

Queens Public Library Helps Close the Digital Divide

Offering adult LEP learners access to innovative career-aligned English language training

AT A GLANCE

CHALLENGES

- Addressing the digital divide
- Catering to various student schedules
- Meeting the needs of all learners

RESULTS

- Measurable improvement in NRS levels
- QPL now provides ESL learning anytime, anywhere

THE INSTITUTION

There are 3.1 million immigrants in New York City, according to a recent report from the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. In New York City, immigrants speak roughly 150 different languages, and nearly 49% are Limited English Proficient (LEP). Queens, a New York City borough, is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the nation, home to nearly 1.1 million immigrants. One of the largest library systems in the United States, Queens Public Library (QPL), has branches serving neighborhoods across the borough, and plays a central role in civic life, offering a forum for the exchange of ideas, the pursuit of intellectual and personal growth, and the joy of learning to all. Currently, the library system serves 239 adult students annually in Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)-funded programs across six QPL locations. Within the WIOA programs, students have access to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes that are career-focused.

THE CHALLENGES

There is a strong need in the communities QPL serves to provide instruction to English Language Learners that gives them an avenue to career pathway programs. Offering flexible learning programs and serving the community as a 24/7 educational resource have always been goals for QPL. However, even before the COVID pandemic, students often juggled multiple family and work obligations, causing them to be absent or drop out of in-person classes, posing a major challenge for the institution. Meeting the needs of all students with varying work schedules is difficult. In addition, the institution also sees long waitlists for its ESL classes. Offering more learning flexibility would mean QPL could enroll and retain more learners, while still permitting them to meet familial and work obligations. Another challenge QPL faces is the digital divide- or gaps in access to technology and varying levels of digital literacy among adult learners. Addressing the challenges of the digital divide and being a resource for students with fluctuating work schedules meant finding and providing a solution needed to close the digital divide and work with the challenging schedules of learners.

SOLUTION

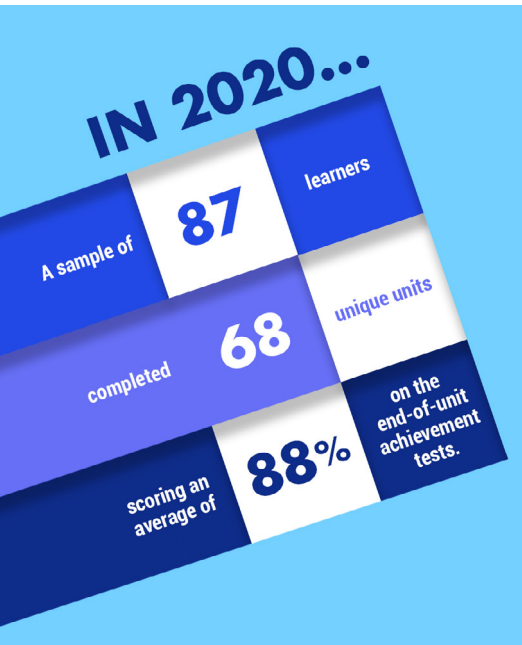
A long-time advocate for blended learning, Fatma Gailan, Assistant Director at Queens Public Library, championed a digital solution as a supplement to the institution's current WIOA programs. Since there were varying levels of teachers and staff who were comfortable using technology, one of the first goals for QPL was to help them understand the value of technology-enabled programming. Gailan offered training to QPL employees on the benefits of blended learning and on ways to make QPL programs more digitally accessible. Next, the organization tried experimenting with several language training platforms, but none were able to meet the needs of all students. Committed to serving the community by improving English proficiency and

“EnGen became a way for students to access their classes to study and reach their goals, wherever and whenever. Being a portable solution, EnGen allowed students to study on their phone and on the train. We found that our learners that are intermediate ESL learners are more challenged when they were using EnGen compared to our previous learning provider.”

- Sarah Sidiq
Interim Blended Learning Coordinator,
Queens Public Library

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EnGen learners at a large Public Library improved more NRS levels on an independent assessment than those who did not use EnGen:

ENGEN GROUP

NRS Change	# of Learners
1 NRS Level Gain	16
2 or more NRS Level Gain	12
Maintained NRS Level	2
Dropped an NRS Level	0
Total Sample Size	30

COMPARISON GROUP

NRS Change	# of Learners
1 NRS Level Gain	12
2 or more NRS Level Gain	5
Maintained NRS Level	5
Dropped an NRS Level	4
Total Sample Size	26

Learners in both groups were enrolled in WIOA-focused ESL curriculum; learners in the EnGen group were part of the 2019 EnGen pilot.

SOLUTION (continued)

closing the digital divide, Queens Public Library was introduced to EnGen. The QPL team also wanted to accelerate language acquisition and graduation rates in adult ESL classes through the use of innovative technology. With EnGen-powered classes, the QPL program is able to cater to the needs of the program's intermediate WIOA students, because the ESL classes are more career-focused, a requirement for WIOA programs. "The students enrolled in the EnGen program were also preparing to enter the job market and were able to benefit from the career-aligned, as well as academic English classes. The students using EnGen either have goals to move up in the workforce or excel with their academic goals, including higher education or college." says Sarah Sidiq, Interim Blended Learning Coordinator.

RESULTS

One of the cornerstones of a successful WIOA program is the ability for program managers to show improvements in National Reporting Systems levels. The National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) is the accountability system for federally-funded adult education WIOA programs. To illustrate the impact of an EnGen-powered program, a cohort of 56 students were separated into two groups—26 learners who took WIOA classes without access to EnGen and 30 learners who had access to both the WIOA classes and EnGen. **After four months of being enrolled in classes, twice as many EnGen learners gained two or more NRS levels, while in the control group four learners dropped a level.** Not a single student in the EnGen pilot dropped a level. Now, students enrolled in QPL classes have mobile accessibility allowing them to study at their own convenience. In the past, learners only had access to in-person-only instruction and were limited to only the homework or information given by the instructor. Today, with EnGen, students now have the power to continue learning and studying beyond the physical classroom, helping to sustain enrollment. Learners also have access to live classes, classes that give learners the opportunity to have real, interactive conversations in English, on the EnGen platform. In addition, teachers now have the added benefit of using the EnGen administrative portal, an intuitive management and reporting platform, to broadcast the top learners of the week which further encourages healthy competition and engagement. **In 2020, a sample of 87 learners completed 68 unique units, scoring an average of 88% on the end-of-unit achievement tests.** The EnGen-powered program at Queens Public Library continues to show promise and we're excited for the untapped potential of their adult learners.