

Building Provider Capacity: A Snapshot of Investment in Adult Education Teachers

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ALL IN

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction	3
II. Project Summary	4
III. Understanding the Adult Educator Landscape	5
IV. Guiding Questions and Methodology	6
V. Findings and Discussion	8
VI. Research Assumptions and Limitations	13
VII. Recommendations	14
VIII. Conclusion	15
IX. Acknowledgements	16
X. References	17

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I. Introduction

Returning to the classroom after years out of school can be overwhelming, but adult learners who do so report that participating in adult education creates new opportunities for gaining literacy and workforce skills, building personal and professional connections, and developing a new self-vision.¹ Adults are motivated to learn, especially when they see opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills in their daily lives. Learning and persistence can be affected by both negative and positive forces such as anxiety about returning to school and a sense of self-determination or belonging.² Supporting adult learners in understanding and managing these forces is critical. For example, newcomer English learners report that sharing the same language or culture with teachers is especially helpful.³

Adult education teachers serve as a stabilizing force, providing social-emotional, academic, and logistical support to accommodate adult learners in various stages of their lives.⁴ This stability is fleeting, as the adult education field continues to rely heavily on part-time instructors and volunteers, including retired K-12 teachers, often with little to no defined training or support for teaching adults.⁵ Adult educators are often expected to teach in multiple subject areas, but “vary in their knowledge of reading and writing development, assessment, curriculum development, and pedagogy.”⁶ Instructors often rely on their knowledge of how children learn rather than apply methods and strategies grounded in adult learning theory, which prioritizes linking new knowledge to a wide range of personal, professional, and life experiences.⁷ Lack of adequate training for how to best teach adults, among other factors, can lead to high turnover rates and an inconsistent quality of instruction.⁸ Further, word of mouth remains the primary tactic for finding and hiring teachers and volunteers, ultimately limiting the hiring pool, especially among teachers of color (Harrison, 2021). Even though full-time adult education teachers tend to have more years of experience and lower turnover rates than part-time teachers, there has been an overall decline in recent years in the total number of practitioners, particularly among full-time staff.⁹ This is with the exception of 2022 which showed a promising increase in the number of adult education teachers in federally-funded programs across all categories.¹⁰ Yet, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects about 4,100 openings for adult basic and secondary education and ESL teachers each year over the next 10 years.¹¹ Despite the critical need for many more high-quality full-time and part-time instructors, there is no established credentialing or career pathway for adult education teachers in the United States.

Federal funding for adult education programs is calculated and disbursed annually through the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) to each state and territory. This funding mechanism is specified in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) Title II of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). States find numerous ways to innovate and stretch their federal and state dollars to build the capacity of their mostly part-time and volunteer educators who are deeply committed to the field. However, even with a required percentage match from each state, the federal funding mechanism is insufficient to meet the overwhelming and diverse needs of adult learners and the educators who serve them. Adult education classes are often scheduled during mornings and evenings to accommodate learners’ schedules, taking into account competing responsibilities such as employment and caring for children or family members. Finding full-time staff to work split shifts is challenging and not always financially viable for small programs, so local administrators reach more learners by employing part-time staff.

The adult education field is also challenged by the variability in state-level administration, which affects the degree and type of professional support that is available to adult educators. In many states and territories, adult education and family literacy programs are administered through the state department of education, leveraging existing systems for professional development and teacher



recruitment. In others, local programs may reside in community or technical college systems, departments of labor or workforce, or higher education departments. Some states require teacher certification, while others only require a bachelor's degree to serve as an adult education instructor.

II. Project Summary

To explore the adult educator landscape, [The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network \(ALL IN\)](#), a collective impact initiative committed to expanding access to adult literacy, teamed up with a research intern via New America's [build4good program](#), a paid mentorship program that matches post-secondary students in tech-related fields to mission-driven nonprofit organizations, to conduct a 10-week, mixed methods study on the adult educator landscape. The purpose of the project is to better understand how adult education is administered and supported in each state and territory and to look for current trends in adult educator recruitment, credentialing, professional support, and wages by state. Specifically, we aim to understand: 1) current investments in adult education, including educator employment status and pay; 2) requirements for teaching adults, such as certifications, credentials or degree requirements; and 3) career skills, training, and/or pathways for adult educators. Our work is inspired by a key initiative to support adult literacy instructors as part of the [National Action Plan for Adult Literacy](#) (NAP), a multisector, multiyear initiative designed to drive inclusive, collective action to increase adult literacy nationwide.¹² The NAP aims to ensure that adult educators and programs are recognized, respected, and funded as an integral part of the U.S. educational system through increased training and job stability.

