

Forum: The Power of Equity and the Future of Adult Education*(Part 1 of 3)*

The Future of Adult Education: Enhancing Economic Growth Through Wage Equity

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In today's ever-evolving job market, adult education serves as an indispensable bridge to work, equipping individuals with necessary skills and fostering lifelong learning. Despite its critical importance, the sector is challenged by significant wage inequities for its leaders, teachers, and other professionals that can impact the quality of instruction and sustainability of programs. Here, I explore the wage disparity in adult education from a business perspective, advocating for strategic investments and policy reforms to elevate the field's impact and effectiveness. Moreover, addressing wage inequities not only enhances the livelihoods of educators but may also bolster the overall effectiveness and reach of adult education programs, making them more attractive and sustainable long-term solutions for adult learners. The importance of resolving this issue cannot be overstated, as it can directly affect the economic opportunities and personal growth of countless individuals.

The wage gap in adult education often mirrors broader demographic inequities, where assumptions about lower pay for women and minorities prevail due to historical biases (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021). Addressing these assumptions involves not only advocating for fair wages but also implementing comprehensive policies that support diversity and inclusion within the field. By offering family-sustaining wages, the field of adult education can attract a more diverse pool of educators, including minorities who have historically been underrepresented in the field due to economic barriers (Harrison & Aguilera, 2024).

Promoting demographic equity in adult education enhances the relevance and reach of programs, ensuring that they effectively address the needs of a diverse learner population and reflect broader societal commitments to equity and justice. Moreover, by fostering a more inclusive

environment, adult education programs can better serve all segments of the population, helping to ensure that every individual has the opportunity to achieve their educational and career goals. This inclusivity is essential for harnessing the full potential of the adult learning sector, as it broadens the scope and impact of educational services to reach underserved and marginalized groups effectively.

Demographics, Equity, and the Wage Gap

Adult education is a vital economic driver within society. However, as a career field, it suffers from a pronounced wage gap compared to other educational sectors as well as other social support services, particularly affecting its educators, reflecting broader societal and economic inequities (American Association of University Women, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2023). This undervaluation poses significant challenges in attracting and retaining skilled educators, thereby also detracting from the quality of education offered. Beyond the immediate effects on educators' livelihood, wage inequities can lead to increased turnover, impacting learners who may receive less consistent and lower-quality instruction thus duplicating the issues that often affected the adult learners' previous educational experiences and undermining the potential of adult education to contribute effectively to workforce development and societal advancement.

Wage disparities in adult education can significantly impact its ability to attract and retain skilled educators and thus the field's sustainability. According to Zippia (2022), the average salary for adult education teachers in the U.S. is \$41,280 annually. Women, who make up 67.4% of the workforce, earn 93 cents for every dollar earned

by their male counterparts. Racial disparities also persist, with Asian educators earning the highest average salary at \$42,000, while Black educators earn the lowest at \$39,967.

The 2024 Wage Equity Survey (Harrison & Aguilera, 2024) targeted professionals within the adult education sector to explore wage disparities, career advancement barriers, and professional challenges. The survey sample included respondents from various demographic and experience levels, providing a comprehensive perspective on the systemic challenges faced in the field. 40.7% of respondents reported that adult learners employed in education programs are paid less than their peers in similar roles, reinforcing the perception of adult education as an underpaid sector (Harrison & Aguilera, 2024). Other key findings emphasize the need for mentorship programs and structured career pathways, particularly for newer entrants, as 27.8% of the workforce reported having only 1-5 years of experience (Harrison & Aguilera, 2024). These insights contextualize the broader issues contributing to wage inequities and their impact on the field's sustainability and emphasize the urgency of addressing wage inequities to create a more stable and effective workforce.

The Economic and Societal Value of Adult Education

Elevating the status and compensation of adult educators can lead to enhanced program stability and improved outcomes, which are critical for the socioeconomic integration of the diverse adult learners supported in adult education. This, in turn, contributes to closing the skills gap, enhancing social mobility, and creating a more inclusive and prosperous society for all. These changes could also help adult education programs better fulfill their potential as crucial contributors to national economic growth and societal well-being. From a business standpoint, the return on investment in adult education extends beyond direct educational outcomes to include broader economic and societal benefits. Well-compensated staff support programs in operating more efficiently and effectively, allowing federal, state, and philanthropic monies to go further. Fair compensation improves job satisfaction, reduces turnover, and attracts more qualified instructors, thereby enhancing educational outcomes for learners (National Skills Coalition, 2020). A well-supported adult education sector can be a powerful

tool for economic development, enabling students to gain skills that match current market demands.

