young peoples' creative autonomy!



The experience **Akilah** built at 826 New Orleans continues to shape her life as a Youth Programs Manager at the Chapter.

“[My mentor was] just one of those adults in my life that was very adamant about encouraging agency and autonomy in young people, especially young Black and Brown students. We are still in touch, of course; she is someone who I called a teacher that now I can call my friend.”



AKILAH TONEY

826 New Orleans Alum and current Youth Programs Manager

DAVION'S STORY

Poet, Gamer, Dreamer.

Meet Davion Marshall: writer, artist, and full-time explorer of words, thoughts, and what it means to be young and Black in America. At 18 years old and a student at Live Oak Continuation High School, Davion discovered something unexpected—his voice. And not just any voice—a voice with rhythm, purpose, and a poem called Freedom that stopped us in our tracks.

When invited to speak at a Juneteenth celebration, Davion brought everything he'd learned about writing and feeling into a single piece that pulses with hope, honesty, and vision.

Since then, he's found a second home in the Black Literary Achievement Club (BLAC) at 826 Valencia, where he writes, reflects, and reminds us that stories—especially student stories—can change the world. His work was recently published in *The Future Is Black*, his first time seeing his name in print, and, in his own words, “the first time I ever felt like a superstar.”



Davion is a video game lover, a deep thinker, and a proud member of a growing community of young Black writers shaping the future—one poem, one line, one truth at a time.

**“Writing could
be your passion.
It could be a
hidden talent—
I found out it
was mine.”**



DAVION MARSHALL

826 Valencia Student Author

FREEDOM

Freedom should be a feeling of lightness
A weight lifted off our shoulders
It should be a sense of brightness
A world where we can all be bolder
Freedom should be a feeling of peace
A world where we can all coexist
It should be a sense of release
A world where we can all persist
Freedom should be a feeling of love
A world where we can all be kind
It should be like the wings of a dove
A world where we can all unwind
Freedom should be a feeling of hope
A world where we can all dream
It should be a sense of an unlimited scope
A world where we can all gleam
Freedom should be a feeling of passion
A world where we can all have joy
Where love can never go out of fashion
A world where we can all be employed
Let us live in a world where our people can be free
Where our black excellence can strive
And where our hope, and goals can come true
Where all my peers can thrive
Without a worry or fear
To stop our beautiful melanin skin
Because we've shed enough tears
Throughout these years
It's time for our dreams to begin

Davion Marshall

Published in *The Future Is Black*

THE STUDENT ADVISORY BOARD'S STORY

Sharing hopes and dreams for our country.

In the midst of a high-stress, high-stakes election year, 826 National invited young people across the country to share their experiences and priorities with the next president of the United States.

The Student Advisory Board, a cohort of young authors from across the 826 Network, was tasked with shaping the vision for the annual student anthology. This year, they highlighted writing from students who expressed their hopes, fears, and dreams for the country's future in a publication entitled, 'Let This Be Our Anthem'.

826 NATIONAL STUDENT ADVISORY BOARD

Rudy Sottile, Grade 9, 826NYC

Yessamin Embalzado, Grade 10, 826 Valencia

Rowan Yorkdy, Grade 10, 826michigan

Samuel Wang, Grade 11, 826NYC

Daniela Martinez, Grade 11, 826 Boston

Josiah Atkinson, Grade 11, 826michigan



**“In these pages,
you will find
courageous students
who aren’t afraid to
dream and demand a
world that we do not
yet have. I implore you
to truly listen to what
these young people,
our future leaders,
have to say.”**



JAVIER ZAMORA

Writer, Poet, and 826 Valencia Alum

**EXCERPT FROM THE INTRODUCTION
OF *LET THIS BE OUR ANTHEM***

When are young people heard—truly heard? As the 826 National Student Advisory Board, we believe that it is important for young people to have a voice, especially during times of change. Children and teens are people too. We are all people! The fact that nobody listens to us is stifling beyond imagination. In response to this cultural bottling up of youth voices, we have created this anthology. We must be heard, so we’ll turn to the head of our nation’s table.

