

“I love what I do, but I don’t stay for the pay.”
Perspectives from Over 600 Adult Educators

David Nguyen and Sarah Cacicio

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ALL IN

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I. Introduction

Adult education teachers share a sense of purpose, belonging, and joy in their ability to help adult learners achieve their goals. The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN), in partnership with a research intern from [build4good](#) via New America, conducted a survey of more than 600 adult education teachers and found that over 90% of participants experience high job satisfaction [as defined by](#) the National Institutes of Health. Indeed, phrases such as “I love my job” or “I love my students” were repeated in virtually every open-ended response.

While sentiments about the rewarding nature of the work were consistent across all respondents, survey results indicate that the perception of job quality was uneven. This was particularly true for early and mid-career teachers who aspire to secure greater pay and stability in their work. These responses align with findings from ALL IN’s 2024 [landscape scan](#) of the adult education workforce, which revealed that 81% of the federally funded adult education workforce was part-time or volunteer. Further, that report revealed that investment in teacher recruitment, pay, and professional development varied significantly by state.

Our new survey builds on this work, illuminating the day-to-day experiences of adult education teachers. It captures more information about where they work, what they teach, how they entered the profession, if and why they choose to stay, and how they perceive their impact on the broader field. Given [recent findings](#) that adults with low literacy increasingly prefer flexible learning modalities, this study also explores whether adult education teachers feel prepared to integrate digital tools and technology for instruction. This includes hybrid learning, fully online classes, and self-paced programs. Results show that part-time teachers or volunteers were much less comfortable with using digital tools than their full-time teacher counterparts.

Taken alongside ALL IN and FTI Consulting’s market research among [employers and policy influencers](#) as well as 2,000 [adults with low literacy](#), we hope this final report will bring to light the experiences and perspectives of the adult education teachers who remain a stabilizing force in our field. Results may be used to inform state leaders, program directors, policy influencers, and the broader adult literacy community to strengthen and support the adult education workforce.

II. Survey Design and Analysis

Over the course of 10 weeks, our research team designed and disseminated a survey via Google Forms to collect wide-ranging data from adult education teachers. The survey was distributed via newsletters and social media posts by ALL IN member organizations, including the [National Association for State Directors of Adult Education](#) (NASDAE), which disseminated the survey to federally funded adult education program teachers via state directors. Data was collected using Google Forms over a 3-week period in June–July 2025, offering a \$200 gift card drawing for respondents.

We solicited demographic data, as well as background information on their job status, wages, and benefits. We asked questions about their career experiences and aspirations, as well as comfort with and use of digital technology for instruction across six broad categories of instructional tools, which were informed by our literature review and an [ALL IN Coordinating Council](#) focus group composed of leaders in education technology. Categories included: 1) learning and education platforms (e.g., Khan Academy, Moodle, Duolingo), 2) content creation and authoring tools (e.g., Canva, Adobe Express, Book Creator), 3) AI tools and chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot), 4) media and entertainment



(e.g., Audible, Kindle, Curiosity Stream), 5) activity, engagement, and collaboration tools (e.g., Google Workspace, Microsoft Teams, Padlet, Kahoot), and 6) web tools and platforms (e.g., Google Scholar, Chrome, Pinterest).

The team used the R programming language to assist with data cleaning, visualization, and analysis. We analyzed responses on comfort level with certain digital tools by age and job status using binomial logistic regression and odds ratios. We also used Google Sheets for built-in tools, such as pivot tables and charts. For open-ended responses, we performed thematic analysis of the data using Maxwell's qualitative research methods, including: 1) researcher memos, 2) categorizing strategies, and 3) connecting strategies through narrative analysis.¹ The team identified convergent themes, narratives, and contextual relationships across items.

An unexpected challenge was the prevalence of bots. We verified the validity of each response, looking at email addresses, responses to open-ended questions, presence of LLM-generated texts, and verification of individuals' job status, and successfully removed over 200 bot responses before analyzing the complete dataset. The data collected provides evidence for a variety of objectives, including raising awareness about adult education, providing recommendations for the future of the field, and increasing support for adult education teachers with digital instruction.