This report details findings from the project's short-term study of the adult education workforce in federally funded AEFLA programs and explores why a stable and well-supported teaching workforce is essential for high quality adult education programs. While more research is needed to fully understand the impact of significant variability in investment, educator qualifications, and employment status on adult educators, this work provides a glimpse into the current infrastructure as well as recommendations for making it stronger. Our research showed that federal spending in each state is not necessarily linked to a higher proportion of full-time educators. States with more investment do not always have more full-time staff, highlighting inconsistencies in how funds are allocated. We learned that adult education programs across the nation are grappling with how to address the projected teaching shortage in adult education. In addition, there is significant variability in qualifications and credentialing requirements for adult educators across states. Program directors seek innovative ways to recruit new instructors, including engaging more part-time instructors with specific backgrounds or skill sets to stretch their federal and state-level dollars and effectively meet diverse learning needs. Finally, teaching adults requires specific skills, but there are uneven professional development standards. In some states, part-time and volunteer instructors are well-trained and supported, while others rely primarily on content area experience from K-12 teaching or informal qualifications, which does not always translate into the adult education classroom. Notably, the field needs a much better understanding of adult educators' and learners' lived experiences in relation to this critical topic.

The report makes several recommendations for improving the adult educator talent pipeline, including the need for accessible certification information and a focus on educator competencies. By ensuring that adult education programs are staffed with capable and committed professionals, states can better serve adult learners. For the field to thrive, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must work together to ensure that adult educators and programs are recognized, respected, and funded as an integral part of the U.S. educational system through increased training and job stability.



III. Understanding the Adult Educator Landscape

According to the most recent OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023, about 28% of adults ages 16–65 in the United States have foundational literacy needs, scoring at Level 1 or below. At Level 1, they can read only simple, short texts to locate information and identify relevant links. Those below Level 1 can, at most, understand short, simple sentences.¹³ Low levels of literacy, including digital literacy, reflect existing inequities in society, and disproportionately affect people of color and under-resourced communities – and have across generations (Waldman et. al, 2022). Despite the immense need, fewer than 10 percent of adults who experience low literacy participate in federally funded adult education programs, which offer foundational adult education, high school equivalency, and/or English language programs to more than 1.1 million adult learners annually (National Reporting System, 2023). Notably, we do not have accurate estimates for the number of adults who may be accessing services through other providers such as community-based organizations, libraries, prison education programs, or work-based programs.

The total number of adult education teachers in federally funded programs has fluctuated over the years. In Program Year (PY) 2022 (July 2022 through June 2023), approximately 81% of the 45,400 adult educators funded under WIOA were employed part-time or as volunteers. While learner enrollment has increased over the three prior years, especially among adult English learners, the total number of full-time teachers decreased by 19%, the number of part-time teachers decreased by 12%, and the number of volunteer teachers dropped by 42% (LeMaster & Tucker, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic likely contributed to this decline in staffing, in addition to other factors.

PY 2022–2023 data collected by OCTAE through the National Reporting System (NRS) reveals that approximately 70% of adult education teachers possess some form of educational certification, with 22% specifically certified in adult education, 33% in K–12 education, 4% in special education, and 11% in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). While many adult education teachers hold educational certifications, these certifications do not always align to learner population needs. For example, only 11% of adult education instructors are certified to teach English learners, even though more than 50% of the total learner population have language learning needs. Beyond tracking relevant qualifications, we have little information known about any specialized skills or competencies that instructors bring to effectively strengthen or improve learning outcomes for adults across a variety of settings. For example, there is no standardized preparation or training to create transformative learning environments for adults in incarcerated settings. However, instructors must be incredibly resourceful to meet the needs of adults who are incarcerated individuals, often with little to no access to technology or adequate interventions for adults with learning differences. Throughout our interviews, State Directors recognized the diversity of teaching skills and resources that instructors bring, while acknowledging the difficulty in validating those skills.

Importantly, the Year 7 WIOA data highlights a notable increase in teacher recruitment efforts. In PY 2022, there was a 13% increase in recruiting new teachers compared to the previous year. This positive trend suggests that, despite the overall decrease in the number of teachers, efforts to attract new educators are yielding results. Many part-time and volunteer teachers are passionate about the field and are deeply committed to supporting student learning. However, teacher retention remains a critical issue, with the data indicating ongoing challenges in maintaining a stable teaching workforce to meet the diverse needs of adult learners.



