



Literacy Works



# Where are the Teachers?

## Adult Education Workers Explain The “Teacher Shortage”

A report by Literacy Works





Literacy Works



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Should you have any questions about the data or analysis presented here, please don't hesitate to reach out to [keighty@litworks.org](mailto:keighty@litworks.org).

# Introduction

Quality teachers are essential for Adult Education programs to be successful, but teacher expertise and experience is rarely acknowledged in larger conversations about the field. There is extensive evidence that experienced educators are essential to strong student outcomes, but those experienced adult educators rarely stay in the field long-term. While this has been true for many years, retention of adult educators is becoming an increasingly complicated problem. Demand for programming continues to outpace program capacity despite recruitment and teacher retention efforts. Anecdotally, Literacy Works has seen an increase in requests for teacher retention strategies and coaching sessions for teachers considering leaving the field. Additionally, according to a 2023 survey sponsored by the Illinois Community College Board Adult Education and Literacy Advisory Council, well over half of respondents said their programs were currently experiencing issues with staff retention.

In the summer of 2022, Literacy Works began collecting information from Adult Education workers from across the state of Illinois. The survey asked both teachers and administrators about the current high turnover in the field. In our November 2022 report, 'A revolving door of professionals': Investigating High Turnover in Adult Education in Illinois, we learned that Adult Education teachers and coordinators are usually part-time, underpaid, and struggling to stay in the field.

Our February 2023 report It Starts and Ends with the Funders: More Insight into Turnover in Adult Education in Illinois focuses its attention on ICCB (Illinois Community College Board), the largest funder of Adult Education programs in Illinois. Through interviews with teachers and administrators, the report demonstrates how specific ICCB policies, requirements, and grant reporting methods obstruct the work of Adult Education programs and create increased barriers for adult learners and Adult Education workers.

In this newest report we want to document teachers in their own voices and focus on individual experiences that give insight into the so-called "teacher shortage." The collection of voices you will read are respondents to a survey launched by Adult Ed WAVE (Workers Amplifying Voices for Equity) in July and August of 2023.

**"...we want to document teachers in their own voices and focus on individual experiences that give insight into the so-called "teacher shortage."**

Adult Ed WAVE is a group of current and former Adult Education workers who began meeting in early 2023 in response to the increased interest in the [Wage Transparency Project](#). The group's mission is to center teachers' experiences and increase teacher representation in field-wide decision-making. In WAVE's [most recent survey](#) we asked for Adult Education workers' thoughts on the "teacher shortage." The mission of Adult Ed WAVE is to highlight the human cost of undervaluing Adult Education by documenting teacher experiences, and this report hopes to be an expression of that goal. The report was written by Literacy Works staff, with feedback from Adult Ed WAVE members.

Survey responses are organized into four sections:

1. Who are the teachers?
2. Why are they leaving?
3. What's the impact?
4. Where are they going, and what would make them stay?

## The Goal

The goal of this report is to enhance the urgency of conversations around this issue and to build a larger community of organized Adult Education teacher advocates and allies. This is a worker's rights and equity issue for teachers. However, teachers' working conditions have implications for the strength and quality of Adult Education programs at large. If you are an Adult Education worker, student, or ally, you have a role to play in making structural change. We hope this information will push you to find your place in the conversation.

As [Robert Reich](#) [[@rbreich](#)], writer and labor rights activist, posted on Instagram on August 30, 2023: "Folks, it's not a 'teacher shortage.' It's a shortage of jobs that treat educators with the dignity and pay they deserve."