The 826 National Student Advisory Board
Published in *Let This Be Our Anthem*

Explore the
latest work
from student
authors across
the country.

MORE
STUDENT
WRITING





Centering Student Voices

826 NATIONAL
2024 ANNUAL REPORT

“When are young people heard—truly heard?”

That question, posed by the Student Advisory Board in our 2024 student anthology, *Let This Be Our Anthem*, echoes through every 826 writing lab, every student publication, and every page of this report.

At 826, we don't just ask that question. We find the answer in every sentence that begins with *I believe, I remember, I imagine*.

This year, over **775,000 students**—86% of whom are students of color, 80% from Title I school partners, and 22% English Language Learners—walked through our doors, both in person and online, and found a space where their ideas mattered. Where the goal wasn't to get it “right,” but to say something real. Where their stories weren't edited down, but amplified.

They were supported by more than **20,000 educators** who know that writing is more than a school subject. It's a way for young people to process the world, express themselves, and take up space. In that space, our students wrote with clarity, courage, humor, wisdom, heartbreak, and joy.

Their growth is undeniable:

- **91%** of students say their writing improved.
- **86%** say they're proud of what they created.
- **88%** feel more prepared for college and careers.

And behind every number is a young person who now knows: *My voice matters. My story counts.*

This is what happens when student voices are truly centered—not just in theory, but in practice. Not just in mission statements, but in classrooms, on bookshelves, in public discourse.

This year, the 826 Network published over **16,000 student voices** across more than **3,000 publications**. And still—we're not done.

The future we envision demands more: More stories. More students. More spaces where young people can speak freely and be heard fully.

Through initiatives such as **826 Digital**, **826 University**, and **826 Partners**, we are collaborating with our chapters to scale this vision with urgency and care. By FY26, our goal is to increase our yearly reach to **1 million students** and **35,000 educators**. We don't see this as growth for its own sake—we see it as an educational and creative necessity.

Because the future is not just coming. It's being written, every day, by young authors in classrooms, libraries, after-school programs, and living rooms across the country.

Thank you for standing with us in this work. This report is more than a record of impact. It's a call to action. The next chapter is unwritten—and we need you to help author this story.

With resolve, with hope,

Laura Brief
CEO, 826 National

laura@826national.org



Spark the power and joy of writing.

WE SERVE AS AN INTERNATIONAL PROOF POINT for writing as a tool for young people to ignite and channel their creativity, explore identity, advocate for themselves and their communities, and achieve academic and professional success.