III. Survey Participants

We received 618 responses across 34 U.S. states and territories, with strong representation (43%) among full-time educators. Respondents reported working in a variety of adult education settings, including community-based organizations (25%), community or technical college-based programs (24%), public school districts or departments (21%), workforce development or labor programs (6%), corrections education programs (4%), and library-based programs (1%), with the remaining respondents (15%) indicating various or more than one setting. About 4% of respondents said they were not sure what kind of organization they worked in.

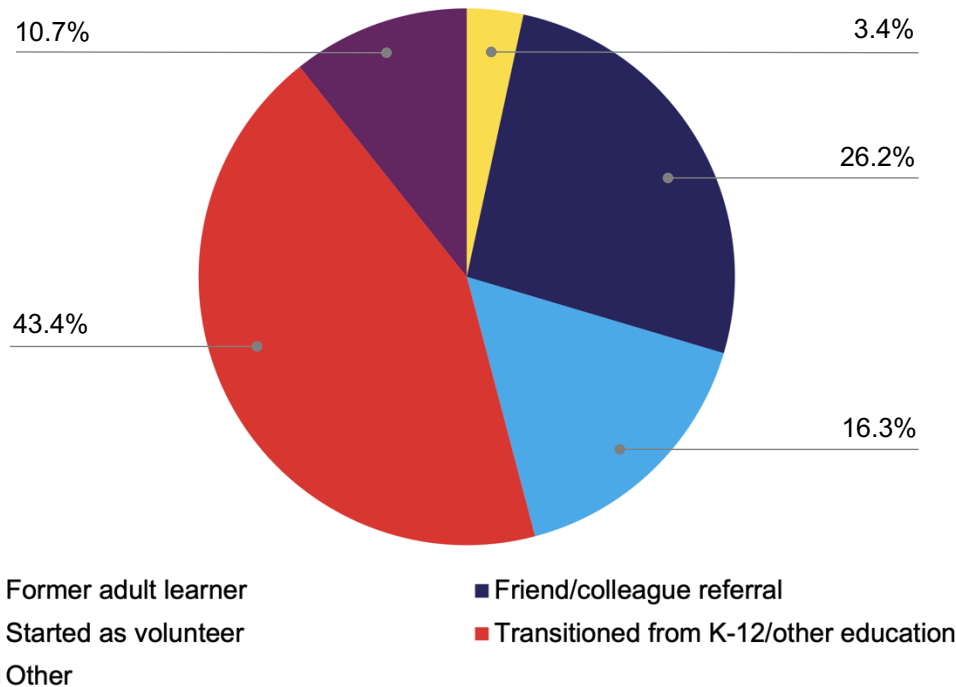
Respondents self-identified as White (81%), African American or Black (7%), Multiracial (4%), Asian or Asian American (2%), and Hispanic (2%). The remainder identified as Middle Eastern (less than 1%); Native races, which includes American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander (less than 1%); or preferred not to answer (3%). About 20% of respondents indicated they were 65 or older, followed by 41% between 50–64, 18% between 40–49, and 14% between 30–39. Only 4% were between 18–29 years old. About 3% preferred not to disclose their age. In terms of age and employment status, we received responses from a diverse group of educators. However, more than half of respondents (65%) identified as White and female. Notably, 40% of all respondents identified as White, female, and over 50 years old.

The most common pathway into adult education cited was a career transition from K–12 or another education field (44%). However, entry patterns differed significantly by age. Among early career respondents (18–29), nearly one-third (31%) started as a volunteer, compared to only 7–21% among mid- or later-career educators (ages 30+) groups. Word-of-mouth from friends or colleagues was the second-most common for all other age groups (24–32%), but the least common pathway among early career educators (8%).

¹ Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.



**Figure 1: How did respondents enter into adult education?
(N = 618 educators)**



The majority of respondents worked in adult education part-time (50%) or as a volunteer (7%), with over 50% of teachers reporting working fewer than 20 hours a week in teaching, tutoring, and/or instructional planning and 30% working less than 10 hours a week in adult education. About 43% reported working as full-time teachers, which is significantly higher than the [estimated number of full-time teachers in federally funded programs](#) (less than 20%). Most adult education teachers earned below \$35,000 a year, with few earning a life-sustaining wage in their state. Slightly over half of respondents (52%) indicated receiving some benefits such as medical, dental, or paid family leave or vacation, which was a bit higher than the number of participants indicating full-time work (43%). The following table shows the percentages of full-time, part-time, and volunteer job status for each age group of respondents.

