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# An Evaluation of the After-school Tutoring Organization 826 Valencia

**What is the San Francisco-based education initiative doing and how can it fare better? Analyzed with concepts from the Complex Systems Theory.**



826 Valencia—Tenderloin

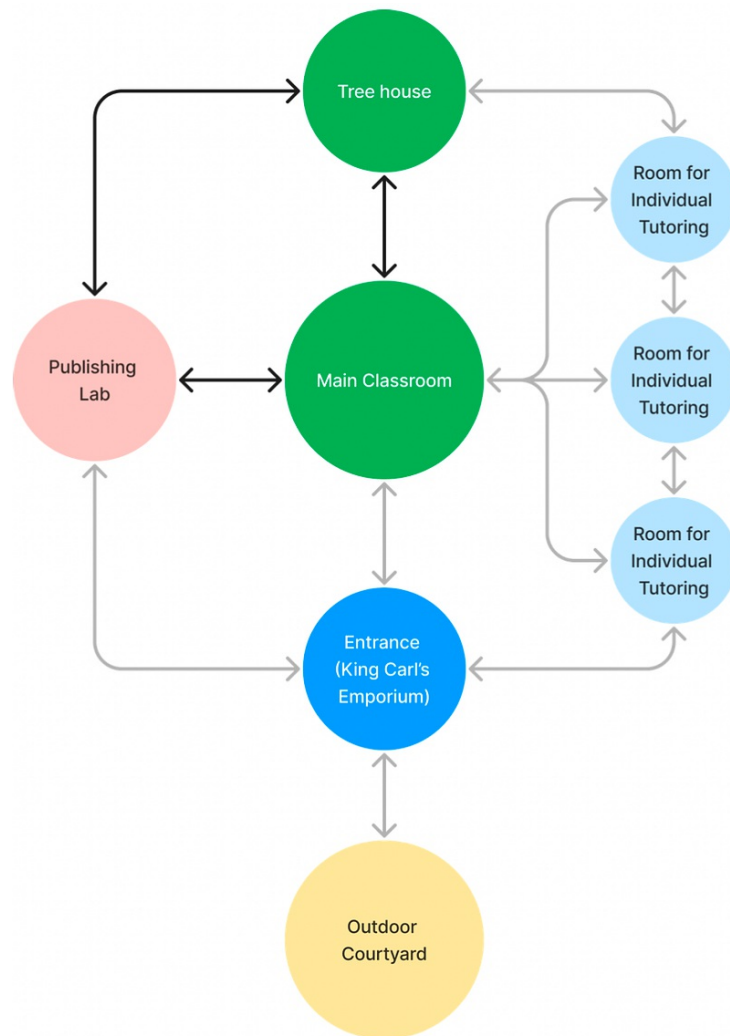
826 Valencia is a youth writing program that has been operating in San Francisco's Mission District for 20 years. Founded by educator Nínive Calegari and author Dave Eggers, 826 has expanded to nine chapters nationwide, with the largest chapter still in San Francisco. They celebrate and elevate the voices of young authors by providing them with opportunities to have their writing published and shared with a wider audience. I will evaluate the effectiveness of 826 Valencia based on its mission, programs, and services in improving the writing skills of students in San Francisco.

826 Valencia's formal mission statement is to support students ages six to eighteen with their creative and expository writing skills and to help teachers inspire their students to write (826 Valencia, 2022).

To achieve this goal, they provide free tutoring services, writing workshops, field trips, publishing opportunities, one-on-one support for teachers, and other resources tailored to each student's needs ('support students'). They have no preferences on which student to serve, though they primarily work with learners who have English as a second language ('ages six to eighteen'). 826 Valencia takes advantage of their project-based pedagogy by presenting different themes of which a student can make a story, article, or podcast ('creative and expository writing skills'). The organization also collaborates with teachers for lesson plans and even schools for after-class activities to promote a culture of fun writing ('help teachers inspire their students to write'). Additionally, the values reflected their goals of providing quality education in classrooms by reducing the teacher-to-student ratio from 35:1 to 3:1 in their local partner schools by employing the help of volunteer tutors.

To assess the impact of 826 Valencia, I will focus on the physical-spatial features of King Carl's Emporium, the branch where I volunteered. Unlike other after-school tutoring centers such as Sylvan Learning of San Francisco and Tutoring Club of SF, 826 Valencia stands out for its unique themes, and use of different rooms and areas within the building to spark creative ideas and support different types of writing activities (Dul, 2019). The forest-themed main classroom is used for group tutoring and workshops, while smaller rooms are used for individual

tutoring. The outdoor courtyard is used for field trips, and the publishing lab is used for editing and printing. There is even a tree house for relaxation. Overall, the use of different spaces within the building supports the organization's goals of promoting creativity and inspiring students to write.



