

United in Mission: Voices of State Adult Education Directors During Uncertain Times

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Introduction

Adult education in the United States is navigating a period of extraordinary uncertainty and transformation. Rapid changes in federal and state policy discussions, ongoing funding instability, workforce system realignment, political polarization, technological disruption, and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have created a leadership environment unlike any previously experienced in the field. At the same time, adult education continues to serve as a critical pathway for workforce development, economic mobility, civic participation, English language acquisition, high school equivalency attainment, and community stability for millions of adult learners across the nation.

In response to these evolving challenges, a panel of nationally recognized state adult education leaders came together at the COABE 2026 Conference to engage in an open and candid discussion about the current realities facing the field. The panel included Hector Martinez of Kansas, Windy Swearingin of Alaska, Carolyn Zachry of California, Amber Gallup of New Mexico, T.J. Armstrong of Ohio, and Kathy Olesen-Tracey of Illinois. Representing a diverse range of governance structures, policy environments, and state systems, the panelists provided valuable perspectives drawn from leadership experiences in K–12 systems, higher education, departments of labor, and state government.

The discussion explored a broad range of topics, including funding uncertainty, leadership during crisis, workforce system integration, advocacy, political engagement, communication strategies, data utilization, organizational resilience, and the future competencies needed for adult education leadership. While each state faces unique challenges, several common themes emerged consistently throughout the conversation, revealing both the vulnerabilities and strengths of the adult education system nationwide.

This white paper synthesizes the key themes, insights, and recommendations that emerged from the panel discussion. It is intended to serve not only as a reflection on the current state of adult education leadership, but also as a call to action for stakeholders across the field. The discussion highlighted the urgent need for stronger advocacy, deeper partnerships, improved

storytelling, strategic use of data, and sustained investment in leadership capacity at every level of the system.

Perhaps most importantly, the panel reinforced that adult education remains deeply mission-driven despite the uncertainty surrounding it. Across every discussion topic, the panelists returned repeatedly to the importance of serving students, strengthening communities, and ensuring that adult learners continue to have access to education, workforce opportunities, and pathways to economic mobility. Their collective message was clear: the future of adult education will require courage, adaptability, collaboration, and a willingness to lead boldly during uncertain times.

1. The Mission of Adult Education Remains Stable Despite Political and Financial Uncertainty

One of the strongest recurring themes throughout the panel discussion was that, despite shifting political climates, funding instability, and organizational restructuring, the core mission of adult education remains constant. State directors consistently returned to the idea that the purpose of adult education—to serve learners, strengthen communities, and expand opportunity—has not changed and will not change, regardless of external pressures. In moments of uncertainty, leaders emphasized that the mission itself becomes the most stable and grounding aspect of the work.

Several panelists stressed that adult education professionals must remain focused on the students they serve rather than becoming consumed by political turbulence or speculation about future policy changes. Directors repeatedly referenced adult learners, English language learners, workforce entrants, and underserved populations as the central reason the field continues to persevere through difficult moments. Whether programs are housed in K–12 systems, higher education, or workforce agencies, leaders described a shared commitment to

helping students improve their lives and participate more fully in their communities and local economies.

Several panelists emphasized that while federal funding remains critically important, adult education cannot define its identity solely through appropriations or federal policy structures. One leader stated powerfully that “we are NOT our federal funding,” reminding the audience that adult education existed long before current federal systems and will continue because of its deep roots in workforce development, literacy, community advancement, and social mobility. This perspective reinforced the idea that the field’s mission and value extend far beyond temporary political or fiscal uncertainty.

The discussion also highlighted the broader societal value of adult education. Panelists framed adult education as essential not only for individual learners, but also for workforce development, economic growth, and community well-being. They connected adult education directly to preparing healthcare workers, emergency services, skilled tradespeople, and other essential members of the workforce. In doing so, they reinforced the idea that adult education is foundational to the health and resilience of local communities.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding funding, policy, and organizational structures, the panelists repeatedly emphasized that adult education leaders across states remain united in mission. Regardless of whether programs are housed in departments of education, labor agencies, or higher education systems, the shared commitment to serving adult learners continues to provide stability, direction, and purpose for the field.

