

# Southwest Fresno leaders criticize hiring of white teacher for Gaston school's cultural studies

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Hannah Furfaro

With just weeks before the new Rutherford B. Gaston Middle School opens in southwest Fresno, community and church leaders are calling on Fresno Unified School District to reconsider its hiring of a white teacher to instruct African-American, Latino and Southeast Asian studies there.

At an early morning news conference Monday, a small group of concerned citizens led by Rev. Karen Crozier met in front of the school on Church Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

People at the gathering said the new school, which is the first southwest Fresno middle school in decades, needs teachers who reflect the ethnic and racial background of its students.

Crozier and others were dismayed to learn the person hired to teach the school's three cultural studies classes is white. District officials initially considered hiring a teacher of color, she said, but ultimately hired Peter Beck, a former teacher at Hoover High School.

"We're just saying what the community wants. We didn't fight for a white male or female teacher to educate our babies," Crozier said. "We still are at these racial fault lines, and we want someone who will be able to think critically about those racial fault lines and how do we help heal, to restore the problems that have existed."

District spokeswoman Micheline Golden did not confirm any details about who the district interviewed for the position.

But she said Beck was the best pick for the job and one of only four teachers in Fresno Unified with experience teaching the three cultural studies classes he'll be responsible for at Gaston.

He has a decade of experience teaching Latino Studies courses and two years of experience teaching African-American courses, Golden said. Beck also has led Hoover's Men's Alliance for four years, a leadership class for at-risk teens. Golden did not know how many years Beck has taught Southeast Asian studies classes.

"We are always looking at the best, most experienced, most qualified who can provide the best education for our young people," she said.

Golden didn't directly answer questions about whether the district made any efforts to hire teachers from ethnic or racial minority backgrounds, but said job candidates are evaluated based on their experience, certifications and education.

District Trustee Cal Johnson, who represents the southwest Fresno community and was not involved in the hiring process, said he supports Beck for the position.

"I do not believe colorism trumps qualifications," he said. "I don't care whether it's white, whether it's black, brown or yellow."

One of Beck's former students, Sabrina Fink, said it was "heart-wrenching" to hear he was the subject of

the dispute.

Fink, a 2002 Hoover High graduate who is Hispanic, said she remembers Beck's enthusiasm and inspiring teaching style from taking his Chicano studies and Mexican history class. He'd frequently bring in speakers, write quotes and statistics on the whiteboard about Hispanic youth and organize culturally sensitive projects on traditional Mexican holidays.

"He inspired all of us," she said.

### **Changing neighborhood**

The controversy swirls just as Gaston prepares to open its doors to students for the first time next month. The school is set on a site that was once home to Carver Academy, 40 residential homes, a flood basin and a church. Part of the area was once known as "The U," a spot notorious for gang activity, crime and drug deals.

Now a sleek silver and yellow schoolhouse -- designed in a similar fashion to nearby Edison High School -- stands on the 26-acre plot.

The new school brings a sense of renewal to the area, which is home to the city's largest black community and includes residents from several other minority backgrounds. Until this year, southwest Fresno children have been bused across town to Fort Miller, Scandinavian, Tioga and Wawona middle schools. The last time southwest Fresno had its own middle school was in 1979, when Irwin Junior High shuttered its doors.

After waiting so long for a place to call home, the concerned citizens say school officials should honor their wishes to bring more diversity into the classroom.

### **'Not about him'**

Rev. Paul McCoy of New Light for New Life Church of God said he met Beck this month at a meeting with one of Gaston's principals and found him "highly intelligent." He's qualified for the job, McCoy added, but said, "we told him it's not about him."

Late Monday night, Beck confirmed through email that he met with McCoy and said he's made an effort to meet with other members of the southwest Fresno community since late June. He said he has not met with Karen Crozier but plans to do so soon.

He deferred other comments to district officials.

The concerns are far from personal, McCoy said. Hiring teachers who look like the students they teach simply helps ensure sensitivity about topics related to race, he said.

The district's latest report to the state shows 122 teachers -- or 3% of the teaching force in Fresno Unified -- are African-American. Just more than 22% of teachers are Hispanic, 64% are Caucasian and 8% are Asian. About 9% of children who attend Fresno Unified schools are African-American, 65% are Hispanic, 11% are Caucasian and 11% are Asian.

Cultural studies classes also help students better understand their own history, McCoy added.

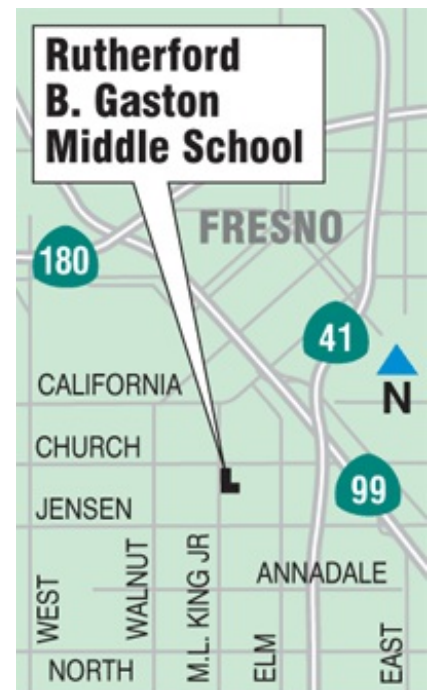
"We're all faced today with so much dysfunction and violence from young people, and that violence is simply because they don't know who they are, they don't know where they come from," he said at the news event. "They don't know the responsibility and accountability it takes to become a vital citizen in this country."

A former Fresno Unified student who attended the news event said she wishes she would have had more teachers of color throughout her schooling.

Nicole Morgan, 25, is now a graduate student at Howard University -- a historically black university in Washington, D.C. -- and said youngsters shouldn't have to wait until their college years to take classes from teachers with their same cultural or racial experiences.

"Although I was taught from an early age about my history, I unfortunately did not receive the same education going through the school system," she said. She added that students need to know their history "so they can know the potential for their future."

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