

It Starts and Ends with the Funders:

More Insights into Turnover in Adult Education in Illinois

a report by
Literacy Works

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last year, many Adult Education programs have begun to notice that adult educators are leaving the field for better paying and more sustainable opportunities. Several “teacher retention” conversations have started as well. However, we have found that teachers don’t need to be retained, there’s no fancy formula to make them stay. They want to do their job, they just also want to be able to pay their bills and go on vacation sometimes. Many consulting groups are sharing their ideas for keeping teachers in their jobs, but this issue has moved far beyond offering incentives and developing a retention plan. **At this point, the solution lies with the funders and the state and federal agencies that govern their allocations.** Any other “retention” strategies that do not include putting the responsibility on the funders are missing the point and will not ultimately result in better teacher retention or stronger adult literacy programming.

When Adult Education workers began leaving the field in great numbers, Literacy Works immediately recognized that their stories were not being told. In the news we heard about the turnover rate in terms of “quiet quitting” and suddenly workshops on “staff retention” were popping up everywhere, but we weren’t hearing from the workers through those channels. We knew that Adult Education workers love what they do and if they were leaving, there was something else happening.

“I enjoy my job but the rising cost of living has me considering leaving for a salary increase.”

-current Adult Ed administrator

Literacy Works is a highly trusted organization among adult literacy administrators, teachers, and volunteers, so when we offered to use our platform to amplify their voices through these reports, they encouraged us to do so.

In the summer of 2022, we began collecting information from Adult Education workers from across the state of Illinois, both teachers and administrators, about the current high turnover in the field. It was initially a project designed to support wage negotiations among Adult Education workers. When they heard about the work, the Secretary of State’s Library Office (SOS) requested that we present them with a report of our findings so that they could use it as a tool to share with the incoming administration. This report helps demonstrate the importance of increased funding earmarked for Illinois State Library’s Literacy programming. In [that report](#), published in November 2022, we outlined the comments from adult educators and gave several action steps for SOS to take, including increasing their funding significantly to support higher pay and full-time positions for Volunteer Coordinators and other program staff.

In our earlier piece, we mentioned the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) as the biggest funder of Adult Education in Illinois, but we did not detail the role they play in the high turnover rate. We also felt that there was more to say on the subject as we received more responses in our [Wage Transparency Survey](#), specifically about ICCB.

We interviewed several Adult Education administrators who manage the ICCB funding for their organization to learn about their experiences.

All respondents mentioned that because the majority of their funding came from ICCB, they feared retaliation for sharing their experiences about the funder and were concerned that doing so would negatively affect future funding opportunities.

We also talked to teachers working under ICCB requirements to investigate the impact of the grant on their classroom work. The following is a compilation of their comments and insights.

Since ICCB is the biggest funder of Adult Education in Illinois, without their funding programs could close and unequal power dynamics have made staff hesitant to speak up. For this reason, we have not included any identifying information including the name of the respondents or their organizations to protect their current jobs and future funding for their work.

Many of the reasons for dissatisfaction in the field, discussed in the earlier piece, focused on higher wages and full time positions. In the case of SOS, they can work to support Adult Education workers and the field by allocating more funds for this grant. With ICCB it's a bit more complicated. While the funding for this grant is much higher than SOS, many organizations lament the spending restrictions, regulations for student progress and extra administrative work for teachers as their reason for not being able to offer higher wages and regular raises.

Here we will focus our attention on ICCB and how their policies, requirements, and grant reporting methods obstruct the work of Adult Education programs and create increased barriers for adult learners and the workers that serve them.

REQUIRED CREDENTIALS

Adult Education teachers, under the ICCB grant, are required to go through a specific credentialing process when they start and are expected to continue as they stay in the position. This process is referred to as a “professional pathway” for adult educators. Its inception was to introduce more professionalization to the field. These trainings and professional development workshops are almost exclusively provided through the Adult Learning Resource Center (ALRC). According to their website, “The ESL Instructional Staff Professional Pathway was developed by the ICCB and the PD Network to provide a professional development pathway for ESL instructors to consider for attainment of state-recognized credentials.” Several respondents included negative comments about this “pathway” in their statements. For example, one ESL teacher said that these credentials are not recognized outside of Illinois or other educational fields making them less of a learning opportunity and more a requirement to keep the job: “they are not transferable and no one else recognizes them”.