While most advocacy for adult education is rightfully focused on the economic gains realized by the learners, it is also important to uplift how better wage equity and living wages can positively affect the overall field. An increase in the number of teachers in adult education is also an economic advantage. Adult education perpetually has a significant number of job openings that go unfilled, leading to canceled classes or educators taking on more classes than they should, often with no change in pay. Recognizing this, stakeholders must advocate for policies that help ensure that funding and resources are allocated towards adult educators' pay to reflect the critical role that these educators play in societal growth. Supporting adult educators' pay thus represents an investment in the nation's future, facilitating a more adaptable and skilled workforce that can better meet the challenges of a rapidly changing global economy.

Impact of Wage Equity on Economic Growth

Investing in wage equity can catalyze what is known in economics as the "multiplier effect," where better-paid educators likely spend more within their communities, fostering local economic development and enhancing the societal impact of educational programs (Economic Policy Institute, 2021). Considering that most adult education programs are housed in locations that have been economically under-resourced, having better-paid teachers who can push money back into these locations is a double win.

For educators, equitable wages could provide greater financial stability, potentially reducing economic stress and enabling them to better focus on their teaching responsibilities. Additionally, higher wages may encourage educators to invest more in their own continuous professional development, which could contribute to enhanced teaching skills and potentially better outcomes for learners. The 2024 Wage Equity Survey (Harrison & Aguilera, 2024) highlights that many educators feel trapped in low-paying roles due to limited career advancement opportunities. It finds that 35.2% of respondents reported that experience in higher education does not translate into

improved compensation and 50% of respondents believe further education or experience within the field does not lead to better pay, underscoring a disconnect between professional development and financial reward.

As a field, adult education has a varied web of training, often leading to educators needing to use external professional development as the main conduits for preparing to be an adult education teacher, upskilling, and becoming an excellent teacher. When provided with higher, more equitable wages, teachers will be able to be in more control of their training—allowing enactment of adult learning theory not only for learners, but for the educators themselves: adult learners should have control of their own learning, and it must be connected to specific personal outcomes.

This, in turn, could foster improvements in educational quality and economic vitality, suggesting that fair pay in adult education is not just an expense but a potential investment in community resilience and prosperity. This investment may also extend further to benefit programs. Moreover, when educators are adequately compensated, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction and remain in their positions longer, which could reduce recruitment and training costs, attract a wider pool of qualified candidates, and help ensure a more consistent educational experience for learners. Stable employment for educators can also contribute to local economic stability, as they are more likely to become long-term, active participants in their communities.

Challenges and Solutions for Funding and Departmental Prioritization

Securing dedicated funding for equitable wages in adult education requires overcoming departmental and bureaucratic hurdles that often prioritize other areas of education. The disconnect between funding streams and educational equity goals needs to be addressed through strategic departmental planning and policy advocacy (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, 2022). To effectively challenge funding disparities, advocates must present compelling evidence of the return on investment from adequately funded adult education programs, using data and success stories to shift perceptions and influence policy at both local and national levels.

Over the past decade most adult education systems and entities have aligned adult education initiatives with broader economic and workforce development goals. While this shift has partially helped in securing sustained and adequate funding from various sources, including government grants, private sector partnerships, and philanthropic contributions, it has not provided adequate funding, particularly not enough funding to allow programs and schools to increase adult educators' pay. For this more aligned approach to provide adequate educator pay, the field requires a coordinated effort among educators, advocates, policymakers, and industry leaders to reframe adult education as a pivotal element of economic strategies rather than a peripheral social service. We must also focus more efforts on supporting the adult educators as a major part of the advocacy ensuring adult educators have fair family-sustaining pay, consistent work schedules, and other work benefits. Adult ed must begin to be intentional about increasing funding for the purpose of increased wages.

Call to Action

The path to enhancing the stature and effectiveness of adult education lies in addressing the wage inequities within the varying levels of the field that undermine its potential. Educators, policymakers, and community leaders must collaborate to foster an environment where adult education is both valued and well-compensated. By advocating for and implementing strategic investments and policy reforms, we can contribute to securing a brighter, more equitable future for adult education. Ultimately, these efforts will not only help resolve economic disparities but also strengthen the educational infrastructure, benefiting individuals and communities alike. It is imperative for all involved to recognize the transformative potential of adult education, which is currently being stalled due, in part, to the below average wages of adult educators. Diligent work is needed towards ensuring its success and sustainability by ensuring that adult educators, who are critical to the success of adult education have a sustainable career path with livable wages that also show respect for their input and support of our larger economy. As we look to the future, the integration of adult education within broader economic and social frameworks remains a key strategy for fostering sustainable economic growth and building a more equitable society.

References

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