**The goal of this report is to enhance the urgency of conversations around this issue and to build a larger community of organized Adult Education teacher advocates and allies.**

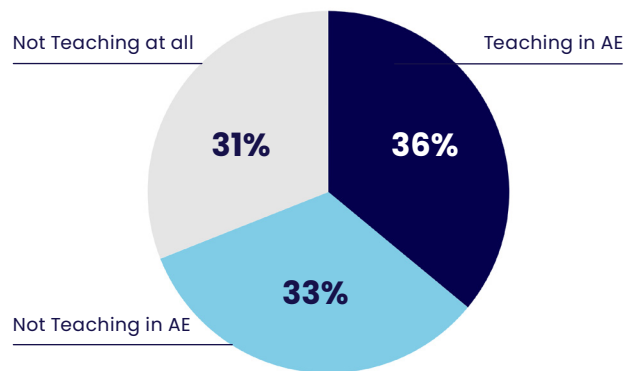
# Who are the teachers?

43 Adult Education workers completed the survey, with representatives from throughout Illinois. The 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%).

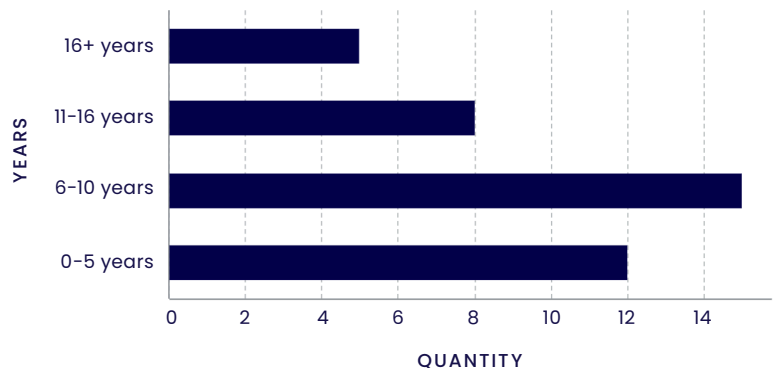
48.5% of respondents reported that they are working or have worked in a Community-based Education setting. 26.5% come from a Community College, 9% from a Local Education Agencies (LEA)<sup>1</sup>, and 16% reported another kind of education setting.

These workers are largely not unionized with 73.8% of respondents reporting that they are not and have not been a part of a union in their work in Adult Education. Significantly, the few that did mention being a part of a union still had responses related to low wages and unstable working conditions as did their colleagues outside of unions. The largest group of respondents (36%) report having had 6-10 years experience in the field.

Teachers in Adult Education (AE) - Current and Former



Years of Experience Working in Adult Education



**The 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%).**

<sup>1</sup>An LEA typically refers to a district's local school board." [These are some examples](#) of LEAs in Illinois. For our purposes, programs within LEAs might be Adult Education classes for parents that are sponsored by the school district.

## Why did they get involved in Adult Education?

We also asked respondents to tell us why they got involved in Adult Education. Many Adult Education teachers joined this field to support immigrants with similar life experiences as their loved ones:

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*"My own parents are immigrants who face many hardships when they came here from financial insecurity to social isolation because of language barriers...My work in adult ed allowed me to see a different possibility for this story. It didn't have to be the way it was for my parents. Adult education could be the path to better economic and social outcomes."*

*"My family were refugees from Iraq when I was born and when they came to America, they had to learn English and assimilate into American culture. Teaching and helping adults improve their lives gives me a sense of fulfillment, like what I'm doing is making a real difference, even if that difference is small."*

*"...I wanted to be able to make an impact and advocate for communities like mine. As I navigate life and advocate for my parents on a day to day basis, I want to be able to create accessible and equitable programs to support other immigrants and refugees."*

A number of respondents mentioned **addressing inequities and injustice as motivating factors** for teaching in the field:

*"I got involved in the field because I thought it was unfair that Adult Education got a fraction of the resources that other educational systems got, and I hoped that I could contribute in some way to creating environments where people could thrive. I wanted students in Adult Education programs to have teachers in their corner that were excited to be there...Being in Adult Education has completely shaped my worldview...It cemented for me how the long embedded inequities in our country have created such uneven systems depending on who you are and where you are born."*

*"I saw literacy and education as a human right that many adults had been denied when they were growing up. Adult education is an important part of social justice."*

