



## QUICK REPORT

# Black/African American Students Show Largest Gains on Writing Assessment

### INTRODUCTION

Across the country, schools are struggling to provide a quality writing education to their students. Due to a lack of time, limited resources, and a focus on more test-driven subjects, many students are leaving school without adequate writing skills. This issue has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Educators have been tasked with addressing low test scores due to pandemic learning loss in subjects such as math and reading, which have reached the lowest levels in decades.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, without a national assessment of student writing to drive attention and priorities, writing remains overlooked.

The most recent reported national assessment of writing, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics over ten years ago in 2011, found that 3 out of 4 twelfth graders were not writing at grade-level proficiency. This is an even greater issue when it comes to students of color and students from under-resourced communities, with 9 out of 10 Black and Hispanic students not writing at grade-level proficiency. And, on average, White and Asian students scored significantly higher than Black and Hispanic students.<sup>2</sup> Although writing education poses challenges to all schools and students, those challenges and their effects are inequitably split by racial and socioeconomic factors. These results likely have not changed since the NAEP assessment.<sup>3</sup>

At 826, we work primarily with students from under-resourced communities, with 88% of our students identifying as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) and 75% coming from low-income families. We have seen how having more time and resources devoted to writing education leads to tremendous growth in writing ability. In contrast to the 1%-2% decline in national reading and math scores, which is the equivalent of roughly a half year of learning, writing assessment scores in 2022 from students in 826 Network programs showed a statistically significant improvement of 6% over the course of programming. Additionally, Black students saw the most improvement in their writing, gaining 12%, double the average for the whole group. This report will take a deeper look at those scores and compare them with national trends in writing education and assessment.



# 75%

of twelfth graders are not writing at a grade-level proficiency

# 90%

of Black and Hispanic students are not writing at grade-level proficiency

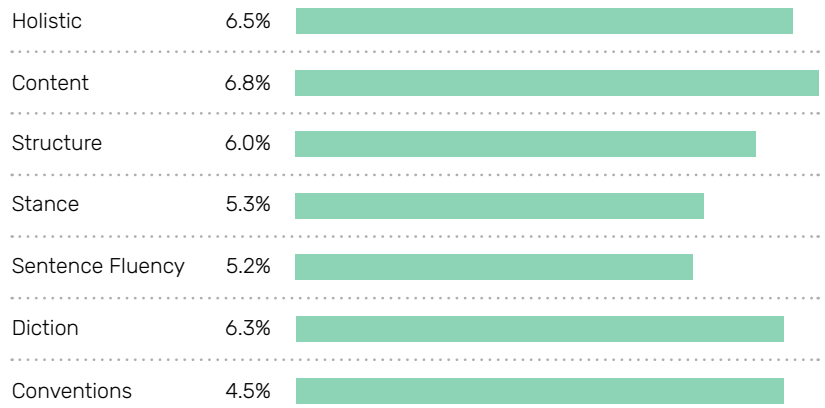
# 2x

writing improvement by Black/African American 826 students

## OVERALL RESULTS

In the 2021–22 school year, the 826 Network assessed 464 students on their writing skills using the Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), a six-point rubric created by the National Writing Project to measure growth in student writing holistically and across six key attributes: Content, Structure, Stance, Sentence Fluency, Diction, and Conventions. The holistic score gives an overall summary judgment of the student piece. Students are assessed once at the beginning of programming in the fall (pretest) and again at the end of the program in the spring (posttest). In the 2021–22 school year, we saw significant gains across the board, with students growing, on average, 6.5% holistically and 5.7% across the six attributes between the pretest and posttest. See Figure A for a breakdown of students’ growth in writing skills while participating in 826 programming.

Figure A. Average Percent Gain from Pretest to Posttest by AWC Attribute



The average percent gained for all attributes was statistically significant from pretest to posttest at  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 464$  (see Appendix for details).

## RESULTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Of the 464 students who were given the assessment, race information across nine racial categories was available for 324 students. Given the small sample size in some of the racial groups, including White, we focus here on the three racial groups with the most students: Hispanic/Latinx ( $n = 143$ ), Black/African American ( $n = 68$ ), and Asian/Asian American ( $n = 37$ ), resulting in a final sample size of 248. Additionally, for simplicity, we report on the holistic score only here. The results were that students’ race affects their performance on the pretest, posttest, and overall percentage gained on this writing assessment.

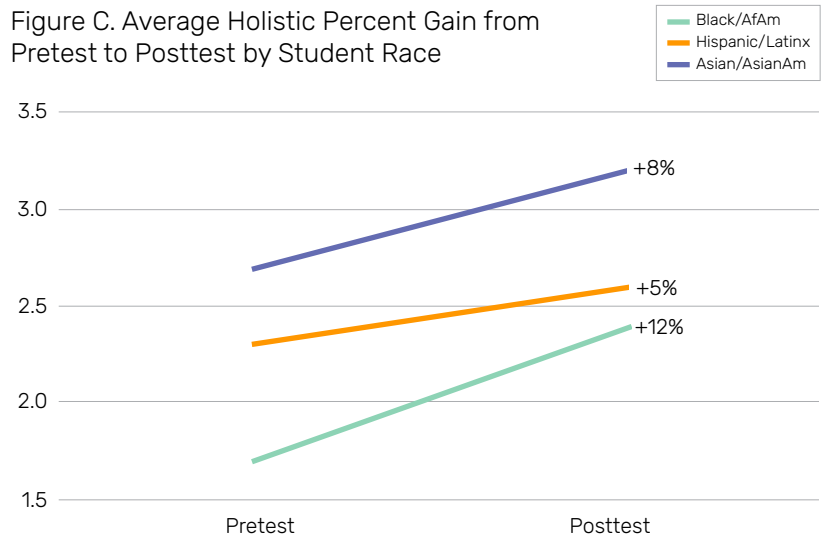
Figure B. Average Holistic Scores from Pretest to Posttest by Student Race

Student’s Race	Pretest Mean (out of 6)	Post-test Mean (out of 6)	Percent Gained
Black/African American	1.7	2.4	12%
Hispanic/Latinx	2.3	2.6	5%
Asian/Asian American	2.7	3.2	8%

In an ANOVA, there was a main effect of race for the pretest scores, posttest scores, and percentage gained (see Appendix for details).

On the pretest, Black/African American students scored significantly lower than Hispanic/Latinx students and Asian/Asian American students. There was no significant difference in scores between Hispanic/Latinx and Asian/Asian American students. These results suggest that when students first come to 826, Black/African American students are struggling most with their writing.

Figure C. Average Holistic Percent Gain from Pretest to Posttest by Student Race



After completing programming with 826, posttest scores rose for all three groups. Black/African American student scores were now comparable to Hispanic/Latinx student scores, though both groups’ scores were still significantly lower than Asian/Asian American student scores. These posttest results are similar to the NAEP scores from 2011, in which Asian/Asian American students outscored other students of color.

**“826 has helped me evolve spiritually, psychologically, and literally. Before joining 826, I wasn’t a very strong reader or writer, but thanks to 826 mentors, I was able to develop solid concepts that allowed me to evolve into a powerful comprehender and thinker.”**

**ACES B., 826 VALENCIA STUDENT,  
BLACK LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT CLUB**

## IMPLICATIONS

Although Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students have historically scored lower in writing proficiency, the data here show that we can bridge that gap. When students receive support and access to quality writing education, we see significant gains in learning. In 2022, the 826 Network provided over 10,000 instructional hours to a majority of students of color. While only 4% of teachers report meeting the recommended threshold of one hour of writing a day,<sup>4</sup> students in 826 programming spend many hours outside of school writing. And, beyond access, 826 builds programming that specifically supports the needs and strengths of students’ communities. Here are a few examples of tailored programming that may have contributed to the results reported here.

### Dedicated Writing Time for Black/African American Students

Although Black students scored lower on average, mirroring NAEP trends, they improved the most from pretest to posttest. 826 programming focuses on providing access to quality writing education to those who need it most. On the following page, we describe two examples of 826 programming focused solely on Black/African American students.