Ultimately, the panelists presented mission-centered leadership as a stabilizing force during times of uncertainty. While policies, funding streams, and agency structures may continue to evolve, the directors emphasized that the field’s responsibility to students remains unchanged. This focus on mission allows leaders and practitioners to navigate instability with greater clarity, purpose, and resilience.

2. Funding Instability and Political Threats Are Driving a Climate of Anxiety

Another major theme that emerged throughout the discussion was the growing climate of anxiety caused by persistent funding instability and political uncertainty. State directors repeatedly referenced concerns about the future of adult education funding at both the federal and state levels, noting that many programs are operating in an environment where long-term planning has become increasingly difficult. The uncertainty has created stress not only for state leaders, but also for local administrators, instructors, and staff who fear sudden reductions in support or the elimination of critical services.

Panelists discussed multiple sources of instability affecting the field. These included proposed federal budget cuts, threats to eliminate adult education funding entirely, and ongoing uncertainty about whether adult education would remain housed within Department of Education or be shifted into Departments of Labor. Several directors acknowledged that even rumors or proposals—before any official action is taken—can create widespread panic across local programs. In some states, legislative hostility toward adult education added another layer of pressure, with leaders describing efforts to reduce funding to the lowest legally allowable levels.

The discussion also revealed how quickly uncertainty can affect local decision-making. Some state directors described hearing from programs that were already considering staff layoffs or drastic operational changes immediately after receiving alarming federal communications or seeing media reports about potential funding cuts. Leaders emphasized that fear often spreads rapidly through the field, particularly when information is incomplete or unclear. As a result, state agencies found themselves working not only to interpret policy developments, but also to calm fears and prevent reactionary decisions that could harm students and programs.

Several panelists described adult education as being politically and ideologically “under fire,” creating a sense that the field must constantly defend its value and existence. This ongoing pressure has contributed to emotional exhaustion and heightened stress among practitioners and leaders alike. Despite these challenges, the directors consistently encouraged programs to

remain focused, avoid panic-driven responses, and continue advocating for the essential role adult education plays in workforce development, community stability, and economic opportunity.

3. Adult Education Must Become More Assertive in Advocacy and Storytelling

One of the most passionate and consistent themes throughout the panel discussion was the belief that adult education leaders can no longer afford to remain quiet about the value of their work. Multiple state directors argued that the field has historically been too modest, too reactive, and too willing to let others define its importance. In response to growing political and funding pressures, panelists emphasized the need for adult education professionals to become far more assertive in advocacy, public engagement, and storytelling.

Several leaders stressed the importance of bringing policymakers directly into adult education environments so they can witness the impact firsthand. Panelists encouraged local programs to invite legislators, congressional representatives, and their staff members to campuses, graduations, workforce events, and community activities. The belief was that once elected officials meet students, hear their stories, and see program outcomes in person, they are far more likely to become advocates for adult education funding and policy support.

The discussion also highlighted the need to tell the story of adult education more publicly and strategically. Leaders encouraged programs to use social media platforms such as LinkedIn, local newspapers, and community media outlets to showcase student successes and community impact. Several directors described adult education as essential infrastructure that supports healthcare systems, emergency response services, skilled trades, and local economies. By connecting adult education outcomes to workforce shortages and economic development, panelists argued that programs can better demonstrate their direct value to communities and policymakers.

One panelist summarized the challenge by encouraging leaders to “make the invisible, visible.” The phrase captured a recurring concern that much of adult education’s impact remains unseen by policymakers, workforce systems, and the general public. Panelists stressed that adult education professionals must become far more intentional about elevating student stories, workforce contributions, economic outcomes, and community impact so that the field’s value is both visible and understood.

Another important element of the discussion centered on visibility within workforce and policymaking systems. Panelists argued that adult education leaders must become more vocal participants in workforce conversations, state planning efforts, and cross-agency collaborations. Some leaders described the need to be “the squeaky wheel” and to stop allowing adult education to be overlooked or minimized in broader workforce discussions. Others noted that advocacy now requires leaders to function almost like “pseudo-politicians,” building relationships, educating lawmakers, and consistently reinforcing the importance of the field.

