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**HEADLINE:** Conference tackles Coachella Valley schools' needs;  
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**BYLINE:** BARBARA E. HERNANDEZ; THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

**BODY:**

PALM DESERT

About 70 representatives from Coachella Valley tribes, local school districts, cities and state leaders converged Friday on a college campus to discuss ways to improve education for local students.

The Towns and Tribes Education Conference, organized by the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, was held at the California State University, San Bernardino, Palm Desert campus.

Jointly sponsored by the College of the Desert, UC Riverside, the **Rose Institute** of State and Local Government, the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership and the Desert Sands and Coachella Valley unified school districts, the conference brought together officials and others to discuss education's importance to the community.

Attendees could take part in panel discussions that dealt with such issues as "challenges in social and cultural factors" and "exploring private and public partnerships."

Foch "Tut" Pensis, superintendent of the Coachella Valley Unified School District, said that his district's biggest challenge is keeping up with state testing. He said state restrictions make it difficult to serve children from different cultures who speak languages other than English.

"The kids have 18 months to be tested in English," Pensis said. "Not every child is the same, and it's just not feasible."

Low-performing schools should be getting more money, not the other way around, he said.

Joey Acuna Jr., field representative for Assembly Speaker Herb

Wesson Jr., said that the changing demographics in the Coachella Valley would continue to change education.

"Society expects a certain package," Acuna said. "We need to start educating the kids we have, not the kids we wish we had."

Claudia Galvez, who represented state Sen. Denise Ducheny, D-San Diego, said the biggest challenge for college-bound youngsters in the Coachella Valley is economics.

"They come from low-income families who work more than one job. Some don't have a lot of education," Galvez said

Luisa Armijo, a librarian at the Education Library Center at the Torres Martinez Indian Reservation, agreed that the challenge was more about poverty.

"We don't have the economic resources to send our kids to Stanford for the summer or to Princeton Review classes," she said.

The state budget is slashed, and there's no money for after-school programs, internships and other academic programs for children from low-income homes, Armijo said.

Acuna said some of the problems children must overcome are the stereotypes and negative opinions shared by some Coachella Valley residents.

"It will be something this valley will struggle with," he said. "Some people thought the Native American community was all right as long as they were poor, but now that they have money and are involved in politics, it's different. Others don't mind people from Coachella as long as they're not living near them or are speaking in Spanish."

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