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# The Desert Sun

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DESERT SUN SPECIAL REPORT

## Coachella Valley literacy rates trail state, nation



Experts: Illiteracy puts communities at social, economic disadvantage

PHOTOS.COM

BY K KAUFMANN  
 The Desert Sun

At a time when Coachella Valley leaders want to diversify the local economy and groom a well-educated and skilled workforce, the desert's literacy rates are worsening.

While the local trend is a microcosm of a larger national literacy problem, valley rates trail well behind those for the region and United States as a whole.

A Desert Sun analysis of California Education Department statistics found that:

- Less than half of valley second-graders scored proficient in English language skills on statewide tests in 2009 — 10 points less than statewide.
- Fewer than 30 percent of valley 11th-graders rated proficient in language skills this year. Forty percent of their state peers did.
- From 1992 to 2003, California's rate for below-basic literacy rose from 15 percent to 23 percent, the highest in the United States. The national average has shown little change, hovering around 14 percent.

"This is a silent crisis facing America, with 30 million who read below (the) third- or fourth-grade level," said David Harvey, president of Syracuse, N.Y.-based ProLiteracy, a national group promoting adult literacy programs.

"We have another 60 million who read below seventh- or eighth-grade (levels)," he said. "We have a major problem in the U.S. that is inextricably linked to our economy and our competitiveness globally."

Literacy is also critical for workers who need to stay competitive in the local job market, said Tom Freeman, spokesman for the Riverside County Economic Development Agency.

"Many employers now are using entry-level testing, and this can be a barrier for some of the better job opportunities," he said.

"If one cannot pass entry-level tests, you're not going to make it to the interview room. That's frightening to a lot of kids," he said.

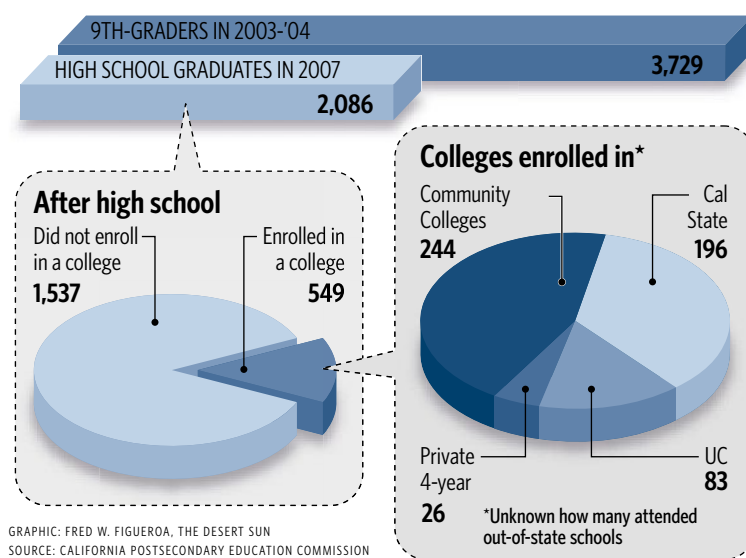
College attendance rates also lag in the Coachella Valley, with about 25 percent of the local high school graduates going on to community college. The rate is 30 percent statewide. And a scant 12 percent of valley grads move on to four-year state schools, compared to a statewide rate of 18 percent.

"If more people will go to college, it ties into the (Coachella Valley Economic Partnership's) economic plan — having a

Please see LITERACY, A11

### The college pipeline

In 2003, 3,729 students entered ninth grade in the Coachella Valley's public high schools. Four years later, only 549 (about 15 percent) entered college of any sort. The Coachella Valley Economic Partnership's recently unveiled economic blueprint that aims to diversify the valley's economy said lack of a well-educated workforce here remains one of its main challenges.



GRAPHIC: FRED W. FIGUEROA, THE DESERT SUN  
 SOURCE: CALIFORNIA POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION COMMISSION

### What is literacy?

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy defines literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." The most recent assessment in 2003 tested 19,714 adults ages 16 and older on three literacy scales.

- **Prose literacy:** The ability to read, comprehend and use information from books, articles or pamphlets.
- **Document literacy:** The ability to extract or act on information from forms or reference documents such as finding the time of a certain program in a television guide.
- **Quantitative literacy:** The ability to complete computations on numbers embedded in a text such as comparing ticket prices for two events.

SOURCE: National Assessment of Adult Literacy, "A Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century," 2005.

## Vote sends health care bill to floor for debate

Republicans unified in opposing overhaul

BY NOAM N. LEVEY  
 McClatchy-Tribune

WASHINGTON — Without a vote to spare, Democrats pushed their health care overhaul legislation over its first obstacle on the Senate floor Saturday, as the chamber voted to begin formal debate of a sweeping measure to guarantee medical coverage for all Americans.

The 60-39 procedural vote — backed by all 58 Democrats and two independents, with Ohio Republican George Voinovich not voting — overcame a Republican-led filibuster designed to block consideration of the bill and kept up momentum behind President Barack Obama's top legislative priority.

The vote also set the stage for a historic health care debate that is expected to begin after Thanksgiving and consume the Senate for the remainder of this year and into next.

"It is more important that we begin this debate to improve our nation's health care system for all Americans, rather than just simply drop the issue and walk away," Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., one of the last Democratic hold-outs, said Saturday in announcing her support for the high-stakes parliamentary vote. "That is not what people sent us here to do." Democratic congressional leaders, who got a health-care bill through the House two weeks ago, are laboring to move legislation through the Senate by Christmas so they can deliver on Obama's top domestic priority by early next year.

Senate Democrats prevailed Saturday only after Lincoln and Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., two centrists from traditionally Republican states who had been withholding their support for the procedural vote, went to the Senate floor and announced they would vote with their party.

Please see VOTE, A2

### More inside

**Abortion:** White House at odds with bishops over abortion. A14

**Q&A:** How the health care bills could affect you. A15

## Good Samaritan meets mother of teen he saved

If Navy Chief Petty Officer William Mason hadn't called 911, Joseph Nicol might have died. Mason and a nurse, who wanted to remain anonymous, stopped to help five teens after a collision left their car mangled and upside down on Highway 74 last Sunday night.

On Saturday, Mason received an emotional thank you from Joseph's mother, Teri Edelson, at Desert Regional Medical Center where Joseph is hospitalized. See story on page B1.

### INTODAY'S PAPER

Advice	E2	Lottery	B10
Bridge	E4	Movies	E2
Business Plus	D1	Obituaries	B10
Classified	F1-6	Opinion	B13-15
Crossword	E4	Television	E5
Desert Life	E1	Travel	E6
Kenken	E4	Weather	D6

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### Art fest continues today

Organizers say day one of Bermuda Dunes' first public art festival drew hundreds of attendees. The festival continues today with more than 80 art tents, a food court and entertainment. B9

### 7 by 7:30 a.m.

What are today's must-read local stories? Check out the 7 by 7:30 a.m. feature on A2.

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