

# "A revolving door of professionals"

## Investigating High Turnover in Adult Education in Illinois

a report by  
**Literacy Works**

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## Adult Education workers are leaving the field because they can't afford to work in it anymore.

In 2022, Literacy Works collected stories and insights from Adult Education workers about their experience in the field. Many are leaving Adult Education, while many are struggling to stay in it. Both cite low wages and the prevalence of part-time work as their reason for the dissatisfaction they have for their jobs.

"There are few opportunities [in Adult Education] in general, and even fewer that pay a living wage. We want that for our students, we should want that for our staff, too."

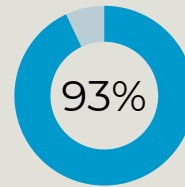
## WHAT ADULT EDUCATION WORKERS ARE SAYING

The majority of respondents shared that **they love their work but that they need more pay and more full-time opportunities**. Many shared stories about working two or three jobs to supplement the low wages they earn in Adult Education.

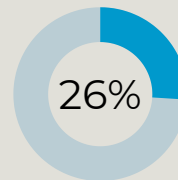
Overall, Adult Education workers are dissatisfied with the working conditions in their field. They recognize that **funders are distancing themselves from the marginalized populations served by adult educators**. One teacher stated plainly, "I think we're paid less because our skills and the people we teach are not valued."

Funders must recognize that **investment in Adult Education staff is crucial to sustaining this field**. Sustainable wages and full-time positions are possible through more funding. For its part, **the State of Illinois can demonstrate its dedication to adult learners by improving working conditions for their educators**.

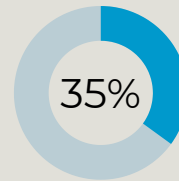
"I love teaching in Adult Education, and I've spent many years developing my craft. The only way for me to make a sustainable wage that will support my family is to leave teaching. It's not right."



full-time teachers that have extra work outside of teaching



Literacy Works members that had a coordinator resign in 2022 (not all vacancies have been filled)



full-time administrators who work over 40 hours a week (half of which are not paid overtime)

# INTRODUCTION

Adult Education is a broad term that usually refers to English as a Second Language (ESL) or Adult Basic Education (ABE). In ESL classes, new English users learn how to read, write and speak English. In ABE classes, adults that grew up speaking English can work on their reading and writing skills. Citizenship, digital literacy, job training, and a lot of other subjects fall under this category too. This field relies heavily on volunteer labor but the paid workers are the subject of this report.

Adult Education workers find their way to this field in a variety of ways. When asked, many say they were “drawn” to Adult Education. Usually, they start as volunteer tutors and then become paid teachers and then coordinators and so on. (In fact, that is how most of the Literacy Works staff got into this work too - we started as volunteer tutors). Adult Education workers are passionate about what they do, but they don’t always love their jobs. In the winter of 2022, we saw a large increase in turnover among Adult Education administrators and teachers. At Literacy Works, we saw that 1 in 4 coordinators left their roles by April 2022. Stories shared by administrators and teachers indicate that turnover was also very high with teaching positions as well. National data reflect this too, with the [U.S Department of Labor Statistics](#) reporting that job outlook for this field is in decline (-6% in 2021). One administrator said that she was “tired of hiring for the same positions over and over again.” And when positions are left vacant, administrators and teachers report that they are often expected to cover the extra tasks.

One administrator writes that their biggest challenge is that they are, “overworked and doing the job of more than just [one] person.” This suggests that high turnover is directly contributing to the dissatisfaction and possible burnout of the staff currently employed which, of course, leads to more turnover.

Inconsistent staff and an inability (or unwillingness) to create a positive and encouraging work environment also speaks to the value assigned to the populations Adult Education programs serve. Many teachers reported that having a rotating staff can be disorienting and disconnecting for adult learners looking for community. Some administrators added that a heavier reliance on volunteers is also not helpful because they are less consistent than paid employees.

