

# Opinion

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“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

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## VALLEY VOICE



**kenneth m. young**

### It's incorrect to call schools in Coachella Valley failures

I would like to correct any misperceptions that may exist about our public schools in the Coachella Valley related to their progress in meeting federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requirements.

Schools receiving Title I federal funds (based on poverty) must comply with the requirements of NCLB. To be compliant, all students must become “proficient” in mathematics and English language arts by 2014. Between 2001 and 2006, the number of students scoring proficient or advanced had to increase 10 percent. Between 2006 and 2014, that number must increase by 75 percent. Schools unable to meet these requirements are labeled “failing.”

Thousands of Title I schools across the nation have already been labeled “failing.” U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently noted, “Many schools, many districts and many states that were showing real improvement got labeled as failures under NCLB. That is dishonest, it’s demoralizing to teachers and principals that are working hard, it’s confusing to parents and students.” By 2014, nearly every Title I school in the nation will be labeled “failing.”

The U.S. Department of Education petitioned Congress to correct several flaws in NCLB. To date, congressional action has been put off. The Education Department recently announced that states can apply for waivers of some of NCLB’s requirements, providing more time to achieve its proficiency goals. This announcement sparked discussions about the number of schools identified as “failing” in the Coachella Valley.

#### English language arts

In 2002, 18 percent of the students in Coachella Valley schools receiving Title I funds scored proficient or advanced in English, 6 percent higher than the first federal proficiency requirement. That same year, 24 percent of the Title I schools in the state were proficient or advanced in English, 12 percent above the requirement. By 2010, 44 percent of students in Coachella Valley’s Title I schools were proficient or advanced in English, 12 percent below the requirement of 56 percent. The state Title I average or advanced in ELA for 2010 was 47 percent, 9 percent below the requirement. Over this eight-year span, Coachella Valley Title I schools closed the gap with the state by 3 percent.

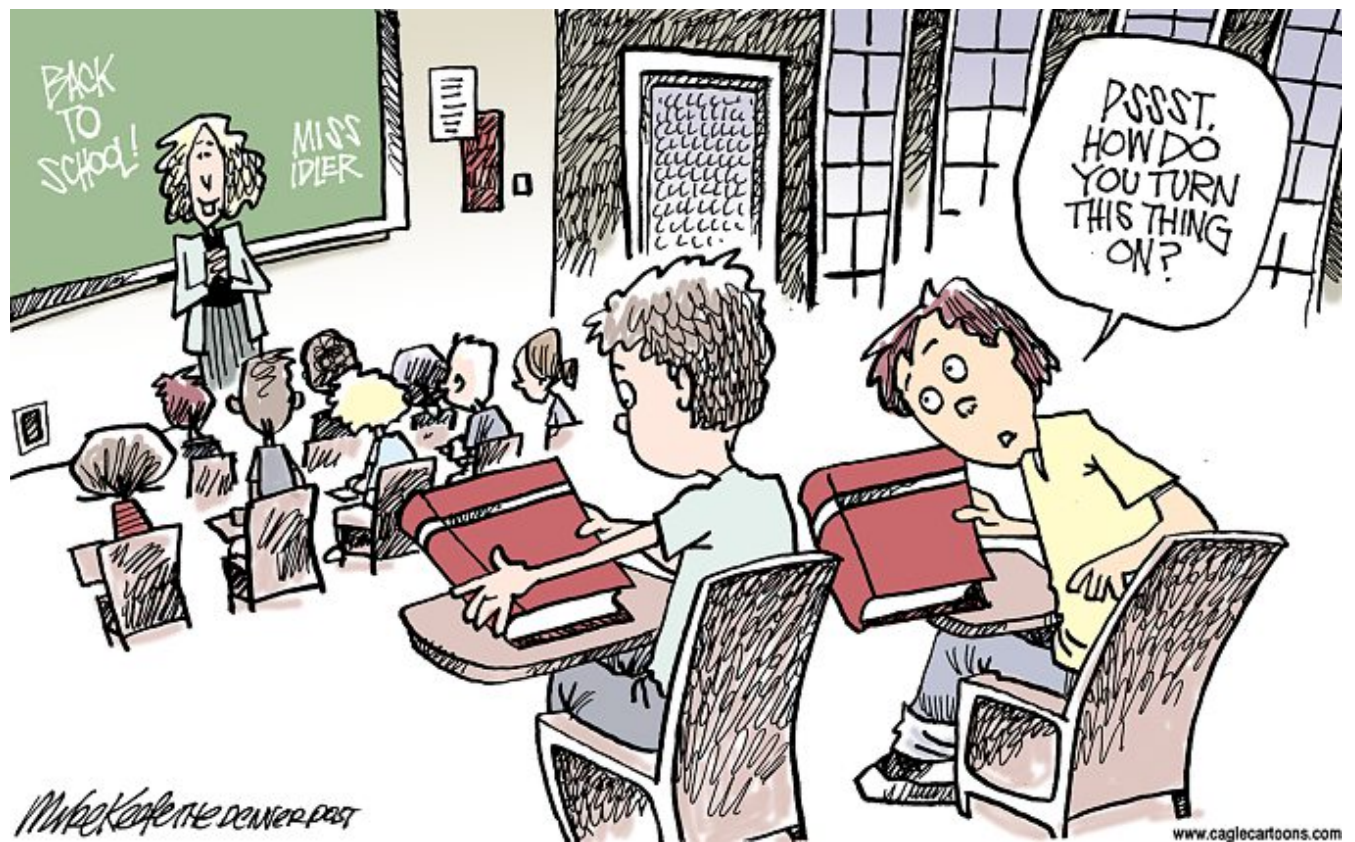
#### Mathematics

Coachella Valley Title I students’ first mathematics results were 21 percent proficient or advanced, 8.5 percent above the first federal proficiency requirement. That same year, 27 percent of the Title I students in the state were proficient or advanced in math, 14.5 percent above the requirement. By 2010, 52 percent of Coachella Valley’s Title I students were proficient or advanced in mathematics, 4 percent below the federal requirement. At the state level, the percentage of Title I schools proficient or advanced was also 52 percent. By 2010, Coachella Valley Title I schools closed the math academic achievement gap with the state. While these results are commendable, when we compare student demographic information along with their academic performance the “failing schools” myth is clear:

- 71 percent of Coachella Valley students are eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program, the national indicator of students living at the poverty level. The statewide average is 56 percent.
- 34 percent of Coachella Valley students are not fluent in the English language. The statewide average is 24 percent.

