

ADULT EDUCATION IS LOSING ITS BACKBONE: TEACHERS

Bria Dolnick

Keighty Ward

Literacy Works and Adult Ed WAVE

ABSTRACT

Adult Ed WAVE (Workers Amplifying Voices for Equity) is a group of current and former adult education workers that aim to highlight the human cost of undervaluing adult education by documenting teacher experiences and work to increase teacher representation in fieldwide decision making. In a recent survey, teachers shared their thoughts on the so-called national “teacher shortage,” revealing that adult educators do not see their work as a viable long-term career choice. Many are leaving the field in search of increased wages and full-time positions. The loss of adult literacy professionals directly impacts program quality. In order to stop the cycle of turnover among adult educators, the adult education field must make it a priority to advocate for the crucial role of dedicated and experienced teachers.

Keywords: equity and inclusion, call to action, reflective, professional development, working conditions, teacher shortage

INTRODUCTION

Keighty

I first learned about the field of adult literacy as a volunteer tutor, which immediately changed my life trajectory. I became an English as a second language (ESL) instructor, went back to school to study applied linguistics, and attended conferences to collaborate and expand my knowledge. I attended workshops and regularly practiced action research in my classroom. I invested my time, money, and energy into the field of adult education because I care deeply about the work. But I often felt that the field did not care deeply about me. I thought teaching English would be a career for me, but it did not turn out that way. I left teaching in 2019.

Bria

I loved being an adult educator. It was a deeply meaningful and challenging job, and leaving was not a decision I made lightly. I was teaching full time, and there were two adults working in my household, but we couldn’t meet our basic expenses with my salary and a child in full-time daycare. During my 11 years of teaching, I watched teachers leave, and I knew that my leaving would affect the program, institutional knowledge, and, ultimately, the students in our adult education program. I couldn’t understand why addressing this cycle of staff turnover was not a state and national priority for adult education leaders. I left in 2023 in search of wages and working conditions that would allow me to support my family.

ADULT EDUCATION WORKERS AMPLIFYING VOICES FOR EQUITY

We know these stories are common among former adult educators not only because we lived them, but because we asked others. We were curious: How can there be a pool of dedicated, qualified, and eager teachers and a teacher shortage simultaneously? We formed Adult Ed WAVE (Workers Amplifying Voices for Equity) with other current and former adult educators in Illinois in order to weigh in on this dilemma. We center teachers' experiences as we document the human cost of undervaluing adult education. We highlight how teachers' working conditions and students' learning conditions are interconnected, and we advocate for policies that create better and stronger adult education programs for teachers and students.

The voices in *Where Are the Teachers? Adult Education Workers Explain the "Teacher Shortage"* comes from respondents to a survey launched by Adult Ed WAVE in the summer of 2023 (Literacy Works, 2023). This report represents a small sample, but the consistency of the stories suggests broader themes with national implications. Put simply, many adult educators do not see their work as a viable long-term career choice.

WHAT SOME TEACHERS HAVE TO SAY: FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

Forty-three adult education workers from throughout Illinois completed the survey. Respondents represent a mix of current adult education teachers (35.7%), former teachers still working in adult education in other roles (33.3%), and retired or former teachers no longer in adult education (31%).

In response to the question about their future in adult education, five of 18 respondents chose, "I expect to be able to teach long term." Of the nine respondents who had 0–5 years of experience, none expected to stay in the field long-term, and four stated they were already considering leaving.

Teachers shared that low wages, part-time positions, unpaid overtime, and lack of respect make the field unsustainable. The following comments reflect the respondents' perspectives:

Teachers want to do more for our students. We want to plan more, create more opportunities for our students, and grow ourselves professionally. However, part-time, low-paid work means we never have the time to do these things. It makes good teachers leave the field, and it leaves our students in a place where they can't find consistency in their education. No one is able to reach their goals, and the field itself doesn't produce the results it could.

In my experience, the only people who were able to stay long term as adult education workers were people who got their benefits from their life partners and relied on their life partner's income. This means that many passionate and capable teachers are excluded from the field.

I left my adult education (teaching) position because I had the opportunity to move into adult ed administration... I would go back to teaching if it were as lucrative as this job.

When I was a teacher there was little respect or attention given to teacher retention. We were seen as replaceable and not worthy of fighting for.

At present, adult education teachers feel that their work, experiences, opinions, and livelihoods are an afterthought to funders and government agencies. Teachers know that funding is unpredictable and that their career hangs in the balance. They feel disrespected and overlooked. This is summarized by the comments of two former teachers with over 10 years of experience in the field:

I think there is a deep irony that the field talks a lot about getting people into jobs with family-sustaining wages that offer various credentials and professional stepping stones to increase students' opportunities while those same goals do not appear to be a priority for the field itself...the duality of talking about equitable practices while not observing them in one's own sector's practices.

There has been a call by teachers for as long as I have been in the field for more pay, better (or any) benefits, more hours, and a chance for advancement. It is the same story today. Until we can change the attitudes of the 'decision makers' who influence the funding and respect bestowed to this field, we will continue to see amazing teachers and adult literacy professionals leave looking for more money, benefits, and respect.

CALL TO ACTION

Recent research demonstrates that experienced educators and consistent teaching staff are essential to strong student outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Yin et al., 2022). A 2023 brief by the Equity in Research working group of the CREATE Adult Skills Network, including Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO, makes the case that learners benefit from having more diverse instructors that reflect learner populations (CREATE Adult Skills Network, 2023). Significant improvements in these metrics will not happen without addressing necessary changes to working conditions.

There never was a teacher shortage—there were and still are many trained, experienced adult education professionals eager to join, return to, or stay in the field. However, because teachers have been largely absent from conversations about the need for systemic changes in adult education, their calls for improved working conditions often go unheard by funders and organizational leadership. Decisions are made *for* them, but rarely *with* them.

Admittedly, transforming working conditions for adult educators poses many structural challenges. But it is time to think about these challenges differently. The adult education field must prioritize advocating for the crucial role of dedicated and experienced teachers. To build a sustainable profession for future adult education teachers, we need to try something new:

- **Respect** teachers and value their experience and the work that they do.
- **Sustain** teachers by offering a professional career path with support to continue teaching.
- **Empower** teachers to be decision makers on policy that directly impacts their work. ☞

Bria Dolnick has over 10 years of experience as an educator in libraries, schools, adult education, classrooms, and documentary arts programs. She became interested in the field of adult education while working as a refugee resettlement caseworker in Tucson, Arizona. She holds a Master of Arts from the University of Arizona, where she studied adult and adolescent literacy. She currently works at Literacy Works, where she provides Illinois adult literacy educators with professional development and programmatic support. She may be reached at bria@litworks.org.

Keighty Ward began their work as an educational ASL interpreter and quickly became interested in the teaching they were interpreting. They taught English as a second language for 3 years, while pursuing their MA in applied linguistics. Their thesis focused on d/Deaf adult English learners, which led them to become interested in adult education specifically. They taught ESL and citizenship before transitioning to Literacy Works where they support community literacy educators. They have presented at several conferences on various topics, including reflective teaching, inclusive teaching and learning, and popular education. They may be reached at keighty@litworks.org.

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