One teacher pointed out that adult education students are often from undocumented and/or marginalized communities and connected this to the lack of funding for this field. These students include beginning-level English learners, pre-literate refugees, undocumented students, parents and grandparents caring for young children, retirees looking to improve their civic voice, students with health issues or disabilities which preclude them from working, and others. But these are usually not the populations funders like to support. She continues,

“Society doesn’t value these populations enough to do what it takes to keep a teacher and let them get really good. It doesn’t seem like it’s a priority for the [funders] to keep us [adult educators] around”

While on paper many funders encourage serving these populations, the resources that funders provide and outcomes measured often don't align with community needs.

At Literacy Works, we wrote about this issue in our Spring 2021 issue of the Literacy Action Project called, Wages and Working Conditions in the Adult Education Sector. Referencing Tithi Bhattacharya's thoughts on the subject, we wrote “as a society, we tend to value processes and institutions that make money or things over people-support activities.” Adult Education as a field is inherently a people-support activity.

While turnover has slowed somewhat since the beginning of the year, as of November 2022 there continues to be regular staff changes at the coordinator level across the programs in Illinois. But high turnover is not a new issue in Adult Education. In fact, one administrator commented that she struggled with the same issues when she was a teacher a decade prior stating, “it’s sad to see we haven’t made much progress as a sector.” We already know about job dissatisfaction but we think of it as a given in this field - we don’t expect anything else. As a group, we know we need to find the answer to this problem but we might be asking the wrong question.

Rather than figuring out how to fix high turnover, this project asks why there is turnover in the first place. We have to go “upstream” and find out what’s happening systemically so we can work on sustaining this field and the staff that labor in it. This report was created to uplift voices from the Adult Education community doing the day-to-day work that ensures the programs continue running.

The teachers and administrators working to sustain these Adult Education programs are leaving their jobs at high numbers and we want to talk about why.

Through surveys, an online community board, and a live virtual roundtable event, adult educators shared their insights and experiences from working in the field. This report is to showcase the adult education worker perspective, one that is often overlooked in reports about workers. From the stories, we found low morale, a sense of pointlessness, and burnout but we also found hope, reflection, and a want to make things better for all of us. We collected the insights into three main themes: more full-time work with appropriate workload, higher wages, and more grant funding.

We are not afraid to question and push back on this field, because we love this field. We know that the only way forward is to acknowledge the past and the present and learn from those experiences. Our hope is that funders and decision-makers will read this and understand that more investment must be made in the staff that are providing the Adult Education services for the state of Illinois. This means higher wages, more full-time positions, livable hours, and as one teacher put it, “I want [the funders] to consider us”.

## **FULL-TIME WORK + APPROPRIATE WORKLOAD**

Adult Education, in general, relies heavily on volunteer and part-time labor to fulfill most of the on-the-ground work. In fact, in fiscal year 2021, 81% of reporting teachers had a part-time Adult Education job and just 12% reported full-time positions. In our survey, we found that 60% of teachers and 20% of administrators have part time positions.



These numbers alone, though, don't explain why Adult Education teachers and administrators are leaving the field. Part-time and volunteer work has always been a part of Adult Education, so why are people leaving now?

One reason is that it is very difficult to have several part-time jobs at the same time. Former teachers shared that they worked mornings, evenings, and weekends to make ends meet, often teaching at several community colleges and organizations at once. Those former teachers went on to say that their decision to move to their current jobs in administrative roles was largely influenced by their need for a stable and consistent job. According to our survey, 18 hours per week was the average for teachers in part-time positions with 22.5 hours being the average for administrators. This means that if 40 hours a week was the goal, they would need to get another job (or jobs) to make up the difference.

One administrator commented that the "majority of the teachers in the Consortium\* have at least one other part-time job".

Others shared about picking up whatever work they could find during winter and summer breaks including working as a seasonal security guard and driving for various rideshare apps. One respondent shared a note on [the community board](#): "Can be hard when hours are low [numbers]...is part-time realistic going forward?" Others echoed this sentiment at the roundtable. One teacher shared that in order to continue teaching there had to be compromises:

"I made it work because I had three roommates and rented from a slumlord. ... I miss teaching a lot - I would go back if there was a full time position but it feels like that's so rare..."

