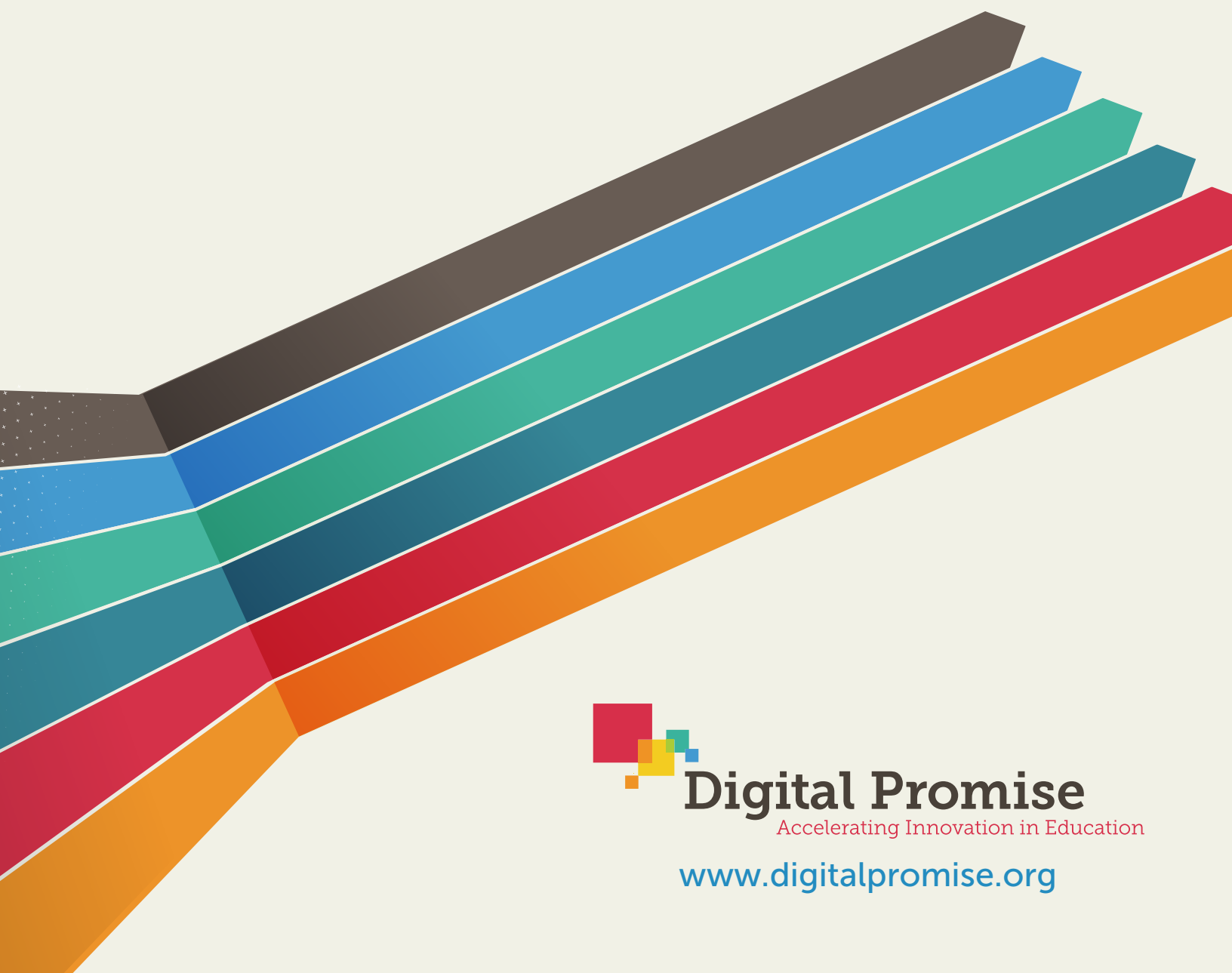Technology and Family Literacy Case Study:

Briya Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.

Digital Promise

Accelerating Innovation in Education

[Briya Public Charter School](#) is a free family literacy program in Washington, D.C. Adults study English, digital literacy, and parenting, while children receive a high-quality early education. Briya integrates the educational experiences of parents and children, building on families' strengths to help improve their educational, economic, and social opportunities.

Briya meets their learners where they are, both geographically and educationally. Briya has four campuses throughout D.C., and each provides classrooms for parents and for children, as well as support services through a partnership with [Mary's Center](#), a federally qualified health center.

In 2016, the D.C. Public Charter School Board School Quality Report for [early childhood](#) and [adult](#) programs gave Briya exceptional marks for student outcomes and overall school environment. Seventy-six percent of Briya's adult learners who had not had a job entered employment or postsecondary education, while 95 percent who had a job either retained employment or entered postsecondary education.

The Start of the Journey: Assessing Learner Needs

Briya's early childhood teachers use technology in their classrooms to support their students' learning. For example, they take pictures of the children reading to help the children see themselves as readers.

They also provide digital educational games during choice time for prekindergarteners. However, as they developed their technology integration plan, Briya wanted to be sure they were taking full advantage of how technology can also support their parents.

Briya's adult learners are predominantly immigrants. In talking with their learners, Briya saw a key struggle: living in America means living in a very digitally literate society, especially in a city like D.C. Parents talked about needing to use email to communicate with their children's schools and about the digital skills required on the job.