An administrator mentioned that many of his teachers are already very qualified to teach ESL or are not interested in this “pathway” and feel that requirements like these take away from their work without adding new knowledge. All respondents noted that they were paid for their time when they attended ICCB trainings. However, hourly employees added that the hours they spent in training was time they were not able to spend on their classroom work.

We did not hear that people are not interested in professional development, in fact almost everyone who shared with us said that continuing education is an asset to the field. When they spoke of the trainings they are required to attend through ICCB, however, many noted that it was not time well spent.

Under ICCB, most Adult Education teachers are obligated to complete a set of standard trainings and fulfill requirements related to their focus (ESL, ABE/HSE etc.). For example, The ESL Instructional Staff Professional Pathway has a specific set of requirements for newly hired ESL teachers. One respondent stated that a training like this would be beneficial to someone who is new to the practice of teaching but not for someone with even a little teaching experience.

According to several respondents, this pathway offers no distinction between new and experienced teachers. In a group discussion, one ESL teacher said, “the material in the training was all covered when I got my Masters Degree in TESOL and some of the educational theories were outdated”. Another added, “It was almost insulting.” ESL Teachers can go on to earn an ESL Specialist Certificate by completing the activities on this checklist. While the experiences shared with us focused mainly on the ESL training, ALRC also offers career pathways in several other specific areas. All respondents agreed that continuing education for teachers is a great benefit to the field and that the ICCB trainings are meant to advance the careers of Adult Education teachers. But teachers are not financially compensated for getting these credentials.

Under a career path model, instructors should be compensated (with bonuses, higher wages, or higher-level positions) as they move through the credential levels, but this does not seem to be happening.

All respondents mentioned their disappointment to learn that teacher education level is not automatically linked to pay. One ESL teacher talked about how earning more money means leaving teaching for an administrative position and said, “the ladder we’re climbing is bringing us farther away from teaching”. This was a common theme in our previous piece and many administrators report regret at having to make the choice between a profession they love and a sustainable income.

Without financial incentives teachers are being expected to build skills that do not advance their career in a sustainable way. If teachers leave the field because they can’t afford to stay, the purpose of a credentials-focused career path such as this becomes unclear. One teacher stated plainly, “This is NOT a career path”.

DATA REPORTING + MANAGEMENT

While data collection and reporting are often required for grant funding, many respondents mentioned ICCB’s practices as “overkill” and “time consuming”. One administrator told us that his organization spends a lot of money and time training staff to manage and collect the data the way ICCB requires it. Several commented on the cost of database programs like Salesforce which are complicated to learn and integrate among staff and costly to acquire.

Some programs even hire full-time staff members whose entire purpose is to collect and manage their data - another position that takes funds away from giving teachers raises. One teacher explained that in order to collect data for their ICCB-sponsored Civics program, staff needed to first learn several codes and processes so that they could manage the data correctly. "But we were not compensated for this extra training, nor did we get a raise once we learned how to do this," she said.

But teachers and administrators are constantly required to complete extra tasks on top of their core responsibilities. From our Wage Transparency Project, we learned that 93% of full time adult educators had to complete work outside of their job description. So this is not a new problem. However, many did note that the specificity required for the amount of reporting ICCB wants took up more time and training than they had anticipated.

One administrator said candidly, "It's not even worth the money when we don't have time to do all the reporting they need. We're not applying again next year." The amount of paperwork, data management, and reporting required for an ICCB grant creates extra barriers for smaller organizations with limited staff and capacity for tasks outside serving their participants. This is especially common with small and rural organizations in high need areas like on the South and West Sides of Chicago and throughout Southern Illinois. These programs are often unable to commit to the time-consuming work of receiving funding from ICCB and thus are left out of the more substantial financial opportunity.