One of the factors causing so many teachers are leaving the field or moving onto administration positions is that part-time work is not conducive with the realities of adult life. If the field of Adult Education is to continue, it will need to keep more staff than it loses and offering part-time work is not the way to do that. So part-time work isn't sustainable long-term, but working too much is also a problem.

Our survey shows that 35% of administrators work over 40 hours a week and only 15% reported getting compensated for overtime. With full-time work, the problem is more about working too much without getting paid for it. Some teachers shared that they are not paid for time spent outside the classroom, but we also learned that 43% of teachers do get paid for prep-time. Yet, of that group, 53% report that the prep-time they are given is not enough and they are often forced to work outside of their assigned hours for no pay.

55% of administrators also have teaching responsibilities on top of their administrative roles but of that group, 45% report that teaching is not in their job description. 93% of full-time teachers report that they have extra work outside of teaching.

*\*a model allowed through Illinois Community College Board where an agency (in this case, Chinese Mutual Aid Association) acts as a project lead and fiscal agent for a group of agencies providing services*

Teachers reported several different tasks that they are responsible for in addition to their teaching duties, including:

- Coordinating volunteers
- Facilitating professional development
- Grant writing and data reporting
- Casework for refugee participants
- Finding referrals for participant needs
- Recruiting students and volunteers

These “extra tasks” are actually full time jobs on their own. In fact, some nonprofit organizations have separate people or departments assigned to do the jobs described above. One of the reasons that so many teachers and administrators are taking on two or three jobs at the same organization is that funding doesn’t always cover a whole position. Several teachers and administrators commented that while they got full-time hours, they were actually working two more-than-part-time jobs at once. One teacher explains it this way in the survey:

*My position is full-time but is only partly funded by Adult Ed related funds. I also have to add to the full-time workload of coordinating and teaching the Adult Ed program other responsibilities related to other funding sources.*

*It means I am a part-time ESL coordinator and teacher (and the only Adult Ed staff at the organization) + a part-time case worker, but all the responsibilities together amount to more than a full-time position (in fact, ESL responsibilities alone take up a full-time workload)*

When teachers and administrators are calling for more full-time positions, they don’t mean this. The same teacher goes on to write, “I often feel like I cannot accomplish all the tasks on my plate to the best it could be done if more funding were available, because that would allow me to focus solely on the Adult Ed position.” One teacher reported that they asked that, in lieu of a raise, to focus on one job and stop working unpaid overtime (the organization did not agree to that and gave her a very small raise and she continues to work two full-time jobs at once).

And on the topic of raises, 66% of teachers and 43% of administrators reported that while they did receive a bonus or a raise last year, they were either “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the amount. One teacher reported that their “salary has increased 9% in the five years since [they] started while inflation has increased about 20% total.” But in order to talk about raises, we have to talk about base pay which brings us to the next theme, wages.

## HIGHER WAGES

As a starting point, we can look at what groups like MIT and MSNBC think about liveable wage/salary averages across the country. According to [an article from MSNBC](#), residents of Illinois need a minimum (before taxes) of \$69,760 to support a family of four. [MIT’s Living Wage Calculator](#) puts it at \$105,000 a year for a family of four if both parents are working (\$82,000 if only one parent works).

But we know that living in a big city can cost more than living outside of the metropolitan area and that some of us don't have children or a partner, so these numbers don't work for everyone. MIT estimates that a single adult needs around \$40,000 a year to sustain themselves. A single parent of one child will need roughly \$74,000 before taxes to pay for housing and expenses. All of these numbers just mean that people need at least \$40,000 - \$105,000 per year to accomplish what they want with their lives.

MIT also estimates the average full-time salaries of workers in various sectors. The field of Adult Education fits somewhere between "Community and Social Service" (\$51,285/year) and "Education, Training, and Library" (\$54,570/year). The U.S Department of Labor Statistics reports that the national median for Adult Education teachers is \$59,720 per year and \$28.71 per hour.

According to our survey results, adult educators working in Illinois are earning significantly less income than the national averages and significantly less than they need to sustain a life in Illinois.

