According to 826 Boston’s website, its mission is: “826 Boston is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting students ages 6 to 18 with their creative and expository writing skills, and to helping teachers inspire their students to write. Our services are structured around the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success. With this understanding in mind, we provide after-school tutoring, field trips, creative writing workshops, in-school tutoring, help for English Language Learners, and in-depth publishing projects. Each of our free programs seeks to strengthen each student’s power to express ideas effectively, creatively, confidently, and in his or her individual voice.”

In an interview with J.J. Javier, Volunteer Manager at 826 Boston, she describes the organization as follows: “This space that we’ve created – we call it a “third space” that’s not the home and it’s not school, but it’s a space where they can completely feel comfortable to be themselves and to learn these social emotional learning skills . . . Our job is always to keep our students safe but our mission is also very particular. We want to give them a safe space, that’s our number one priority, but also to give them an avenue to be able to talk about those things as well. But we also don’t want to be confused for a community center either; community centers offer different types of programs to support families and students.”
In a TED Talk with 826 Founder Dave Eggers, he says, “You can use the skills you have. The kids need you, the students need you. They need your actual person, your physical personhood, open minds, open ears and boundless compassion. Sitting next to them listening and nodding and asking questions for hours at a time. Some of these kids just don’t plain know how good they are, how smart, and how much they have to say. You can tell them, you can shine that light on them one human interaction at a time, so we hope you’ll join us.”
“I’m amazed at how competent they are as readers and writers now and how independent they’ve become when it comes to getting their homework done.”

-Ubah, after-school parent
“We even had dressing rooms. We had cheering fans. I felt like I was famous.”

-Elijah W., age 10
826 Boston FY14 Financial Activity

Total Revenue $762,762
- 44% Events
- 34% Grants
- 15% Individuals
- 6% Corporate Support
- 1% Store

Total Expenses $759,259
- 69% Programs
- 23% Fundraising
- 8% Administration

Image attributions: 826boston.org
In 2002, educator Nínive Calegari and author Dave Eggers founded 826 Valencia in San Francisco, CA to relieve the stress of overworked teachers by creating a space where talented professionals from the area could give students additional one-on-one attention that they can’t get from schools. Now situated in six U.S. cities with countless partner projects and offshoots around the nation, 826 has evolved from a small neighborhood tutoring center to a national movement empowering students and communities in its wake. 826 Boston opened its Roxbury neighborhood location in 2007. The project recognizes the need for creative space outside of a formal classroom setting for children to express and explore their talents. As the program has gained momentum, the initiative cannot be stopped and the results have exceeded all of the founders’ initial expectations.

This project began to bring writing programs to students who do not receive enough attention in the subject, but its impact is much greater. As students develop a voice through their writing they gain self-confidence and maturity that assists them beyond school. At 826, educators aim to improve the writing skills of their students but also encourage the development of soft skills, or social-emotional learning. What sets 826 apart from schools and other tutoring centers is that it is not a school or home, but rather a unique space they call a “third space.” The nature of this space makes the development of social-emotional skills possible. Social-emotional development is often ignored in schools but skills such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and learning how to ask for help and advocate for one’s self are valuable life skills. At 826 Boston students have the opportunity to interact with and learn from other kids older and younger; they encourage each other as they are encouraged themselves and are motivated through their work. Thus, the mission has grown to not only enhance writing skills but also to utilize these skills as a vehicle for creative expression, individual growth, and preparation for life outside of school.
In addition to free after-school tutoring, 826 Boston also offers creative writing workshops, storytelling and bookmaking field trips, summer theater and writing programs, in-school programs like the Writers’ Room at John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, and college essay writing “boot camps.” The Writers’ Room is a great example of the potential for 826’s mission to expand. The Writers’ Room is located in a local high school, John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, in collaboration with Northeastern University’s Writing Program. The room is available to students throughout the school day and after school to provide additional help and mentoring. Meanwhile the room also serves as a space to host and promote creative endeavors like poetry slams and a student-run literary journal. 826 Boston recognizes the importance of providing space for young people to find their voice in an encouraging environment without the pressure of teachers, family, and grades.