IV. Guiding Questions and Methodology

For this project, we had several guiding questions related to: a) investment in adult education, including educator employment status and pay; b) requirements for teaching adults, e.g. certifications, credentials or degree requirements; and c) career skills, training, and/or pathways for adult educators by state.

Investment in Adult Education

- Does it matter where the adult education system is housed at the state level in terms of funding and full-time staff?
- How does per-learner spending at the federal level impact the percentage of full-time adult educators by state?
- How does state-level spending impact the percentage of full-time adult educators by state?
- Is there a set pay level for adult educators in each state?

Educator Qualifications and Requirements

- How easy is it to become a teacher in adult education contexts? How accessible is the information for becoming a teacher? Is the accessibility of the information correlated to a higher percentage of full-time staff?
- What are the certification requirements for teaching adults broken down by state and territory?
- What is the ratio of full-time and part-time staff in each state?

Educator Professional Development, Training, Resources

- Do any states offer a statewide certification program in collaboration with an accredited institution of higher education?
- Is there a relationship between teaching time and professional development requirements? Are adult educators compensated for their planning time?

Over the course of 10 weeks, the team applied a mixed methods approach to understanding the adult educator landscape, collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. The team also conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including staff in OCTAE, staff in the National Association of State Directors of Adult Education (NASDAE), and several State Directors of Adult Education to inform survey protocol development.

We started by reviewing existing data sources to gather and compile baseline information in a spreadsheet, including the number of full-time and Part-time teachers in each state and federal spending per adult learner by state as indicated in Educate and Elevate Fact Sheets created by the Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE). We gathered information from the NASDAE [Directory of Adult Education State and Territory Directors](#) and [Adult Education 2022–23 Fact Sheets](#) as well as state-specific data from the [Elevate & Educate Map Locator Tool](#) also maintained by COABE. We also referenced data tables from the [National Reporting System for Adult Education](#) (NRS) to look at the total number of local teachers in adult education programs, for example. The data collected provided metrics and benchmarks used to guide and inform the interview findings.

Next, we wanted to understand adult education certification or credentialing requirements by jurisdiction. To determine how easily potential teachers can access this information, we reviewed each state agency's website. We learned quickly that this information is not always readily available.



To determine how accessible this information was for potential teachers, we reviewed each agency's web page for about 15–20 minutes and searched around the site for any information regarding credentialing. In the event that information related to the required licensure for teaching adult education courses was mentioned or linked on the website, the URL was noted in the corresponding spreadsheet, with the accessibility column indicating “Yes.” If the information was not found on the website, “No” was recorded. The use of the website's search toolbar was permitted, with search terms such as “requirements,” “qualified,” “guidelines,” and “policy” yielding the most favorable results. We imported the spreadsheet into R, a statistical analysis software, then used regression to uncover any underlying relationships within the dataset. This is discussed more in the results section below.

This project's quantitative research component involved designing and implementing a comprehensive survey targeted at State Directors of Adult Education. The survey was crafted to collect quantitative data on various aspects of adult education programs, including but not limited to professional development, certifications, and funding. The survey contained an even mix of yes/no questions and questions where a range of values could be selected as a way to capture the full spectrum of data points. The survey received responses from 31 state directors among 28 states and three U.S. territories.

The qualitative component of this research involved in-depth interviews with seven State Directors and/or their respective teams, focusing on their experiences and insights regarding adult educator recruitment, training, and pay. To ensure a structured approach, an interview protocol was meticulously designed that informed interviewees, namely State Directors, about the nature of the research being conducted and its significance, while also mentioning how each volunteer being interviewed played a crucial role in the data collection methods. The protocol explicitly stated that Zoom would be used to house the interview and permission was asked for each interview to be recorded. The protocol included a series of open-ended questions aimed at uncovering the challenges, policies, strategies, and outcomes associated with adult education initiatives in interviewees' respective states.