Wage Transparency survey results (averaged)	
Adult Ed teacher salary	\$41,975/year
Adult Ed admin. salary	\$50,038/year
Adult Ed teacher hourly	\$31.19/hour
Adult Ed admin. hourly	\$19.30/hour

This means that a majority of adult educators are not making enough money in their current jobs. Survey respondents were asked if they believed their salary was on par with others in their position. Notably, one respondent reported they knew they were not on par with their colleagues because their direct supervisor has shown them "a SERIES of market studies of [their] position at other organizations and there is what [they] define a substantial gap between where [they are] and where they are." Of the other respondents, 40% responded "no" and 35% responded "I'm not sure". That means that over a quarter of respondents don't know how much other workers make in their same position. Which means they also don't have the information they need to advocate for higher wages.

This issue was the reason the Wage Transparency Project was created. One teacher wrote, "I recently heard an education policy analyst claim that professionalizing a field cannot be done without empowering the employees. For all of the talk about professionalizing adult ed, I feel like we've gone the opposite way in terms of empowerment." One respondent left a comment on the community board about the importance of wage transparency for new adult educators:

*Training programs need to have more discussion around compensation in Adult Education. This was something lacking in my undergrad and Masters programs ... Honestly, if I knew that I wouldn't be able to support myself for 9 years on my salary, I probably wouldn't have entered into the profession.*

When workers know how much their colleagues are being paid, they can more effectively advocate for raises and more importantly, they will be able to make informed decisions about their career path - including picking another career altogether.

In the roundtable discussion, many teachers noted their resentment towards a system that makes this job unsustainable without deep pockets. They often mention a colleague with a well-paid partner who can make up for their low income in Adult Education. One teacher said that wages will have to increase otherwise, “we’ll only have a specific group of people - someone with a partner or family member that can support them financially and they don’t have kids or they have kids but they also have a full-time on-call caretaker for them - that’s a really small group of people.” This sentiment suggests a large divide between those who can afford to teach and those who can’t. This is now a profession where workers have to decide whether they have enough money to work. One teacher noted that “you don’t see older adult educators anymore, it’s hard with a family and kids”. Low wages contribute to a repression of diversity and intersectionality among Adult Education staff. Plainly, with the income opportunities so narrowed, this field will narrow too until all the staff and all the voices are from the same perspective. As one administrator puts it in the survey:

There are few opportunities [in Adult Education] in general, and even fewer that pay a living wage. We want that for our students, we should want that for our staff, too. *Especially if we want to see more diverse voices in the field - not just those in positions of privilege who can afford to work a job where they are paid nothing (perhaps because they have a spouse with a higher paying job).*

On the community board one respondent shared, “I had to stop teaching because I couldn't afford to do it anymore. I taught [five] ESL classes and worked two other jobs but couldn't make it. It hurts that I had to make that choice.” In the survey an administrator wrote, “I struggle to keep up with living expenses on my current salary, but I'm cautiously hopeful that continued conversations, further transparency, and ultimately updated salary bands will allow me to continue working with the programs I love.”

Again and again, teachers and administrators shared about loving the work they do and the missions of their organizations but feeling strongly that the field does not feel the same way about them. One teacher laments in the survey that they are being forced to choose between having a family and doing the job they want: “I love teaching in Adult Education, and I've spent many years developing my craft. The only way for me to make a sustainable wage that will support my family is to leave teaching. It's not right.” One teacher writes, “ I like this org A LOT, but my decision to stay or leave will depend partially on raises and bonuses. I have to pay my bills.”

Teachers, specifically, noted that leaving teaching for an administrative position was a way to get more money and stability. Several teachers who spoke of leaving teaching for higher paying administrative roles, also shared the sadness of having to choose income over their passion. Some aren’t sure they should stay in the field at all as one survey respondent notes, “The attrition in my workplace and our field as a whole shakes my confidence in staying here.”



Several respondents reported that they are no longer working in Adult Education and cite low wages and part-time work as the main reasons for their decisions. All of those reporting that they left the field shared that it was a difficult decision and they continue to miss their work in Adult Education.

