



# Unlocking Potential

How California's Coachella Valley Is Integrating Education  
Into An Economic Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

College Access Foundation of California • Spring 2014  
Coachella Valley Economic Partnership



## Coachella Valley, California

When the Great Recession hit in 2008, the business, civic and education leaders of California's Coachella Valley knew they needed a plan to take control over their economic destiny.

So they came together, did their homework and created one.

Devised under the auspices of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, or CVEP, the Economic Blueprint lays out a series of strategies to create a true twenty-first century economy: one with diverse industries that spur economic growth, and boasts a labor force that meets the

needs of employers and raises incomes for families throughout the region.

Today, much of the work to shape the blueprint into reality is grounded in tried and true economic development practices, like those seen in cities and regions in California and across the country.

What distinguishes the work from more typical economic development programs is this: at the heart of this bottom-line economic development entity is one of the most ambitious education and career preparation endeavors in California.

CVEP has created a forum where business leaders engage side-by-side with the heads of education, government and civic institutions — to listen, share ideas, and ultimately, collaborate on ways to empower more of the Valley's youth with the specialized skills they and businesses need to compete in the global economy.

### CVEP Partners

CVEP supports and partners with businesses, local governments, education and civic institutions to improve college and career readiness. Leading partners are listed on the back cover.



It is an undertaking that extends throughout the K-16 system, touching students at nearly every school, college and university in the Coachella Valley.

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This highly integrated marriage of business and workforce development means that as CVEP works to help dozens of local companies create thousands of new jobs, it is also promoting intensive academic and career development programs, college scholarships and professional internship opportunities that are reaching more than 7,000 students throughout the Coachella Valley.

The level of collaboration is a tangible acknowledgement by diverse segments of this community that quality education is central to the region's economic future, and that each must play an active role to ensure success.

### Coachella Valley at a Glance

Cities	9
Population:	439,363
Number of Firms:	7,505
Adults w/College Degree:	23.5%
Median Household Income:	\$45,253

Source: CVEP Annual Economic Report 2013



# Taking Charge of Its Economic Future

The 2008 housing market collapse and decline in consumer spending hit the Coachella Valley hard, sparking a realization that local economic development plans needed a reboot.

“We had a lack of focus at times, where cities next door to each other might compete for the same business,” says Tom Davis, a CVEP board member and chief planning and development officer for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

“One of the things that makes the Valley unique today is we have real planning at the regional level,” Davis adds. “The economic blueprint helped get us there.”

So regionalism – a game plan for all nine cities in the Coachella Valley – emerged as one tenet of the new economic strategy. The second was economic diversification, a drive to expand the

Valley’s economic base beyond important, yet cyclical industries such as agriculture, retail and tourism.

Extensive research and examination of where the Valley might have a competitive advantage led CVEP to target several industries, with a particular focus on three: health care and life sciences, energy/clean technology and creative arts and design.

Each plays to the Valley’s strengths, such as the presence of large health care institutions like the Eisenhower and Desert Regional Medical Centers, a climate favorable to renewable energy development (and a need to satisfy high energy requirements in the Valley), and lower operating costs compared to regions with significant media and entertainment industries.

## Coachella Valley Strategies

Regionalism  
Economic Diversification  
Workforce Development  
Quality of Place

*Coachella Valley Economic Blueprint, 9/23/2009;  
[www.cvepblueprint.com](http://www.cvepblueprint.com)*



One of the most visible efforts to jumpstart business growth is the new Coachella Valley Innovation Hub, or iHub. It is one of 16 centers established in partnership with the state of California to serve as a source of innovation for start-up companies, business groups and venture capitalists.<sup>1</sup>

The Valley's iHub focuses on renewable energy development, with its start-ups pursuing a



Tom Flavin, CEO of CVEP and a former executive for economic development in Los Angeles and Seattle, sees local innovation as one of the keys to the region's future.

"To be successful in the economy of the twenty-first century, we believe you need to be able to compete globally, collaborate regionally and execute locally.