Our Core Values



**CULTURE OF
CREATIVITY AND
LEARNING**



**POWER AND
POTENTIAL OF
YOUTH**



**STRENGTH OF
COMMUNITY**



**EQUITY AS
MISSION, VISION,
AND PRACTICE**



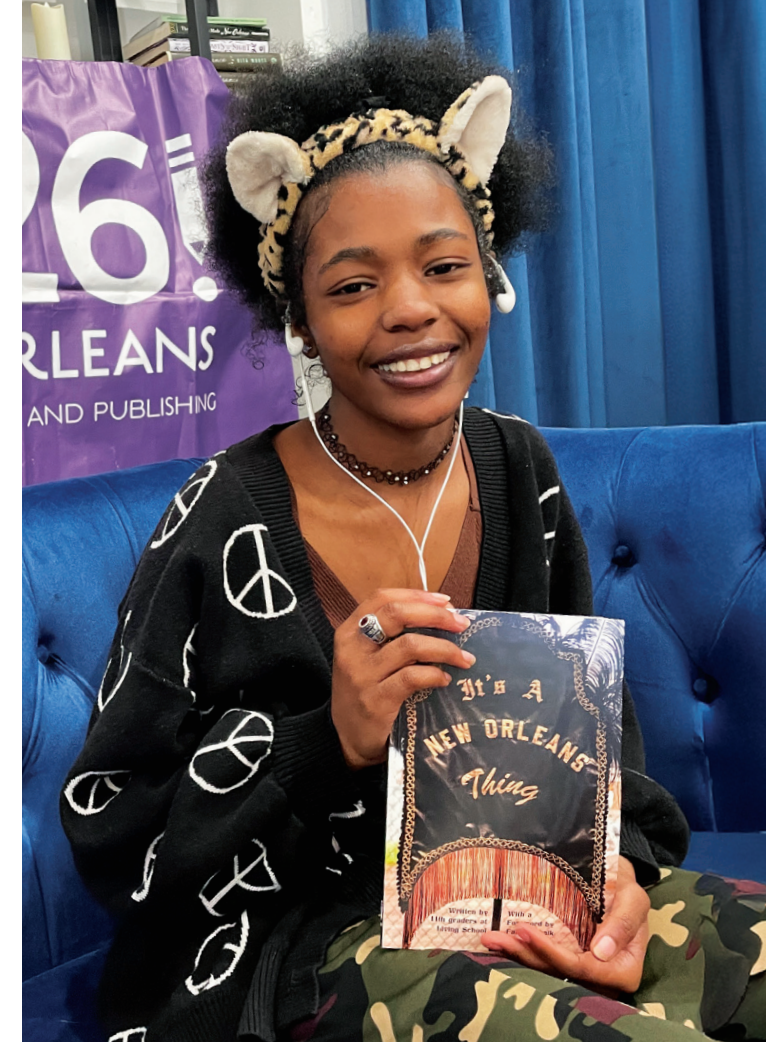
**TRANSFORMATIVE
POWER OF WRITING**



**826 NATIONAL SERVES
K-12 EDUCATORS AND
STUDENTS AGES 6 TO 18
NATIONWIDE.**

826 National supports and strengthens a growing network of in-person writing centers and online writing resources with field-tested curricula and insightful research. Students use 826 programming to develop writing skills, tell stories, publish books, and share their life experiences.

As the largest youth writing network in the country, 826 teaches thousands of young people each year in under-resourced communities to harness the power and joy of writing.

