

# OPINION

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The Inland Valley Daily Bulletin welcomes letters to the editor. Letters must include your name, address and a daytime telephone number. All letters subject to editing. Those more than 300 words will not be considered. Please limit submissions to one a month.

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# INLAND VALLEY Daily Bulletin

A MediaNews Group NEWSPAPER

## Region can reverse educational deficit

By Gregory Bradbard

At Inland Empire United Way, we are dedicated to investing in the health, education and financial stability of individuals in our community every day. Of those three, we recognize that education is the cornerstone of individual and community success.

In our community, the reality is that only 19 percent of San Bernardino County residents over the age of 25 have a minimum of a bachelor's degree, as compared to 28 percent for the nation. Furthermore, according to data from the 2011 California Human Development Report, the San Bernardino-Riverside area ranked lower than any of the other four top metro areas in the entire state in all three areas of education, health and income.

Clearly, we face an educational deficit in our own backyard, which in turn, impacts the quality of our labor pool and the region's overall community health and economic well-being.

So, how can we all play a role in preparing our future workforce for the challenges that it will be facing in the next decades? First off, continued improvement will require the involvement and resources of many. Our county's educational shortfall is reversible, but only when public, private, and nonprofit sectors work together — and that is our goal at United Way.

Students need the basics, and that is why we feed 1,000-plus children every weekend and provided over \$1.9 million in school supplies to needy students in the past year. But we

must also give them new skills by ensuring more students have access to technical training and higher education. This way they are well prepared for the challenges ahead, proactively contributing to their community's future and their own.

One issue often overlooked is the fact that too many children in our region do not attend college simply because of a lack of information about how to get there and a lack of financial resources to make it a reality. We need to level the playing field so that every child in every community has access to programs that support high levels of educational attainment and access to college and technical training programs.

A great example of the positive impact of collaborative work is the Online to College Program. Created in 1999, Online to College's central strategy is an early message of aspiration and goal setting for students, linking their current educational experience to plans for a college degree or technical training. The program helps them understand that higher educational attainment links to life satisfaction, career options, and lifetime earnings. The program begins working with fifth-grade students and supports them as they move through to middle and high school and then on to college.

Truly a collaborative effort, Online to College has served over 4,600 fifth-grade students in partnership with Ontario-Montclair School District, Chaffey Joint Union High School

District, Chaffey College and the city of Montclair. Program participants who stay in the community and graduate from Montclair High have increased their college-going rate to an impressive 54 percent compared to the baseline of just 36 percent.

Inland Empire United Way has invested in this successful program and is working to support its expansion. United Way volunteers are rolling up their sleeves to read and mentor at local schools, meet the basic needs of students, and donate funds to extend its impact.

Enhancing access to post-secondary education accrues benefits for all, not just for some. The future prosperity of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. When a society invests wisely in children, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.

If you are a business or community leader with an interest in giving our students access to better life options and to building a brighter future for our workforce and region, then please join us as we expand our work or join other groups in your community doing the same.

For information about getting involved in programs like Online to College, contact Leslie O'Hare Sorensen, resource development administrator, Ontario-Montclair School District, Learning & Teaching Division, at 909-418-6331.

Gregory Bradbard is CEO and president of Inland Empire United Way.

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