Through these discussions, Briya saw that their parents often do not have the digital skills they need to truly be a part of their new society. Even more so, they often lack the confidence that they can learn them. In addition to these digital literacy needs, Briya's adult learners also tend to have low levels of literacy overall.

Briya's challenge therefore was how best to address this double literacy need. Katie Gass, Briya's Digital Literacy Coordinator, explained, "We really do believe that our [parent] students are better able to succeed and therefore support their children when they have access to jobs, looking up information, and translating words."

Enter the power of thoughtfully integrated technology.

Technology as a Gateway to Independence

To address their parents' needs, Briya made digital literacy a core part of their adult curriculum. Gass explained that they want to help their immigrant learners achieve "that independence that comes when moving to a new country and being able to navigate it themselves."

As they were conceiving their digital literacy program, Briya knew the convenience of their four campuses in their urban environment was a great asset. Research shows adult learners have a particularly strong need for connection with and encouragement

from their teachers and peers because of the barriers they face. Therefore, Briya created a classroom-based digital literacy curriculum where their learners could be together with the support of their teachers.

Thinking about how to also address their learners' literacy needs drove Briya's choice of the technology they use. All of their devices, software, and online programs use English, so their learners are integrating their English language learning (ELL) with their digital literacy work. Teachers also incorporate traditional ELL strategies into their digital literacy classes. For example, teachers have students read aloud website names, URLs, email addresses, etc, so they hear and practice English pronunciations.

Briya also offers a full complement of digital literacy classes, from beginner to advanced. As explained above, Briya knew their parents often struggled the most with having the confidence to use digital skills. So Briya scaffolds their learners through the path from beginning user to confident digital citizen. Gass explains that these classes are designed to "help students overcome their fears by making the computer program lighthearted and fun, where you can enter at any level and leave with a feeling of confidence."

Finally, every digital literacy class has a lead teacher and at least one supporting teacher so students have ready help if they struggle. Briya's digital literacy courses are competency-based — students apply their knowledge

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with hands-on tasks using their devices. For example, to complete a review of how to access their online Google Classroom and email, students used [Kahoot](#), an online quiz program that aggregates responses across a classroom. They had to login to Kahoot and understand how to manipulate its interface, all while reviewing the concepts of logging into and using the digital classroom. Briya knows their learners learn the most by actually using their devices, so they ensure they have the staff ready to support this practice.

This approach is clearly working, as one can see when visiting a Briya campus. Nearly every seat in their digital literacy classes is full, and laughter can be heard as you pass the rooms.

Paul Ngouabeu is also a walking example of what Briya has achieved with its intentionally designed digital literacy program. Ngouabeu came to the United States in 2014 from Cameroon and started taking classes at Briya. In the summer of 2016, Briya hired him as a full-time Educational Fellow and Digital Literacy Instructor. He focuses on helping his students cross the chasm of the digital literacy divide between their home countries and America, just as Briya helped him.

Going Beyond the Classroom

Briya also focuses on helping students transfer skills to their lives. As Briya's goal is to provide parents the confidence and tools they need to support their children's

learning and improve their family's economic opportunities, Briya knew they needed to think beyond the classroom.

Gass surveys their adult learners each year to determine the access and devices they have at home. She has found that most have a tablet and/or a smartphone. Many of their parents also have to use tablets for their jobs.

So Briya uses these types of devices in their curriculum. Briya has more than 200 devices, both iPads and touchscreen laptops that fold into tablets, across its four campuses. Students are also encouraged to use their own phones and tablets in class. Experience on the actual devices or types of devices parents will use at home with their children is critical to the transfer of skills.

Even though the results of Gass's yearly surveys show their learners have access to technology at home, Briya understands that their learners do not always have support for when something goes wrong with their devices. As a result, they provide full technical support to ensure their parents and children always have the devices they need. Briya connects their learners to a local program that provides low-cost laptops for families who do not have their own devices.
Briya's learners can also use Briya's IT department for help with any issues they have with their devices. Finally, their adult learners can use Briya's devices before and after school.

Key Takeaways

Briya is an example of how a digital literacy program can be personalized for a specific learner population. Briya has leveraged technology to help their immigrant learners overcome the digital gap they encounter moving to a highly digitally literate environment. In turn, these parents can teach their children the skills they need to grow up in what is now their home city.

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By ensuring that parents are digitally literate and confident, family literacy programs help these parents be their children's first teachers, as well as provide parents and their families further social and economic opportunities.

Overall, Briya's journey highlights four aspects to consider when integrating technology into family literacy programs:

- **Digital literacy is critical.** It is a core skill for truly being a part of American society, particularly in urban areas. By ensuring that parents are digitally literate and confident, family literacy programs help these parents be their children's first teachers, as well as provide parents and their families further social and economic opportunities.

- **Integrate ELL and digital literacy.** These can be effectively combined in one curriculum, increasing practice with English while also learning digital skills.

- **Find out what devices and access your learners have**. Adult learners, even in underserved populations, often have their own devices. Therefore integrating technology does not necessarily require purchasing devices for all learners. Survey your adult learners to understand the hardware costs you may or may not need to undertake.

- **Provide free or low-cost technical support.** Even when families have their own devices, they often do not have access to affordable technical support. Opening up your program's IT division is a creative way to solve this need.