

# LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

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## **Agassi Prep students excel, but few come from nearby neighborhoods**

### **Charter school spends \$13,000 per student, charges no tuition**

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A sky bridge on the campus of the Agassi Prep Academy links two buildings, but its purpose is more motivational than functional.

Senior class members, the first in the school's eight-year history, will become the first to cross the bridge on graduation day June 12.

Not even Andre Agassi, the tennis superstar and school founder and namesake, has walked the William J. Hornbuckle III bridge.

"Crossing the bridge has become a goal that students can't wait to conquer," said Agassi, who never graduated from high school.

The three-story bridge symbolizes a future "where the sky is the limit," Agassi said.

As graduates celebrate their possibilities, school officials are wrestling with their own dream -- of making the school live up to its mission of serving the underprivileged.

Located just east of the intersection of Lake Mead and Martin Luther King boulevards, the charter school is in a neighborhood where one in five residents lives below the poverty line, according to U.S. Census figures.

But judging by its student demographics, the school seems to have drifted away from its mission of "creating a climate of hope" for some of the community's "most challenged students."

Only a third of the graduating class lives within a 2-mile radius of the school.

Some seniors live as far away as Summerlin and the northeastern neighborhood around Nellis Air Force Base.

Altogether, the 581 students at Agassi Prep, a K-12 school, represent 43 different ZIP codes in the Las Vegas Valley, with 20 percent sharing the same ZIP code as the school, 89106.

Ben Sayeski, chairman of the school's governing board, said wealthier communities such as Summerlin in northwest Las Vegas and Green Valley in Henderson are represented, but those neighborhoods might have only "one or two students" attending.

Only a quarter of Agassi Prep students qualified or applied for free and reduced price lunches this year.

On the other hand, 80 percent to 100 percent of students attending public schools near Agassi Prep qualify for free and reduced price lunches.

Also, their racial demographics are much different from Agassi Prep's. Reflecting a changing neighborhood, nearby schools like West Prep and Carson Elementary School have Hispanic enrollments ranging from a third to a half.

Hispanics at Agassi Prep account for 3 percent of the school's enrollment, while African-Americans make up 95 percent.

Agassi acknowledged that "not everything that has happened at Agassi Prep has been to our liking."

"As a start-up school, we've overcome many hurdles along the way to get to the place we're at today, which always takes longer than you would like," Agassi said.

The school has operated under an ambitious schedule, adding a new grade level every year.

"Some might argue we have moved too fast; but if so, it is only because we see daily that the earlier you interrupt the downward spiral, the more profoundly you can impact a young life," Agassi said.

To get kids ready for college, Agassi Prep has offered class sizes of 25 students or less. Its school day is a few hours longer, and its school year is two weeks longer than what is offered in the Clark County School District.

Tuition is free.

Public funding is supplemented with private donations. The school spends about \$13,000 per student, or more than twice what local public schools spend.

Agassi Prep seniors even got a free trip to France this spring, paid for by an anonymous donor.

Because of the opportunities the school offers, Agassi said the demand "has been overwhelming." Charter schools have open enrollment, so anyone can apply.

Sayeski does not fault any parent for wanting to send their children to Agassi Prep.

"Every parent wants what's best for their children," Sayeski said. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Besides its own popularity, the lack of regulations for charter schools has made it difficult for the school to realize its mission. Unlike public schools, for instance, Agassi Prep cannot enforce an attendance zone.

Charter schools are hybrids of public and private schools; they receive public funding but are not as regulated as public schools. They are viewed as alternative schools.

Agassi Prep is not in any danger of violating laws on racial balance, because enrollment is voluntary, according to Bill Arensdorf, director of fiscal accountability for the Nevada Department of Education.

Fewer regulations are supposed to encourage innovation in charter schools. But Andre Agassi has had to personally lobby the Legislature for tighter rules so the school could give priority to disadvantaged children from its neighborhood.

Because the school gets more applications than available seats, applicants go through a lottery system.

In 2006, Agassi got the law changed so the school could give preference to those living within a 2-mile radius.

This year, Agassi was successful in pushing for a bill that also would allow charter schools to give priority to at-risk students. Gov. Jim Gibbons signed the legislation.

Sayeski, the school's chairman, said the changes in law are bearing fruit.

For the 38 openings in kindergarten next year, preference will be given to 75 applicants who live within a 2-mile radius of the school.

Also, for the first time in the school's eight years, Agassi Prep is preparing a Spanish application form.

Linda Young, the Clark County School Board member whose district includes Agassi Prep, said she has never received complaints from parents who feel like their children are being excluded from the school.

Nor is there any outcry over the school's racial imbalance.

Rather, parents are more likely to complain about school issues like the high turnover of staff, Young said.

Larrisha Burrell, 17, a graduating senior, also recalled a staff turnover problem several years ago and said she had considered transferring to another school so she could play sports. The school offers just limited competitive sports.

Burrell, who lives near the school, knows of family and friends who are faring much worse at public schools.

She is grateful for Agassi Prep for the simple reason that "we have updated textbooks we can take home."

Wearing a black beret that she bought in France, Burrell said she enjoyed visiting the castles and Gothic cathedrals.

"Here you read about history in a book," Burrell said. "There, you actually get to see it."

Burrell wants to attend Concordia University in Portland, Ore., to study international business.

Of the 34 seniors, 25 have been accepted into a four-year college. All are graduating.

The daughter of a truck driver, Alexis Wallace said she will be the first person in her family to go to college.

Alexis, who lives near the school, is looking forward to attending Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.

"I doubt I would be going to college if I hadn't gone here," she said.

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