Teacher Age	Full-time	Part-time	Volunteer
Age 18-29	50%	35%	15%
Age 30-39	56%	40%	4%
Age 40-49	53%	46%	1%
Age 50-64	49%	46%	5%
Age 65+	13%	72%	15%

Overall, survey respondents were highly educated and well-trained. Many respondents (45%) had 10 or more years of experience in teaching adults. Over 65% held a graduate degree or higher, while 33% had a



bachelor's degree and 2% had an associate degree or technical certification in a skilled trade. More than half of respondents (52%) were certified in K-12 and 37% were certified in adult education, with many in both or more areas. Additional certification types included but were not limited to TESOL or ESL (22%), Special Education (8%), and Literacy or Reading Specialist (6%). A small percentage also indicated certification in school administration or related areas. A significant number of educators surveyed (79%) were certified in one or more areas of instruction, but about 21% were not certified in any instructional area.

We asked respondents to check all that apply for their instructional focus areas. About 55% of respondents reported teaching high school equivalency preparation (HSE) and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) respectively. Other instructional areas included foundational literacy (44%), workforce preparation (39%), digital literacy (34%), foundational numeracy or math skills (31%), college readiness (27%), and secondary education or high school diploma (25%), with 3% indicating another specific area of instruction. Job titles varied greatly from GED teacher and ESL instructor to intake or career services specialist or volunteer tutor.

Most adult education teachers (61%) reported teaching classes with the same cohort of learners 2-3 times per week, followed by every day (15%), once per week (10%), and 4 times per week (2%), while the remaining 10% either taught at a different frequency or the question did not apply. The majority of adult educators surveyed (58%) reported either having insufficient time to prepare lessons or not having paid prep time at all. Only 42% reported being paid for adequate prep time aligned to the number of full-time staff.

IV. Insights from Adult Educators

For many survey respondents, adult education is their secondary career either following retirement or serving as a part-time job to supplement their income. While reasons for entering and staying in the field differed, nearly all respondents (90%) referenced elements of job satisfaction, citing the joy of working with adult learners and the direct impact observed in their lives. We found that most educators were motivated to stay in the profession because of a strong belief in the value of their work and purpose in helping adult learners achieve their goals. Respondents also valued a sense of community in the adult education field achieved through working with like-minded friends and colleagues.

"I love what I do, but I don't stay for the pay."

- Anonymous Adult Educator, Age 30-39, Pennsylvania

In terms of job quality and skill level, many teachers cited the flexible nature of adult education as a benefit, especially among retired individuals or working parents of small children (mostly mothers) looking to supplement their family income. Finally, we found that adult education teachers need more and ongoing professional development to meet the [reported demand](#) for flexible learning options among adults with low literacy skills to expand hybrid, fully online, and/or self-paced learning options.

In analyzing survey responses, three key takeaways emerged from the data.

- 1. Adult educators enter the profession through different pathways, but stay because of a shared sense of joy, community, and purpose in the work.**



Despite different entry points to the field, adult educators reported remarkably consistent reasons for teaching across all demographics. Respondents overwhelmingly reported (90%) high job satisfaction, describing their experience teaching adults as positive, joyful, and rewarding. The phrase “I love my job” or “I love my students” was repeated throughout survey responses. In fact, the words “love” or “joy” appeared more than 200 times in survey responses about their current educator roles. Nearly all talked about the value of being able to directly see the impact they made in their students’ lives. Many said that this work aligned with their personal story or experiences.

“I keep working in adult education because I feel like I am making a difference in people’s lives. I care about every student that comes through our program, and I want to see them succeed.”

– Robin, Age 50–64, West Virginia

Respondents were generally motivated by the meaningfulness of their work, directly addressing community needs and helping learners achieve goals like getting a GED, improving English, or gaining workforce skills. They reported a sense of purpose and intellectual stimulation from applying their skills and credentials in an adult education setting, while being exposed to diverse cultures and backgrounds. Many teachers from the K–12 system highlighted that they could focus on teaching, rather than state-mandated evaluation or testing initiatives prevalent in K–12 education, with some even turning down higher-paying administrative positions to remain in the classroom.