*"...I have also noticed the lack of care and support for adults who have aged out of K-12. ...I have observed adult ed needs going unmet and it has motivated me to contribute to the field. We talk a lot about educating the whole child, but what about the whole adult?"*



Many reported that working in this field increased their empathy, improved their civic engagement, and gave them tools for working with adults inside and outside the classroom:

*"I have grown as an educator, a humanitarian, a student of life, and an advocate. Even as I am looking at possibly leaving the field, I have every intention of remaining active in advocating for our community and have no doubt I will find my way back to this work."*

*"I wish it wasn't over, but I am so grateful for my time as an ESL teacher. Working in adult ed taught me to be empathetic, community-centered, and culturally humble (among a million other things) and has changed the way I take care of myself and those around me."*

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*"Being in adult ed has made me much more aware of social inequities and the struggles that immigrants, refugees, and low-income folks face in trying to navigate life in the U.S. (particularly how cumbersome it is to access social services or things like the naturalization process). I hope to say that it has made me a more empathetic human being, and a greater advocate for immigration."*

*"Adult Education has expanded my empathy and understanding of what it means to really be American. It has also taught me a lot about my own privilege."*

*"Being in Adult Ed has taught me so much about language itself: how it is a resource we all have and can share with each other. It has helped me realize the value all humans have in society, regardless of the language a person uses. It has also shown me how much knowledge and skill is required to be an effective teacher in Adult Education."*

Working in Adult Education also changes lives, as one respondent wrote:

*"I not only got to teach my students new skills, but I've gotten to be a part of their lives and stories. I have eaten meals with them, played with their kids, and witnessed inspiring resilience. My students have changed me and taught me how to look outside of my own lens of seeing the world. Adult ed brings hope and community and a way forward."*

In short, the teachers are dedicated, passionate, community-oriented professionals who serve more than 40,000 adult learners throughout Illinois (including non-ICCB sponsored programs). They love what they do and would like to continue doing it as long as possible.

# So... Why are they leaving (or thinking about leaving)?

In our last two reports, we focused mostly on the impact of low wages and unstable work. Adult Education workers shared that low wages, part-time teaching jobs, and required unpaid overtime makes the field unsustainable. Our current survey responses continue to reflect this issue, with 22 individual comments **citing low wages and part-time work as the reason they've left or are thinking about leaving teaching.**

Here, we will focus on new findings – namely that many teachers (or potential teachers) don't see a long-term career in this field. When asked about their thoughts on their future in Adult Education, only 27% of respondents chose "I expect to be able to teach long term." Of the teachers who reported working in Adult Education for 0-5 years, zero respondents expected to stay in the field long term with nearly half of them saying they were currently thinking of leaving the field. Many new teachers are not pursuing careers in Adult Education because they're more interested in finding a long-term path. These comments are reflective of respondents' reasons for why a long-term career in Adult Education doesn't seem possible:

**Only 27% of respondents chose "I expect to be able to teach long term."**

*"With no way to move up, I expect to change positions in the future after kids. I might stay within the field or make a career change in the future."*

*"...You also can't focus on this as a career, really. For me, I have to pick up all kinds of crazy side jobs just to pay rent, not to have any savings or really live in any kind of comfort, so that makes all of my free time work time and I can't just be a teacher in the world, enjoying life. That kind of freedom during your free time is important for growth, reflection, and development. It's just not there for me and people in my position."*

*"As an adult ed teacher, I worked 8:30 AM – 12:30 PM Monday through Thursday and 5:30 pm to 9:00 pm on Mondays and Wednesdays. It can be hard to think long-term with a schedule like that – or get a second job to make ends meet."*



Several former teachers mentioned **personal situations that limited their opportunities** to continue in Adult Education.