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***– Tom Davis, CVEP Board Member***

range of technology innovations: from the manufacture of components to convert gas-powered engines to electric, to the development of earthquake warning systems, to the production of mobile farming systems that can be used in remote locations and disaster areas.

"Our work to help companies grow and create high-wage jobs, and support educators in preparing the next generation of workers is vital to the Coachella Valley's success."



*Unfinished homes, Coachella Valley – When the Valley's housing market collapsed in 2008, local planners realized that diversification would be critical to the region's economic success in the future.*



## Investing in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce

To local leaders, gaining influence over the region's economic future would also mean addressing the low education achievement levels of a sizable portion of the Valley's population. As a 2009 assessment done for CVEP stated:<sup>2</sup>

*Compared to the nation and comparison communities, the Coachella Valley has a higher proportion of adults without a high school diploma and a lower number of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher.*

Students at two of the region's three school districts perform at lower levels than average for California, and less than one-quarter of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, a smaller percentage than other areas of Califor-

nia such as Los Angeles, San Diego and Orange County.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the region's planners understood the need for a more comprehensive workforce strategy than programs aimed at individuals on the cusp of the job market. They needed interventions at every step of the "education-to-career" pipeline.

For years, Valley educators, business and civic leaders had undertaken initiatives to improve student performance and increase workers' skills. What changed was the will to address the region's needs with a more comprehensive set of interventions – backed by an explicit strategy, with specific outcomes.

Sheila Thornton, CVEP's vice president for workforce excellence, says business concerns over the lack of marketable skills and educa-







tion attainment among local workers was the major impetus for a more intensive approach. She points to a survey of major companies that indicated 80 percent of their job recruitment was focused on attracting workers outside of the Coachella Valley.



**CVEP's workforce excellence team.** The need for workers with better skills and education led the organization to take a more comprehensive approach to college and career readiness.

"Simply put, the local population didn't meet the needs of our employers. They were also frustrated with the lack of basic soft skills among local job candidates, in areas like critical thinking, communication and a customer service orientation," Thornton says.

"All agreed that we had to do something if we were going to reverse the trend and have our local graduates match the real needs of employers."

In 2012, CVEP worked to align the various initiatives taking place under a single strategic plan, the Coachella Valley Regional Plan for College and Career Readiness, which has the broad agreement of school administrators, local universities and business leaders across the Coachella Valley.

The plan sets ambitious goals, including enrolling nearly 7,000 high school students – roughly one-third of the Valley's high school enrollment – into education programs that offer a path

### Coachella Valley Education/ Workforce Initiatives

Students in career-related academic programs:	<b>6,979</b>
Students receiving scholarships since 2009:	<b>1,155</b>
Total dollars of scholarships since 2009:	<b>\$7.6 M</b>
Business partners offering internships:	<b>287</b>

*Source: CVEP Workforce Excellence internal documents*

to professional careers. Many of these students will emerge from career-related programs being offered to thousands of young people at elementary and middle schools throughout the Valley.

It also sets a goal of increasing high school graduation and college-going rates by 10 percent, and creating an endowment that will offer \$1 million in college scholarships to students every year. All within the next four years.

The constellation of education and career preparation activities directed at achieving these goals is substantial, and managed under several broad initiatives, including:

- **Career academies at the high school level**, which supplement core academic curricula with coursework and experiences that introduce and prepare interested students for careers in industries such as health care, energy and clean technology, and creative arts.
- **Initiatives to increase college access and success**, including college scholarships, mentoring and academic support to low-income students,



*Veronica Ruiz is a graduate of Coachella Valley High School and the University of Redlands. She is employed at RENOVA Solar, a local manufacturer of residential solar systems, assisting with business contracts.*



as well as partnerships with schools to expand students' access to public financial aid, through completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and maximizing access to Cal Grants.