**Figure 1.** A network diagram showing the spatial layout of 826 Valencia's King Carl's Emporium branch. The different areas within the building are represented as nodes, with the flow of students between these areas as edges. Larger nodes represent bigger spaces. Darker edges represent higher foot traffic, indicating the most popular routes and areas within the building.

In 826 Valencia, the network's edges show a conserved flow of high traffic in the classroom, treehouse, and publishing lab, indicating that students are actively engaging the program's resources. This heavy foot traffic emphasizes the success of 826 Valencia's project-based pedagogy, as students are completing tasks and submitting their work for feedback or publishing. Based on both personal experience and the podcast, it appears that different types of students

have different preferences for how they complete their tasks (Madrigal, 2022). Some students prefer to work with their peers, while others prefer to work alone in the treehouse. This indicates that 826 Valencia is inclusive and allows students to choose the learning environment that best suits their needs. This inclusivity contributes to the organization's mission of impacting a wider range of students with writing. To further improve the network and the program's effectiveness, I would recommend launching an initiative that encourages students to seek individualized feedback from grown-ups in tutoring rooms. This would provide students with a richer learning experience and help them to incorporate feedback more effectively into their work.

During my volunteer experiences, the facilitators used to access to the treehouse as an incentive. In response to that, the 4th graders I was dealing with finished their work as quickly as possible. Here, the facilitator employs the theory of motivation, using the treehouse as an extrinsic motivation to reward the students when they finish their tasks. This is applied weakly, however, since a downside is having students satisfice, explainable in Cognitive Appraisal (Lazarus) Theory terms with students wanting to join their friends and play (cognitive appraisal), speeding up their writing because they feel more pressured (physiological arousal), their cognition (subjective experience) and focused heightened, disregarding feedback from me and other volunteer-tutors (action). When I raised this to the facilitator, she acknowledged and explained that she would usually pull this trick once the time is limited. According to her, this is because she wants to spend the second half of the session—that is after students finish eating their lunch—refining their writing. Research shows that student performances improve after a break, so this strategy benefits the facilitator, volunteer tutors, and students and maximizes personal utilities (Rees et al., 2017).

826 Valencia must conform to certain informational social influences related to education, such as the value of strong writing skills. For example, a study found that students who received writing instruction had significantly higher scores on standardized tests than those who did not receive writing instruction (Kim et al., 2021). By taking action based on science, the organization is able to gain support and credibility within the educational community. This is important because so far, 826 Valencia is proven to be effective. However, in order for them to have a larger impact—a power cascade—and be adapted by the American education system, there must be a shift in the power dynamics at play. Currently, the education system is dominated by traditional teaching methods and standardized testing. The emphasis on these methods is reinforced by the power of politicians, policymakers, and funding agencies, who prioritize quantitative measures of success. As a result, schools and teachers may feel pressure to prioritize these measures and may be less likely to incorporate innovative teaching techniques such as those used by 826 Valencia. However, 826 Valencia's success in improving students' writing skills and engaging teachers suggests that their approach has the potential to challenge the dominant power dynamics and shift the focus towards more holistic measures of success. By working with teachers and schools to demonstrate the effectiveness of their methods, 826 Valencia can build support and advocacy for their approach. This, in turn, can influence policymakers and funding agencies to prioritize more diverse and creative teaching methods.

826 Valencia is a response to the education scene in San Francisco showing alarming statistics. Only 27% of high school seniors are proficient in writing Nationwide, 40% of 3rd graders meet or exceed English Language Arts standards in the state of California, and less than 40% of African American and Latinx students are proficient in English Language Arts compared to 60% of their white peers (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; California Department of Education, 2022).

I will employ system dynamics to explain how 826 Valencia is impacting by making the education scene in San Francisco the phase space. One of the key dimensions of the phase space in this context is the level of support for writing education in the city. This can be measured in terms

of funding for writing programs, the availability of resources and facilities, and the level of engagement and interest from teachers and students. 826 Valencia operates in a region of the phase space that is characterized by low levels of support for writing education, with many schools facing challenges such as overcrowding, budget cuts, and a lack of resources (Tucker, 2021).

The attractors in this phase space represent different levels of support for writing education in the city. One attractor represents a situation in which writing education is a low priority in the city, with limited funding and resources available, while the second attractor represents a situation in which writing education is highly valued, with ample funding and resources.

826 Valencia is currently located in the basin of attraction for the low-support attractor, pulling San Francisco's education towards a state of limited support for writing education. Though it is hard to climb because of more pressing issues today such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. Government officials might think it is better to allocate resources away from education. In order to move San Francisco's education towards the high-support attractor, 826 Valencia will need to pass through a critical point on the boundary of the basin, where a significant intervention can shift the organization onto a new trajectory. This might involve increasing funding for writing programs, developing partnerships with schools and other organizations, and successfully raising awareness of the importance of writing education. Though attractor # 2 is not so shallow in anticipation of potential "more pressing" issues that the government will deal with in the future.

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