

## Fiscal strength is goal of newest board member

**BY PEGGY GOETZ IRVINE WORLD NEWS**

University Park resident Gavin Huntley-Fenner says Irvine Unified is an example of what's right about public education.

He says he is excited about the chance to help the district move forward, despite the challenges of tight funding from the state.

He was appointed Jan. 25 by the school board to fill the seat left vacant when Steven Choi stepped down in December to take a seat on the City Council.

Huntley-Fenner, 40, has jumped into the work of the board with enthusiasm since he was sworn in Feb. 1.

His priorities as a board member are to restore fiscal strength to the district and to help extend the district's leadership position beyond test scores. He wants to see achievements and leadership in a broader spectrum of educational areas and activities, including legislative action.

The immediate issues facing the school district and the board are contract negotiations with teachers and the fight to preserve school funding levels mandated by state law, Huntley-Fenner said this week.

"The teacher issue is critical and I would love to get that settled," he said.

The best way to save the state funding levels, he said, is to engage in the debate at the state level. Irvine Unified's needs are different from the large urban districts in the state, he said, and it is important to keep the needs of districts like Irvine in the game.

"The onus is on us to set the terms of the debate and put an emphasis on the debate," he said. "We must be clear about our needs. If we don't say it, no one will."

Other state issues to keep in the forefront include getting an equal share of funding for Irvine and increasing local control over how money is spent. The federal government also needs to be pressed to cover its full share of special education, he said.

In the long-term Huntley-Fenner hopes to see achievements by at-risk students, under-represented students and girls in science and math. He wants to apply his background in business and strategic planning to district management and to see diversification of local sources of financial support. He would also like to see the school district work with the city to increase the supply of affordable housing so young teachers and other workers can live in the city where they work.

Huntley-Fenner was born in England, but immigrated to Guyana, South America, when he was 2. His father was a mining engineer and his mother taught elementary school. Along with his sister, they all immigrated to New York when he was 12. He was sent to high school in the Bronx, more than an hour and a half commute each direction. He graduated when he was 16 and started college at the University of Rochester.

He took some time off and worked and considered becoming a professional musician but returned to college on a scholarship to Vassar College to pursue his passion, cognitive science.

He graduated from Vassar in 1990 and went on to MIT for a doctorate in brain and cognitive sciences in 1995. His dissertation was on language development in children. He studied computer sciences and logic as well, all

"very quantitatively oriented," he said.

He came to UC Irvine as a faculty member in 1996 and settled in University Park with his wife, Beth. The two decided to hyphenate their two last names when they married 12 years ago.

After five years of teaching and doing research, Huntley-Fenner decided he wanted to expand his base. Instead of going for an additional degree in business, he worked with McKinsey and Co. as a business consultant as a way to get hands-on training. That meant lots of travel and time away from his family.

Last year he started work as a scientist and safety expert for Exponent. The company now has an Irvine office.

Huntley-Fenner became involved with Irvine Public Schools Foundation as part of the community leadership program and also worked to raise money for class-size reduction. He has stepped down as a foundation board member to devote his focus to the school board.

The Huntley-Fenners have two children, 5-year-old Miles and 10-year-old Walden. Miles, who has autism, is part of the special education program at the Early Childhood Learning Center. Walden is in fourth grade at Vista Verde in University Park.



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