

New set of Fresno leaders affirms support for Gaston Middle School teacher

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By Hannah Furfaro

The breezy front entry to the new Rutherford B. Gaston Middle School has become a makeshift podium for prominent southwest Fresno leaders over the past few weeks, where a splintering has taken place among the black community over who should teach their children when school starts this month.

On Friday, a dozen church and community leaders set a new tone during a media event in front of the school, this time calling for trust and acceptance of a white teacher hired to lead cultural studies classes there.

"One of the things we advocate for is solidarity and unity, not just in southwest Fresno, but throughout this city," said pastor Jymme Foote, president of the West Fresno Ministerial Alliance. "This issue has raised a hornet's nest of debate, but I believe the entire community has goodwill in mind because we recognize it's our children we're talking about."

The hiring of Peter Beck, a former Hoover High teacher, has rustled frustration among some Fresnans who say a teacher of color would be a better pick. A media event at the school last week led by a group of church leaders including the Rev. Karen Crozier called on school officials to reconsider Beck's hire in favor of someone who looks more like the diverse body of middle schoolers who will attend Gaston.

The comments quickly ignited a public debate over race and the school district's hiring policies, with some slamming the critics and others declaring their support for Crozier's group. On Tuesday, a group led by the Rev. Floyd Harris, of New Light for New Life Church of God, said Crozier's comments represent "what the community wants" in an ethnic studies teacher.

The small group gathered for the early morning event Friday drew a clear line between themselves and Crozier's supporters, noting their desire for more teachers of color while affirming support for Beck and school administrators.

"We admire the administration for what they have done and we encourage them to reach out, and sometimes you have to go out to recruit and find people, but it's important that our children, every single one in this district, feel accepted, feel loved and feel cared for," said Mary Curry, a former Fresno Unified trustee.

Fresno City Council Member Oliver Baines, Fresno Unified Trustee Cal Johnson, Fresno Unified Superintendent Michael Hanson and Golden Westside Planning Committee member Bob Mitchell stood alongside several church leaders and members of the Gaston family at the event.

Harlan Gaston, the son of the school's namesake Rutherford "Bud" Gaston, said he was surprised to hear the criticisms and stands in full support behind Beck.

"I think what (Crozier's group) should have done is talk to the person who they hired first, and find out what his background is, what his knowledge is and I think this would have been laid to rest," he said.

This story will be updated.

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