826 Boston is located in a residential area in Roxbury. Situated in a neighborhood, with some of the families who utilize 826 programming even living upstairs in apartments above the organization, 826 Boston highly values community involvement. The organization is not a community center in the traditional sense of the word, but is rather a resource for families. According to J.J. Javier, Volunteer Manager at 826 Boston, community involvement is one of its greatest strengths; most of the students live within a two-mile radius of the center. However, this accessibility does not deter students traveling from elsewhere in the greater Boston area; J.J. estimates that 826 Boston serves about twelve additional neighborhoods.

Another major strength of 826 Boston is its role as a “third space” for students. Away from school and home, the organization is a separate space where students can develop their writing skills and freely express their creativity. Having this “third space” directly in the community is especially beneficial because it provides students a safe space close to home in an
often-risky area. 826 Boston is in a neighborhood with “lots of gang involvement [and] a lot of gun violence,” J.J. remarked. “A couple of weeks ago a woman was shot in the car right in front of our center.” Thus 826 Boston’s unique position allows it to provide students not only a safe space within the community, but a “third space” in which they can talk about surrounding issues. Writing programs provide an outlet for students to process what they witness around them, all the while building skills that will benefit them later in life.

826 Boston faces a similar challenge to many cultural change organizations: a lack of funding. While the budget is not preventative in terms of the work being done, more money would allow the organization to expand in various ways, such as acquiring a bigger space or hiring more staff members. 826 Boston has the potential to reach to more communities and especially more schools - due to limited resources, only one school has a Writers’ Room. Similarly, the after-school programs have a waiting list. One clear avenue for expansion is the in-school programs. According to J.J., the after-school programs are strong, and 826 Boston’s next step is improving the in-school programs. “What would it look like if we opened a Writing Room at a middle school level? Elementary level?” she wonders. Aside from funding, one challenge to this goal is working within the bureaucracy of the Boston Public School system.

In order for 826 Boston to strengthen its work, it is crucial for it to have a strong foundation with the students is already serves. The organization has a high retention rate - many students remain with the program for years - so it cannot commit to other communities without strong footing in its existing programs. Another condition for success is support from the Boston school system. In order to create more in-school programming or install more Writer’s Rooms, administrative support from schools is key. This could even manifest in using school buses to
transport students to 826 Boston’s after-school programming, an initiative that would not only make the commute safer but broaden the organization’s reach.

When one looks critically at the current form of education in the United States it is easy to get lost in bureaucracy, policy, and antiquated theory. 826 revolutionizes the way one can interpret an education by reimagining tutoring and academic standards. The organization measures student success differently than traditional school systems, focusing on the acquisition of social-emotional learning skills and enabling creative expression. Student work can also be published at the end of a program, providing a tangible accomplishment for participants. This re-imagination of writing programs motivates students and imparts skills that resonate outside of the classroom.

Crucial to 826’s model is that it provides space for creativity. Not only do students receive writing tutoring, but they can express their creativity through 826 programming. While learning key writing skills, they can create pieces both serious and lighthearted; 826 Boston’s website features myriad student work with titles such as “Agent Sneaky,” “Please Don’t Eat Me, Fudge!” and “Am I Really A Bully?” The Writers’ Room is also a combination of both educational resources and creative outlets. In addition to providing tutors for student assignments, it hosts clubs for a slam poetry team and a student-run literary journal. Located in the John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, the Writers’ Room is a hub for artists to take a break from academia and express their creativity; in a video on 826 Boston’s website, the Writer’s Room is titled, “A Room Where I Can Be Who I Am.”

826 Boston represents a solution interpreted through a moral imagination. The 826 model of education turns traditional education on its head to reinvent a more successful system. When the creators of 826 Valencia were imagining the difference they could make, they recognized that
they could be a valuable resource to the existing community by enabling talented professionals to teach young kids and thus make a stronger future. The communal exchange of intellect is emblematic of the interconnectedness one must recognize in order to make a positive social change. The benefits of 826 are bolstered by the emphasis on interconnectedness because it allows for personal and communal growth beyond structured curricula. The project was indeed a risk, but allowing students a space to be creative enriches their lives beyond the traditional classroom. 826 Boston works because its image of the future challenges and reimagines the current system.