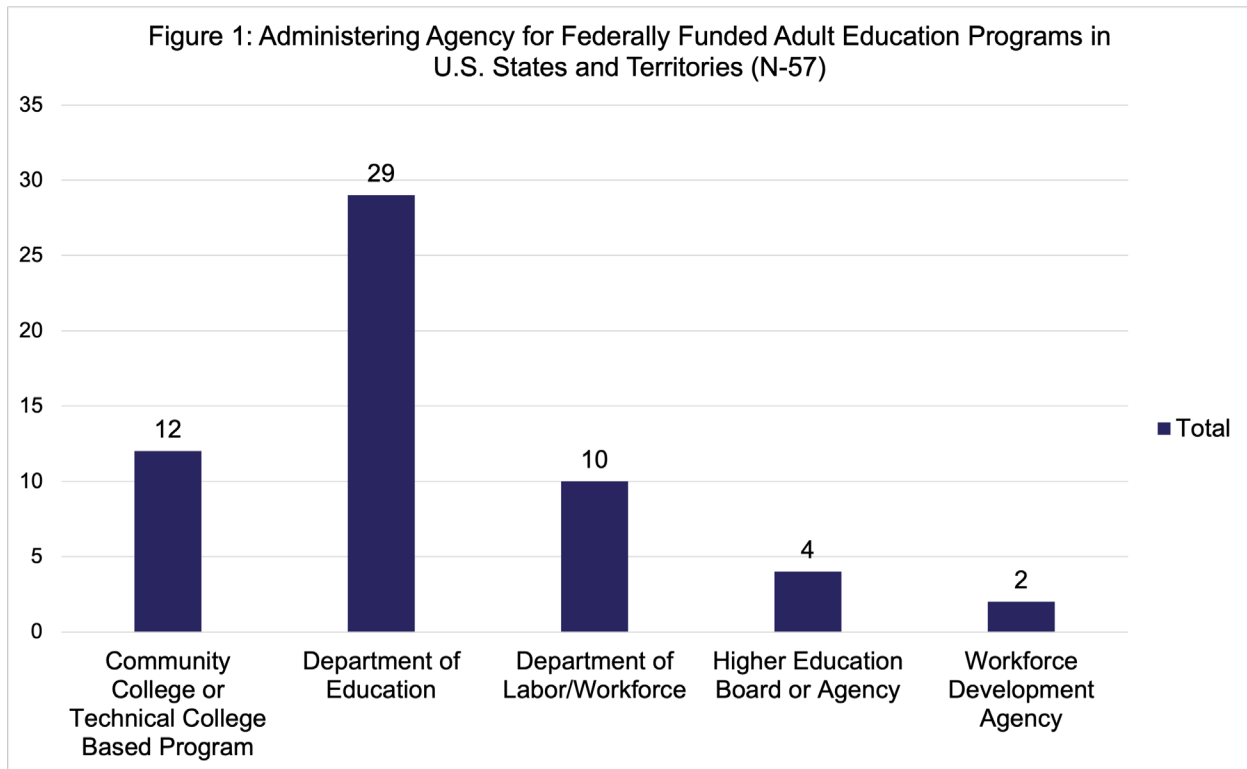
The recorded sessions were automatically transcribed using the ReadAI feature and reviewed by the researchers for accuracy, providing a detailed account of the discussions. These transcripts were then imported into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, for coding and thematic analysis. We used a deductive coding method, drawing on a predefined set of codes to analyze interview data. One researcher would independently highlight and tag certain phrases within the transcript that best represented answers to questions on a state's adult education system and a state's efforts for adult educator recruitment, certification, and/or compensation. Another researcher would proceed with the same process of tagging, ensuring no key pieces of information were left out and reducing the room for error.



V. Findings and Discussion

Investment in Adult Education

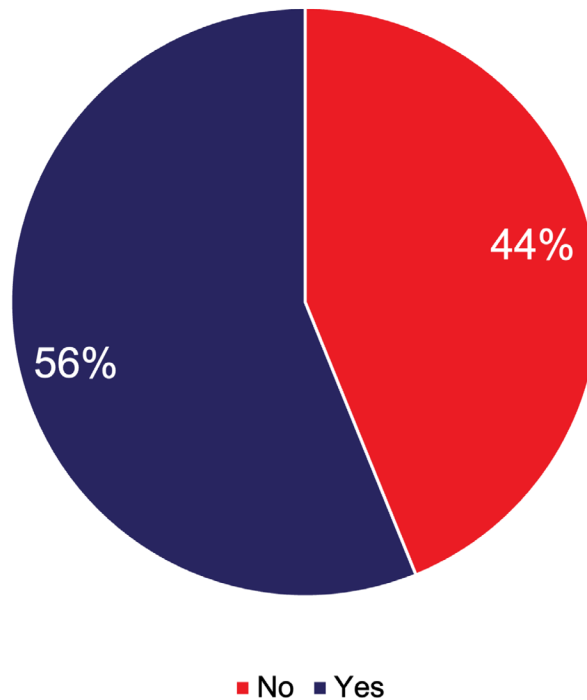
To streamline the analysis, state adult education agencies were categorized into 4 groups: Department of education, Department of Labor/Workforce, Community College/Technical College System, and Higher Education Board or Agency (see Figure 1).



