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Agassi Hopes Charter School Will Be a Model

By JULIE DUNN

LAS VEGAS - At the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, the school day is eight hours, not the traditional six.

"That's a third more time on task," said Mr. Agassi, the tennis player, who founded the charter school, which opened in 2001. "It doesn't sound like a whole lot, but at the end of an education, instead of going to 12 years of school, you're going to 16 years of school."

Mr. Agassi, a native of Las Vegas, has made a big investment, both emotionally and financially, in creating the school.

Through private donations and benefit events like the annual Grand Slam for Children concert, he has raised more than \$23 million to build a campus in a neglected neighborhood in west Las Vegas neighborhood, which now includes a modern elementary school, a middle school and an arts and music building. Construction of a high school and a gymnasium is expected to begin next spring.

"I'm interested in seeing this school duplicated and used as a blueprint, a model for how our education system should be in this country," Mr. Agassi said. "I know that tennis has given me the opportunity to do a lot - and you need a lot of funding to support a school like this. You need a lot of private dollars so you don't have to play by the same set of rules, so to speak."

The school currently has 250 students in grades three through seven, and its first class is expected to graduate in 2009. Admission to Agassi Prep is by lottery; more than 300 children are on a waiting list.

The racial breakdown of the school this year is 88 percent African-American, 4 percent Asian, 4 percent Hispanic and 4 percent white. When the expansion is completed, the school will have 650 students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

"We're committed to adding a grade every year," said Mr. Agassi, who donates more than \$1 million a year to a foundation that supports the school.

Agassi Prep students are required to wear uniforms and repeat a "code of respect" daily. Both parents and students must sign "commitment to excellence" contracts.

"We expect a lot from our children," Mr. Agassi said. "And when you expect a lot from a child, it means that you think a lot of that child. I think that our standard of expectations teaches these children that they should expect a lot from themselves."

With more than 268,000 students, Clark County, Nev., which includes Las Vegas, is the sixth largest school district in the country, and one of the worst when it comes to student performance. When Agassi Prep opened in August 2001, none of the 150 children enrolled were at grade level in math, reading or writing. Nine months later, 86 percent were testing at grade level. On the standardized Iowa Test of Basic Skills, all of Agassi Prep's students placed at or above the national average last year, according to Kimberly Allen, the principal. One goal is often repeated: a 100 percent graduation rate.

Clark County spends an average of \$5,099 per charter school student. Agassi Prep receives that much in public funds, but adds private contributions to bring per-pupil spending to more than \$7,400.

"I grew up in this neighborhood and this school has changed it 1,000 percent," said Zina Cottrell, whose daughter N'Dea is an Agassi Prep fifth grader. "It is causing

everything else to step up. I'm definitely pleased that my daughter can go to a place like this."

Juli Stanley, whose son Ronnie is in fourth grade, is also enthusiastic.

"My son is getting a lot more choices here than at a private school that we were paying almost college tuition for," she said. "I'm very impressed with the passion that the educators here have."

Despite such praise, Agassi Prep has not avoided all of the charter school pitfalls. In early March, it was cited for failing to meet state laws regarding teacher performance reviews, teacher licensing and the reporting of student information. Ms. Allen blamed the problem on paperwork issues and promised that the school would be in full compliance well before the mid-May review date.

"The law gives any charter school a 90-day time frame to resolve the issues, and I know that they are working diligently to do so," said Craig Kadlub, director of public affairs for the Clark County School District. "My expectation is that they will come into compliance."

Mr. Agassi is confident that his method of combining public and private dollars can be used as a blueprint for charter schools nationwide.

"I hope that this system is one that is adopted elsewhere and that other communities will understand just what a difference this makes," he said. "I don't claim to understand the controversy that has surrounded charter schools through the years, but I know that a lot of them are struggling. This school is a statement that the model can work."

Mr. Agassi has also planned ahead so that the inevitable end of his tennis career will not affect the school's future.

"The good news is that I've created an endowment fund that will pay for the school forever, so we'll never be going back to anybody just to keep the lights on," he said.

"But I do understand that the longer I play, the better off I know that the school will be."

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