One panelist summarized the challenge directly by stating that adult education has historically been “too humble.” Others used words such as “mouthy” and “assertive” to describe the kind of leadership now required. Collectively, the discussion reflected a growing belief that the survival and growth of adult education will depend not only on program quality, but also on the field’s willingness to advocate loudly, confidently, and continuously for its mission and impact.

4. Data and Storytelling Must Work Together

Another recurring theme throughout the panel discussion was the importance of pairing compelling human stories with strong, measurable data. State leaders repeatedly emphasized that advocacy efforts are most effective when programs can demonstrate both the personal impact of adult education, and the broader economic outcomes associated with their work. While stories help people emotionally connect to the mission, data provides the evidence needed to influence policymakers, justify funding, and guide strategic decision-making.

Panelists stressed that accurate and timely data collection is essential for the future of the field. Several leaders noted that state offices rely heavily on local program data to tell the story of adult education to legislators, workforce boards, and funding agencies. They emphasized that data is not simply a compliance requirement, but a critical advocacy tool that demonstrates program effectiveness, workforce impact, and return on investment. Without reliable data, leaders argued, it becomes far more difficult to defend programs during periods of political or financial uncertainty.

At the same time, the panelists cautioned that numbers alone are not enough. Programs must contextualize data with stories that illustrate the real-world impact of adult education on individuals, families, and communities. Leaders shared examples of former adult education students becoming healthcare workers, EMTs, firefighters, and skilled tradespeople. These stories helped connect abstract performance metrics to the everyday realities of workforce shortages, economic mobility, and community well-being. By combining quantitative outcomes with personal narratives, programs can make their impact more visible and relatable to both policymakers and the public.

The discussion also highlighted the role of data during moments of crisis and uncertainty. Several state directors explained that data helps determine where resources should be prioritized, how programs should pivot, and what arguments can be made to protect funding and services. Examples discussed during the panel included linking GED attainment to increased economic activity, demonstrating improved employment outcomes, and showcasing adult education's contribution to workforce pipelines in healthcare, emergency services, and skilled trades. In this way, the panel framed data not only as a reporting mechanism, but also as a strategic and political tool essential to sustaining and advancing the field of adult education.

5. Relationships and Local Partnerships Are Critical to Survival

Another significant theme that emerged from the panel discussion was the critical importance of relationships and local partnerships, particularly during periods of uncertainty and crisis.

State leaders repeatedly emphasized that adult education programs cannot operate in isolation and that strong partnerships often become the foundation for stability, advocacy, and problem-solving when funding or policy challenges arise. Many panelists noted that the strength of these relationships frequently determines how effectively programs are able to respond during difficult times.

Several leaders discussed the importance of building and maintaining relationships with legislators and legislative staff before a crisis occurs. They explained that policymakers are more likely to support adult education programs when they already understand the mission, know the local impact, and have established trust with program leaders. Directors stressed that advocacy cannot happen only during budget emergencies; instead, programs must consistently cultivate relationships with elected officials through ongoing communication, invitations to events, and regular sharing of program successes and outcomes.

The panel also highlighted the importance of partnerships within the broader workforce and community ecosystem. Workforce boards, chambers of commerce, community organizations, and state agency partners were all identified as essential allies in supporting adult education efforts. These partnerships help strengthen workforce alignment, expand community awareness, and create additional opportunities for collaboration and funding. Several leaders emphasized that adult education programs play a central role in workforce development and local economic growth, making these partnerships especially valuable in demonstrating the field's broader impact.

College leadership and institutional partnerships were another important focus of the discussion. Some state directors acknowledged that local program administrators often operate within complex institutional environments where college presidents, fiscal officers, and senior administrators influence decision-making during times of uncertainty. Building strong internal relationships, therefore, was viewed as equally important to external advocacy. Leaders noted that programs with supportive institutional relationships were often better positioned to weather funding disruptions and maintain staffing stability.

Overall, the panelists made clear that relationships built during stable periods become indispensable during crises. Several leaders explained that prior investments in partnerships allowed them to secure emergency support, gain political backing, negotiate funding flexibility, and move more strategically during uncertain times. The discussion reinforced the idea that collaboration, trust, and relationship-building are not secondary aspects of leadership in adult education, but essential components of long-term sustainability and survival.