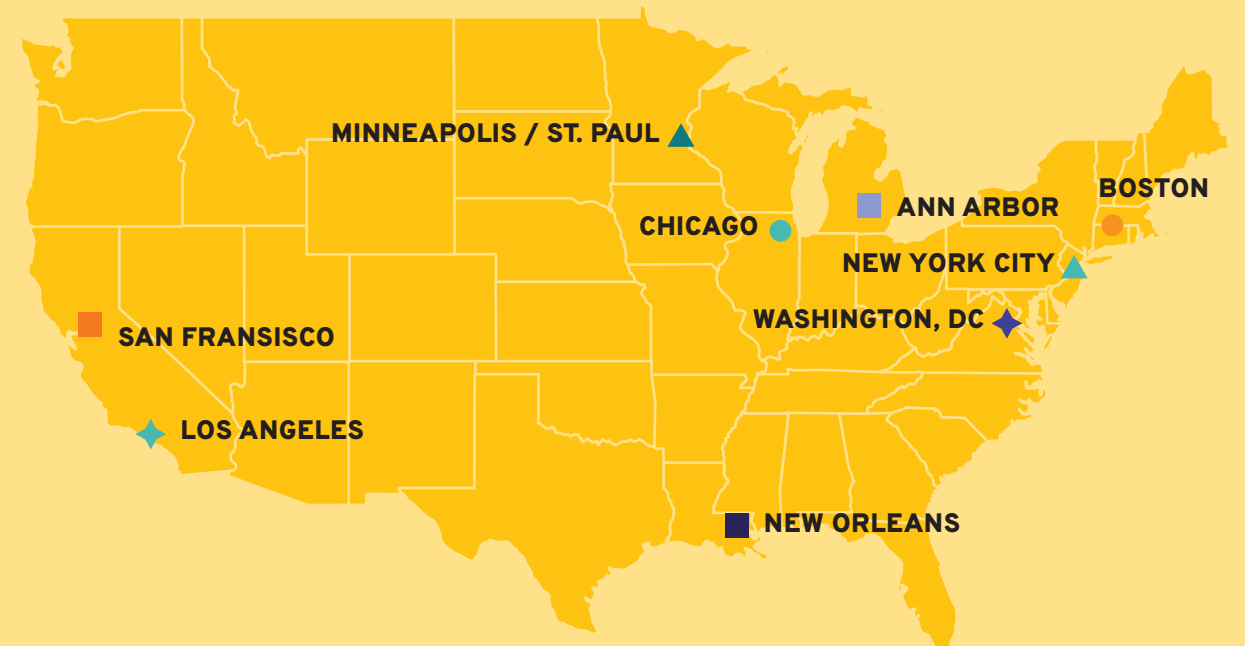
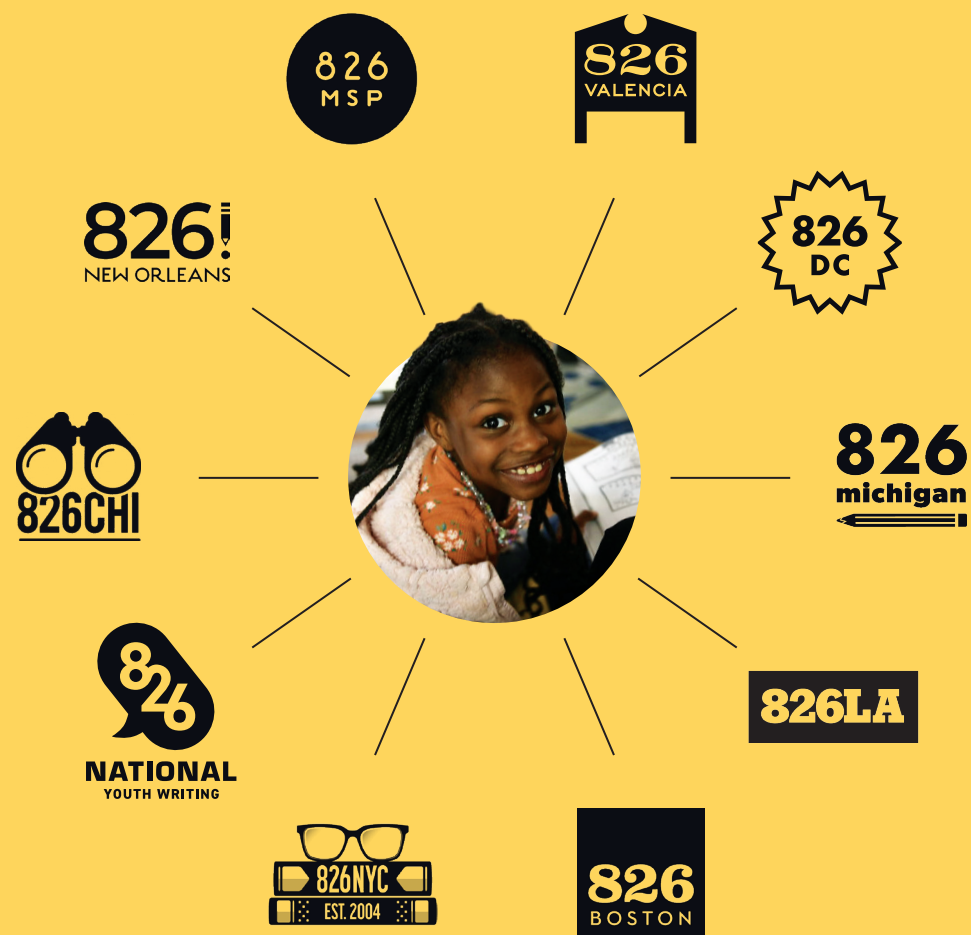


**Our work
is rooted in
the belief
that strong
writing skills
are essential
for academic
and lifelong
success.**



Supporting the efforts of nine writing and publishing centers across the country.