More than half of all responses (51%) specifically mentioned “students” or “learners” as their main motivation for staying in the field. Adult educators described their students as motivated and eager to learn, which aligns to [findings](#) from a recent ALL IN survey of 2,000 adults with low literacy where 94% recognized the value of education and the importance of improving their skills. Adults without a high school diploma, as well as younger learners and job seekers, were particularly likely to say that improving literacy skills was very important.

2. Flexibility is appreciated, but opportunities for job stability, career growth, and life-sustaining wages are scarce.

Even though some educators appreciated the extra money and flexibility, early career educators viewed the instability and low pay as a barrier to career advancement. Some teachers reported frustration with the lack of full-time job opportunities with benefits, competitive wages, and career pathways, reflecting [recent findings](#) among adult education teachers in Illinois from Literacy Works and Adult Ed Wave (2025).² Many adult education teachers raised challenges with creating full-time courseloads given that classes tend to be offered in early mornings, evenings, and/or on weekends when adult learners are available.

“I left the field for 8 years after I got my master’s degree and could not find a full-time job. I came back when I needed a part-time job, while raising three young kids, and by a miracle, secured a full-time teaching job.”

– Anonymous Adult Educator, Age 50–64, Illinois

Most adult education teachers surveyed reported below \$35,000 a year, with 37% earning less than \$20,000 annually for their work in adult education. Among part-time teachers, more than half indicated that they had a second job. Most reported being paid hourly, with some full-

² Dolnick, B., & Ward, K. (2025). Adult education is losing its backbone: teachers. *COABE Journal: The Resource for Adult Education*, 14(1)



time staff on salary. Wages ranged significantly from \$18–\$64.50 per hour, with the median pay at \$27.50 per hour. The wide range of rates align with findings from our [previous research](#) on the adult education workforce: the vast majority of states do not uphold a standard pay rate for instructors.

Adult education providers are often constrained by limited budgets and grants, and sometimes cannot provide enough hours, even if the educators are willing. As one respondent—a New Hampshire-based educator over the age of 65—put it, “I can only afford to stay because of my husband’s salary. I could not support our family on so few hours.” More than 80% of respondents indicated that their program funding was not secure or certain.

Importantly, more than 70% of teachers aged 65+ worked part-time, and in many cases were retired K–12 educators. Open-ended responses revealed concerns about inconsistent pay that is not aligned to skills and qualifications, lack of societal support, and unstable funding. Results show that adult education teachers often juggle multiple roles with insufficient pay or prep time.

“My position is very part-time, so it is not that I think about leaving, but I think about what else I can do to sustain my life. Thankfully my husband works and supports our family. I certainly cannot afford to live on this pay alone and often think about what other positions I can take.”

– Suni, Age 30–39, Pennsylvania

3. Part-time or volunteer teachers reported lower levels of comfort with using digital tools for instruction, regardless of age.

As part of this study, we found that adult educators vary greatly in their use and comfort level when it comes to digital tools and technologies for instruction. Part-time and volunteer respondents, as well as older educators (50+), were significantly more likely to express low comfort with digital tools compared to full-time participants and early career educators, respectively. They were 63% more likely to report low comfort with AI tools, more than twice as likely to report low comfort with learning platforms, and 46% more likely to report low comfort with content creation tools. This pattern persisted even after accounting for age differences, with part-time and volunteer respondents remaining 36% more likely to report lower AI comfort than their full-time peers.

The overwhelming majority (86%) reported teaching the same cohort of adult learners at least once class per week. For this reason, we combined reported daily and weekly use to analyze weekly use across six categories of tools, as described in the survey design section above. Learning and education platforms like Khan Academy or Duolingo were most widely used, with 49% using them weekly or daily. AI tool usage was fairly evenly divided among teachers: 34% weekly/daily users, 31% occasional users, and 35% never users. While 77% used general web tools weekly, less than half used other digital tool categories for instruction.

As Vanek et. al (2020)³ notes, effective professional development is particularly important when helping teachers with technology integration because the technology landscape is constantly changing. Although deeper analysis on individual training and use is needed, on the whole, we found that increased and ongoing professional development with digital tools correlated to increased use in the classroom. For example, about half of respondents reported receiving training for integrating collaborative writing tools in the classroom. In terms of use, only 23% reported using these tools on a regular basis, and 43%

³ Vanek, J., Harris, K., & Belzer, A. (2020). *Digital literacy and technology integration in adult basic skills education: A review of the research*. [Research brief]. *ProLiteracy Adult Literacy Education Journal*.



reported never using them. Overall, fewer than 11% of respondents reported receiving professional development in using digital tools across all categories. In alignment with Takeaway #2, there is an evident need for increased exposure and quality for professional development in adult education.