6. Leadership During Crisis Requires Transparency and Communication

A dominant operational theme throughout the panel discussion was the importance of transparency and consistent communication during times of crisis and uncertainty. State leaders repeatedly emphasized that in moments of instability, one of the most important responsibilities of leadership is to provide accurate, timely, and calming information to the field. Panelists acknowledged that uncertainty can quickly generate fear, rumors, and misinformation, making proactive communication essential for maintaining trust and stability across local programs.

Several directors described the communication systems they established to keep local administrators and staff informed during rapidly changing situations. These efforts included weekly webinars, statewide update meetings, Friday question-and-answer sessions, FAQ documents, and immediate communications following major federal announcements. Leaders explained that even when there were no major updates, maintaining a predictable cadence of communication helped reassure the field that state offices were actively monitoring developments and advocating on behalf of programs and students.

Panelists also stressed the importance of sharing information quickly, even when all the answers were not yet available. Leaders described how local programs often begin reacting immediately to headlines, rumors, or partial information, sometimes considering drastic actions such as staff layoffs before official guidance has been clarified. Because of this, state directors

emphasized the need to communicate early and often in order to reduce panic and prevent reactionary decisions that could negatively affect programs and learners.

Another important aspect of the discussion centered on helping the field understand the complexity of policy and funding processes. Several panelists referred to this as explaining the “sausage making” behind federal appropriations, legislative timelines, and administrative procedures. Leaders argued that understanding how decisions move through government systems can help local programs remain calmer and more strategic. By explaining what proposals actually mean, what steps remain before changes become reality, and what timelines are involved, state leaders were able to reduce misinformation and provide a more realistic understanding of evolving situations.

Ultimately, transparency was repeatedly described as essential to maintaining credibility and stability within the adult education system. Panelists emphasized that honest communication—even when the news is difficult or incomplete—helps strengthen relationships between state offices and local programs. The discussion reflected a shared belief that effective leadership during crisis is not about having every answer immediately, but about remaining visible, communicative, and trustworthy while helping the field navigate uncertainty together.

7. Leaders Must Balance Urgency With Strategic Patience

Another major leadership theme that emerged throughout the panel discussion was the tension between acting quickly during moments of uncertainty and resisting the urge to make fear-driven decisions. State directors acknowledged that crises often create enormous pressure for immediate action, especially when funding announcements, policy rumors, or political developments generate anxiety across local programs. At the same time, many leaders cautioned that reacting too quickly—without adequate information or perspective—can create unintended consequences that are more damaging than the original threat itself.

One of the most memorable concepts introduced during the discussion was “The Power of the Pause.” Panelists described this idea as the discipline of intentionally slowing down decision-making long enough to assess the situation clearly before responding. Rather than allowing fear, anger, or urgency to dictate immediate reactions, leaders encouraged administrators to pause, gather accurate information, evaluate options strategically, and avoid making major operational decisions in the middle of emotional turmoil. This approach was framed not as inaction, but as thoughtful leadership under pressure.

Several directors referred to the danger of making decisions “in the red zone,” meaning during moments of extreme stress, fear, or emotional overload. Leaders noted that crises often trigger survival instincts that push organizations toward rapid staffing cuts, program closures, or policy shifts before the full reality of a situation is understood. In many cases, local programs reacted to rumors or preliminary announcements as though they were final decisions. Panelists emphasized that leaders must recognize when they are operating emotionally rather than strategically and create enough space to think clearly before taking action.

Several panelists warned against “anticipatory compliance,” or making significant operational or policy changes in response to rumors, political messaging, or proposed actions before formal guidance or enacted policy exists. Leaders stressed that reacting prematurely can create unnecessary disruption, fear, and unintended harm to students and programs. Instead, they encouraged administrators to remain grounded in existing law and official guidance while carefully monitoring developments.