*"I tried to stay in the field for as long as I could but once my partner lost his job I had to transition to support us."*

*"...Even though I was fortunate to be teaching full-time and there are two adults working in my household, we couldn't meet our basic expenses with my salary and with a child in full-time daycare...I have a masters degree and more than 10 years of experience teaching, and it felt more and more crazy to be working so hard and being compensated so little, with so little promise that things would change."*

Not surprisingly, **most teachers are leaving because they can't afford to stay in their current positions.** But wages and full-time work for teachers are rarely a priority in Adult Education, where federal funding provides **only \$577 per adult learner** (compared to \$10,000 per learner in K-12).

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## What's the impact?

When asked if working conditions for Adult Education teachers are impacting the field as a whole, many passionate comments suggested that low wages and part-time work for teachers leads to a lower quality of teaching and a lower quality of programming for students.

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*"Almost every teaching job I have ever worked or looked at has been part-time with little to no time for lesson planning or prep time. It is difficult to devote time to teaching and teaching well when you can't make enough money to live on."*

*"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...The field itself doesn't produce the results it could."*

*"Because there's such high turnover, there's less experienced teachers mentoring new teachers. I think this leads to even greater turnover"*

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*among staff, degrades the quality of programs, and lowers the quality of education that students get. It also degrades the trust that students have in Adult Education programming.”*

*“I also felt like as an adjunct, it was difficult to be able to contribute to the field as fully as I would have been able to with a full-time role. I felt expendable and did not have the opportunity to really dig into the work in a way that I would have liked....It was also difficult to build a collegial community with others in the field due to the limited hours we all worked. I became bewildered that a job that required a balance of so many skills and ACTED like an important field could not figure out a way to treat the employees in ways that would truly allow the field to be a stronger professional sector.”*

**You can't take risks when you're constantly starting over...**

*“There are so many wonderful novice teachers, but the field would benefit so much from being able to retain knowledge. The high turnover means students are losing important relationships and navigating programs that keep changing as institutional knowledge gets lost. It forces programs to stay in survival mode, rather than being able to really explore what transformative [education] would look like for their students and communities. You can't take risks when you're constantly starting over...”*

Several respondents commented that it was the **degraded quality of programming** itself that led them to leave the field.

*“I stopped teaching because I disagreed with programming decisions at my former agency. These decisions were likely due to the poor funding in the field. The agency I worked for made decisions based on numbers and not student well-being, which I believe they thought was the only way to keep the doors open since Adult Education is funded so poorly.”*

*“I also think there's also been a growing emphasis on standardized testing and workforce development. It's frustrating and disheartening as a teacher when you can't teach what students want to learn because of expectations set by people who never have and never will know your students.”*

Multiple respondents noted that **low wages also affect the diversity** of its workforce.

*“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."*

*"Low wages certainly influence the diversity of the field. It's hard to stay in the field if you don't have some other source of financial support, and that really limits the kinds of people who teach Adult Education."*

*"I observed that teachers who stayed in the field for a time often had personal situations that allowed them to work in these roles, at least for a time (a spouse supporting them, other income, no other family members to take care of). It often seemed when people left they weren't just switching to another Adult Education job...they were switching to another career pathway altogether that offered more pay and more stability."*

Notably, the teachers that have spent the most time in this field pointed out that **working conditions have been an issue in Adult Education for a long time**. Several respondents that have worked in the field for 16 years or more shared that they've been talking about these issues for years and very little has changed:

*"That we are still experiencing the same conditions for teachers (and coordinators) in the adult literacy field many years later says it all. There has always been tremendous turnover - especially the coordinators - for as long as I have been in the field. 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."*

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Transition specialists and career navigators often prioritize sustainable jobs for their participants. This means that workforce programs consider wages, hours, and safety when referring a participant to a new job opportunity. However, as one former teacher shares, the same consideration is not given to the teachers and other Adult Education workers:

*"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. This is a major challenge for the nonprofit and government sector in general but particularly apparent in Adult Education: the duality of talking about equitable practices while not observing them in one's own sector's practices."*

This paradoxical behavior by funders has left teachers feeling replaceable and undervalued and it is logical that they would be looking for work elsewhere in Adult Education or in other fields altogether.