Twenty-nine agencies operate within their state’s Department of Education, 12 within Community College/Technical College Systems, and 11 within their state’s Department of Labor/Workforce. Five are classified as Higher Education Board or Agency. As indicated in the methodology section, we were interested in understanding the extent to which adult educator qualifications were accessible and available on agency websites. A key finding was that 56% of agency websites provided links to adult education instructor qualifications, while 44% did not. Among the websites with accessible qualifications, 50% were from Departments of Education, 22% from state Departments of Labor/Workforce, 19% from Community College/Technical College Systems, and Higher Education Boards each contributing 9%. Figure 2 illustrates the relative percentages of sites that did and did not provide links to adult education instructor qualifications.



Figure 2: Is Information on Teaching Certification Requirements/Career Pathways Accessible on the State Agency Website? (N=57 websites)



We discovered that, on average, Community Colleges and Technical Colleges had the highest percentage of full-time instructors in adult education at 34.10%. Additionally, we observed that the Departments of Labor and Education exhibited similar average percentages of full-time instructors with 22.77% and 23.45% respectively. Agencies that were among the 44% that did not provide links to adult education instructor qualifications on their websites had approximately 13% more full-time instructors when compared to agencies that did. However, the percentage of full-time instructors was more evenly distributed among the four different agency types for agencies whose websites did not provide links. The agencies that did not provide links to qualifications included four U.S territories, which, compared to states, have fewer total instructors. This results in higher percentages of full-time instructors, thus potentially skewing the data.

The collected data indicated that Departments of Education exhibited the greatest variation in per-learner spending. Overall, the average per-learner spending in adult education is \$837.12 per year. Programs under the Departments of Education and Departments of Labor/Workforce spent slightly more per adult learner on average in federal disbursements for adult education at \$853 and \$907 respectively per year. For further reference, the average spending per learner for adult education programs under community colleges and technical colleges is \$779 and under higher education boards or agencies is \$704. For comparison, public school spending per K-12 student was on average \$15,633 in 2022, according to data from the 2022 Annual Survey of School System Finances released by the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).



The analysis of federal-level spending's impact on the percentage of full-time adult education instructors by state, using simple linear regression, yielded non-statistically significant results. This indicates that federal investment is not a strong predictor of the percentage of full-time instructors. Many other variables should be considered along with federal funding to more accurately understand state- and local-program efforts to recruit, hire, and support full-time instructors in adult education. Similarly, the analysis of the impact of federal per-learner spending on the percentage of full-time instructors by state, using simple linear regression, also revealed non-statistically significant results. This indicates that per-learner spending is not a strong predictor of the percentage of full-time instructors. Consequently, other variables should be considered in future research, either as replacements or in conjunction with per-learner funding, to more accurately predict the percentage of full-time instructors or changes in this percentage within a state. Variables that could be included in both regressions to produce a more accurate model include the learner-teacher ratio, because higher ratios might indicate the need for more instructors. Another potential variable could be whether a bachelor's degree or certification is required to teach in adult education programs, impacting the talent pool.

According to the results of the survey, the vast majority of states do not articulate a standard pay rate for instructors. Only 16.1% of the respondents indicated that their state implements a standardized hourly pay rate for adult education instructors. The states and/or territories that did incorporate a set pay rate were Delaware, Guam, Hawaii, Mississippi, and Northern Marianas. In other states, such as Washington State, instructor salary is governed locally by contract through negotiations between labor unions and college administration. In California, for example, wage rates for adult educators who teach via Department of Education programs are determined by K-12 district local unions and contracts. California serves more than 1,000 school districts, approximately half of which provide access to adult education.

“Even though a teaching license is not required, individual educators who are teaching high school level math must have a secondary math teaching certification or a bachelor’s degree or higher that ensures knowledge of all content required in the Subject Specific Program Guidelines for Pennsylvania Mathematics 7–12 certification.”

