

Palm Beach Post: Indian teachers cleared to stay

By Cara Fitzpatrick

February 21, 2008

Sixteen Indian teachers working in St. Lucie County schools on a cultural exchange program through Florida Atlantic University have been granted visa extensions and could return to class as soon as Friday, officials said Wednesday.

The State Department approved the extensions Wednesday, but has not yet issued them, said St. Lucie Schools Superintendent Michael Lannon. Once the visas are issued, the teachers can return to work. The extensions are good until June 15.

The teachers, who have been on unpaid leave since Feb. 9, were given the word Wednesday at a news conference with school and university officials and Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, at the school district offices in Fort Pierce.

"We have good news," Mahoney told the teachers.

School and university officials and Florida lawmakers made several requests to the State Department to extend the visas after it was discovered that the university applied for the wrong type of visa when it brought the teachers here from India. The visas, short-term with no option to extend, expired Feb. 9, giving the teachers just 30 days to leave the country voluntarily or risk deportation.

The error left six St. Lucie County public schools without the 16 teachers in the middle of the school year and in the midst of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Substitute teachers covered the classes, at a cost to the district of \$70 per teacher per day.

On Wednesday, the teachers expressed relief that they will be allowed to stay and concern that their students might have fallen behind in their absence.

Ravichandra Subramanyam, a sixth-grade math teacher at Southport Middle in Port St. Lucie, said he had been coordinating his lessons plans with his team leader, another teacher, at his school.

"Luckily, I got a sub who can teach math," he said.

The university, which recruited the teachers from India to fill much-needed positions in math, science and special education, has been criticized for its handling of the program and how much the teachers have been paid.

In a sharply worded letter to FAU last month, the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs chastised FAU for recruiting teachers under a short-term scholars program designed only to allow foreign students to study up to six months at the university.

The department also blasted FAU for paying the teachers "poverty" wages.

The teachers, all of whom have master's degrees and several years of experience, were paid about \$5,000 each the first half of the school year. The school district was paying typical salaries for the teachers, but the sums above \$5,000 in the first semester went to FAU to run the program.

Their salaries increased commensurate with their experience and education in January, after they were removed from probationary status, said Susan Ranew, the district's assistant superintendent of human resources.

Of 17 teachers recruited, 16 were asked to stay when the probationary period ended.

FAU President Frank Brogan answered some of that criticism Wednesday when he met with the university's board of trustees in Boca Raton. He told trustees FAU is responsible for the problem with the visas and is reorganizing the department that dealt with the paperwork and giving the responsibility to another office.

"At the end of the day, the error was ours," Brogan told trustees. "It is far more than an apology. We are going much further in regard to assure it never happens again."

Trustees were upset that they learned about the State Department's rebuke in a newspaper story Saturday rather than hearing about it from Brogan.

"I did not know about the letter. I read about it in The Palm Beach Post and, like everybody else, was not happy that that's where I learned about it," said Norman Tripp, the trustee board's chairman.

Brogan said the Indian teachers were aware of the salary, which would be increased to a normal rate this semester under the contract they signed.

"The first semester, they were as much students as they were teachers," Brogan said. "They are learning about the state assessments, the standards, and teaching here."

The teachers also were told by university officials that their visas could be extended another year or more if their teaching was satisfactory. That issue still has not been resolved, but Lannon said there is some possibility that the district could sponsor individual teachers for additional years.

Lannon said the district also is discussing ways to compensate the teachers for the unpaid eight days of school they missed.

On Wednesday, Mahoney questioned the teachers about the conditions in which they had worked and lived this year. He gave them his personal cellphone number to call if they felt uncomfortable speaking in front of an audience.

"I was afraid I was going to find people starving to death, and that's not good because I'm running for reelection," he joked.

Joshua John, a seventh-grade math teacher at Allapattah Flats K-8 School, said he was worried only for his students.

"We knew it would work out," he said.