

Fresno Unified hires more legal help amid federal investigation

By Mackenzie Mays
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The Fresno Unified School District is bringing in longtime criminal defense lawyer [Carl Faller](#) to provide counsel amid a federal investigation into the school district's construction contracts.

Faller, who worked for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Fresno for 20 years and specializes in federal grand jury investigations, will assist Fresno Unified officials as they respond to a [federal subpoena](#) for documents concerning the district's use of no-bid contracts.

The investigation was sparked by a controversial \$37 million "leaseback" contract Fresno Unified signed with Harris Construction to build Gaston Middle School, which opened last fall. The 5th District Court of Appeal ruled in [June](#) that the school district improperly used the leaseback method of financing – which was designed to allow cash-strapped districts to build schools by going outside the traditional competitive bid process and handpicking a consultant to do the work on a pay-back basis.

Details about the subpoena, which was delivered to Fresno Unified officials last week, have not been released.

I have nothing to say to the public regarding anything.

Fresno Unified School Board President Cal Johnson

School board members are staying tight-lipped about the investigation, offering few comments and deferring questions to Faller.

Board President Cal Johnson said Thursday, "I have nothing to say to the public regarding anything."

Trustee Janet Ryan said that "it is in the best interest of everyone that our attorney answer all questions."

Trustees Brooke Ashjian and Carol Mills also declined to comment on the details of the investigation, but said they had asked to see the subpoena after the news broke last week and were not allowed access until Wednesday afternoon.

"I've been very vocal obviously in the past, and I intend to speak up for any kind of injustice. But...the proper authorities are looking at it, and they're looking at it in depth, so I'm going to let them do their job," Ashjian said.

We are cooperating in every way possible and will fully comply with the submitted request.

Fresno Unified spokeswoman Amy Idsvoog on ongoing federal investigation

Faller said Thursday that for now, the case will remain highly confidential.

"About all I can say is...we're cooperating in the investigation and have started the process of complying with the request in the subpoena. Other than that, I can't really make any comment," he said.

The district released its official statement Wednesday evening through Fresno Unified spokeswoman Amy Idsvoog, saying, "Fresno Unified received a subpoena from the U.S. Attorney's office last week. We are cooperating in every way possible and will fully comply with the submitted request."

Idsvoog did not respond to questions about Faller's contract by press time Thursday.

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