V. Limitations

There were several limitations of our study. Our survey was distributed through ALL IN partner organizations via email and social media posts. We were not able to estimate non-response bias, and as a result, acknowledge potential overrepresentation in terms of geographic area, states, employment status, and age group. For example, 20% of total responses were from Pennsylvania and 10% were from Connecticut. Our findings are based on a non-probability sample and may not generalize to the broader adult education workforce, though they do provide a detailed snapshot of lived experiences at this point in time.

Finally, this study was conducted within the limited time frame of a 10-week summer research internship with a New America build4good intern. As a result, certain stages of the research process were accelerated, such as the literature review and qualitative coding and analysis. Additional time should be spent conducting cross-analyses and statistical analysis of the data collected. For example, in the technology use section, we only asked about use and comfort to get a general sense of how prepared teachers may be to meet learner needs through digital modalities. This study did not explore teacher effectiveness or any ties to learner engagement and/or outcomes.

VI. Implications and Future Work

The adult education workforce is made up of highly qualified, committed, and motivated individuals. Even though few states require certification as indicated in our [previous research](#), nearly 80% of respondents to this survey were certified teachers in one or more instructional areas. While the will to support adult learners remains strong, the infrastructure to support and expand the adult education teacher pipeline is significantly lacking in our field.

K-12 has been the primary pathway to adult education, but in recent years, volunteering has proven to be an important entry point to the field, especially among early career educators (ages 18-29). As noted previously, a significant number of adult education teachers are at or beyond retirement age. While we greatly value (and rely on) the contribution of so many second career teachers, as a field, we must think about career growth and sustainability for our teaching workforce. State and program directors must consider expanding their volunteer efforts, engaging local libraries and nonprofit organizations that support volunteer literacy tutors, such as [ProLiteracy](#).

However, even with an increase in volunteers, we need to consider job quality for adult education teachers. According to Jobs for the Future, [quality jobs](#) allow workers to thrive by providing: 1) financial well-being, 2) workplace culture and safety, 3) growth and development opportunities, 4) agency and voice, and 5) work structure and autonomy. This research shows that adult education as a profession demonstrates some elements of a quality job, such as providing a positive workplace culture and strong sense of agency, impact, and belonging. However, much more work is needed to strengthen high quality learning and advancement opportunities across the field. As the adult education ecosystem continues to shift, we must center the needs and experiences of learners as well as the educators who serve them.



VII. Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we thank adult education teachers for their unwavering commitment to this work, whether full-time, part-time, volunteer, or retired. We greatly appreciated learning about your experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Your voice matters and your insights will be used to strengthen opportunities for teachers across the field.

We would also like to thank leaders from the [Adult Ed WAVE](#) (Workers Amplifying Voices for Equity), a group of current, former, and future adult educators working together to advocate for a more sustainable field through the Community Literacy Program at Literacy Works in Illinois. The WAVE team shared community-based research, advised on survey design, and affirmed the need to strengthen job stability for adult educators.

We are also grateful to the Coordinating Council of the Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN), a collective impact initiative that is dedicated to expanding access to high-quality services for adults with low literacy skills. Members include: American Library Association (ALA), Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, COABE, Jobs for the Future, National Association for State Directors of Education (NASDAE), National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), National Coalition for Literacy (NCL), ProLiteracy, TESOL International Association, and World Education, a division of JSI Research and Training Institute. We appreciate the valuable input and feedback of the ALL IN Research & Marketing Committee on the survey design and dissemination. The committee also provided excellent insights in the kind of digital tools and technologies that are relevant to adult education teachers to inquire about in the study. We also thank NASDAE for distributing this survey to State Directors of Adult Education who shared it with their teaching workforce.

We thank An-Me Chung and the team at New America, who created [build4good](#), a brilliant match-making program to support talented first-generation college students and nonprofits with a mission!

Finally, this work would not have been possible without the partnership and support of the Dollar General Literacy Foundation. The team greatly values community engagement in our collective work to advance adult literacy, especially opportunities to create feedback loops with adult education teachers and learners.



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