This funding might allow these organizations to grow and serve more adult learners, but ICCB's administrative requirements are holding them back from even applying. In this way, the obligations from ICCB directly impact the stability and sustainability of the field of Adult Education throughout Illinois.

Besides the burden of data collection and reporting, ICCB encourages programs to grow every year which can be difficult for small programs with limited capacity and staff. In Chicago, the Consortium was created to help with this by creating a collective group of small programs led by the Chinese Mutual Aid Association. But as one administrator puts it, "ICCB still wants you to show that your program has grown every year. So the Consortium takes some of the pressure off, but not much." This means that in some cases, programs might be spending the majority of their time expanding a program to appease ICCB whether or not it's good for their program or needed by the population they serve.

Some teachers mentioned that the pressure to improve on their outcomes every year requires them to constantly be acquiring new skills to keep up. During the beginning of the pandemic, for instance, almost all Adult Education programs were moved online. However, most programs were not prepared to do this, especially not so quickly and in such a chaotic time. One teacher remembered what it was like to learn Zoom for the first time and then figure out how to teach it to newly arrived refugees - over the phone. Again, teachers and staff were not compensated with raises for learning these new skills.

“You have to improve on your goal every year if you want to expect *level funding*. Then you have to go above and beyond if you want more funding,” one teacher said. Not improving on last year’s outcomes can mean the end of a program. Several long-standing foundational Adult Education programs in Chicago were almost shuttered in 2020 due to not receiving funding from ICCB because they were unable to consistently hit targets during the pandemic. Some were given substantially less funding than the previous year which caused disruption in staffing and programming. One, Albany Park Community Center, closed their Adult Education program for good.

The goal of growth at all costs is not conducive to a nonprofit, community-based educational setting. In fact, it is antithetical to the practice of teaching altogether. One executive director said that growth every year can be good, but it depends on your definition of growth. She said, “If your organization is growing in efficiency or you made a part-time job a full-time one, that’s growth too. But ICCB doesn’t want that, they want the numbers and sometimes that doesn’t fit with our mission of serving our community.” Adult Education is not about hitting targets, it’s about building relationships and meeting people where they are. Education is valid on its own and doesn’t need to be tied to a monetary outcome. One teacher sighed and said:

“We’re tired of having to prove Adult Education is important over and over with this overly complicated reporting. **Education is important and that’s it.**”

CONFUSION, DELAYS, + INCONSISTENCIES

Another common theme from our conversations was how ICCB’s internal policies and staffing cause disruption in their work. For instance, several respondents had frustrations about the processes around their grant awards. Several shared experiences about not knowing how much they would be awarded until well into the fiscal year, sometimes as late as October. In an email, one former administrator wrote, “Funding applications shouldn’t be structured so that allocations are not known until almost or even after the start of the funding period.” One program director talked about ICCB’s irregular funding and how it affects their programming: “Funding and their funding schedules are unpredictable. You can kind of guess how much they might award you and use that to plan your budget. But you never know what they’ll do. They just might stop funding us. You can’t plan anything.”

Many administrators mentioned that they want to give teachers raises but sometimes they don’t even know how much money they’ll have until the job has already started. When pressed for details about the rules they were attempting to follow, almost all respondents had no answer. Most could not explain the rules or the reasoning behind them and expressed concern that their ignorance would affect their future funding. One teacher shared: “There are a lot of rules and sometimes you don’t even know you’re breaking one because you’re just doing your job.”

When administrators did the work to reach out and ask questions, they were met with a variety of answers. For instance, a common example of inconsistency was the fact that all respondents believe that community colleges and community-based organizations are not funded the same way. Most could not produce an explanation for this imbalance or even proof that it was happening. One teacher said, “I just heard it from my boss but I don’t know if it’s true or not”.