**“I was able to express my feelings deeper with people that understand where I am coming from.”**

**ACES B., 826 VALENCIA STUDENT,  
BLACK LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT CLUB**

### 826 VALENCIA'S BLACK STUDENTS INITIATIVE

826 Valencia launched the Black Students Initiative in 2020 to create new opportunities that specifically support Black students. Alongside increasing the number of Black students whom they serve, the initiative also aims to hold space for, amplify the voices of, and improve the academic success and social and emotional confidence of Black students. The initiative seeks to reach these goals through several different programmatic and organizational avenues:

Program	Description	Result
The Black Literary Achievement Club	Weekly meetings with students in eighth through twelfth grade to explore their Black identities and histories through writing	Students receive participation stipends, publishing opportunities, academic support, space for creative expression, and mentorship by Black professionals.
The Black Student Cohort	Weekly meetings for a group of Black-identifying third through fifth graders from the Tenderloin community in San Francisco	Throughout the school year, the cohort engages in writing lessons, community builders, and other enrichment activities in order to grow their leadership and social and emotional skills.
Volunteer Outreach	Intentional recruitment, placement, and retention of Black volunteers	Students benefit in unique ways from having individualized support from adults who share their cultural background.

### 826 BOSTON'S LIFT EV'RY VOICE

In 2021, the 826 Boston Writers' Room partnered with Becoming A Man (BAM) at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester to publish a book about becoming a Black man in America today. Students had the chance to be mentored by Black men, who encouraged them to stand in their truth and write about their unique experiences of being young and Black in America. "I want to get better at vocalizing my voice and not being afraid to say what I want to say. Mostly because I want to help the other people who are scared to say something," said Isaiah, one of the student authors and members of the Student Editorial Board. "At the end of the day, we are still human, and we should all have our own voice." This book features poems, spoken-word pieces, and essays from Boston students and their mentors that explore what it's like to be a young man of color today. [Watch the full video](#) to hear more from students and members of the 826 Boston community about what it felt like to make this book.



**“I want to get better at vocalizing my voice and not being afraid to say what I want to say. Mostly because I want to help the other people who are scared to say something.”**

**ISAIAH, 826 BOSTON STUDENT  
LIFT EV'RY VOICE**

## Supporting English Language Learners (ELL)

While Hispanic/Latinx students did not gain as much on assessment as Black/African American students, they did show significant improvement in writing skills. Many of our students who identify as Hispanic are also ELL students, which adds extra challenges to the academic writing process for them. Nineteen percent of students who participate in 826 programming identify as ELL, nearly double the average 10% for public schools in the United States. Research shows ELL students face several challenges in acquiring writing skills, including struggles with vocabulary, grammar, and spelling; a lack of access to relevant books and reading materials; and an overall lack of readiness and motivation to write due to the aforementioned challenges.<sup>5</sup> However, these gaps are not unbridgeable, as the data show significant improvement in writing for this population after more exposure to writing instruction. Here is an example from 826NYC of how 826 programming specifically supports ELL students:


### 826NYC'S MANGO IS MY MIDDLE NAME

During March 2023, 55 middle school students at I.S. 171 in Brooklyn took on the challenge of creating poetry and fiction born out of their memories, hopes, and family stories. A majority of the students in the classes were emerging bilingual/ELL students from Central and South America, many of whom were newly arrived in New York City at the start of the school year. Writing was submitted in Spanish or Spanish and English, and both languages appear throughout the book, so that it is accessible to the students' multilingual community. The majority of students (96%) reported that they felt that the 826 team respected their cultural backgrounds and individual identities. And, students saw the benefits of strengthening their writing, with 93% of students reporting that they will use the writing skills they learned at 826 in the future.

Many students wrote about their families' food and traditions, their experiences moving to the U.S., and the things that make them who they are, from national pride to sports preferences to their favorite home-cooked meals. *Mango is My Middle Name* is not just a beautiful collection of poetry and prose; it is a tribute to the ingenuity and diverse talents of these young writers and to their bravery in facing down the blank page to make art out of thin air.

