

LAS VEGAS SUN

Andre Agassi prep school graduates inaugural class

Each student in 'economically challenged' school to pursue college

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The first class of graduates from the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy celebrated Friday night with a bold attack on critics of the public charter school, which primarily serves students from low-income areas.

"Some along the way have short-sightedly labeled us as at-risk," salutorian Simone Ruffin noted in her speech during Friday night's commencement. "Well, we are at risk -- at risk of excellence, at risk of success," she continued, drawing enthusiastic cheers from the audience.

"We are at risk of having a class where 100 percent of the students graduate and go to college," she said.

The class of 2009 is prepared to do just that as all 34 graduates have been accepted to and plan on attending college in the fall.

The commencement of the first group of high school students is a major milestone for the school, which was founded by tennis legend Andre Agassi to serve what he called an "economically challenged" neighborhood.

"To have 100 percent of your seniors graduating is pretty exciting," Agassi said in an interview earlier this week.

At Agassi Prep, 26 graduates plan to attend a four-year college next year, while the other eight will go to two-year schools, school officials said.

"Tomorrow we will no longer be the lions of high school, but the cubs of college," said student body president Alexis Wallace. "But I'm OK with that because I would rather be a cub of college than a high school dropout."

In his address to students during Friday's festivities, Agassi emphasized how the students have been a success in what has been an experiment in education. As they move forward, they can look back on their experiences at the school for strength, he said.

"Tell yourself again the story of how you were a pioneer," Agassi told the students. "How you proved all the naysayers wrong; how you defied the odds and made your parents and teachers and that one old tennis player very, very proud."

Agassi said the graduation was a heart-wrenching time for those who have been involved with the students.

"It's emotional ... sad, in some respects, but in a good kind of way, like, I guess, watching your child go off to college," he said. "But soon, summer will be over with and we'll be back at it again because we've got future classes and future lives to look out for."

The school's achievement in sending the entire class to college is not the final marker of success, Agassi said.

"My hope for them (the graduates) ultimately is that they ... come back home, come back here ideally, but to this community, to this neighborhood, to this city, and make a difference for future generations," he said. "I think that's ultimately how we are going to define success."

Agassi Prep is different than most other county public schools. As a charter school, students are not charged for enrollment. The school receives a \$6,530-per-pupil allocation from the state and Agassi's charitable foundation supplements that with about \$6,000 more per student.

With the extra support, the school provides an additional two hours of instruction each school day, plus an extra two weeks of school each year. Students can also choose to participate in after-school activities for free.

Chancellor Marsha Irvin, who came to the school after being a regional superintendent in the School District for eight years, said Agassi Prep has an advantage in preparing students for college because of the help of donors.

"Those kinds of resources and having small classes really does make a difference in terms of helping children identify what is going to be best for them," she said. "The ratio is a lot smaller than in most schools and that just makes all the difference in the world."

Thanks to help from donors, every graduate this year received at least one scholarship to help pay for college. All together, the 34 students received more than \$257,000 to go toward higher education, the school said.

Agassi said the school has had a positive effect on the surrounding neighborhood.

"I think we've seen how this community has safeguarded this school; how they've protected it, how they've taken ownership of it," he said. "In an area that's economically challenged, we haven't seen crime or graffiti or anything of that nature on this campus, which is a beautiful testament to the human spirit and what happens when people start to have hope in their lives."

Ben Sayeski, president of the school's governing board of directors, thanked the students for their help in testing what he called the school's new model of education. He promised them it would spread to other schools.

"Much of the Agassi Prep model is based upon the fact that resources matter -- that two extra hours a day matter, that two extra weeks per year matter, that after-school opportunities matter," Sayeski said during the commencement on Friday.

"With every single graduate attending college, you have more than done your part to make the case that resources matter," he said. "But that's not where it ends, because we're going to take that message to the entire state. Every child in this state deserves the resources that you received and the outcomes that you got."