But one administrator shared this in an email: “For community-based organization provided programs like ours, ‘the maximum generation rate for reimbursement per unit of instruction shall be equal to the community college system reimbursement rate for Adult Education divided by one-third.’” He cites that he is quoting from Illinois State Statute (110 ILCS 805/2-12 through 2-12.5). According to this statute, it seems that community colleges are able to generate “units of instruction” three times quicker than community-based organizations which gives them more flexibility with their Generation. But he wanted to reach out to someone at ICCB to get clarification. He reports that they responded that while it was a statute, they didn’t follow it.

If this statute exists but is not followed, what does this mean for other rules? Inconsistencies like this encourage misunderstandings about rules and regulations and make it difficult for workers to do their job well.

This is especially true when turnover is high and institutional knowledge of ICCB practices is lost year after year.

“GENERATION”

By far the most popular topic that came up in our interviews, conversations, and group discussions was *Generation*. While many struggled to explain exactly how it worked, one teacher summed it up like this, “Grants from ICCB are like loans. They promise you money but you have to earn it by ‘generating hours’. Whatever money you can’t earn by the end of the year, you have to pay back.” The ‘hours’ she’s talking about are actually called “units of instruction” in ICCB manuals. According to their formula: “Every 15 Enrollment Hours (# Hours of Instruction Provided X # of Students Enrolled) equals 1 Unit of Instruction”. (We’re referring to page 25 of the 2023 ICCB manual)

Generation and unpredictable funding are the reasons why one program director shared that they will not be applying for ICCB funding next year. One administrator said that one year they were given more funds than expected but he wasn’t fully excited. “I was nervous that we couldn’t generate that extra money and would have to pay at the end of the year.”

It is not only a matter of generating enough units, they also have to be the most valuable units. Certain subjects have more generation value than others. On page 25 of the FY23 Providers Manual, the “funding amount per UI [unit of instruction]” is explained in this chart:

Instructional Type	Base Rate	Funding Multiplier	Funding Amount per UI
ABE	\$101.98	100%	\$101.98
ASE		90%	\$91.78
HSCR		90%	\$91.78
VOC		125%	\$127.48
ESL		100%	\$101.98

This practice forces the teachers to shoulder the responsibility for the funding of the whole program by generating enough UI to keep their program funded. This also makes it very difficult to give raises. In order for a teacher to get a 7% raise to keep up with inflation, they have to show that they can earn it with their units of instruction. In an email, an administrator wrote:

To the extent an organization has classes with less than 15 students, classes of less than 60 hours, instructors teaching fewer than 3 classes, or any combination thereof, the "Maximum Available Teacher Salary" will be significantly less even before subtracting those costs. One can very quickly feel the constraints on teacher salary by this funding formula before any number of other considerations.

The biggest demand from Adult Education workers is higher wages and more full time work. We can see here that ICCB's funding policy has a direct impact on the ability of a program to do this for their workers. To be clear, budgets are moral documents and raises for staff will happen if they are a priority to the organization, but Generation sets up many more hurdles. This limits organizations to their current capacity instead of building them and increasing their impact. It also contributes to competition, encourages a scarcity mentality among Adult Education workers and programs and makes it more difficult for programs to provide services to the community in an effective way.

Many respondents shared stories about making programming decisions solely based on what was best for ICCB funding. "We looked at all the classes and cut the ones that weren't making enough money.

If we had a small group that met infrequently, we couldn't keep them because the teacher wouldn't be able to earn their salary," said one teacher.

One administrator said that this funding strategy inhibits creativity and taking risks with programming that might be better for participants.

Generation discourages small group classes but it also makes it more difficult to hold less frequent class schedules. For example, a Monday through Friday class would generate more units than a Saturday class. When thinking of generating enough units, a director might decide not to hold a Saturday class, even if their population requested it, simply because they might not be able to fund it. In this way, Generation favors students that are available for a consistent weekly schedule. This excludes students with time-consuming jobs or parents of small children who might benefit from a less frequent learning opportunity.