- **Workplace learning opportunities with nearly 300 business partners** throughout the Coachella Valley, which offer students at the middle, high school and collegiate level career explorations in business and professional settings, job shadowing, business mentoring and internship opportunities.

## Attracting Philanthropic Investments

Coachella Valley education and workforce development efforts have secured investments from numerous local, state and national partners (public and private), including support from major foundations:

- **College Access Foundation of California** made a multi-year commitment in 2009 to encourage greater college going and completion among Coachella Valley youth, providing more than \$1 million per year for scholarships, supporting intensive post-enrollment services and investing in strategies to increase federal and state financial aid.
- **The Ford Motor Company Fund** designated the Coachella Valley as a Next Generation Learning Community (NGL), to aid the region in its work to increase college and career readiness. NGL helped CVEP lead the development of a five-year strategic plan that has garnered the buy-in of the region's three school districts, the local college and universities, and numerous civic, business and community leaders.
- **The James Irvine Foundation** has been a longstanding supporter of CVEP's work to promote college and career readiness, including support for career academies in local public schools that combine preparation for real-world professions with rigorous academics. Coachella is one of Irvine's regional "Linked Learning" sites.
- **The Desert Healthcare District** has been a key partner to CVEP in developing a quality health care workforce for the region, supporting career explorations, scholarships and internships for college students. It is also leading the way in connecting graduates to full-time positions in the health field.



## Business Perspectives on the Work in Progress

As CVEP and its partners work with thousands of young people to place them on a trajectory to better levels of education — and eventually, better jobs — the substantial fruits of this labor remain some years away.

Yet even at this early stage, business leaders recognize the benefits of these investments and offer a glimpse into how corporations are actively shifting their role in the local education and workforce landscape.



*Nelson Maravilla (right) received his bachelor's degree in Nursing from California State University, San Bernardino, with the help of a college scholarship from CVEP. He works in the Emergency Department at Desert Regional Medical Center, and plans to become a nurse practitioner or attend medical school.*

With studies forecasting the need for up to 2,000 additional health care workers in the Coachella Valley by 2016<sup>4</sup>, how the region prepares a local workforce to satisfy this demand will likely signal its ability to succeed in other fields.

Eisenhower Medical Center is located in the city of Rancho Mirage. Ann Mostofi, vice president of patient care and chief of nursing at the center, notes that Eisenhower has been a close health care partner with CVEP for years. However, she adds that the hospi-

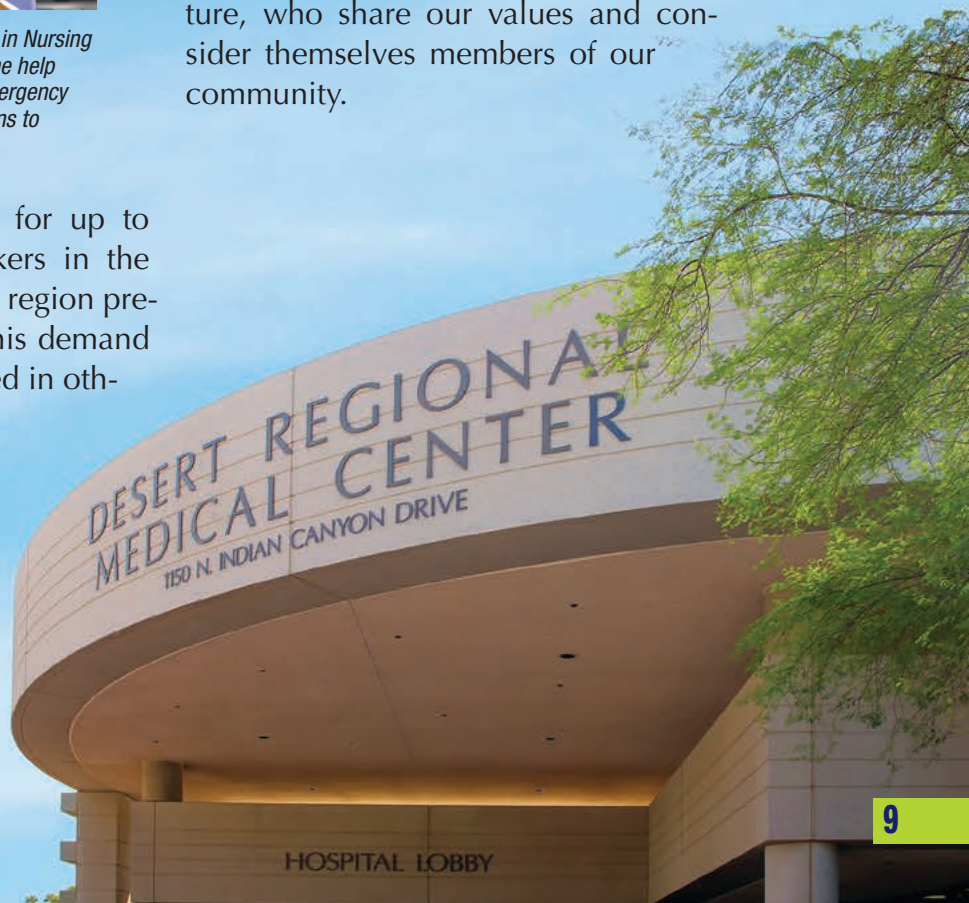
tal's workforce needs have required a national recruitment strategy.