People need more money for their work. Again, that's not a new concept, especially in Adult Education. It's something we say comes with the job as one administrator wrote, "I figure non-profit employees don't make much income." Current strategies for dealing with the turnover due to low wages typically do not address the funders that provide money to run these programs. Adult Education workers understand that it is the funders that are ultimately responsible for how value is assigned to their work. When funders emphasize progress over people, the organization it funds will do the same - which is the next theme of this report, grant funding.

## MORE GRANT FUNDING

To talk about funding, we have to talk about raises again briefly. Adult Education workers know that they can ask for a raise as much as they want but if it's not "in the budget", it's not happening. We wrote about the budget as "moral document" too:

...if you are told that your low wages are a result of the constraints of the budget, what is actually being said is that the fair compensation of the staff is not a priority to the organization.

Staff are frustrated with upper management for not prioritizing their wages in budget decision-making. Several respondents cite negative conversations they had with supervisors about getting a raise.

One teacher wrote about their experience:

*I sat down with my boss this year to discuss my salary and she told me point blank that ROE #33 [Regional Office of Education #33] does not guarantee cost of living increases and does not offer performance based increases ... I have more responsibility than ever before, and even had a title change to reflect this, yet am earning less than my starting salary. I have always had glowing reviews, have pursued high level professional development, and have presented to my peers in the field. There is no opportunity for growth in my organization in this field.*

In the survey, many teachers and administrators commented on the inconsistency between their organization's mission and how they treated their employees. A teacher from Erie Neighborhood House wrote:

*As a server in a restaurant I used to make in one week what I make here in two. My part-time colleagues get paid very, extremely low hourly wage (sic). Meaning that they are not getting any benefits and between \$17 to \$20 per hour ( I feel like this is surreal or a joke), when hotel housekeepers get paid between \$19 and \$24 per hour. Erie Neighborhood House promotes social justice, equality and equity but with this (sic) wages I feel some hypocrisy that I don't want to be part of.*

At Literacy Works we often share job postings for our member organizations and have noticed the low wages being offered. We require that job posts include salaries because it forces decision-makers to reflect on their priorities around pay. We believe that hiding that information manipulates the candidate into accepting a job they want before they know how little they will be paid.

Many respondents touted the value of unionized labor forces and cited Heartland Alliance and City Colleges of Chicago as two organizations with worker unions. But even they struggle with talks of salary increases. One former teacher City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) wrote:

*Unless another contract is negotiated sometime soon, all CCC instructors who were hired as as (sic) AR (after ratification) will never make any more money than a brand new instructor. There are no longer steps and therefore no longer any incentives for instructors to want to stay and build a long-lasting teaching community. This has created a massive divide in the instructors who are not considered AR, as they make significantly more money than the rest of the instructors.*

A teacher from Heartland Alliance wrote, "Heartland is currently in negotiations with our union to determine our raises next contract of 3 years and it's going terribly! Heartland is not allocating resources in the budget to pay staff a living wage/match the cost of living in Chicago." That same teacher reported their salary as roughly \$40,000 last year. According to [ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer](#), the executive director of Heartland Alliance earned \$265,212 in 2020. So, it's not that they don't have the money, it's just not being distributed fairly.

We have to recognize that most organizations operate this way. We are familiar with the idea of top-earners making significantly more than the lowest paid worker because we see it in the news with multi-million dollar companies. So we're not surprised when it happens at our organization but we should question that too. We are going to cite our [Literacy Action Project](#) again as we talk about the reason behind this wage disparity mindset:

*It's important to point out how the [Nonprofit Industrial Complex \(NPIC\)](#) has influenced the field of Adult Education. The NPIC is a system by which nonprofits are shaped by the state, local governments, and wealthy foundations so that funders can control certain aspects of social movements. As a result, nonprofit organizations end up being run like businesses that are governed by their funding rather than their missions.*

If the business world is the model, the nonprofit and community service sectors are just following the trends of [their for-profit counterparts](#). For-profit businesses often cater to their board of directors to ensure more investment, nonprofits often cater to their funders for the same reason. Which brings us back to grant funding.