Not earning units quickly enough is also a problem for what some respondents refer to as "SOS students". "SOS students", as they were described, are students that have goals other than getting a job or going to college. This includes undocumented immigrants, stay-at-home parents, retired individuals, and learners with disabilities. They are often called "SOS students" because this is the population that the SOS grant aims to support. They don't often fit into the criteria for an "ICCB student" though. These students, who make up a large percentage of adult learners, often take longer to complete classes, have unpredictable work schedules, and/or struggle to find childcare so they can attend class among any number of other issues.

Consequently, these types of learners are not always reliable sources for generating units of instruction. “We might refer an SOS student to another organization if they aren’t progressing fast enough. It would just hurt our numbers,” one administrator admitted. One teacher said that they have taken “SOS students” out of an ICCB-funded class and sent them to one-on-one tutoring (funded by SOS) to help generate more units. “Some [ICCB] rules seem specifically targeted to discourage ‘SOS students’ like how you can’t count a student that stays in a class for more than four terms,” stated one teacher. Under ICCB’s Generation policy, education decisions are made based on what organizations can do to keep their funding and not what is best for the learners.

The fact that ICCB is the biggest funder of Adult Education plays a large part in this dynamic. All respondents mentioned that they want to do what’s best for the learner but they also need the funding to keep the program running. Many respondents described being caught in the middle and attribute a lot of the stress to Generation. This funding stronghold is why ICCB’s practices have gone unquestioned in a public way for so long and it was why individuals only agreed to tell their story if we promised their anonymity.

COMPETITION NOT COLLABORATION

According to most respondents, Generation is the biggest problem with ICCB funding because it affects so much of the work they do. It impacts how they think about programming, how they prioritize their time, who they can hire, and the populations they can afford to support.

In addition to all of that, it encourages competition between Adult Education programs. This not only limits the capacity of a program because they lack the collective effort of the field but it also creates more harm for the learners.

One former administrator recalled going to an Area Planning Committee meeting (APC) - a meeting all ICCB funded programs are required to attend:

I remember we were talking about this student and how they weren’t gaining levels fast enough and I suggested we refer them to a smaller organization so they could get the support they needed. But everyone totally disagreed and complained that I was taking away their students and giving them to another program. Later when we asked our ICCB rep about it, they told us the org that had the student last gets the credit. But we did all the foundational work and we sent them to community college and we don’t get credit for our work?

In this example, collaborating with another organization in order to support the learner where they are was openly discouraged. And instead, focus was given to the number of students rather than the students themselves. It also shows that ICCB’s policies around “counting” students, clearly discourages collaboration between programs and, in fact, incentivizes them not to work together. Competition also encourages secrecy and limits resource sharing between organizations. Programs are less likely to work together on a project for the community because they would have to share the credit and that might affect next year’s ICCB funding.

One teacher talked about her experience looking for a venue for a potential night class. In researching available spaces, she found that another organization was holding classes in the library just down the street. "I didn't know they were there. I could have been referring students there this whole time. But there's a pressure to not refer students to other organizations and that's why I didn't know about them.

"This grant encourages competition and resource scarcity. **Competition was grown in this field - it didn't start out this way"**

-current adult educator

Many respondents noted that they regularly feel like they are constantly fighting for their jobs. This mental strain can have great impacts on the work they're trying to do. One administrator, who left the field in early 2022 said, "Right now I want to have a job where I can make money and just do the work. That's too hard to do in Adult Ed." They now work in the restaurant industry and report that they are making much more than they did as an administrator. Policies and regulations like Generation explicitly contribute to the deterioration of this field. Generation makes working in this field difficult for Adult Education workers in a variety of ways. And when we're discussing why workers are leaving the field, it is impossible not to mention the harm caused by the actions of ICCB and other funders.

CALL TO ACTION

It is problematic that the two main funders of Adult Education in Illinois have drastically different missions and disproportionately allocated funds.