## Where are they going, and what do they need to stay?

We can assume that since they didn't disappear, Adult Education teachers are going somewhere. We asked teachers to share why they were leaving Adult Education and where they were going to work instead. Many respondents shared that they chose to move into another career for the higher pay, benefits, and job security. **Over half the responses specifically mentioned leaving teaching in Adult Education to work in K-12, higher education, or in an administration position.** They cite the hours, predictable salary with raises, benefits, and respect as the main reasons for choosing to move their career to a more stable area of education.

*"I left teaching in Adult Education to pursue a job in K-12 education because I needed a better salary, more "traditional" hours, and better health benefits. I would love to go back to teaching adults in the future; however, I would only do so if I could find a full-time job that paid at least \$70K/year with benefits."*

*"The [Adult Education] field also has a limited career path for growth from both a skills perspective, responsibility, and pay. The field isn't valued the same as an elementary or high school teacher or a college instructor."*

*"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."*

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Besides higher wages, full time work, and investment in Adult Education teachers, several respondents wrote that **program leadership could play a bigger role in the fight for a sustainable field**. When asked what their program leaders were doing in response to teacher turnover, a quarter of respondents said they haven't seen their leadership working on this issue in any meaningful way at all. One teacher wrote that their manager tried team building activities, retreats and professional development to help sustain teachers in their program, but added that "more effort needs to be put into having conversations about salary/funding and developing a 3-5 year plan for growth within an organization with adult ed. programming."

Some former teachers shared that they felt expendable to management and some felt that their requests for better working conditions were not being taken seriously:

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*"Honestly, leadership knows teachers are disposable, it's a revolving door profession. At least in my experience, community based Adult Education, volunteers would become teachers, former students would become teachers, then educators would move on to the greener pastures. That's been my situation."*

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*"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."*

*"I have seen several strategies. The most common seems to be lecturing teachers on the fact that the organization cannot pay very much because they just don't have the money. There is a huge amount of guilt and manipulation in these conversations. The implication is always that teachers are money-hungry and greedy."*

*"Leadership doesn't care about retaining teachers. Their attitude is 'just hire new teachers'."*

*"When I was an instructor, we lost instructors every semester and the only thing I noticed that administration did was hire more instructors. When they couldn't hire anyone new, they simply merged two classes together, and more than once this was to the students' detriment."*

**Many respondents wrote of dedicated managers and supervisors that are fighting for them to stay in their teaching positions.**

Still, **many respondents wrote of dedicated managers and supervisors that are fighting for them to stay in their teaching positions.**

Some current teachers reported that they have seen their management insisting on pay increases, prioritizing more full-time positions, and utilizing teachers' input in program design.

*"I had one amazing administrator who did everything she could to listen to her instructors and advocate for them when upper administration pushed back. In fact, one of her very last negotiations before she resigned was to make sure I was compensated at the same level of my peers starting in the next fiscal year. I had no idea she had done this for me, and I never brought it up to her. She just has that level of integrity, and wanted to make sure her instructors were as happy as possible before she left ... I can think of some other examples of administrators successfully preventing turnover in their education staff, and they've all also said that higher pay was on their lists of retention initiatives."*

*"Leadership can often make an effort to reward dedicated performance with more opportunities in the classroom and also opportunities to contribute outside of the classroom with curriculum and intake and other organizational projects. I have also seen the willingness to accommodate schedule requests and provide as much flexibility as possible to teachers when necessary. It is important to be proactive in these areas as well - not to make the teachers have to ask for things or at least make it as easy as possible for them to do so."*

*"In one program I had managers who worked hard to create a strong teaching team, and they gave us a lot of freedom and input into determining the way our program worked. That program was very responsive to students and their needs and the managers treated the knowledge and opinions of teachers with great respect. It was unique in my experience, and it made a huge difference to me and kept me in the job longer than any other Adult Education job I've had."*

In many cases, administrative leaders are trying new strategies and asking teachers for input and guidance. However, even with these efforts, administrators are often not able to address the real causes of low-wage, part-time work in Adult Education. There are structural hurdles and limitations to current Adult Education policies that make it difficult for administrators to create sustainable conditions for their teachers.

