

April 7, 2009

Andre Agassi testified on education policy issues at Nevada legislative session

Andre Agassi visited Carson City on April 1 to testify before the Nevada Senate and Assembly education committees advocating for children and education. Nevada lawmakers listened to Andre's testimony while considering three separate charter school bills. Bill SB391 would allow charter schools to serve its targeted population. AB489 and SB385 would create the Nevada Charter School Institute to explore regulation and oversight of existing charter schools, and better serve the charter movement. Below are his comments.

Good afternoon Chairwoman Parnell, Chairwoman Wiener, and fellow committee members. I'm Andre Agassi.

Thank you for sharing your time with us today. It is an honor to be here with all of you who are leading and guiding our state into the future. We came here today to talk about the future of education in Nevada. But first let me share with you what we've been doing and learning. It is a story of innovation, an iron will, and some very big hearts, and we believe that it is just the beginning of the story.

We began our foundation in 1994 and in spite of a demanding career at the time, helping children quickly became my real life's work. We opened the Andre Agassi Preparatory Academy as a public charter school in 2001. We wanted to create something bold and lasting. Our school is still a work in progress so we look at ourselves everyday with fresh eyes and ask how can we be more effective. This spirit of innovation drives our strategy at Agassi Prep and has created many success stories. Unfortunately, the educational system is often a confined environment, making it difficult for new thinking to thrive. As a reform minded school we have found the ability to maneuver and innovate to be an up-hill battle, combine that with a shortfall in funding, and it is unnecessarily hard to forge a new path. It is time to encourage and reward the spirit of reform. Why? Though we are all very proud of our state, the tough news is this, in every way you measure education, Nevada comes up short. In fact we rank at, or near the bottom nationwide in dropout rates, per pupil spending and college attendance. We are failing an entire generation of children. Out of 100 ninth graders, only half will even graduate. Only 10 will graduate college. That's 9 out of 10 young lives left unprepared for the 21st century. Not only is this a blemish on our system, it will take a heavy toll on our society in the future. I am here to ask you to do the hard work of reform. I know we can do better. We have to do better.

I personally know what it feels like to underachieve and come in last because I had slipped to an embarrassing low at one point in my career. My ranking was the tennis equivalent of being the state that comes in 50th. I knew I had to take ownership of my choices. And I learned a great lesson falling so low. It actually can become a dramatic moment for change. Being last in the country in education may sound hopeless, but I know it is a ripe opportunity to seize the situation, be bold, and re-prioritize. And I know first-hand that you make big news on the way up when you turn things around.

Our state is under the most difficult strain since its beginning, so there are no easy answers. But I am here to advocate for kids all across Nevada and make clear that we have to make more resources available to improve the reality our children face every day. We must also hold every educator and school more accountable for their performance. Our resources may be finite, but our children's potential is infinite. On their behalf, I ask that funding for the

education of our children be our greatest priority. I also ask that we harness the bold, can-do, resilient spirit that Nevada has long been known for, and direct that toward how we allow our schools to work. Our state became great by bucking the system when something didn't work, and by re writing the rules until they did. I am asking that we bring that ingenuity to a system that desperately needs fresh thinking. I thank you in advance for doing everything possible to make our children your number one priority.