– Amanda Harrison, Chief of the Pennsylvania Division of Adult Education

Educator Qualifications and Requirements

The survey achieved an estimated response rate of 56% (n = 31). These responses provided a more detailed and nuanced understanding of adult education recruitment, investment, and training, which was not previously discernible from publicly available information. For example, 52% of state directors said a bachelor's degree is required to teach adult education classes such as Adult Basic Education (ABE), English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and/or High School Equivalency (HSE) preparation in their state. These are often programs that are housed in the state's Department of Education. In California and South Carolina, teachers are expected to hold a bachelor's degree as well as a teaching license in any area. Adult educators in Pennsylvania, which is also housed in the state's Department of Education, must have a bachelor's degree, although a teaching certification is not required. Amanda Harrison, the Chief of the Pennsylvania Division of Adult Education, reported that “even though a teaching license is not required, individual educators who are teaching high school level math must have a secondary math teaching certification or a bachelor's degree or higher that



ensures knowledge of all content required in the Subject Specific Program Guidelines for Pennsylvania Mathematics 7–12 certification.” In Pennsylvania, it is up to local programs to ensure that all staff meet the requirements. Only four of the 31 respondents (Colorado, Minnesota, Washington DC, and Wisconsin) indicated offering a statewide certification program in collaboration with an accredited institution of higher education. It is important to note that 12 of the 31 respondents indicated certification requirements for adult education.

According to the survey, Wisconsin requires certification in nearly every area of instruction, including ABE, Adult Secondary Education (ASE), HSE preparation, ESOL, Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE), Career and Technical Education (CTE) or Integrated Education and Training (IET), and Family Literacy. In New Mexico, efforts are underway to establish an adult education credential in collaboration with a state university and the state’s Higher Education agency. While this credential will not be mandatory, the state plans to link its attainment to potential pay increases, incentivizing instructors to pursue it without imposing a requirement.

Approximately 61% of respondents reported that state-required certification is not mandated for certain areas of adult education, including ASE, CTE, and IELCE. The most commonly cited area requiring state licensure was ABE at 29%, followed closely by ASE at 26%. In addition, only 29% of respondents indicated that their state/territory either requires or provides a curriculum for their instructors to utilize. Among the minority, 66% were adult education agencies housed under a community college or technical college system.

Educator Professional Development, Training, Resources

Approximately 19% of respondents mentioned using OCTAE’s [Adult Education Teacher Competencies](#) for their respective state. Regarding teacher recruitment, over 40% of state directors reported active recruitment in ABE, ASE, HSE preparation, and TESOL. According to survey and interview data, the main three methods for recruitment and advertisement of qualified instructors were word of mouth, website promotion, and social media marketing. These methods actively recruit qualified instructors who reflect the learner population, with the most popular being teachers who live in the communities they serve. About 42% of respondents use annual wage increases or bonuses to help retain instructors, while 40% provide health and retirement benefits. Although incentives and initiatives exist to retain qualified instructors, identifying effective adult education instructors requires a focus on specialized skills and backgrounds.

According to Jerry Haffner, Adult Education Division Director, Indiana Department of Workforce Development, “our programs really look for special kinds of teachers, such as special education, homebound (teaching students who must remain at home), elementary teachers, especially with reading endorsements are usually good picks for the adult education program.”

Educator Pay

Investment in adult education, including educator pay, differs widely, with some states allocating substantial funding to attract and retain qualified educators while others struggle with budget constraints. As Carolyn Zachry, Administrator of the Adult Education Office in the California Department of Education, noted, “The state does not dictate [educator pay]. That is really driven by either the local school district or the community college, or if the adult education is at a library, or community-based organization. Ninety percent of programs are in a K–12 district, and in that case, pay is driven by their local union and their contract.”



Requirements for teaching adults also vary; certain states mandate specific certifications or credentials, ensuring a standardized quality in adult education, whereas others have more lenient or diverse requirements. Additionally, the availability of career skills training and pathways for adult educators, such as professional development programs, training sessions, and accessible resources, is inconsistent. Some states provide robust support systems to foster continuous growth and skill enhancement for adult educators, while others offer limited opportunities, potentially impacting the overall effectiveness and quality of adult education.

“Our larger issue is not finding enough qualified folks. Our larger issue is being competitive. We have seen salaries in K-12 skyrocket.”

– Cayanna Good, Assistant Commissioner of Adult Education for the Technical College System of Georgia

Adult education programs housed within community and technical colleges were found to have the highest percentage of full-time instructors. Despite this, programs housed within community colleges face challenges similar to those faced by programs housed in other types of agencies. In an interview, Cayanna Good, Assistant Commissioner for Georgia’s adult education programs, identified the primary challenge for Georgia’s technical college system as the difficulty in remaining competitive in recruiting qualified instructors. She noted, “Our larger issue is not finding enough qualified folks. Our larger issue is being competitive. We have seen salaries in K-12 skyrocket.”

However, the difference in full-time instructor percentages between agencies that do not provide instructor qualification links online and those that do (as shown above in Figure 2) suggests that a lack of transparency does not necessarily correlate with fewer full-time staff. Perhaps not posting the information indicates greater instructor stability (e.g. less need) in these agencies, but more work is needed to understand specific agency and local program outreach, recruitment, and hiring needs.