A particularly important part of the discussion focused on distinguishing between rumors, proposals, political messaging, and enacted policy. Several state directors reminded the audience that not every alarming headline or public statement results in immediate operational change. For example, proposed federal budgets, agency recommendations, or political rhetoric may generate concern, but they do not automatically become law or funding decisions. Leaders stressed the importance of understanding governmental processes, legislative timelines, and appropriations procedures before making sweeping programmatic responses. By helping local

programs understand these distinctions, state leaders aimed to reduce unnecessary panic and prevent destabilizing reactions.

At the same time, the panelists acknowledged that there are moments when rapid action is necessary, particularly when student safety, access, or legal compliance are at stake. In those situations, leaders emphasized that quick decisions should still be grounded in clear priorities and focused on protecting students and maintaining services whenever possible. The discussion suggested that effective leadership is not simply about choosing between speed and caution, but about knowing when each approach is appropriate.

The broader conversation ultimately framed leadership during crisis as a combination of emotional regulation and strategic judgment. Leaders must remain calm enough to think clearly while also providing reassurance and direction to others who may be overwhelmed. The “Power of the Pause” became a larger metaphor for disciplined leadership: the ability to slow down emotionally even when circumstances feel chaotic. Panelists suggested that this capacity is increasingly important in adult education, where uncertainty has become more constant and leaders are regularly called upon to make difficult decisions in rapidly changing environments.

Several directors also implied that practicing strategic patience helps preserve organizational stability and morale. When leaders pause before reacting, they model steadiness for staff, reduce fear within the system, and create space for more thoughtful collaboration and problem-solving. In this sense, the pause itself becomes a leadership tool—not a sign of weakness or indecision, but a deliberate act of stability in moments when others are tempted to panic.

8. COVID Was a Transformational Turning Point for Adult Education

The panel repeatedly identified the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the most transformative events in the history of modern adult education. While the pandemic created enormous disruption, uncertainty, and loss, many state directors described it as a turning point that

fundamentally reshaped how adult education programs think about service delivery, student engagement, technology, and instructional flexibility. Leaders emphasized that the field was forced to adapt rapidly under extreme conditions, and in doing so, developed innovations and capacities that continue to influence adult education today.

One of the most significant transformations discussed was the rapid expansion of virtual learning. Before the pandemic, many adult education programs relied heavily on traditional in-person instruction and had limited online infrastructure. COVID forced programs to quickly build virtual classrooms, train instructors in online teaching strategies, and find ways to keep students connected despite lockdowns and social distancing requirements. State leaders acknowledged that the transition was difficult, particularly because many instructors and students initially lacked technology skills, reliable internet access, or appropriate devices. However, the crisis accelerated digital learning in ways that would likely have taken many years under normal circumstances.

The discussion also highlighted how programs were required to completely reimagine core operational processes such as assessment, orientation, intake, advising, and instruction. Adult education leaders described how systems that once depended on face-to-face interaction had to be redesigned almost overnight to function in remote or hybrid environments. Programs experimented with new instructional models, virtual orientations, online assessments, flexible scheduling, and alternative methods of student support. In many cases, these innovations improved accessibility for students who previously faced barriers related to transportation, childcare, work schedules, or geographic isolation.

Another major shift involved increased flexibility in service delivery. Panelists explained that the pandemic demonstrated that adult education programs could operate more creatively and responsively than many had previously believed. Rather than limiting instruction to fixed locations and schedules, programs learned how to meet students where they were—both physically and technologically. This flexibility became especially important for serving

vulnerable populations, including immigrant communities, working adults, rural learners, and students facing economic instability or health concerns.

Several leaders also discussed how COVID accelerated technological growth across the field. Programs strengthened their digital infrastructure, expanded the use of learning management systems, increased technology training for staff, and improved their ability to communicate with students remotely. While the pandemic exposed significant inequities in technology access, it also pushed adult education systems to become more technologically capable and adaptable. Panelists suggested that these gains continue to benefit programs today, particularly as new political, funding, and operational challenges emerge.

The panel additionally noted that the pandemic changed how programs serve immigrant and vulnerable populations. Some leaders described how virtual learning and flexible scheduling later became important tools for supporting students living in communities affected by immigration enforcement concerns or transportation barriers. The ability to quickly shift locations, provide remote instruction, and maintain continuity of services became an important lesson learned from the pandemic experience.

