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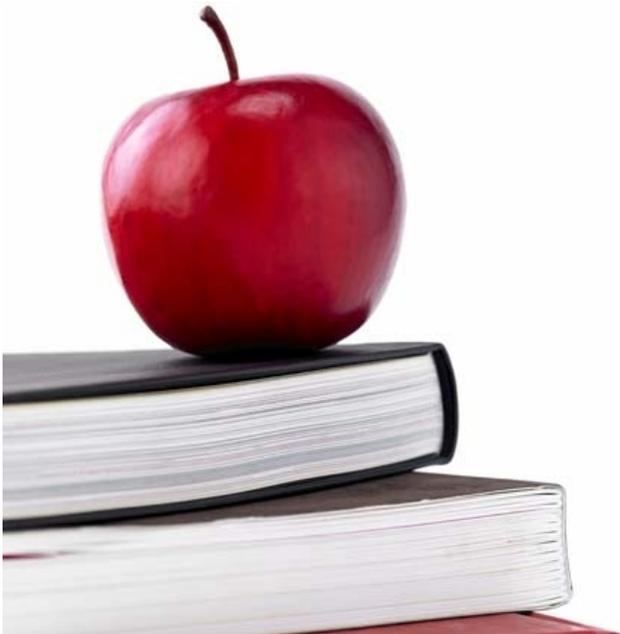
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Stampede for school choice



THINKSTOCK

By **GLENN COOK**
LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

To say valley parents are starving for school choice is an insult to hunger.

Demand for public school alternatives to typical neighborhood campuses is so great, the state is years away from being able to meet it.

Consider the annual race to place children in the Clark County School District's magnet programs and career and technical academies. More than two dozen such schools have about 21,000 students enrolled, and the waiting lists are getting longer. For the coming academic year, the school district received 2,527 applicants for 719 openings at magnet elementary schools; 4,636 applicants for 1,319 openings at magnet middle schools; and 9,013 applicants for 4,982 openings at magnet and career high schools.

Many charter schools face a similar stampede.

The Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, the state's most famous charter school, has an enrollment of about 1,200 and a waiting list of 750 children.

Discovery Charter School has an enrollment of 374 and a waiting list of 84.



Glenn Cook is senior editorial writer for the Review-Journal. His column appears Sunday in the Viewpoints/Opinion section.

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The Quest Academy will have 741 students enrolled this fall, and 315 children are on its waiting list.

The Somerset Academy, which has four campuses around the valley, has total enrollment of about 3,000 students, and about 3,400 children on its waiting lists.

The Doral Academy, a new charter school set to open in the southwest valley this fall, had about 1,800 children apply for its 750 spots.

(For school choice novices, charter schools are public schools that receive roughly the same amount of per-student funding from the state as public schools, but charter schools have the freedom to innovate and operate under a different educational focus. The state provides oversight to make sure tax dollars aren't squandered, but it isn't supposed to micromanage what goes on in the classroom. Charter schools do not receive tax funding for construction or building leases, one reason why it's so challenging to open them.)

Families who want to get their children out of the schools in their attendance zones but can't afford private school tuition still have options. Some charter schools have openings. Elissa Wahl, vice chair of the State Public Charter School Authority, has organized a charter school open house for Saturday, Aug. 3. Parents and students can meet representatives from several charter schools from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the RISE Education Resource Center on the property of Advent United Methodist Church, 3460 N. Rancho Drive.

Nevada is behind the curve when it comes to charter schools, partly by design. The state's education establishment was openly hostile to charters for years, to the point that entire years went by without a single school opening. Nevada has just 32 charter schools, 17 in Clark County, including a few statewide virtual schools and distance-learning programs. By comparison, Arizona has 540 charter schools and Utah has 93. There is considerably more education experimentation going on right next door.

The 2013 Legislature didn't provide a lot of help. The most important charter school bill of the session, SB311, would have allowed parents to turn a failing public school into an empowerment school and, eventually, a charter school, if 55 percent of them signed a petition. Obtaining facilities is the greatest hurdle charter schools face, and allowing them to take over struggling campuses — as some states do — applies serious competitive pressure. Partisanship did not kill SB311 — it passed the Senate 21-0, but died in the Assembly with Democrats and Republicans voting against it.

However, legislation that allows the State Public Charter School Authority to issue loans and bonds passed, giving charters some new help in opening campus buildings.

It says a lot that so many parents are eager to take a chance on a charter school — even a new, unproven one — rather than risk sending their child to a school district campus. Some politicians are figuring that out. Elected officials should attend next month's open house as well, so they can find out why parents are so desperate for more choices.

Glenn Cook (gcook@reviewjournal.com) is the Las Vegas Review-Journal's senior editorial writer. Follow him on Twitter: @Glenn_CookNV. Listen to him Monday's at 4 p.m. on "Live and Local with Kevin Wall" on KXNT News Radio, 100.5 FM, 840 AM.

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Bite at the Museum 3

Saturday, Sep 28, 6:30 pm
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