826 CHAPTERS ARE HUBS OF CREATIVE INSPIRATION AND SOURCES OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT.



From pirate supply stores to time travel marts, these playful spaces invite students to think and write without limits.



Tracking our impact

775k+

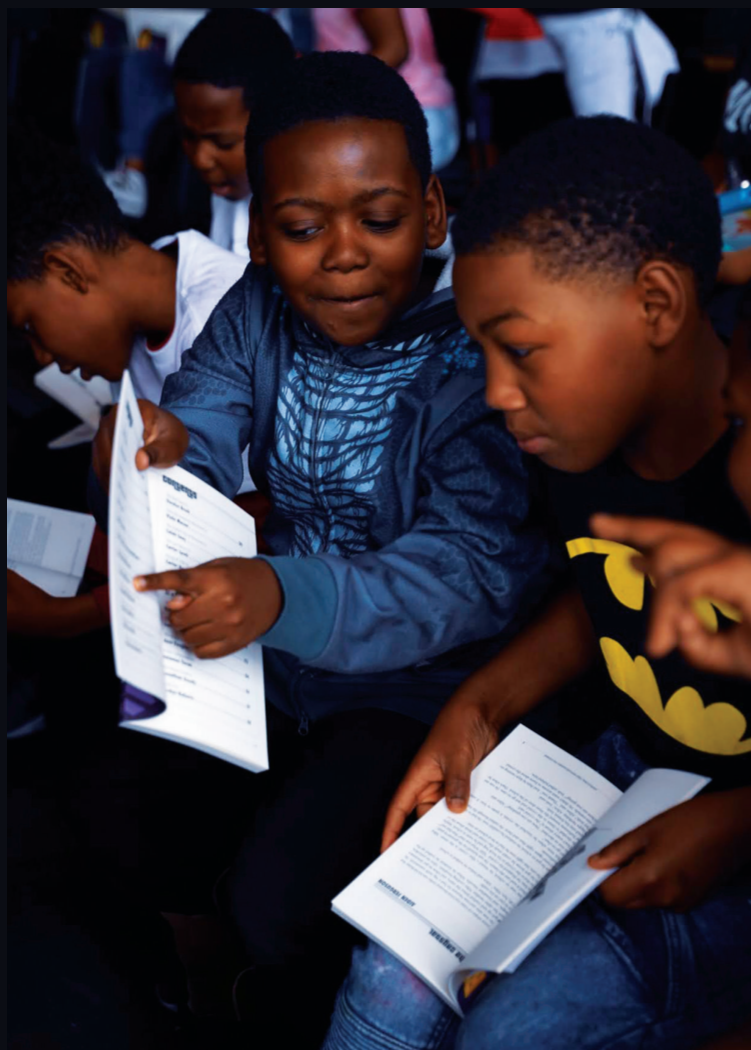
STUDENTS were served by
826 Chapters and 826 Digital

20k+

EDUCATORS were supported
with programs, teaching
resources, and curriculum

2.5k+

VOLUNTEERS spent over 50K
hours supporting the 826 Network



86%

OF 826 PARTICIPANTS
identified as students of color

80%

**OF OUR ACADEMIC
PARTNERS** were Title 1 schools
serving low-income families

22%

OF 826 STUDENTS
were English Language Learners
(*more than double the
national average!*)

16k+

STUDENTS
became published authors





Our work amplifies
students' unique
perspectives
and powerful stories.



Investing in our network of leaders.

TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR 826 CHAPTERS

Exchanging Ideas and Inspiration

Eight staff members participated in the **Chapter Exchange Program in 2024**, visiting other Chapters in the 826 Network to learn from peers and see their work in action: **Celia Mendoza**, 826 Boston Writing Workshops Coordinator; **Danny Kim**, 826NYC Volunteer and Programs Manager; **Joshua Bohnsack**, 826CHI Publishing Programs Manager; **Eli Sparkman**, 826michigan Detroit Program and Volunteer Coordinator; **Annie Chen**, 826 MSP Writers' Room Manager; **Alma Carrillo**, 826LA Senior Manager of Strategic Partnerships and Communications; **Sarah Richman**, 826DC Associate Director of Communications & Development; and **Lucy Gosline-Ratliff**, 826 Valencia Design Coordinator.



“The Home We Create”

This report, led by inaugural research fellow **Brianca Wright**, uses 826 as a case study to explore how writing positively impacts students' social, emotional, and mental health outcomes. The 826 National Research Fellow Program provides current graduate-level and post-doctoral researchers of color with professional development opportunities and a platform to conduct and publish research on writing education practices, focusing on their impact on K–12 students and their communities.

\$417k

GRANTS PROVIDED
to 826 Chapters

126

**HOURS OF
PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT**
opportunities were
facilitated throughout
the year

Trends in Education Philanthropy

Dr. Ulcca Joshi Hansen, Chief Program Officer for Grantmakers for Education, joined the 826 National community to discuss the evolving priorities of education funders and how 826 programming can fit into the current philanthropic landscape.



Doors to Our Future

At the 2024 **Staff Development Conference**, 110 team members gathered in Los Angeles for three days of connection and learning (this was our community's first in-person gathering in five years!). Keynote speaker **Chinaka Hodge** shared reflections on her journey as an 826 student, professional poet, playwright, and screenwriter. Attendees also sat in on 22 professional development workshops on topics ranging from management skills to AI best practices.



Expanding Access to Writing Education.

RESOURCES AND CURRICULUM FOR TEACHERS NATIONWIDE




Elevating Educator Perspectives

We expanded our **826 Digital Educator Leader Cohort**, a community of practice comprised of educators serving students in kindergarten through twelfth grades across public schools and out-of-school time programs. This group is vital to our understanding of educators’ perspectives and evolving challenges. They serve as 826 Digital advisors and ambassadors, representing 826 at conferences and at their school or program sites.

Amplifying our Digital Impact

We collaborated with major nonprofit and community organizations to expand the reach and impact of 826 Digital resources. With great thanks to our incredible partners, we connected thousands of students with opportunities to write and get published with 826.



 New York Public Library	
	College Essay Guy
Empatico.	WE NEED DIVERSE BOOKS



PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT: Life Stories

826 Digital launched a new video resource collection in partnership with **Life Stories**, a nonprofit media organization that creates documentary films and educational resources about people whose lives inspire meaningful change.

The collection features ten videos from *The Thread*—a Life Stories interview series that explores what it means to live a purpose-driven life through conversations with creative leaders and visionaries who have helped shape our society—paired with writing prompts designed for students to discover the meaningful stories they carry within.

In these video lessons, students hear from artists and advocates like **Jason Reynolds, Gloria Estefan, Dr. Rev. Jacqueline Lewis, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Tony Hawk**, and more. Then they put pen to paper to write their own stories.

100

NEW RESOURCES were added to 826 Digital

4

NATIONAL AND STATE CONFERENCES

where we highlighted 826 Digital resources and expertise

- NATIONAL**
NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) Annual Convention
National ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) Conference
ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) Conference
- STATE**
CATE (California Association of Teachers of English) Convention

100%

TEACHERS said they would recommend 826 Digital after a pilot program

90%

STUDENTS felt they improved their writing skills after using 826 Digital resources

Reaching students where they live, play, and study.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH LIKE-MINDED ORGANIZATIONS

Imagine That!

We worked with **Paramount Pictures** and **John Krasinski**, the writer and director of the film "IF," to publish three volumes of the *Big Book of IFs*, celebrating the imagination and creativity of students across the 826 Network. The partnership included funding to support staff time and book production for the project's duration.