Ultimately, the directors framed COVID not only as a crisis, but also as a catalyst for innovation and transformation. While no one minimized the hardship and disruption the field experienced, several leaders argued that the pandemic revealed the resilience, creativity, and adaptability of adult education professionals. Many of the innovations developed during COVID—particularly around flexibility, technology, and student-centered service delivery—were described as essential tools that continue to help programs navigate today’s environment of political uncertainty, funding instability, and changing workforce demands.

9. State and Local Leaders Often Misunderstand Each Other’s Constraints

Another important theme that emerged throughout the panel discussion was the ongoing disconnect between state-level systems and local program realities. Several panelists reflected

candidly on the misunderstandings that can occur between state agencies and local adult education providers, particularly during periods of uncertainty and crisis. While both groups are working toward the same mission, the discussion revealed that they often experience very different pressures, limitations, and operational realities.

State leaders noted that local programs sometimes overestimate the amount of authority or control state directors actually possess. Several panelists shared examples of local administrators expressing frustration or expecting state offices to immediately reverse federal decisions, influence national policy, or provide instant answers during rapidly evolving situations. State directors acknowledged these reactions often stem from fear and frustration, but they emphasized that state agencies themselves operate within significant legal, political, and bureaucratic constraints. Many explained that they must follow guidance from legal counsel, higher-level administrators, state boards, or federal agencies before issuing formal direction to the field.

The panelists also discussed how policy guidance often requires multiple layers of review before it can be communicated to local programs. State leaders described navigating complex chains of approval involving attorneys, agency leadership, boards, and governmental procedures. Several directors admitted that, before becoming state leaders themselves, they had not fully understood how much internal coordination and review was required before official guidance could be released. This reality can sometimes create delays that frustrate local programs seeking immediate answers during moments of uncertainty.

At the same time, the discussion revealed that state directors also recognized their own blind spots regarding local realities. Several leaders acknowledged that state offices sometimes underestimate the daily pressures facing local administrators and instructors. These challenges include staffing shortages, budget constraints, operational demands, and the expectations imposed by college presidents, superintendents, workforce boards, and other institutional leaders. One panelist specifically reflected on realizing that local program administrators were often caught between state guidance and institutional directives from their own organizations.

Rural realities were another area where state leaders acknowledged the importance of listening more carefully to local programs. One director described learning quickly that policies which appear workable “on paper” may not function effectively in geographically isolated or resource-limited communities. Transportation barriers, limited staffing, broadband access, and small program sizes all shape how adult education services can realistically be delivered in different regions. The discussion emphasized that successful statewide policies require flexibility and input from local practitioners who understand these community-specific conditions.

The conversation ultimately underscored the importance of empathy, collaboration, and two-way communication between state agencies and local programs. Panelists repeatedly suggested that misunderstandings often arise not from bad intentions, but from incomplete awareness of one another’s pressures and limitations. By improving communication, listening more actively, and involving local leaders in decision-making processes, state agencies can create stronger partnerships and more responsive systems. Likewise, greater understanding of state-level constraints can help local programs navigate uncertainty with more realistic expectations and stronger collaboration.

10. Future Leadership Will Require Adaptability, Assertiveness, and Emotional Resilience

In the closing portion of the panel discussion, state leaders reflected on the kinds of leadership capacities that will be necessary for adult education leaders over the next five years. The conversation made clear that the environment surrounding adult education is becoming increasingly complex, fast-moving, and politically charged. As a result, panelists emphasized that future leaders will need far more than technical knowledge or administrative competence. They will need the ability to lead through continuous uncertainty while maintaining focus, stability, and advocacy for students and communities.

One of the most frequently repeated competencies was adaptability. Panelists described adaptability not as an optional leadership trait, but as a core survival skill for the future of adult education. Leaders discussed how rapidly changing funding conditions, policy shifts, workforce demands, and social pressures require programs to pivot quickly and rethink traditional ways of operating. Several directors reflected on how experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of being able to adjust instruction, communication, service delivery, and operational strategies in real time. Future leaders, they argued, must become comfortable navigating constant change rather than waiting for stability to return.

