

How will Shawnee Mission schools recover after losing two important Black leaders? | Opinion

BY THE KANSAS CITY STAR EDITORIAL BOARD
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Diversity coordinator Tyrone Bates Jr. and success coach Andre “Coach Dre” Carnegie are both leaving the district. Students need diverse role models. smsd.org; Twitter/DreSuccessCoach

Speaking directly into the microphone as she addressed the Shawnee Mission School Board of Education Monday evening, Jill Jolicoeur, a parent of children in the district, encouraged the board to follow its own strategic plan to create an inclusive learning environment for all students.

Losing the district’s first diversity, equity and inclusion coordinator and its only student success coach — both men of color — is not a sign of progress, Jolicoeur told the board.

“It’s hard not to see that as a step back,” Jolicoeur said.

She wasn’t wrong.

Later, Kim Whitman, another district parent, shared similar concerns about the recent resignation of diversity coordinator Tyrone Bates Jr., who will step down at the end of the school year to focus on his own consulting business.

And Andre “Coach Dre” Carnegie, the district’s student success coach and a well respected mentor, is on the way out, too. Last week, Carnegie announced his resignation effective at the end of the school year, according to The Shawnee Mission Post.

“The best outcome would be to clone Coach Dre,” Whitman told the school board. “Unfortunately, that is not possible, and sadly the district no longer has one Coach Dre.”

Jolicoeur and Whitman are members of the district’s equity coalition group that helped foster Shawnee Mission schools’ diversity initiatives. In a district with an ever-changing student body with different needs, losing two Black male educators could be a sign that something is amiss.

Not so, district officials told us. Breaking down decadeslong systematic issues requires buy-in from every stakeholder in the district. Patience is needed. Progress is not predicated on one or two individuals, district leaders contend. We don’t disagree. The work for a more equitable educational experience for every child in the district must continue, though.

On Monday, during the public comment portion of the board’s monthly meeting, several speakers questioned the district’s effort to address challenges faced by marginalized students in Shawnee Mission schools. All children — especially those of color in a still predominantly white district — need representation, concerned parents told the school board.

Not only must the district replace Bates and Carnegie with qualified candidates of color, but the district should also expand its student success mentor program to each school and make the diversity coordinator position a leadership one with director in the title.

Then and only then, will we see how serious the district is about its commitment to its own strategic plan, concerned parents said.

Carnegie’s roving position throughout the district has now been relegated to just one site, Apache Elementary School. For parents such as Jolicoeur and Whitman, the change contradicts the district’s stated goal to increase diversity among district staff.

Bates was instrumental in developing a program to recruit and retain professionals from marginalized backgrounds, and helped establish student equity leadership teams at the district’s high schools, officials said. Carnegie spent years mentoring an untold number of students throughout the district.

Financial restraints kept the success program from expanding, district officials said. Outside groups with such expertise are always welcome to bid their services. But resources for more than one full-time mentor are limited.

In the absence of Bates and Carnegie, the work must continue. Superintendent Michelle Hubbard knows this, as do other leaders in the district officials said. Hubbard's executive leadership team includes two African American men, not including Bates, one Hispanic man and three women, none of whom are African American, according to district officials.

Creating a fully unified, equitable and inclusive culture is doable. But after losing two of Shawnee Mission schools' top Black leaders, every stakeholder in the district. must demand the district follow its own plan to create an inclusive educational environment for all students.

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