Every day our schools strive to achieve the goals of 100 percent student proficiency. From this data, we can clearly see they are anything but failing.

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## OUR VOICE

# Technology, innovation can bolster education

As students prepare to go back to school in the Coachella Valley, The Desert Sun encourages them and their parents, teachers and administrators to do all they can to overcome the obstacles.

We can celebrate the slow-but-steady progress that all three districts showed on the California Standards Test.

We are relieved by the changes in the No Child Left Behind Act, which will prevent the vast majority of our schools from being labeled as failures.

We are intrigued by creative use of new technology and by innovations such as the new ideas at Painted Hills Middle School in Desert Hot Springs.

This is the time of year for new backpacks, optimism and dogged determination to excel no matter the odds.

#### ‘Steady progress’

Despite a significant decline in resources because of the recession and Sacramento’s inability to resolve its budget issues, Coachella Valley students improved in English and math.

Only the Desert Sands Unified School District exceeded statewide averages in both categories, but Coachella Valley Unified showed the strongest local improvement in math scores, up 2.4 percent, and Palm Springs Unified had the biggest jump in English scores, up 3.4 percent.

Of course, major challenges remain. In Coachella Valley Unified, fewer than a third of its students were proficient in English. However, that’s understandable considering that 80 percent of the students are English learners. In that context, we again applaud the progress.

### Most improved in California standards tests

	COACHELLA VALLEY UNIFIED	DESERT SANDS UNIFIED	PALM SPRINGS UNIFIED
ENGLISH	<b>Oasis Elementary</b>	<b>John Adams Elementary</b>	<b>Landau Elementary</b>
	2011  29%	2011  61.1%	2011  45.6%
	2010  20%	2010  47.2%	2010  35.9%
MATH	<b>West Shores High</b>	<b>Desert Ridge Academy</b>	<b>Bubbling Wells Elementary</b>
	2011  26%	2011  53.9%	2011  71.9%
	2010  14.4%	2010  40.5%	2010  57.8%

THE DESERT SUN

### How did your school perform?

Check out the Standardized Testing and Reporting results for your school district and individual schools at a user-friendly, searchable database at [mydesert.com/star](http://mydesert.com/star)

### Higher standards left behind?

Last week, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that states would be able to seek waivers to No Child Left Behind, which mandates that all children test proficient in math and English by 2014. Standards increase every year, so even well-performing schools have found it hard to keep up — especially when resources dwindle.

In the Coachella Valley, 75 percent of traditional public schools missed federal requirements last year, up from 50 percent of schools the year before.

It seems like the nation is surrendering on a lofty goal set in 2001. But the reality is that without the added flexibility, 82 percent of schools would be listed as failures.

Duncan correctly calls the system demoralizing, dishonest and confusing.

“We want to shine the light on excellence,” he said.

### Alternatives?

Washington Post columnist Esther J. Cepeda shares her frustration with Chicago schools on this page. The way the system is supposed to work, if your child is in a poorly performing school, he or she can be transferred to a better one. But in her district, better schools are not available.

The situation is similar here. In Coachella Valley Unified, no school meets the standard, so there are few options. Desert Sands Unified has several options at all levels. Palm Springs Unified has options in elementary schools, but none in middle or high schools.

### Innovation and technology

The days of a No. 2 pencil and notebook paper are fading. All three of our districts are experimenting with technology, looking for frugal ways to keep students engaged in learning.

Instead of chalkboards, most classrooms

have LCD projectors that show websites, movies and other images. Most teachers have devices that display writing on the screen.

Also growing in popularity are student-response systems that allow students to answer multiple-choice questions with remote controls. This makes grading much easier for the teacher.

We’re concerned that as technology changes quickly, there will be a constant cost of upgrades. But there are potential savings, such as putting textbooks on computer notebooks. When a student reading a digital book finds an unfamiliar word, a click can provide a definition. This also can solve the problem of heavy backpacks.

### New learning environment

When Painted Hills Middle School opens Aug. 29 in Desert Hot Springs, it will be a model of modern innovation, including chairs that allow students to rotate, recline or rock. Research shows that when students can move around in their seats, attention and retention increases, according to the new school’s principal, Ryan Saunders.

The media center and library will have the look and feel of a coffeehouse. The school also will use a creative and flexible schedule.

### Doing more with less

The dream of smaller class sizes may be gone, but that doesn’t mean the end of academic success. What matters is smart planning, good teaching and using technology to motivate children to learn.

The educators The Desert Sun has talked to understand the challenges, but they don’t use them as an excuse. They know that education is the key to success.

Every student in Coachella Valley deserves a chance to go on to college, become a success in life and be an asset to the community.

We encourage everyone to do their part in helping the children succeed.

## INSIDE OPINION



### Esther J. Cepeda

No Child Left Behind waivers a sign of weak national leadership. **B10**



### Ray M. Smythe

Retired valley teacher shares tips for having a successful year. **B10**



### Letter of the week

Owners thank vets who helped Dexter recover from a snake bite. **B11**