Although state Departments of Education oversee more programs than the Department of Labor/ Workforce (as shown in Figure 1), the latter allocates more federal grant money per learner for adult education on average. More research is needed to understand how those funds are being spent and the impact on adult education experiences and outcomes. Additionally, the considerable variation in per-learner spending by the Departments of Education indicates inconsistent funding allocation, which could result in unequal access to quality adult education programs across different regions. This inconsistency highlights the need to explore equitable and evidence-based funding models to ensure all adult learners—and the educators who serve them— receive adequate support.

Active instructor recruitment efforts are primarily focused on ABE, ASE, HSE preparation and TESOL, reflecting a demand for instructors in these areas. The reliance on word of mouth, website promotion, and social media marketing for recruitment underscores the importance of community-based approaches in attracting qualified instructors who reflect the learner population. In terms of recruitment, several state directors indicated that it’s not always a natural transition for K-12 teachers into adult education settings and that teaching adults requires specific skill sets, especially the ability to make connections to adult learners’ daily life and work experiences.

In Washington State, some programs hire former adult learners, especially those who share language and culture with those who are currently enrolled. In Alaska, recruitment efforts center on hiring



Native Alaskans to better reflect the adult learner population. This approach emphasizes the importance of cultural relevance and community connection in adult education. By prioritizing the recruitment of individuals who share the culture and experiences of the learners, Alaska aims to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment. In South Carolina, the state has gotten creative in developing alternative certification processes for paraprofessionals, bus drivers, and other education-related roles for adults who are already part of the school system. In this way, they are working to create upward mobility pathways within the system and grow careers for adults who already know the students and community. These efforts align with broader strategies to ensure that instructors can connect with and support adult learners in meaningful ways, fostering stronger educational outcomes within the community.

State Directors recognized the value of annual wage increases, bonuses, health, and retirement benefits as retention strategies to support and incentivize qualified instructors. However, these benefits are not uniformly available or offered, which might impact the stability and satisfaction of the workforce. More research is needed to understand the impact of wages and benefits on educators, themselves.

VI. Research Assumptions and Limitations

At the outset, we assumed that greater federal investment in adult education as measured by per-learner spending by state might result in hiring more qualified, full-time instructors. This does not seem to be the case overall. While decisions about recruitment, training, and qualifications varied significantly, all states relied on a majority of part-time staff. Having part-time and volunteer staff with specific knowledge and skill sets was, in some cases, viewed as a strength by state directors, allowing programs to meet diverse learner population needs.

Notably, this analysis is insufficient because it does not take into account the state and local investments that may also contribute to staffing. Given the nature of adult education programs, perhaps a focus on the percentage of full-time instructors is not the right indicator, but rather, we should look more specifically at educator competencies, commitments, and skills in future research studies.

This research faced several limitations. First, although we had access to extensive resources and statistics on adult education investment and qualifications at both state and federal levels, the ten-week duration of the project did not allow for a comprehensive analysis and reporting of the numerous research questions proposed. Secondly, a technological mishap resulted in the loss of the recording and transcript of one interview with a state director, potentially skewing our qualitative analysis. Instead of the full transcript, the team uploaded hand-typed notes from the interview to Dedoose and coded that data using the same set of codes.

Finally, this initial research focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of state directors. To deepen our understanding of educator training, recruitment, and compensation, we recommend expanding this research to include adult education program directors, teachers, and learners themselves. For more on this point, please see key recommendations.



VII. Recommendations

As noted in the [National Action Plan for Adult Literacy](#), the work of teaching adult literacy skills is often overlooked and undervalued as a key part of the U.S. education system. One of the proposed solutions is to place adult education on par with K-12 education – with adult educators and programs recognized, respected, and funded as an integral part of the U.S. education system. This may include establishing a nationally-recognized credential or career pathway for educators across the adult literacy and learning field. While we fully support increasing job stability, wages, and career growth opportunities for adult education teachers, the unique flexibility in this field offers space for innovation in upskilling a diverse group of professionals and volunteers to meet multiple literacy needs.

“Whatever hours part-time teachers teach, it is safe to double that with learning and planning time. However, teachers only get paid for their teaching time.”