ICCB gets their funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). They use a mix of federal and state money for their grant allocations. WIOA's purpose then, is applicable here since ICCB is essentially an extension of WIOA within Illinois. Their aim is "ensuring that our workforce system is job-driven - *responding to the needs of the employers and preparing workers for jobs available now and in the future.*" SOS shares that the purpose of their grant is to "enable educational agencies to provide reading, writing, math, and/or English language instruction to *adults who lack basic academic skills enabling them to fully engage in family, work and community roles.*"

Because ICCB has considerably more funding to distribute, compared to SOS, their mission gets the most attention. ICCB is backing an employer-centered workforce development program structure and any organizations receiving this funding will have to follow suit eventually. This means that ICCB is explicitly changing the landscape of Adult Education to focus more on workforce development and less on the foundational skills adult learners need to thrive.

The influence of ICCB to dictate which services should be offered and to whom, creates dissonance for Adult Education workers and programs that exist to support their community's needs. Many respondents reported feeling torn between fulfilling the needs of ICCB and providing the programming and support needed by the participants they work to serve.

Workforce development certainly has an important role to play in the field of Adult Education and it is a valuable asset to those looking for new or better employment.

However, learners interested in a job often have a very different timeline than the expectations set by WIOA. These learners often take multiple years with many starts and stops to accomplish their career goals or even to enter basic employment. ICCB's policies suggest that getting a job quickly is better than learning basic skills first. This discounts learners who are not currently in the workforce but are still working on career goals while improving their English or reading skills. At the same time, a great number of Adult Education students are not ready or interested in working or changing career paths. It seems unthinkable that ICCB is asking us to choose who is deserving of education based on how quickly they can move through a program. "Education helps the whole family, not just the one that is working," one administrator told us. It's not just about getting a job, it's about having the skills to grow in that job. That means learning English and practicing reading and writing - not just workforce readiness training. To restrict support to only those who are interested in working calls into question the whole purpose of the field of Adult Education. **Are we here to teach adults the skills they need or are we just preparing workers for employers?**

ACTION STEPS

To the Illinois Community College Board:

- Eliminate "Generation" and distribute funding based on proposals and outcomes without the stipulation that programs need to earn the funding to receive it
- Ensure that grant allocations - both notification of award and actual funding - are received in a timely manner that allows programs to plan their year accordingly
- Eliminate the expectation that learning quickly is better than learning well. Programs should not be penalized for supporting their students regardless of their progress and ICCB will not incentivize programs to push learners to achieve unrealistic goals
- Recognize that education is valuable apart from WIOA goals and dedicate specific funding for literacy level students and English learners
- Acknowledge that learning English serves many purposes outside of getting a job
- Advocate on behalf of Illinois programs for more general funding at the federal level
- Increase transparency in rules and regulations and utilize plain language methods to share information so that all grantees fully comprehend what it means to be funded by ICCB
- Emphasize the importance of cooperation between programs and incentivize collaboration by crediting all programs involved, not just the one "who had the student last"

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The data collection was done by the Wage Transparency Project team including Rachel Greenwood, Bria Dolnick, and Keighty Ward. Thank you to all the Wage Transparency Project members for brainstorming, attending meetings, and bringing more energy to this work.

Thank you to all of those who shared your stories with us.

Interview Details

Members of the Wage Transparency Project gathered stories from Adult Education workers, both former and current, in a variety of ways including email, Zoom calls, and phone conversations. All respondents knew that their information would be used in this project and that no identifying information would be shared.

Learn more about this work:

Our first report calls on SOS to improve working conditions by allocating more funding towards Adult Education

- ["A revolving door of professionals" Investigating High Turnover in Adult Education in Illinois](#)

You can still review and contribute to the Wage Transparency sheet anytime:

- [Wage Transparency for Adult Educators \(results\)](#)
- [Wage Transparency for Adult Education Administrators \(results\)](#)
- [Wage Transparency Community Board](#)

About Literacy Works

Literacy Works promotes literacy justice and communication equity. Founded on principles of popular education, we support a membership of community-based adult literacy programs across Chicago and Illinois. We also work closely with mission-driven organizations to prioritize clear, effective communication in our communities so people can access information they need to thrive.

You can learn more about this work at www.litworks.org.