

# LITERACY: Getting books into kids' hands key

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more educated workforce," said Toni Lawrence, director of programs and outreach at UC Riverside's Palm Desert campus.

"It ties into everything we're trying to do in this community," Lawrence said.

The Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, a nonprofit group created in 1994 to help expand the valley's economy, in October unveiled a plan to diversify the desert's economy. Among the noted challenges were the region's low educational test scores and rate of college attendance.

In response, Lawrence and other concerned officials at UC Riverside have launched a new initiative — the Coachella Valley Literacy Network — to encourage more children and adults to read and prepare them for college-level courses and vocational training.

The network sponsored its first Literacy Festival on Saturday at the Coachella Public Library. The event centered on family literacy — making reading and trips to the library an integral part of family life.

"If kids don't know how to read by third grade, they're basically struggling," said Cristina Gregorio, another network member from UC Riverside's Palm Desert campus.

"Up until third grade, they're learning to read and, after, they're reading to learn."

## Roots of illiteracy

Harvey cites three main causes for low literacy rates:

- Learning disabilities. "We have a number of people who would make wonderful employees, but they also suffer from learning disabilities, like dyslexia," Freeman said. "The ability to read and write at grade level does not indicate one's IQ."

- High school dropout rates. The Coachella Valley's current dropout rate is 21.5 percent, just ahead of the statewide rate of 20.1 percent.

- Immigration — and the resulting influx of adults who may not be literate in their native languages.

At Oasis Elementary School in Thermal, this year's 110 kindergarten students included only two English speakers, said principal Elizabeth Ramirez.

Children in first through third grades are screened early, and those who fall behind in language skills are targeted for a special one-on-one tutoring program staffed by AmeriCorps volunteers.

"I made the choice to work with my lowest, lowest (achievers)," said Ramirez, who raised \$2,000 in extra funding to ex-



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Sariah Villegas, 9, flips through a book during the Coachella Valley Literacy Network's first Literacy Festival on Saturday at the public library in Coachella. Free books for young readers were handed out by First 5 Riverside in partnership with the Coachella Valley Unified School District.

## How to donate books

The Coachella Valley Literacy Network will hold a holiday book drive Dec. 1-17 to collect books for Saul Martinez Elementary School in Mecca.

Donations of books may be made 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday to Friday at UC Riverside-Palm Desert Graduate Center, 75-080 Frank Sinatra Drive.

Call Cristina Gregorio, (760) 834-0954 or e-mail [cristina.gregorio@ucr.edu](mailto:cristina.gregorio@ucr.edu).

The Desert Sun also will collect donated books for all age groups starting Monday. Hours are 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

Monday-Friday, 750 N. Gene Autry Trail, Palm Springs. Questions? Please e-mail [localnews@thedesertsun.com](mailto:localnews@thedesertsun.com).

pand the tutoring program.

At the Coachella Public Library, library technician Sue Duran agrees that the language barrier is one of the key factors in literacy gaps among the kids she sees daily, but it's also important to have enough books for them.

"We do our best to keep a nice stock of everything here, (but) it is really hard," said Duran, who also runs a teen reading club.

A recent study shows that in middle-income neighborhoods, the ratio of books per child is 13-1.

In low-income neighborhoods, the ratio may be as low as one book per 300 children, said Joan Sahlgren of First



Britton

Book, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to improving those numbers.

The Washington, D.C., group works with publishers to provide free and low-cost books to literacy programs targeting low-income children.

"Getting books into the hands of children — they will share it with their siblings; they will share it with their family," Sahlgren said. "It becomes a resource for all generations to learn how to read."

No statistics are available on the valley's book-to-child ratios, but some local groups have recognized the importance of providing more books for children and their families.

BookPALS, a program that puts actors and other readers in school rooms to help kids get into the reading habit, also distributes free books three times a year, said Tere Britton, the group's director.

"I have books to give the week they start school, before they go on Christmas vacation and the end (of the school year)," the Rancho Mirage resident said.

Project Read With Me focuses on families with preschool children, sending books home to help parents get into the reading habit with their kids early.

"We do know (that), overall, about 35 percent of children start kindergarten without the language skills they need to learn how to read," said Jamie Ayala, spokeswoman for First 5 Riverside, which funds the program.

Also called the Children and Families Commission, First 5 Riverside funds a range of programs aimed at improving health and education opportunities for preschool children and their families.

The Project Read With Me program includes hands-on workshops covering small things parents can do that don't take much time or money, coordinator Barbara Brown said.

Last year, more than 1,850 families participated in the program countywide, she said, and follow-up surveys found that more than 1,700 were using the literacy activities they learned.

Many of the parents she works with are single or working parents, some with two jobs and some who may not read or write very well themselves, she said.