Many respondents noted the impact of grants on their ability to do their work. One administrator wrote that their program was organized to make it easier to report to the funders even though it wasn't easier for the staff: "Our program is structured on a quarterly basis. This has been helpful for the grant [cycle], but there are peaks and lulls in work which can be difficult to manage."

Another mentioned the pressure put on staff to meet grant expectations:

*Working under a performance-based grant is stressful. We can put all of the supports in place for a student, but we cannot provide the motivation for them to attend. I fear that when our numbers don't look great, the perception is that we are a poor program or that we are not doing all that we can. This, of course, is not the reality. I am not sure how this could be changed.*

Our Community Literacy Program recently started a buddy program for new and experienced Adult Education coordinators throughout Illinois. When administrators registered for the program, they were asked about the issue they were most worried about in their position. 50% of respondents noted fulfilling grant requirements as their biggest concern. Grant reporting and site visits are also a common topic of conversation at the Coordinator Support Group meetings.

The state of Illinois is one the top funders of Adult Education in the state. The funding is managed by the Secretary of State's Literacy Office (SOS) and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB). According to [the SOS website](#), in fiscal year 2021 (July 2020 - June 2021), The State of Illinois allocated \$4,114,640 to support SOS adult literacy programs. To better understand what the means, even if that dollar amount was divided evenly between the 68 programs they fund, each would receive only \$60,000.

That amount alone is nowhere near what it takes to cover the costs of running an adult literacy program, let alone paying a living wage to its staff. This means that if SOS is a program's only funding source, they might not be able to pay anyone a living wage (or any wages at all). For this reason, many programs find additional funding to supplement their SOS awards.

The other big funder of Adult Education in Illinois is the [Illinois Community College Board \(ICCB\)](#) which gets their funding from the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#). They use a mix of federal and state money for their grant allocations. Their awards are much larger than SOS. [According to their records](#), ICCB awarded \$57,808,570 to 72 programs throughout Illinois in 2022. If their money was divided evenly, each program would get a little over \$800,000 each.

The W in WIOA is for Workforce, which is the main purpose of this act - to create more workers for the workforce. On [WIOA Works Illinois' website](#), they clearly state their goal for this program:

*WIOA formally adopts many parts of Illinois' progressive workforce development model on a nationwide basis, with the goal of 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. (emphasis added)*

Programs that receive funding from ICCB must adhere to the guidelines set forth by WIOA. This means ICCB-funded programs must also “respond to the needs of employers and prepare workers”.

At the roundtable discussion, one teacher commented on this topic: “We shouldn’t be valuing people based on their earning potential or their ability.” But the federal and state governments give ICCB over \$50,000,000 to spend on Adult Education, and workforce development is what they need to prioritize. This often leaves adults not in the workforce, such as stay-at-home parents and retired folk as well as undocumented workers out of the equation completely. In fact, undocumented students are excluded from workforce development programs and might not be the priority of an adult literacy program that receives most of its funding from ICCB.

Adult educators know that the funders have a lot of control over how organizations are run because they can decide if the program will be funded or not. On the community board, one respondent left a note calling on funders:

*I think that those at at (sic) the top (i.e.: our major funders) play a huge role in setting the tone and expectations of our local programs. If one is responsible for allocating what little bit of money is currently in adult ed, it's important to do everything possible to ensure those funds are stewarded in the least harmful ways possible.*

The programs that are offering more workforce-focused opportunities will be more likely to receive funding, potentially a lot of funding. Now the program with a lot of ICCB money has to prioritize some learners over others if they want to fulfill the grant requirements.

That is, they will have to develop programming that supports a work-first approach to learning. The retired grandparent learning to read for the first time might not be such a good fit in a program built around getting a job. But as one teacher at the roundtable discussion said, “We shouldn’t divide up our participants into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’”. We shouldn’t but we do. They go on to say, “...there’s a lot of funding for things like bridge classes for highly educated, high paying jobs but cut funding for older [adults] and [undocumented] immigrants, single parents, low-wage workers.” An administrator in the group added that “a lot of value is put on the ones who can get a job”.

