



# 2021 QUICK REPORT:

## Learning Gains in Writing During a Pandemic Year

**In a year** that presented challenges in all aspects of our lives, education has been an area greatly affected by the pandemic. With most instruction across our nation becoming virtual, many reports show a “learning loss” in highly tested subjects such as reading and math, particularly for students of color. But what about writing? Writing is a critical tool, especially in challenging times, as it allows for self-expression, communication, reflection, and, when needed, an escape. In this Quick Report, we share the learning *gains* in writing that we’ve seen in 826 students during the pandemic.

As we reflect on this past year and prepare for the year to come, we wanted to share what we’ve seen across the 826 Network. This report showcases the role that writing plays in supporting students through the challenges of the past year, and how writing can continue to support students as we transition back to in-person and hybrid learning.

### 826 IMPACT

**As classrooms** around the country became virtual, programming across 826 chapters did as well. Our students continued to write, some more than ever before. Although switching our programming to a virtual setting at first seemed daunting, we persevered together in partnership with our students, teachers, and communities. Through our chapters’ adaptability, responsiveness, and dedication, students found their time with 826 just as valuable as they did with our in-person programming. In a survey of more than 1,500 students across the 826 Network’s nine chapters this virtual year, 97% felt safe with 826, 91% liked working with 826 volunteers, and 90% felt 826 helped them to become better writers.

Not only did students feel they have valuable experience with 826, their writing also proved it. At 826 Valencia, 217 students were given the Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), a writing assessment developed by the National Writing Project, at the beginning of programming in the fall (pretest) and again at the end of the program in the spring (post-test). Their scores showed gains on every attribute of the AWC, averaging a 7% increase from pretest to post-test papers. Additionally, in a time when racial disparities in learning are compounded by the pandemic and digital access, the gains shown here are predominantly from students of color (who make up 90% of the students 826 serves).

97%

FELT SAFE WITH 826

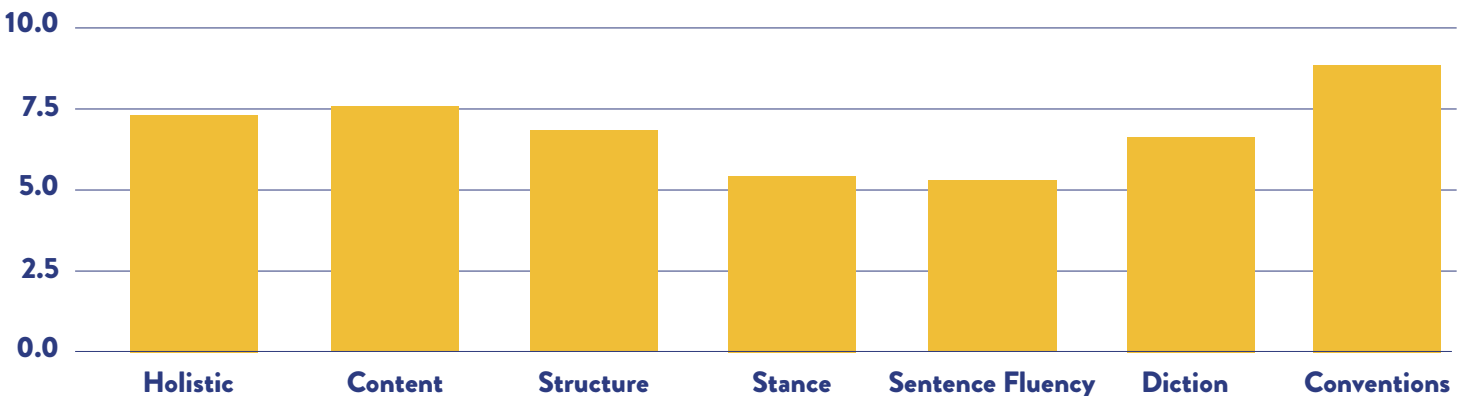
91%

LIKED WORKING WITH 826 VOLUNTEERS

90%

FELT 826 HELPED THEM TO BECOME BETTER WRITERS

### AVERAGE PERCENT GAIN FROM PRE TO POST-TEST BY AWC ATTRIBUTE



The average percent gained for all attributes was statistically significant from pretest to post-test at  $p < .05$ .

