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## Program Helps Students Express Themselves With Creative Writing



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This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

826 is the name of a nonprofit organization that works to help students become better writers by thinking creatively. 826 is also the address of the first center where this literary arts program began in two thousand two.

Author Dave Eggers and educator Ninive Calegari started the program in California at 826 Valencia Street in San Francisco. It now serves thirty thousand students through writing and tutoring centers in eight American cities.

Eight twenty-six Valencia Street is a fun place for students and visitors. At the front is a pirate supply store. Think of the kind of place where Captain Jack Sparrow from "Pirates of the Caribbean" might shop.

Leigh Lehman is the executive director. She says the idea of entering through a pirate store is meant to get students not to think of the place as an education center.

LEIGH LEHMAN: "This is not school; this is not a tutoring center. This is a place for me to be myself and to find my voice and find my creativity and excel."

The goal is to help public school students between six and eighteen years old write creatively. During the day, teachers bring classes on field trips and volunteers help with writing projects.

After school, students come for help with creative writing and their schoolwork -- yes, it is a tutoring center. Eight twenty-six Valencia is located in a mostly Latino neighborhood. Ms. Lehman says many of the children are from immigrant families.

LEIGH LEHMAN: "A lot of the parents don't speak English as a first language so it's harder for them to help their children with school work. So we're trying to provide the services that parents wouldn't otherwise be able to offer their kids for free."

Each 826 center around the country has a different theme -- from a pirate store in San Francisco to a store for "spies" in Chicago.

The national chief executive, Gerald Richards, says budget cuts in public schools mean less money for arts education. And as that goes away, he says, so does the ability for students to use their imagination.

GERALD RICHARDS: "I think there is much more of a focus on science, technology, engineering and math. There's a lot of a focus on testing and a lot of the teaching that's going on in schools is focusing on the test and passing the test rather than thinking about how do we get kids to think."

Mr. Richards points out that thinking creatively is also important in the sciences. And knowing how to write well will help students get to college and beyond.

GERALD RICHARDS: "For jobs and employers and just any, really every subject, the ability to communicate well really does open a lot of doors."

Leigh Lehman says 826 builds confidence. Students can publish and sell their work at places like the pirate supply store and on the Internet. In twenty-ten, the programs across the country published nine hundred forty-four volumes of student writing. Ms. Lehman says students are proud when their writing gets published.

One of the students in San Francisco is Sofia Marquez.

SOFIA MARQUEZ: "I get to use my imagination -- that's why I like writing."

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report. You can watch a video version of this story at [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com). I'm Christopher Cruise.

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