Another dominant theme was the need for greater assertiveness and advocacy within the field. Multiple panelists argued that adult education leaders can no longer afford to remain passive or overly cautious in policy and workforce discussions. Instead, leaders must actively advocate for the value of adult education, educate policymakers, and ensure the field has a visible and respected voice in decision-making spaces. Some directors described the future leadership role as requiring a blend of educator, advocate, and political strategist. They emphasized that leaders must be willing to challenge assumptions, speak up in difficult conversations, and consistently communicate the importance of adult education to legislators, workforce partners, and institutional leaders.

The discussion also highlighted the growing importance of emotional resilience. Panelists acknowledged that adult education leaders are increasingly expected to operate in environments characterized by uncertainty, political pressure, financial instability, and emotional fatigue. Leaders described the need to remain calm and grounded even when programs, staff, and communities are experiencing anxiety or fear. Several directors emphasized that resilience is not simply about endurance, but about sustaining clarity, optimism, and purpose while helping others navigate stress and instability.

Boundary setting emerged as another critical leadership skill. One panelist reflected candidly on the personal toll of remaining constantly available during times of crisis and explained that leaders must establish healthy boundaries in order to continue leading effectively over time.

The conversation suggested that leadership sustainability requires intentional self-management, including knowing when to step back, disconnect, and preserve personal well-being. Without those boundaries, leaders risk burnout and diminished effectiveness during prolonged periods of uncertainty.

Political engagement was also identified as increasingly essential for adult education leaders. Panelists noted that future leaders will need to become more comfortable engaging with legislators, workforce systems, government agencies, and public policy processes. This includes understanding how funding decisions are made, building relationships with policymakers, and advocating strategically for programs and students. Several directors suggested that adult education leaders must now function, in many ways, like public advocates and community organizers in addition to educational administrators.

Another memorable concept discussed was the need to “manage the heat.” Panelists used this phrase to describe the ability to absorb, regulate, and de-escalate anxiety within organizations and systems during periods of crisis. Leaders emphasized that fear and uncertainty can spread quickly through programs, and effective leaders must help create stability rather than amplify panic. This requires emotional intelligence, thoughtful communication, and the ability to remain steady under pressure.

Ultimately, the panelists emphasized that uncertainty in adult education is no longer temporary or episodic—it has become a constant condition of leadership. Future leaders, therefore, must be prepared to operate effectively in environments where rapid change, political tension, and funding instability are ongoing realities. The discussion reflected a shared belief that the next generation of adult education leaders will need to be adaptable, vocal, emotionally resilient, politically savvy, and deeply grounded in the mission of serving adult learners and communities.

Conclusion

The panel discussion among state adult education leaders revealed a field that is simultaneously under pressure and deeply resilient. Across all ten themes, the conversation reflected both the immense challenges facing adult education and the unwavering commitment of its leaders to students, communities, and workforce development. While funding instability, political uncertainty, shifting policy environments, and organizational stress continue to create significant challenges, the panelists consistently returned to a shared belief that the mission of adult education remains essential and enduring.

One of the clearest takeaways from the discussion was that adult education leaders are being called to operate in a fundamentally different leadership environment than in previous decades. Uncertainty is no longer viewed as temporary or episodic; it has become a continuous condition requiring leaders to adapt constantly while maintaining organizational stability and focus. In response, the panelists emphasized the need for a new kind of leadership—one that combines strategic thinking, emotional resilience, advocacy, communication, and political engagement.

The discussion also underscored that the future of adult education will depend heavily on the field's willingness to become more visible and assertive. Leaders repeatedly challenged the long-standing tendency of adult education to remain “too humble” about its impact. Instead, they called for stronger storytelling, more aggressive advocacy, and more intentional engagement with policymakers, workforce systems, and local communities. The panelists made clear that adult education must actively communicate its value not only through compelling student stories, but also through accurate data and measurable workforce and economic outcomes.

Another important conclusion from the conversation was the growing recognition that relationships are central to sustainability. Whether discussing partnerships with legislators, workforce boards, colleges, or community organizations, panelists consistently emphasized that strong relationships built before crises become critical during moments of instability.

