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At Agassi Prep, a big goal in sight



Desmnd Jetton, an Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy senior, will be among the charter school's first graduating class this spring. The academy has a predominantly black student population in kindergarten through grade 12. About 600 students attend, and 1,000 are on the waiting list.



Ashley Justice, left, cheers during a basketball game at Andre Agassi Preparatory Academy in December. Justice will be among the Class of 2009, the charter school's first-ever commencement this spring.

By *Emily Richmond*, Las Vegas Sun

When Ashley Justice arrived at Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy for eighth grade, she was uncertain what she would find.

She didn't know what a charter school was. All she knew was that her mother said it would be smaller, safer and provide a better education than the public middle school she would otherwise have attended.

What stood out to her upon entering the classroom was a stack of new textbooks on her desk.

"I was surprised we had new books," said Justice, now a senior at Agassi Prep. "I was wondering where all the kids' writing was inside. They were all clean and nice."

Agassi Prep, which has a predominantly black student population with many drawn from some of the valley's poorest neighborhoods, was founded to reverse the high dropout and low graduation rates among West Las Vegas students.

The school's formula includes longer instructional days, a longer school year, an intensive focus on core academics and per-student-spending that is almost double the district average, at \$13,233.

The school has been held up as a national model of a successful charter school by members of Congress, the U.S. Education Department and Oprah Winfrey.

A more important indication of the school's progress is approaching, as the first class of seniors graduates this spring.

As that milestone approaches, there are signs the formula is working. But the school has also seen high staff turnover and a need to continue to refine its approach.

Justice and other members of Agassi's first graduating class say they are keenly aware of the expectations of them.

The dedication last year of a footbridge connecting two campus buildings — it will be used exclusively by graduates as they walk to commencement — has served as a prominent reminder.

Desmend Jetton, a senior who has attended Agassi Prep since middle school, said he wants to blaze a trail of future academic achievement that will benefit schoolmates who follow him.

"I want colleges to say, 'I like this kid from Agassi, because of how well Desmend did,'" Jetton said.

Sponsored by the Clark County School Board, Agassi Prep opened in 2001 and has about 600 students in grades K-12. Charter schools receive per-pupil funding from the state, but operate independently with more freedom in instructional methods and staffing.

The initial outlay for the school came from Agassi, the tennis legend and Las Vegas resident, as well as corporations and foundations. The Agassi Charitable Foundation has continued to pursue donations and grants on the school's behalf.

Students are selected through a lottery system, and cannot be turned away for a lack of academic ability. The waiting list has more than 1,000 names.

The elementary program has earned top marks for academic performance on standardized tests and the middle school has performed well.

The high school has had a tougher time. For the 2007-08 academic year, the high school did not make "adequate yearly progress" and is on the state's "watch" list. A second year of low test scores will land it on the "needs improvement" list.

School administrators say their response has been to raise core academic requirements and place a renewed emphasis on college readiness in all grade levels.

Dottie Smith, who took over as Agassi Prep's high school principal in August, said her first priority was to reestablish a "college-going culture."

That's something the Agassi Charitable Foundation, which supports the school financially, wants as well. In November, the foundation hired Marsha Irvin, then the School District's northeast region superintendent, for the newly created position of chancellor over K-12 programs. As region superintendent, Irvin required campuses to emphasize college readiness at all grade levels.

Last spring, the Agassi high school hired its first-ever director of college access, Lisa Wolpowitz, who had worked for College Track, an academic enrichment program serving low-income students in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Private consultants have long helped students from more affluent families navigate the college application process, often charging thousands of dollars for their services. Wolpowitz said her goal is for Agassi Prep's students to receive the same advantages.

Once the applications are completed, Wolpowitz's focus will shift to helping seniors prepare for success as college freshmen.

Agassi Prep will be keeping close tabs on them, Wolpowitz said.

"Our plan is to follow them all the way through college graduation," she said. "It's not enough just to help them get in."

Clark County's public high schools have an average counselor-to-student ratio of 400-1, said Kim Boyle, the district's director of guidance and counseling.

The ratio of students to counselors at Agassi Prep is 60-1. The attention is particularly important for at-risk students who might become the first in their families to attend college, Boyle said.

“Having a role model at home who’s been through the college application process can really help,” Boyle said. “If a student doesn’t have that, the school counselor becomes even more important.”

Students say they welcome the attention from teachers and counselors, but turnover has been a concern.

Larrisha Burrell was a member of the first class of fifth graders when the school opened in 2001, and will graduate this spring. Along the way, she’s seen many of her teachers and administrators come and go, often without explanation.

It was most difficult when a teacher would leave in the middle of a semester, she said.

“Every teacher has their own method,” said Burrell, who wants to go East for college and study business administration. “If one leaves and another comes in and teaches in a different way, there’s a lot of confusion and it takes a lot longer to learn things.”

Smith is the third high school principal in as many years.

On the upside, Burrell said, she’s been challenged academically.

“When I was in eighth grade, my brother was a sophomore (at a public high school) and we had some of the same books,” Burrell said. “I felt like I was always ahead.”

For those who don’t keep up, there’s additional attention. Several students were identified at the beginning of the year as being at risk of not graduating. The school has surrounded them with intensive mentoring and support, Smith said.

At the same time, “We try to treat our students as young adults,” Smith said. “We talk to them about their personal responsibilities. You have to strike that balance, and give them space so they can grow.”

The success of the school, and the students, ultimately rests with the students themselves, said Justice, who has been nominated for the U.S. Military Academy by Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev.

“A lot of people here say they want a ‘normal’ school with lots of dances and things like that,” Justice said. “But we should do our own thing. As long as people see a vision for our school to be better, it will be better.”

In an interview with the Sun, Agassi acknowledged the symbolism attached to the first graduating class, and the anxiety some seniors might be facing as a result. But the charter school has always maintained high expectations for all its students, Agassi said.

Because the school can’t accommodate all who would like to attend, there’s an additional responsibility to make the most of this opportunity, he said.

He said he is looking forward to watching the first group of students offered that opportunity celebrate their achievement this spring.

“I can’t wait to watch every one of them walk that bridge,” he said.