**"I am a child of many places because I like to go  
out for walks  
My language runs through my blood  
I like to swim in the seas and beaches and pools  
When I used to visit my grandmother in  
the countryside, I liked  
to pick cocoa  
I am full of my Ecuadorian music"**

**"Yo soy un niño de muchos lugares porque me gusta  
salir a caminar  
Mi idioma corre por mi sangre  
A me me gusta nadar en los mares y playas y piscinas  
Yo cuando visitaba a mi abuelita al campo,  
me gustaba  
recojer cacao  
Yo estoy llena de mi música Ecuatoriana"**




**96%**

of students felt that their cultural backgrounds and individual identities were respected by the 826 team

**93%**

of students plan to use the writing skills they learned at 826 in the future



## SUMMARY

Overall, these findings demonstrate that a lack of time and access to quality writing instruction are the main barriers between students and writing excellence, particularly for those students of color who may not have the same educational opportunities as their counterparts. How can we best support these students to help alleviate this inequity and make sure they reach their full writing potential? The first step is ensuring access to quality writing education. 826 does this by focusing on serving students who have long been overlooked in writing instruction, leading to the significant gains in writing that are described in this report.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Goldstein, Dana. "What the New, Low Test Scores for 13-Year-Olds Say About U.S. Education Now." *The New York Times*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/21/us/naep-test-results-education.html>.
2. National Center for Education Statistics. *The Nation's Report Card: Writing 2011 (NCES 2012-470)*. Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2012, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2011/2012470.pdf>.
3. Chiong, Cynthia, and Gabriela Oliveira. "The Truth About Writing Education in America: Let's Write, Make Things Right." 826 National, 2021, [826national.org/research](https://826national.org/research).
4. Chiong, Cynthia, and Gabriela Oliveira. "The Truth About Writing Education in America: Raising Teacher Voices." 826 National, 2023, [826national.org/research](https://826national.org/research).
5. Moses, Rachel Nyanamoney, and Maslawati Mohamad. "Challenges Faced by Students and Teachers on Writing Skills in ESL Contexts: A Literature Review." *Creative Education*, vol. 10, no. 13, Dec. 2019, pp. 3385-91, DOI: [10.4236/ce.2019.1013260](https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2019.1013260).

## APPENDIX

Overall Assessment	AWC attribute	t-value	p-value
	Holistic	-7.31	< .001
	Content	-6.95	< .001
	Structure	-6.84	< .001
	Stance	-5.25	< .001
	Sentence Fluency	-5.43	< .001
	Diction	-7.49	< .001
	Conventions	-5.20	< .001

ANOVA BY RACE	Student's Race	Mean	SD
Pretest	Black/African American	1.74	0.91
	Hispanic/Latinx	2.32	0.96
	Asian/Asian American	2.70	1.25
Posttest	Black/African American	2.39	1.05v
	Hispanic/Latinx	2.58	1.08
	Asian/Asian American	3.24	0.88
Percent Gained	Black/African American	12%	.95
	Hispanic/Latinx	5%	.91
	Asian/Asian American	8%	1.05

		F-value	P-value
	<b>PRETEST HOLISTIC</b>	13.05	< .001
Post Hoc Tukey's HSD	Black/AfAm < Hispanic	-	< .001
Post Hoc Tukey's HSD	Black/Af/Am < Asian	-	< .001
	<b>POST-TEST HOLISTIC</b>	8.33	< .001
Post Hoc Tukey's HSD	Black/Af/Am < Asian	-	< .001
Post Hoc Tukey's HSD	Hispanic < Asian	-	< .002
	<b>PERCENT GAINED</b>	4.34	< .01
Post Hoc Tukey's HSD	Black/AfAm > Hispanic	-	< .001

## 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 more than 470,000 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 toward 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.



**NATIONAL**  
YOUTH WRITING

### CREDITS

**Written by:**

Gabriela Oliveira, Research Manager

Cynthia Chiong, Ph.D.,  
Director of Research

**Designed by:**

Grace Molteni

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