Writing to Change the World

For the first time since 2018, 826 National joined 25 826-inspired organizations in Edinburgh, Scotland, for the **Writing Our World (WOW) Conference**. Participants shared learnings and best practices to serve students everywhere.



Ensuring the Freedom to Read

Collaborating with **The New York Public Library**, the **American Library Association (ALA)**, and the **Unite Against Book Bans initiative**, we hosted a national essay contest focused on the "freedom to read" and provided free online access to controversial and banned books.



Dear Poet...

826 National partnered with the **Academy of American Poets** on the annual Dear Poet project, resulting in a record 2,400 letters sent from young people to nine featured poets—and a published anthology of select letters and their responses.

BANNED BOOKS FOR ALL

2,400

LETTERS for the *Dear Poet* project were sent from 36 states, 8 countries, and 172 schools

370

STUDENTS published in the *Big Book of IFs*

9

BOOK RELEASE CELEBRATIONS and advance screenings of *IF* organized for students at each Chapter

Sharing student experiences with the world.

WRITING AND RESEARCH TO SHAPE THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

Flagship Publications

In addition to our network's regular publications, we published student writing from across the country, including:

Let This Be Our Anthem

Sharing students' reflections and letters to the future president during an election year.

Three volumes of the *Big Books of IFs*

Three volumes of the *Big Books of IFs*, celebrating students' imaginary friends—and including a foreword from **John Krasinski**.

Read students' work:

826national.org/student-writing



SHOP
STUDENT
PUBLICATIONS



Transformative Research

The 826 National research team released the following reports supporting an evidence-based approach to writing education.

"Black/African American Students Show Largest Gains on Writing Assessment" is an analysis that highlights the significant gains in Black 826 students' writings.

"The Home We Create", written by inaugural research fellow **Brianca Wright** and co-published with George Washington University, found that 826 writing programs significantly enhance students' social and emotional learning and support their mental health.

Explore all our research:

826national.org/research



READ
RESEARCH
ONLINE



Is AI the End of Writing Education?

826 National published a position statement on generative AI, sharing how we can protect and celebrate the power of writing while using AI as a helpful tool—not a replacement.

READ



4

BOOKS PUBLISHED
featuring student writing
from across the country



NEW RESEARCH
directly responding
to the national youth
mental health crisis

Leading the national movement for creative writing.

REVENUE

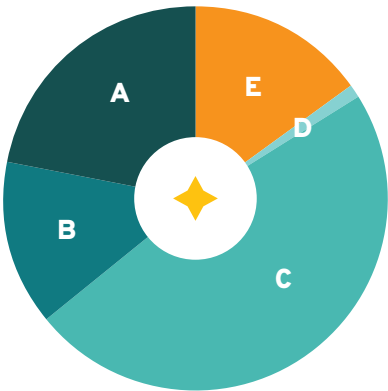
\$2,448,697

SUPPORT

- A FOUNDATION**
\$542,838 • 22%
- B CORPORATE**
\$336,257 • 14%
- C INDIVIDUAL**
\$1,183,404 • 48%
- D GOVERNMENT**
\$15,000 • 1%

OTHER REVENUE

- E EARNED REVENUE**
\$371,198 • 15%



EXPENSES

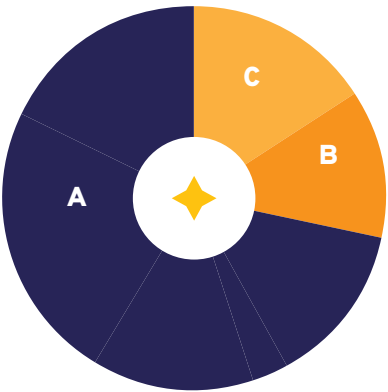
\$2,739,816

PROGRAM

- A PROGRAM**
\$1,968,765 • 72%

OTHER EXPENSES

- B ADMINISTRATIVE**
\$345,733 • 13%
- C FUNDRAISING**
\$425,318 • 15%



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