"We've traditionally found it difficult to find the type of nurses in the Coachella Valley who can offer patients the full continuum of care, people with specialized training who help us avoid placing patients in chronic care settings," she says.

Mostofi also says the paradigm is changing, noting CVEP's leadership in initiating programs to prepare new nurses for emergency room, operating room and critical care positions, as well as the emergence of bachelors of science in nursing (BSN) programs offered by California State University at its San Bernardino and Palm Desert campuses.

She believes as the health care field places greater emphasis on community-based care, the work of CVEP will become even more important in the future.

"Institutions like ours will always need people with highly specialized skills, but we also value people who are part of our local culture, who share our values and consider themselves members of our community."





“...We value people who are part of our local culture, who share our values and consider themselves members of our community. CVEP is looking at the needs of our communities well into the future, and that’s a real asset to the Coachella Valley.”

– *Ann Mostofi, vice president at Eisenhower Medical Center*

“CVEP is looking at the needs of our communities well into the future, and that’s a real asset to the Coachella Valley.”

Hank Hudson, former head of human resources at Desert Regional Medical Center, says the social and economic benefits of local job growth in the health field cannot be underestimated.

“The health care profession is generally one of the highest paid fields in the Coachella Valley, along with education and the public sec-

tor. With the average nurse earning \$60,000 to \$70,000 after receiving his or her degree, this is really a ticket for many into the middle class,” he says.

“That’s why the work to place our young people in an environment to make sound career decisions is so important.”



**Q&A With Vincent Battaglia**, CEO of Renova Solar, a Palm Desert company that designs and manufactures residential solar systems.

**Q: How did Renova Solar get started?**

**A:** Part of my MBA work at UC Riverside focused on the business prospects of solar in the Valley. After graduating, I developed a business plan and in 2007 started my own company. Today, we’ve grown to 53 employees.

**Q: There’s considerable talk about the potential growth of the renewable energy sector in the Valley. What are your thoughts on this?**

**A:** I think market conditions signal continued growth for renewable energy in the Valley. As an example, our region’s energy, or “load” requirements are two to three times higher

than other areas of California. Solar can reduce the load requirement of our existing utilities significantly.

**Q: As a company that manufactures and installs solar systems, how have you found qualified employees?**

**A:** Before I became active in CVEP, I’d say nine out of 10 people I hired had no solar experience, so I had to do considerable on-the-job training. Today I work closely with College of the Desert, even helping them refine their program for certified energy practitioners. So COD is an important source for recruitment today. I’ve hired close to 15 new staff from their program in the past year alone.