# JOSIAH ATKINSON

Student, 13 years old, 826michigan

## What role has writing played in your life during the pandemic?

I have more time than I used to so I've been able to write more and it's just been better. I've really been able to give it more substance and attention. I've been journaling more because I have much more time than I did in the past so it's been easier to get out what I want to write, just get it on paper. I've been journaling about my feelings and how everything is feeling because it's always been hard for me to put that into words. I journaled a little before this year but not as much as I have now.

Journaling is making it so that I don't have to think about [the pandemic] as much, because I've already got my thoughts out so I'm able to focus more. Writing made me feel better. It's fun when you're writing about what you want to write about, not when you're writing an essay or [reports for school]. Writing is a nice way to get everything out — it would clear my head but also fill it with stuff I want it to be filled with.

## How have you been involved with 826michigan this past year?

I've been in 826michigan's tutoring program and on an editorial board for a book that was a collection of writing



from students. I have been associated with 826michigan since I was around 8, mostly in the tutoring program. The virtual learning has actually been going well, it still had the same feel as in-person learning. I did miss the human connection and focus of in-person, but I did still like it. Everyone at 826 is always really helpful and it helped a lot with school work.

## What do you hope to be writing about in this next school year?

I want to write more stories about anything, really. I like making character profiles a lot and world building is also pretty fun, so I've always wanted to write more about different characters and story ideas.

### VIRTUAL PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT

## 826 Digital

826 Digital is a free online platform for educators that makes the 826 approach to teaching writing possible anywhere in the world. It features adaptable, standards-based writing resources designed by educators for educators that inspire students grades 1-12 to write with confidence. In this past year alone, more than 5,000 educators signed on as new users, showing a greater need for digital writing resources than ever before. Learn more at [826digital.com](https://826digital.com).



*"The resources support writing that is meaningful for kids in a really authentic and enduring way." —Elementary School Educator, 826 Digital User*

## SUMAIYA ABEDIN

Parent of Ayana, 826NYC

### How were you and your student involved with 826 this year?

For the past few years, my daughter Ayana completed in-person learning with 826 in Park Slope. She soon transitioned to remote learning where she eagerly joined all the classes. Her excitement was particularly due to her mentor, Corey, who she greatly admires. She often would exclaim, “*Corey is the best! I want to be like Corey when I grow up...*” Corey’s involvement in Ayana’s interests motivates her to write often and join virtual classes with enthusiasm.

Ayana’s knowledge and awareness of current world events broadened as a result of the education she received from her mentors in 826. As a mother, knowing there is someone, aside from me, listening to her views and opinions gives me a sense of reassurance that she is being heard and understood. Oftentimes, I ask my daughter, “*How did that make you feel?*” She’s able to pause, reflect, and then formulate her thoughts and feelings into coherent words — and that has helped her come out of her shell. Her increased level of comfort in sharing her thoughts has led her to become introspective, emotionally stronger, more open-minded, confident, and understanding of different perspectives.

### What role did writing play in your child’s life this pandemic year?

Ayana greatly enjoys putting pen to paper and letting her thoughts fill the pages. We share a journal where we exchange entries with one another. After tucking her into bed, I will often pull out the journal and write an entry to her. In the morning, as soon as she wakes up, she’ll read my entry and respond. This routine not only strengthens our mother-daughter relationship but gives Ayana a chance to express her innermost thoughts, concerns, and opinions as well as give her the practice to increase her vocabulary and strengthen her sentence and clause structures.

As a first-generation American, my own experiences have taught me the importance of proper communication. Growing up in America with a mother who spoke



limited English, there was often difficulty in communicating and understanding one other. My views were influenced by my American upbringing, often clashing with my mother’s traditional back-home views. As a result of this, I would journal to express my thoughts. I strive to teach Ayana to use writing as a personal outlet to express her own thoughts in a tangible manner, as I once had. At a time when the world seems uncertain and unordinary, plagued by the pandemic, Ayana has used writing to make sense of what is going on around her.

### What do you look forward to next school year?

I hope Ayana continues to be surrounded by the great mentors she currently has, who inspire and motivate her to dream big and accomplish anything she sets her mind to.

I would like for my daughter to continue learning about world events. I like that the 826 family does not shy away from discussing the realities of what occurs around the world. I hope that by learning about these kinds of topics, Ayana will be motivated to stand as an advocate for her community. As an empath, Ayana brings a lot of heart and care to the things she feels strongly towards. I can only imagine the greater ways she will continue to impact the world with the guidance, knowledge, and skills 826 will further instill in her.

