



Making Their Voices Heard: A Partnership to Build Writing Skills through Empowerment, Imagination, and Scaffolded Supports

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In San Francisco, a partnership between a K–8 school and a nonprofit writing program helps students who are achieving below grade level find their voices and blossom into confident thinkers and writers.

The sky is made with secret ingredients. It had to be made so everyone could breathe. After it was made, people threw blue glitter at it. Maybe it was a boy or a girl, or maybe a grown-up who was throwing blue glitter. A crocodile was selling blue glitter every night. He was selling glitter so everyone could have it. He wanted everyone to have some glitter to throw into the sky. The sky could be turquoise or blue or sometimes even purple, when people threw glitter at it.

This is the opening of a myth to explain why the sky is blue, written by a third-grade student who participates in one of 826 Valencia’s writing programs.¹ This student is classified as “beginning,”

1 See <http://826valencia.org/why-is-the-sky-blue/>. This story was also published in *Hot Sauce Planet* and the *826 Quarterly* Volume 21, available online at <http://826valencia.org/store/departments/books/>. For more information about 826 Valencia, see <http://826valencia.org/>.

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according to the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), a standardized state test that measures a student's English language proficiency. In addition, she is currently reading far below grade level. However, given targeted, small-group support and intervention, she is making tremendous growth towards achieving grade-level proficiency.

826 Valencia is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting under-resourced students ages six to eighteen with their creative and expository writing skills, and to helping teachers inspire their students to write. Our work is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen when trained tutors work with small groups of students to develop a strong foundation of writing skills. In our increasingly connected world, communicating clearly is a fundamental skill, and 826 Valencia seeks to help students develop writing skills to articulate their ideas and make their voices heard.

I was first drawn to 826 Valencia because of the way it helped students cultivate wonder, while at the same time providing support and intervention that would help students communicate in the real world. As a former classroom teacher, I was impressed with the way that students were engaging with the writing process in an authentic way and building skills that would help them in the future.

In addition to supporting teachers and students during the school day, 826 Valencia partners with neighborhood schools to help students develop the skills to write well. One example of these partnerships to support English language learners (ELLs) is the 826 Valencia Annex at Buena Vista Horace Mann (BVHM), a K-8 bilingual school in San Francisco's Mission neighborhood. This 826 Valencia program came

about initially as a result of the advocacy of parents in the school community who were seeking additional writing support for their students. This advocacy then developed into a partnership with school leaders from BVHM and staff at 826 Valencia, who co-designed a program to provide an intervention that supports the students' acquisition of English reading and writing skills. Through on-site programming, 826 Valencia was already supporting some BVHM students, and it was a natural fit to further expand that support in the school community. Now in its third year, the program continues to develop and evolve, growing from two grade levels to three, and now potentially expanding to support an additional grade level during the school day. Through regular evaluation, feedback, and reflection, the 826 Valencia program seeks to continually evolve to meet the needs of students and teachers in the school community.

As the program manager of 826 Valencia's program at BVHM, I support trained volunteers as they tutor a targeted group of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students to improve their writing skills. These students are performing below grade level and were identified by their teachers as being in need of additional reading and writing intervention. The students participate for the entire school year, which allows them to build relationships with tutors and to engage in writing more deeply.

The group consists of primarily English language learners with varying degrees of oral and written proficiency. The 826 Valencia program is delivered in English as a way to support the students' acquisition of English reading and writing skills. Although students write in English, the 826 Valencia program supports an asset-based view of language development, in which we recognize that the students are coming

to the table with knowledge and language skills in their primary language. The writing projects are scaffolded to help support students as they become more independent and gain confidence in their English writing skills. An example of this is the students' "Where I'm From" poems, in which students explore their rich cultural heritages and how their knowledge of more than one language is a critical part of their whole identity.

Through 826 Valencia's project-based approach, students are supported in their exploration of writing, and over the course of the year, build confidence in their growing academic skills. Because 826 Valencia is embedded into the structure of curriculum and planning at the school, the writing projects done after school can be designed to align with and support the literacy instruction during the school day. I regularly meet with teams of teachers and coaches during the school day to evaluate student writing, identify skills gaps, and develop projects that align with the writing being done during the school day.