– Hector Martinez, State Director of Adult Education, Kansas Board of Regents

- 1. Develop a state-specific strategy to find, hire, and retain highly qualified adult education teachers.** Marketing matters! As indicated in the report, there will be an estimated 4,100 openings for adult basic and secondary education and ESL teachers each year over the next 10 years, but over 40% of agencies have not made information about certification or hiring requirements for potential teachers available on their websites. For starters, all states should review their agency website and make sure information about becoming an adult education teacher is clearly defined and readily available on the website. In addition, programs might consider offering more choice and flexibility for adult educators when it comes to instructional modality, hiring for in-person and hybrid learning contexts.¹⁴ Finally, as indicated in our conversations with state directors, part-time staff should be paid for their instructional planning, training, and travel time. As Hector Martinez, State Director of Adult Education, Kansas Board of Regents, notes, “Whatever hours part-time teachers teach, it is safe to double that with learning and planning time. However, teachers only get paid for their teaching time.” Other benefits such as wage increases, health benefits, and retirement planning may also attract greater and more diverse teaching talent. All states should be able to articulate why adult education matters and the kind of impact individual teachers, including volunteers, can have on adult learner communities.
- 2. Focus on adult educator professional competencies over certifications.** Hiring full-time staff with teacher certification is not always feasible or necessary in the field of adult education. To meet diverse learner needs, states and local programs can focus efforts on finding and training part-time instructors with specific backgrounds or skill sets, such as expertise in teaching English, writing, or digital skills for adult learners. It would benefit states and local programs to consider the educator competencies, commitments, and skills needed to support foundational skill development among adult learners, such as adults with learning differences, trauma, and/or justice involvement, for example. The team recommends designing a set of educator micro-credentials, leveraging evidence-based competencies, such as the [Adult Education Teacher Competencies](#) developed by OCTAE with the American Institutes for Research and its partners World Education and Drennon and Associates, to guide professional learning and identify the



knowledge and skills needed by adult education teachers to improve student learning and performance across adult learning contexts. In addition, educators should be compensated for the additional competencies they demonstrate and acquire via micro-credentials or other verification methods.

- 3. Invest in adult education provider- and learner-centered research to understand specific needs related to qualifications, effectiveness, professional learning, and job satisfaction in each state.** Program directors are more directly involved in the day-to-day operations and implementation of adult education programs. They have firsthand knowledge of the challenges and realities faced in recruiting and retaining full-time faculty. Program directors can provide more detailed and practical insights about faculty composition, professional development needs, and the effectiveness of various strategies at the ground level. They are likely to have a more granular understanding of what works and what doesn't in their specific contexts. Lastly, when dispersing a survey to multiple program directors, ideally a larger sample size will be achieved. That is important because a large sample is more likely to reflect the diversity and characteristics of the overall population, ensuring that the findings are more generalizable. With a larger sample, the impact of outliers and anomalies is minimized, reducing the potential for sampling bias and making the results more robust. Larger sample sizes increase the statistical power of a study, making it more likely to detect true effects or differences when they exist. This reduces the risk of Type II errors (false negatives).

VIII. Conclusion

This study was conducted in just 10 weeks, and opened the door to further possible research questions for other researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders to dive into. This report underscores the significant challenges and opportunities within the adult education landscape, highlighting the variability in investment, educator qualifications, and employment status across states. Moving forward, a more focused approach on enhancing educator competencies and improving transparency around recruitment and certification processes will be crucial in strengthening the adult education workforce and, ultimately, outcomes for adult learners. While we need to strengthen the adult education system, we don't necessarily want to replicate the K-12 infrastructure and create more requirements for adult education teachers. Rather, we should think about building capacity for a diverse teaching workforce to meet the specific learning needs in their community and compensating teachers with adequate pay and benefits. As Jerry Haffner, Adult Education Division Director, Indiana Department of Workforce Development, poignantly notes, "Adult learners don't care if there's full or part-time staff employed in their local programs. They want to learn, advance in careers, provide for families, and have a better future. Finding the right individuals for this work is not easy but is necessary to ensure adult learners, often our most vulnerable population, can succeed."

"Adult learners don't care if there's full or part-time staff employed in their local programs. They want to learn, advance in careers, provide for families, and have a better future. Finding the right individuals for this work is not easy but is necessary to ensure adult learners, often our most vulnerable population, can succeed."

– Jerry Haffner, Adult Education Division Director, Indiana Department of Workforce Development



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- Jerry Haffner, Adult Education Division Director, and Lara Pastore, Director of Instructional Design, Indiana Department of Workforce Development
- Michael King, State Adult Education Director, South Carolina Department of Education
- William Durden, Director of Basic Education for Adults, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

These conversations helped us better frame, think about, and understand many of the factors that impact the current infrastructure for adult education teachers, and the history and processes that produced this system.

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