

Adult Education Works

A common-sense executive report on the lasting value of adult education

Three survey waves • 571 responses • 543 adults • 2023, 2025, and 2026

EXECUTIVE TAKEAWAY Adult education does far more than help adults earn a high school equivalency. It creates a practical pathway to work, college, stronger families, financial stability, and community participation.

Across three survey waves, alumni consistently described adult education as a turning point. In the 2026 survey, 86.5% rated its impact on their lives as high or very high, including 70.8% who selected “very high.” Those ratings remained consistently positive across all three waves, with no statistically significant difference over time.

The value at a glance



The common-sense conclusion: when adults gain skills, confidence, and a recognized credential, the benefits travel with them—into workplaces, colleges, homes, and communities.

One educational investment, multiple returns

The study shows a straightforward chain of value. Adult learners often enter programs without a high school diploma, but they do not stop at earning one. They use adult education to move toward better jobs, further education, greater financial stability, and fuller participation in family and community life.

THE IMPACT PATHWAY Foundational skills and a credentials build confidence. Confidence supports the next step. The next step produces economic, family, and community returns.

1. Adult education restores the on-ramp

Most respondents entered adult education without a high school diploma—between 66.3% and 72.0% across the three waves. Earning a diploma or high school equivalency was also their most common accomplishment, reported by 66.3% to 81.4% of respondents.

- **The practical value:** adult education gives adults a recognized starting point that many jobs, training programs, and colleges require.
- **The broader value:** it replaces a closed door with a sequence of possible next steps.

2. Adult education feeds the talent pipeline

Employment was common across every survey wave, ranging from 59.6% to 68.9%. Among employed respondents, full-time work was the most common arrangement. By 2026, 46.1% said getting a better job was one reason they entered adult education, and 42.7% reported greater confidence in their ability to find one.

- **Skills improved:** 41.6% of 2026 respondents reported gains in reading, writing, and/or math, compared with 28.0% in 2023.
- **Career confidence grew:** confidence to find a better job was reported by 42.7% in 2026 and 48.3% in 2025.
- **Employment continued:** 37.1% to 45.8% reported that they had remained employed since completing their program.

3. Adult education leads to more education

Adult education is not an endpoint. It is an entry point into the education and training system. About half of respondents in both 2025 and 2026 were enrolled in postsecondary education and/or training.

- **Community college:** 40.4% of 2026 respondents reported community college enrollment as a next step, up from 33.0% in 2023.
- **Four-year college:** 13.5% reported enrolling in a four-year institution in 2026, more than twice the 2023 level of 6.3%.
- **Credentials beyond adult education:** by 2026, 24.7% reported completing a community college diploma or certificate, 21.3% a non-credit training program, and 23.6% a digital badge.
- **Readiness to continue:** 65.2% of 2026 respondents said adult education increased their confidence to pursue further education.

The return extends beyond the learner

A narrow measure of success would stop at a diploma, job, or college enrollment. The alumni findings show why that misses much of adult education’s value. The effects also appear in household stability, children’s education, and civic life.

4. Adult education strengthens families

Adult learners reported meaningful signs of household stability. Homeownership rose from 24.2% of respondents in 2023 to 34.8% in 2026. The share of survey completers reporting emergency savings increased from 37.9% to 43.8%, and 31.5% of 2026 respondents said they had paid off a loan.

The strongest family story may be educational engagement. Among respondents living with children, 71.4% regularly helped with homework, 71.4% communicated with teachers, and 65.7% attended parent-teacher conferences in 2026. Nearly three-quarters—74.3%—said the children in their household were performing “very well” in school.

WHY THIS MATTERS Adult education helps break intergenerational cycles: adults gain skills and opportunity while children experience more educational support at home.

5. Adult education builds stronger communities

The public return is visible in taxes, voting, volunteering, and community participation. These are not abstract benefits; they are the everyday activities that sustain healthy communities.

2026 indicator	Result	What it signals
Paying taxes	78.7%	Contribution to the public base
Community volunteering	58.4%	Local service and social connection
Regular voting	44.9%	Civic participation
Engaging policymakers	19.1%	A stronger public voice

Source: COABE Alumni Study, 2026 survey wave. Results are self-reported.

Volunteering also became more common and more varied. In 2026, respondents reported serving through adult education centers, community centers, religious institutions, community assistance organizations, caregiving, and community action groups.

“It gave me a support system I was lacking and helped me grow confidence in my skills.”

What the findings mean for leaders

The data support a simple policy and investment conclusion: adult education should be treated as essential economic and community infrastructure—not as a stand-alone remedial service.

Priorities for action

- **Fund the full pathway.** Support instruction, navigation, transition services, digital access, career preparation, and connections to postsecondary education and employment.
- **Build adult education into workforce strategy.** Employers, workforce boards, community colleges, and adult education programs should design talent pipelines together rather than operating in parallel.
- **Measure what matters.** Credentials and employment are essential, but they do not capture the whole return. Confidence, continued learning, family engagement, financial stability, and civic participation also matter.
- **Make the next step visible.** Learners should leave adult education with a clear transition plan to college, occupational training, apprenticeships, industry credentials, or a family-sustaining career.
- **Keep listening to alumni.** Continued longitudinal study can help the field understand which benefits endure, which supports matter most, and where additional investment can improve results.

BOTTOM LINE Adult education converts untapped potential into talent, earnings, educational momentum, stronger families, and community contribution. Its value is both personal and public.

A responsible reading of the evidence

This report summarizes 571 survey responses from 543 unique adults across three survey waves in 2023, 2025, and 2026. Two adults participated in all three waves, and 24 participated in two waves. Respondents came from 35 states in 2023 and 26 states in both 2025 and 2026. Later survey waves included more alumni who had been out of their programs for one year or longer, allowing the study to capture outcomes beyond the immediate point of completion.

The results are descriptive and self-reported. The samples differed across years, including in age, race and ethnicity, and time since program completion. Therefore, changes in percentages should not be read as proof that outcomes increased or decreased for the same population over time, or that adult education alone caused each outcome. Statistical testing was limited to the Life Improvement Rating; ratings did not differ significantly across waves (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2) = 2.22$, $p = .330$).

Even with those cautions, the consistency and breadth of the findings are important. Across different survey waves and different groups of alumni, the same practical pattern appears: adults report that adult education helped them move forward in education, employment, family life, and community participation.