Bridge programs, often well funded, only allow access to the most advanced students in a program and, again, often exclude many populations. Programs will continue to do what is needed to keep their services running and their workers paid, at least a little. But that means they have to go where the money is - which is ICCB - unless SOS can provide more funding for Adult Education programs in Illinois.

Starting over a decade ago, Literacy Works has consistently spoken out about the changes in funding priorities in the past decades. We started to notice a strong pull towards workforce development programming and a favoring of job-focused education. We have always known that job-related goals are very common with adult learners, but they’re not the only goals learners have. We have written about how workforce-focused programs prioritize the needs of potential workers over other community members who are equally deserving of their support.



At the roundtable event, one teacher shared that many adult learners support the workforce without having a paid job. She gave this example: “maybe you tutor an 80 year old student who just comes [to Adult Education class] for the community and they are taking care of a grandchild so those parents can work. Everyone is contributing in their own way.” All kinds of people have educational goals that don’t involve getting a job including: refugees, immigrants, people that were imprisoned, seniors, people with disabilities, English-learners, stay-at-home parents. There are a lot of people looking for adult education services, but there is not enough financial investment to support the need. Until this work is valued by funders, there will never be a strong enough workforce of educators to fulfill this need.

Many respondents noted Adult Education teachers commented in several places that they felt their job was not valued or appreciated, especially as it related to their education level. Survey respondents were asked to share their level of education

Reported education levels of Adult Education teachers and administrators

Degree	Administrators	Teachers
Bachelors	40%	36%
Masters	50%	55%
PhD	6%	5%
Chose not to respond	4%	4%

ZipRecruiter collects job data from all the postings on their site and regularly shares information around job trends and salaries. They write that “as of Oct 27, 2022, the average annual pay for the Masters Degree jobs category in the United States is \$66,908 a year” and set Bachelors Degrees at \$53,620 a year. These averages are higher than the reported salaries from both the administrators and the teachers and yet nearly 50% of them report having at least a Master’s Degree. Experience should also be valued and does in many fields. From our survey we found that administrators have at an average of 7 years experience and teachers have an average of 11 years. However, we know that Adult Education workers are often denied raises or are unsatisfied with the increases they do receive. Many respondents mention their disappointment that their experience in the field rarely affects raises or bonuses. One teacher reflected on the value of experienced teachers:

*I have been teaching for 10 years ... I can solve problems differently now because I have experience and background knowledge that I didn't have 10 years ago. And it really just kills me to start thinking about throwing all of that away and starting something new. It's such an awesome job.*

Many respondents also mentioned what it feels like to be underpaid in an undervalued field. At the roundtable discussion, one teacher explained what it feels like when people don’t see Adult Education as a valid profession: “... even if you work really hard, you’re still an ESL teacher - not even an English teacher, you’re just an ESL teacher. I hope one day we get what we deserve for all the work we are doing”.

Adding on, another teacher responded, “A lot of people think ESL is an easy volunteer job. People think if you speak English you can teach - it’s so easy anyone can do it. It’s not considered professional like other subjects.”

Other respondents shared their frustration with having to defend the value of their work to board members, upper management, and funders. Many felt that if these decision-makers really knew what was going on in their programs they would understand why Adult Education deserves more funding. They’re not “just ESL teachers”, they are highly educated, trained professional educators and administrators. One teacher noted:

*... There are really serious things that come with teaching adults: partner violence, insecure housing, childcare. We’re not just teaching, we’re creating a safe place for people to learn - a safe place we have to create because systems have created unsafe spaces everywhere else. So when someone says, “oh you just teach ESL” they’re not considering everything else we’re doing.*

One roundtable attendee stated, “I think it comes down to society not valuing our learners just because they don’t read and write yet or speak English yet. And that’s reflected in our pay and the support of our field.” An administrator added, plainly, “This field is undervalued because of the populations we serve.” Another said,

**“I think we’re paid less because our skills and the people we teach are not valued.”**

On their Adult Literacy Grant Program Overview page, SOS states that the purpose of these adult volunteer literacy grants are 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.”**

The inclusion of family and community roles stands in stark contrast to ICCB emphasis on employer-based needs. It's critical to have funders like SOS that are community-centered and understand that the adult learners are many things, not just workers. But the amount of funding provided by SOS is far too little to accomplish the programs’ goal. For its part, the State of Illinois can demonstrate its dedication to adult learners by improving working conditions for their educators and increasing the funding allotted to SOS. And now the action steps.