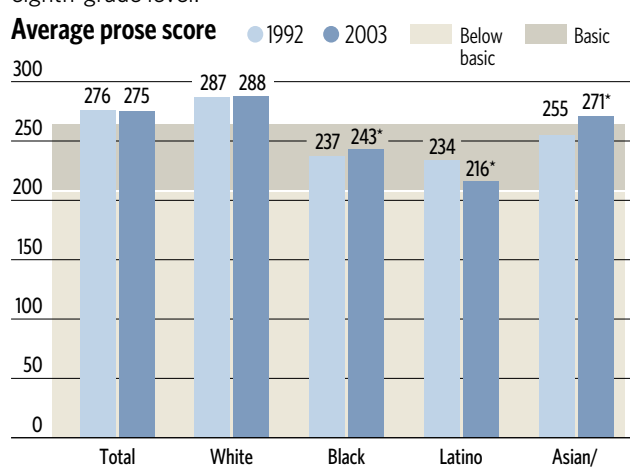
"We give them a few techniques. You go with the pictures, you make up the story," she said.

"Once you invest time and they like to read — job well done. The children will be able to go on."

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## The National Literacy Assessment

Literacy rates have changed little since 1992, according to the federal government's National Assessment of Adult Literacy. Americans in general read at or just above the seventh- or eighth-grade level.



## Why literacy matters

Low literacy rates have a trickle-down effect that reaches all aspects of American society, experts say.

- **Workforce:** Continued low literacy in the U.S. will result in a shortfall of 12 million qualified workers in the next decade.
- **Poverty:** Among adults at the lowest level of literacy skills, 43 percent live in poverty, compared with only 4 percent of adults with strong literacy skills.

- **Crime:** High school dropouts commit 78 percent of juvenile crime. A 5 percent improvement in male graduation rates would save the U.S. \$4.9 billion in crime-related costs per year.

- **Health:** Low literacy skills among seniors cost about \$73 billion annually in longer hospital stays, emergency room visits, more doctor visits and increased medication.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education; National Children's Reading Foundation; Alliance for Excellent Education; National Academy on an Aging Society

# Volunteers battle illiteracy — one student at a time

BY K KAUFMANN

The Desert Sun

Eight-year-old Darlicia Medina sat across the table from AmeriCorps volunteer Ariana Delgado on Thursday, tapping her chest, left to right, as she broke simple words into their basic sounds.

"Ve-ay-en ... van," said Darlicia, a second-grader at Oasis School in Thermal who up until this year struggled with reading skills.

"We have them do physical motion so they're doing something," Delgado said, explaining the chest taps and other hand signals the kids learn to associate with breaking down words and sounding them out.

When Delgado, 21, asks Darlicia for a word that rhymes with "van," she thinks for a moment and, after once again tapping out the sounds across her chest, comes up with "man."

For 15 minutes a day, Delgado works one-on-one with Darlicia and other first-through third-grade students who are struggling with language skills, using exercises to build up their ability to sound out words — first phonetically and, later, in writing.

"It helps me," Darlicia said after her tutoring session on Thursday. "I never learned reading."

Now she said, she can read "a little bit."

Delgado is one of three AmeriCorps tutors at the elementary school. Each work with as many as 30 kids a day, and provide help with homework at an after-school program.

Last year, AmeriCorps volunteers tutored 737 students in six schools in the Coachella Valley, said Cynthia Radley, executive director of the Valley Partnership, a Palm Desert-based nonprofit that sponsors the program.

The program is aimed at identifying kids who need extra help with reading and writing early, and get them reading at grade-level by the end of third grade, said Sean McQuown, coordinator for the tutoring program at Oasis.

"If you can't speak it, you can't read it," McQuown said, explaining the phonetic approach of the program. "If they're not caught up by fourth grade, it's very challenging."

With budget cuts and class sizes increasing, the AmeriCorps tutors are filling a critical gap, said Elizabeth Ramirez, principal at Oasis.

"For a student to get every single day 15 minutes (of) one-on-one intervention — I can't pay for that," she said.



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Second-grader Darlicia Medina, 8, of Thermal works with AmeriCorps tutor Ariana Delgado, 21, of Thermal at Oasis School on Thursday. Three AmeriCorps volunteers work on phonics, phonetic awareness and reading with first- through third-graders at the school.

The children are monitored and their progress is assessed regularly, Ramirez said.

"They're going to give them a fluency test (to see) if they're getting up to grade level in the number of words they can read," she said.

The fluency rate for a second-grader is 90 words per minute, she said.

Darlicia's teacher, Sally Salazar, said she's seen a dramatic change in her and other students who are being tutored.

"At the beginning of the year, her excuse for not doing anything was she couldn't read it," Salazar said.

"Once she was going to AmeriCorps, she'll come up to me and read to me. It's meant a great deal in her personal self-respect."



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Barbara Brown, (left) coordinator of the Riverside County Library Read with Me Workshop, gives Adrian Balbuena books at the Indio Learning Village, a preschool facility, during a workshop to teach parents how they can help their children learn to read and appreciate books at home.