Collaboration, trust, and communication emerged as essential leadership practices that help programs navigate uncertainty more effectively.

The panel also highlighted how transformational experiences—particularly the COVID-19 pandemic—have permanently changed the field. Adult education programs demonstrated remarkable adaptability during the pandemic, reimagining instruction, expanding virtual learning, and developing new approaches to serving vulnerable populations. Many leaders suggested that these innovations continue to provide valuable tools for navigating today's challenges and may ultimately position adult education to become more flexible, accessible, and responsive in the future.

At its core, the discussion reflected a field that understands both its vulnerability and its importance. Adult education leaders acknowledged the political and financial pressures facing their programs, but they also spoke with deep conviction about the role adult education plays in strengthening communities, supporting workforce development, advancing economic mobility, and transforming lives. Throughout the conversation, there was a strong sense that adult education is not simply a collection of programs, but a vital public good tied closely to social mobility, civic participation, workforce readiness, and community well-being.

Ultimately, the panel suggested that the future of adult education will depend not only on policy decisions or funding levels, but also on the ability of leaders at every level to remain mission-driven, adaptable, collaborative, and courageous. The field's greatest strength may be its ability to continue serving students and communities even in the face of uncertainty. As several panelists implied throughout the discussion, adult education has endured because of the people who lead it, advocate for it, and believe deeply in its transformative power.

Call to Action

The themes that emerged from this panel discussion make one thing abundantly clear: the future of adult education cannot rest solely on state leaders, policymakers, or a small group of advocates. Every stakeholder in adult education—including instructors, administrators, staff, workforce partners, community organizations, students, and state leaders—has a role to play in strengthening and sustaining the field during this period of uncertainty and transformation.

The challenges facing adult education are significant, but so are the opportunities. The panelists repeatedly emphasized that progress will require collective action, stronger advocacy, deeper partnerships, clearer storytelling, and a renewed commitment to the mission of serving adult learners and communities. No single strategy will solve every challenge, but meaningful change can occur when individuals and organizations each commit to taking action within their sphere of influence.

The following call to action items are intended to provide practical starting points for stakeholders across the adult education system. Stakeholders are encouraged to identify at least one area where they can contribute immediately—whether that means improving data practices, inviting policymakers into programs, advocating more publicly, strengthening partnerships, supporting staff wellness, or simply telling the story of adult education more often and more boldly. Small actions, taken collectively and consistently across the field, can strengthen adult education’s visibility, sustainability, and long-term impact.

What YOU Can Do:

- **Tell the Adult Education Story More Aggressively**
Share student success stories, workforce outcomes, and community impact consistently through social media, local media, presentations, and public events.
- **Invite Policymakers Into Programs**
Bring legislators, workforce leaders, and community stakeholders onto campuses to meet students, attend graduations, and see programs in action firsthand.

- **Strengthen Data Collection and Use**

Ensure program data is accurate, timely, and connected to clear workforce and economic outcomes that can support advocacy and funding efforts.

- **Build Relationships Before a Crisis Happens**

Develop ongoing partnerships / relationships with workforce boards, chambers of commerce, schools, elected officials, and community organizations before funding or policy challenges emerge and develop local leadership.

- **Communicate Early, Often, and Transparently**

Maintain regular communication with staff and stakeholders during uncertain times to reduce fear, prevent misinformation, and build trust.

- **Practice “The Power of the Pause”**

Avoid making panic-driven decisions during moments of crisis. Pause, gather facts, assess the situation strategically, and respond thoughtfully.

- **Continue Innovating Beyond COVID**

Preserve and expand flexible practices developed during the pandemic, including virtual learning, hybrid services, and technology-enabled student support.

- **Advocate Assertively Within Workforce Systems**

Ensure adult education has a strong voice in workforce development conversations, funding discussions, and policy planning processes.

- **Support Leader and Staff Well-Being**

Encourage healthy boundaries, emotional resilience, and sustainable leadership practices to reduce burnout during prolonged uncertainty.

- **Focus Relentlessly on the Mission**

Keep student success, community impact, and economic mobility at the center of every decision, regardless of political or financial instability.

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