## Lessons and Observations

An initiative of this size and scale is bound to face its share of uncertainties.

Natural questions arise, such as: will the jobs be there for college graduates who are ready to work? Will businesses remain committed to the effort in the face of inevitable economic swings and challenges? Can the region's K-12 institutions maintain their commitments to college and career readiness, in light of changing budget conditions or new state or federal mandates? Can local colleges and universities succeed in delivering graduates, given typically low-to-moderate graduation rates statewide?

As business, education and workforce leaders wrestle with these important questions and work together to build a 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce, early observations and lessons emerge that are relevant to other economic development and workforce initiatives taking place in California and elsewhere:

- **CVEP has created a platform that is leveraging considerable outside expertise and financial support.** While the genesis and the leadership behind the initiatives in the Coachella Valley are home grown, the level of strategic planning, and the buy-in and participation from local government, education and business leaders has helped

attract millions in public and private support from outside the region.

- **Workforce development is viewed as more than a means of supplying qualified workers; rather, it is seen as integral to economic development.** CVEP's mantra of "education is economic development" reflects the importance of the region's education system to its economic development planning.



*Anselmo Montez attends UC Riverside, where he is pursuing a degree in Public Policy. Over the summer, Anselmo interned at Raíces Cultura, whose mission is to create a space for artistic and cultural expression and strengthen the perspectives of the Eastern Coachella Valley.*

Leaders of the K-12 school districts, community college and four-year universities work as full partners with business and civic leaders at all levels of planning and implementation. By aligning education needs directly with its economic goals, Valley leaders are strengthening the foundation of their education system in a way that will benefit the region for years to come.

- **Creating a "college-going culture" will have broad economic and social implications for the future of the Coachella Valley.** A region that is home to hundreds of former Fortune

500 CEOs has more than one in four children living in poverty — a microcosm of an income gap that is growing throughout the United States.

The mission to create a college-going culture is central to the Coachella Valley's vision of itself as a region that is both economically vibrant and equitable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>1</sup>[www.cvihub.com](http://www.cvihub.com); <sup>2</sup>Coachella Valley Competitive Assessment, 8/2009; [www.cvepblueprint.com](http://www.cvepblueprint.com); <sup>3</sup>U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2010;

<sup>4</sup>"Charting the Course, a Coachella Valley Healthcare Workforce Needs Assessment," Desert Healthcare District, 2009.







# Unlocking Potential

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*Entities leading the Coachella Valley's work to improve college and career readiness:*

Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians ■ Bank of America ■ Best Best & Krieger ■ Burrtec Waste & Recycling ■ City of Cathedral City ■ City of Coachella ■ City of Desert Hot Springs ■ City of Indio ■ City of La Quinta ■ City of Palm Desert ■ City of Palm Springs ■ City of Rancho Mirage ■ Coachella Valley Unified School District ■ College of the Desert ■ Convention & Visitors Bureau ■ CSUSB-Palm Desert Campus ■ Desert Blood Services ■ Desert Regional Medical Center ■ Desert Sands Unified School District ■ Eisenhower Medical Center ■ Esterline Technologies ■ Gulf-California Broadcasting – KESQ ■ Humana ■ Imperial Irrigation District ■ JFK Memorial Hospital ■ Kaiser Permanente ■ Mex-American Entertainment Group ■ N Balance ■ Oliphant Enterprises ■ Ontable Media ■ Osborne Rincon ■ Pacific Western Bank ■ Palm Springs Unified School District ■ Penta Building Group ■ Rabobank ■ Riverside County EDA ■ Riverside County Office of Education ■ Silicon Springs Ventures ■ Southern California Edison ■ Southern California Gas Company ■ SunLine Transit Agency ■ Sunrise Company ■ The Desert Sun ■ Time Warner Cable ■ Union Bank ■ University of California Riverside ■ University of Redlands ■ US Bank ■ WalMart ■ Wells Fargo Bank

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