*"One issue that has remained problematic is the constant shifting of work hours based on our grant funding. For example, my director may be able to offer three classes one semester but only two classes the next."*

*"The only example I can think of is when we were able to advocate from*





*a part-time position and [it was] converted into full-time. We were only able to get away with this because we were opening classes at a new location and the part-time instructor was able to travel between locations to justify transitioning to full-time. I can't think of a systematic effort to retain teachers."*

*"My direct leadership is supportive and kind, but can only do so much due to extremely limited resources. We recently began being paid for meetings, which is a new thing."*

*"My organization has made a commitment to having an entirely full-time staff. This means that teachers have access to a complete benefits package that includes healthcare. They've also taken steps to lighten our admin load by bringing on interns. On the other hand, because our teachers are full-time the management is floating the idea of requiring all new full-time staff to increase their number of in-class hours which in my view still leaves them spread thin."*

## Recommendations from current and former teachers

Current and former Adult Education teachers have a few suggestions:

- ✓ Higher pay
- ✓ More full-time positions
- ✓ Flexible scheduling (including 'work-from-home' options)
- ✓ Paid time for meetings, planning, and thinking
- ✓ A true career path for teachers to stay teachers (not just administrative positions)
- ✓ More active teacher participation in program development
- ✓ Benefits for part-time teachers
- ✓ Acknowledgement that Adult Education teachers are qualified professionals and the people they teach are important to our society
- ✓ A commitment from leadership that teachers are valuable and not replaceable
- ✓ Recognition of the legitimacy of student goals that are not centered around job placement and standardized test scores
- ✓ Less restricted and more predictable funding from state and federal agencies

# Summary

National media coverage of a post-pandemic K-12 “teacher shortage” has influenced the terminology Adult Education professionals use to describe current teacher turnover. However, that term communicates an absence of teachers, and that is simply not accurate. On the contrary, there are many trained, experienced Adult Education professionals eager to join and to stay in the field. Yet, teachers have been largely missing from conversations about systemic improvements to Adult Education, and their calls for improved working conditions often go unnoticed by funders and organizational leadership. Decisions are made for them, but rarely with them.

This report represents a small sample of Adult Education teachers in Illinois, but the consistency of the stories collected here and in earlier reports suggest a wider theme. We must think about this issue differently if we want to see a different outcome. We know that ignoring the importance of increased wages and full-time positions has not been effective in encouraging teachers to stay. We also know that teacher wages will not change if they are not prioritized by Adult Education programs and their funders. State and federal funding agencies can alleviate this problem by allocating more funding designated for teacher salaries and by evaluating programs’ efforts to ensure sustainable working conditions for Adult Education staff.

Thank you to all of you that were able to share your stories with us for this report. We were touched by your words and are grateful for your candidness. Though the reality of working conditions in Adult Education can sometimes feel hopeless, we encourage teachers and other Adult Education workers to recognize their power and expertise. Without you, there is no Adult Education. If we advocate collectively, we can make a real difference in the way funders and society thinks about Adult Education. [Join us in the work](#) and learn more about Adult Ed WAVE – your voice is valued!



Literacy Works



# Thank you

## 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](http://www.litworks.org).

## About Adult Ed WAVE:

WAVE is a group of adult ed teachers, including some who have left teaching, working together to advocate for Adult Education. We love our job and our students but we are frustrated about the working conditions that have led to the so-called "teacher shortage". If this report got you fired up, you'd make a great addition to the WAVE team. [You can learn more and join in the work](#) or email [keighty@litworks.org](mailto:keighty@litworks.org) with any questions.

## Special thanks to:

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