## JACQUELINE ADAMESCU

High school teacher, 826LA

### **What role has writing played in your students' lives during the pandemic?**

During the pandemic, it was extremely difficult to have students write as much as I normally would. Writing is a very intensive process, especially for the young people who I serve, who in general are lacking in foundational skills in reading and writing. I still saw and knew that students were experiencing a sense of joy and accomplishment through their writing. We worked on a fictional narrative that students write in response to a short-story unit. I was very pleasantly surprised at what students were able to produce. In the context of the pandemic, I don't see it as escapism, I see it as world-building; it is so much of the projection of the self into other lives, experiences, landscapes, and emotions that we might know extremely well or we might not and hope to understand more about.

826LA supported me with an interview project involving living in Los Angeles during the pandemic. The majority of my students are Latino who come from multigenerational immigrant households, or who at least have grown up in South Central Los Angeles or working-class neighborhoods that are similar. Reading is a practice in empathy, as seeing yourself as another, but the act of writing is truly an act of creation. The 826LA tutors were most struck by students' innate ability to make connections and communicate similarities and differences. My students, in my experience, tend to have a lot of learned helplessness. So they don't necessarily expect to be able to compare and contrast, to analyze and reflect. The project was a way to both zoom out and take a magnifying lens to carefully consider the dramatic effects of living in L.A., particularly during the pandemic, on both themselves and the people they care about.

### **What has writing instruction looked like this past year during the pandemic?**

The pandemic really cut into both reading and writing, because both are time-intensive activities, especially



for students that have trouble writing on command. Some things I did that students really appreciated were discussion posts on our learning-management system, using digital tools like Padlet (virtual Post-it Notes) and Flipgrid (video responses). I also afforded every student the opportunity to answer their questions in audio and not just in writing. A lot of students might be able to express verbally what they can't in writing. They do still need to practice the skill of writing, but at the end of day, I made the decision to give students every possibility they could to express their understanding.

### **What would you like your students to be writing about next school year?**

Next year, I want students to be writing about the same thing I always do: their curiosity, their questions and their ideas about literature, but also about their lived experience. I'm interested in education as a practice of freedom, a practice of liberation. So I view literature and reading and writing as a means to an end, the end being that these students have these hard skills of being able to use particular styles and formats of writing in a professional or academic setting, and other essential skills like empathizing, critical thinking, deep listening, and finding intrinsic motivation. When students write their short stories, I'll be curious to see if there's a shift. For example, I let students pick their own genre and I wonder if there will be more post-apocalyptic, more horror, more journalistic style, or more comedy.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

As we look forward while also looking back, here are a few recommendations to best support students as they transition back into the classrooms of 2021-22.



## Students' choice

Whether through journaling or more formal assignments, students enjoy the freedom of writing about something they choose to write about, especially during challenging times like the pandemic. It's also a chance for teachers and parents to be curious and see what they can learn about their students.



## Stability

This past year has brought about many changes, and not all bad. There may have even been innovative changes that were even more effective than anticipated. What worked well even in this past year that can be carried forward? Keeping some things constant like a virtual writing tool or a writing mentor is important during transitions.



## Ease into the in-person

While most of us have missed the in-person relationships between peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student, we've also been fairly secluded for over a year. Some students may have anxiety about being around others, reacting to in-person feedback, and sharing their writing. Remind students about in-person interaction norms and take off the edge by doing structured activities around peer-to-peer feedback or creating celebrations of student work.

### ABOUT 826

826 is the largest youth writing network in the country. 826 National serves as the hub of the movement to amplify student voices and champions the belief that strong writing skills are essential for academic and lifelong success. The 826 Network now serves close to 120,000 students ages 6 to 18 in under-resourced communities each year online via 826 Digital and through chapters in nine cities: Boston, Chicago, Detroit/Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis/St. Paul. 826 National was established in 2008 to support a growing network of writing centers founded by author Dave Eggers and educator Nínive Calegari in San Francisco in 2002. We work towards a country in which the power and the joy of writing is accessible to every student in every classroom.

Together, we believe writing is the key to cultivating a new generation of creative and diverse thinkers who will define a better, brighter, and more compassionate future.

To learn more about how you can get involved with 826's movement for writing and creativity, please visit our website at [826national.org](https://826national.org)

Download this report at [826national.org/research](https://826national.org/research)

#### WRITTEN BY

Cynthia Chiong, *PhD, Director of Research*  
Gabriela Oliveira, *Research Manager*

#### DESIGNED BY

Grace Molteni