For example, during a persuasive writing unit, the 826 Valencia students wrote imaginative stories about a day without any rules and then wrote a persuasive letter to their school principal, supported with clear reasons and strong examples, about a school rule they wanted changed. They then delivered these letters to the principal, confident in their arguments, and gratified that their voices would be heard.

This connection between creative prompts and scaffolded support helps students to develop key academic skills, as well as confidence in themselves as writers. As a result, the students are able to engage in the 826 Valencia writing projects in a supported, lower-stakes environment. As one fifth-grade ELL student reflected,

When I first started at 826 Valencia, I could barely write three sentences. Now I can write more paragraphs and full stories. Something that I learned from writing at 826 Valencia is that I can be more creative in what I think. It also helps me to write more. When I entered this program two years ago, I thought that I couldn't do things. Now, when someone tells me we are going to write, I think, "This is going to be easy."

Students practice writing in a variety of genres, taking each piece through the writing process, from brainstorming and drafting, all the way through to revising, editing, and publishing. Twice a year, students select a piece of their writing to be published in a collection of stories. The latest publication was called *The Hot Sauce Planet* and included myths, stories about new superheroes, and adventures in other worlds.² Because the book is professionally published, students take tremendous pride in their writing and gain additional confidence in themselves as writers who have original perspectives to share with the world.

The writing projects students complete in the 826 Valencia program are not graded, nor will their writing be used to determine their grade-level proficiency. Because of this, students are relieved from the pressure that is usually associated with writing and are able to write about what interests them. From designing unique characters, such as the "dofi," a half-dog, half-fish who helps to save the world, to writing stories about journeys into

² *The Hot Sauce Planet* is available for sale through 826 Valencia's Pirate Supply Store at <http://826valencia.org/store/?p=3255>.

other worlds, where bubble gum is used to fix rocket ships, students are encouraged to think creatively and write about something that hasn't been written before.³

In addition, students are able to articulate their growth and their newfound understanding of themselves as published authors. As a fourth-grade student wrote at the end of her first year of the program,

My favorite, most fabulous piece was about a mermaid witch named Coral, who falls prey to a horrid curse. I think I have made this piece more interesting in one hundred ways. I can tell it definitely shows the progress I've made. I wouldn't change anything. Having been in 826 for one year, I know I have made progress. I used to only be able to write, like, three sentences, and now I can write stories that are four pages long! When I look back at the beginning of the year, it makes me think, "Wow, I can't believe that I've made so much progress!" It has made me proud.

In addition to reporting more positive attitudes about their academic success, students who participated in the 826 Valencia program at BVHM experienced accelerated reading level growth (as measured by Fountas and Pinnell reading assessments). In the program's first year, 74 percent of third- and fourth-grade students improved more than a year's reading level, in just five months. This accelerated reading growth is especially important for ELLs, who are often entering school below their grade level in reading and writing. With the targeted support and intervention that students receive through 826 Valencia programming, these students can continue to make

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3 For more examples of imaginative student writing, see the Student Writing Gallery at <http://826valencia.org/category/writers-gallery/>.

gains that will help them to reach grade-level proficiency in their reading and writing. I feel fortunate to be able to witness the journey of these students as they blossom into confident thinkers and writers and develop positive connections to their own learning.

After completing my first year in the program at 826 Valencia and working with the staff, teachers, and school community at BVHM, I have seen how much students flourish with structured support and intervention. With regular tutors to support them, both adults and students alike are invested in their progress and are able to celebrate student successes over the course of the school year. Whether it is a student who can now confidently put his pencil to the page and take off into a journey of his own imagining, or an ELL student who is able to practice spelling patterns and apply them independently to her writing, the students are hungry for continued growth and achievement. 826 Valencia seeks to cultivate wonder and help students develop positive associations with writing and their own academic success. When students can see evidence of their own imagination in print, they become invested in themselves and seek to write more.