## CALL TO ACTION

Comments and thoughts were shared through this project in various ways. Most respondents shared about how much they love the work they do. Several shared their grief after making the financial decision to leave. There is a lot to do to make Adult Education an inclusive and sustainable field, but the first step is acknowledging that we’re not there yet. As one community board comment said, “We need to be better.” Literacy Works will continue to advocate for Adult Education workers and the people that bring education to adult learners all over Illinois. We hope that you can join us in these efforts, whatever your title or where you work.

# ACTION STEPS

## To the State of Illinois:

- Allocate more funding to the Secretary of State Adult Literacy Program
- Continue to invest in Adult Education programming that supports all adult learners, *not just workers or potential workers*



## To the Illinois Secretary of State Adult Literacy Program:

- Recognize the influence you hold in the Adult Education field
- Encourage and demonstrate practices that support wage transparency among adult educators
- Require the volunteer coordinator positions be full-time, paid positions
- Collect data on volunteer coordinator salary or hourly rate by including the following questions on any applications and reporting forms:
  - What is the annual income of the Volunteer Coordinator?
  - Is this a living wage, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator? Yes or No
  - What percentage of the salary is covered by SOS funding?

## To Managers, Supervisors, and Directors:

- Encourage staff members to share income information and be transparent about raises and bonuses (including when there are none)
- Demonstrate practices of wage transparency by only sharing job postings with the wage and number of weekly hours listed
- Write grant outcomes that reflect your organization's mission and include that employee wages and work-life balance are priorities

## Teachers and Administrators

- Review and contribute to the Wage Transparency survey results
- Be open about wages, raises, and bonuses
- Advocate for higher wages for low-paid colleagues
- Stick together and look out for each other

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

### A very special thank you to:

Rachel Greenwood, Bria Dolnick, and Nathaniel Van Wienen for their great work in helping this project happen and continue. Thank you for your contributions and dedication to the work we do.

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This report is a result of the work done by Keighty Ward, Community Literacy Program Director at Literacy Works. Feel free to reach out - [keighty@litworks.org](mailto:keighty@litworks.org)

### Survey Details

This survey was conducted online through a Google Form format. Adult Education teachers and administrators on the Literacy Works' email list were sent an invitation to participate in the survey. We also advertised the survey through social media. All questions are optional and participation is not required to see the results. The survey is on-going and the results are immediately available for review. The respondents that submitted their responses before October 31, 2022 were included in this report.

### Community Board Details

The Community Board was created for respondents that wanted to share their thoughts without completing a survey. This board is also still available for review or contribution.

### Roundtable Discussion Details

The Roundtable Discussion took place on October 27, 2022 via Zoom. Attendees were asked to share their insights, thoughts, feelings, and ideas regarding the state of the field of Adult Education - particularly about wages. The event was open to everyone and registration was not collected. There were 7 people in attendance. [Here is a flier for this event.](#)

### Respondent Anonymity

All responses were anonymous and were not linked to any email address or identifying information. All respondents knew participation was voluntary and any information they shared would be viewed by others.

### Data collected by Literacy Works and used in the report:

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

### Organizations mentioned in the wage transparency survey results:

Sauk Valley Community College	Heartland Alliance
Erie Neighborhood House	Erie Neighborhood House
The Learning Center	HANA Center
Parkland College	World Relief in Chicago
Hanul Family Alliance	City Colleges of Chicago
Oakton Community College	Madonna Mission
Touch Gift Foundation	UIC Center for Literacy
Jane Addams Resource Corporation (JARC)	Chinese American Service League
Chinese Mutual Aid Association	Regional Office of Education #33
Kaskaskia College	Harper College