

Creating an ESL Bridge for a Comprehensive 3-Step Career Pathway

Equipping adult learners with the English-language training needed for career-aligned pathways and certification programs

AT A GLANCE

CHALLENGES

- Awareness of affordable and free adult learning programs
- English-language requirements for IET bootcamps and career certification

RESULTS

- High engagement levels across students
- Measurable improvement in English-language skills
- Confidence and language skills necessary to advance through career program

THE ORGANIZATION

Peninsula and Regional Education Program (PREP) is a regional adult education program administered under Newport News Public Schools in Virginia. This program prepares students for college, careers, and citizenship by offering adult learning instruction for basic skills, GED Credentialing, English-language learning (ELL), and integrated education and training (IET) bootcamps. PREP also works in partnership with Thomas Nelson Community College to offer career certificate programs.

In 2021, PREP was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education's Advancing Innovation Project as an innovative practice in adult education.

THE CHALLENGES

Building awareness and recruiting students is an uphill battle for many adult-learning organizations. Many learners, whose lives could improve with ongoing education and upskilling, are simply unaware that affordable and free resources like PREP are available.

More challenging still, many of these potential students are Limited English Proficient (LEP). According to a 2018 Census Bureau survey, one in eight Virginia residents is an immigrant. The adult immigrant and first-generation population in Virginia can benefit greatly from adult education programs like those offered by PREP, but these programs are designed for native speakers and employ English-language requirements to ensure all those enrolled can keep up with the fast-paced learning environment. PREP's IET career bootcamps require an 8th-9th grade English reading level and its career certification programs through Thomas Nelson Community College require a 9th-11th grade English reading level.

These English-language requirements are a major barrier to entry for ELLs. It can prevent this population from having access to continued education and career pathways, which also affects the workforce and talent available to local employers. PREP needed a way to equip their LEP adult learners with the English-language skills necessary to advance through PREP's career pathway. PREP wanted to ensure that those learners with limited English-language skills are not only aware of the programs available to them, but that they would be set up for success, participation, and advancement once enrolled.

SOLUTION

PREP's IET Coordinator, Danielle Perry, and ESL teacher, Melissa Curtiss, became internal champions and began designing a solution. They sought to build a three-step bridge program for ELLs, providing them an onramp to PREP's IET bootcamps and career certifications through blended in-person and digital English-language instruction. They aimed for this onramp to provide the necessary language skills and confidence required for ELLs to advance through PREP's comprehensive three-step career pathway.

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PREPS THREE-STEP BRIDGE PROGRAM INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING:



STEP 1

English-language instruction with a two-hour-per-week digital commitment. These classes are taught with a blended model of virtual instruction by an ESL teacher and access to a digital learning platform for added flexibility and participation.



STEP 2

IET Career Bootcamps lasting two months with a 12+-hour-per-week commitment. These career bootcamps are offered for logistics, healthcare, and IT. They are taught in-person and maintain English-reading requirements, but include an embedded ESL tutor and continued access to a digital English-learning platform.



STEP 3

Career certification program in partnership with Thomas Nelson Community College. These career certification programs require a three-to-four-month commitment at 12+ hours per week.

After researching potential digital English-language learning platforms, PREP was introduced to EnGen through Virginia's Department of Education office. PREP was drawn to EnGen's digital platform because it offers new and regularly updated, contextualized content and job readiness instruction to each learner based on their proficiency level and career pathway interest. The two organizations formed a partnership to pilot PREP's new bridge program in November of 2020.

RESULTS

Together, PREP and EnGen launched the "Season 1" cohort of the bridge program to 20 ELLs. In Step 1 of the bridge program, ELLs were offered two months of a blended in-person and digital learning model. They committed to virtual teacher-based ESL instruction, as well as two hours of digital programming through EnGen each week.

Guided and supported by their ESL teacher, Melissa, the Season 1 cohort worked in the classroom and on EnGen's digital platform. The platform helped them stay motivated to learn using bite-sized chunks of instruction. Seventy percent of students were highly engaged, averaging 13.9 hours of instruction on EnGen, nearly 7X the required two hours. One hundred percent of tested learners increased their proficiency assessment score after just 60 days in the program. So far, four learners from this cohort have "crossed the bridge" from ESL classes to an IET Bootcamp, with two auditing with an ESL tutor. Another two of the 20-student cohort have enrolled in the career certification program through Thomas Nelson Community College.

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“We were introduced to EnGen through Virginia’s Department of Education office. This was our first time creating a career [pathway] program for ELLs and we wanted an innovative platform to help our learners build the language skills to move into career certificate programs.”

- Danielle Perry
*Integrated Education and Training
 Coordinator, Peninsula Regional
 Education Program*

After success in the pilot season, PREP made informed updates and launched Season 2 of the bridge program to an expanded number of ELLs. Melissa built awareness through informational sessions and successfully enrolled 57 students into Season 2 of the bridge program. Instead of two months of digital English-language instruction with EnGen, students have access for five months. Fifty four percent of total students showed high engagement, averaging 16.8 hours of time on the EnGen platform per month, and four students from this cohort have crossed the bridge to an IET bootcamp.

Over Seasons 1 and 2, learners have completed more than 150 different thematic units (each of which contains dozens of learning activities and a final achievement test). Ranging from workforce readiness to preparation for the citizenship test, the depth and breadth of the content completed by the PREP learners is a testament to their varied needs and interests.

TOTAL LEARNERS	60	AVERAGE TEST SCORES	84% <small>PASSING SCORE IS 70%</small>
REQUIRED ENGEN HOURS/WEEK	2	AVERAGE ENGEN HOURS/WEEK DURING STEP 1	15
IMPROVED PROFICIENCY	100% <small>OF LEARNERS TESTED TO DATE</small>	TRANSITIONED TO BOOTCAMP	8 <small>AND COUNTING</small>

Based on the results from Season 1 and 2 PREP’s partnership with EnGen continues to grow, opening more opportunities to more students. With the endorsement of PREP, EnGen is now on the Virginia Department of Education’s approved list for distance education solutions, which allows PREP to count the time students spend on EnGen as proxy hours.

With this blended bridge model, ELL students are able to gain the language skills and confidence required to advance forward in PREP’s career pathway programs. Students report that EnGen is a flexible, challenging, and effective tool for improving their English.