

Why These Teens Are Fighting to Learn Multicultural History in School

Two teen sisters are fighting to make Black and Indigenous history a part of American history in school. They are holding school districts accountable for equitable and just public education. Here's why it matters.

By **Tara L. Conley**

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When sisters Nene and Ekene Okolo decided to bring their community together, they transformed an entire school district's curriculum in southern California. Their passion: fighting to bring ethnic studies classes to their school district.

It all started when Nene and Ekene decided to take on San Diego's Poway Unified School District (PUSD) for its history of racial bias in school curricula. The sisters created an anonymous Instagram account, Black in PUSD ([@blackinpusd](#)), and sent out polls to their followers using the platform's story feature. "We had a daily segment on our Instagram story called, 'What they didn't teach you in school,'" says Nene, 19.

They hoped to educate followers about racial justice, [the prison industrial complex](#), racial disparities in health care, and [redlining](#). The success of their Instagram profile inspired them to create a website, [Ethnuccion](#), as well as a podcast series, [Culture Talk](#), that encourages people to educate themselves on history "beyond a Eurocentric lens," says Ekene, 16.

The momentum of their advocacy campaign forced people to take notice—including PUSD. Their Instagram stories on racial bias provided the sisters with enough evidence to approach PUSD's district leaders with a list of demands. "We wrote down a list of proposals and sent them to the school district," says Nene. "The proposals exemplified what we wanted to see changed, and what policies we wanted to see implemented. Since then, our district has installed 12 additional Black teachers, and one Black assistant principal."

They also pressured the district to implement ethnic studies courses in its 2021–2022 curriculum. Christine Paik, chief communications officer of PUSD, says the experiences shared by students and alumni on the Black in PUSD Instagram account were eye-opening and “heartbreaking to read.” It was also enough for district leadership to take immediate action. “We saw it as a call to action for change,” says Paik. She says district staff worked closely with Nene and Ekene, as well as other student leaders, parents, and community members on a racial equity and inclusion plan, which includes hiring more diverse staff and clear, strict consequences for those demonstrating racist behavior. The superintendent and other district leaders are proud of the students who came forward, says Paik.

Why Change is Needed in Schools

Besides normalizing Black, Indigenous, and Latinx history as American history, courses examining the ways race and culture affect people's experiences have been shown to improve the attendance rates and academic performance of students from racial and ethnic minorities, according to a 2016 study by Stanford University. And as our country's current racial reckoning underlines, there's still much work to be done to

understand and tackle racism. "We need to be the generation that ends the cycle of prejudice and bias," says Nene. "It's better for us to start these reforms now and avoid the consequences later."

The Okolo sisters continue to carry on a legacy of student organizing, civic engagement, and political activism in the United States. Black youth like the Okolos have taken on this risky fight for equitable education, even though they are disproportionately policed and discriminated against in schools. José Vilson, former New York City public school teacher, current doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University, and author of *This Is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education*, says there's precedence for young people of color demanding school change. He points to Ruby Bridges and the Little Rock Nine, who braved racism daily and often violent mobs as they attempted to integrate white schools in the '50s and '60s. "A lot of this is not new," says Vilson. "We have a genetic memory."

Other experts recall student protests in the 1960s, particularly the East L.A. walkouts. "Mexican-American students fought for accurate histories of their communities," says Bianca J. Baldrige, Ph.D., associate professor in the department of educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and author of *Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work*. "Young people have always been revolutionary."

Part of it, according to experts, has to do with America's educational institutions' refusal to confront a sordid history of anti-blackness and American exceptionalism in the public school system. "If you refuse to see Black people as human, or something other than human, that's reflected in the curriculum. You have to believe in the greatness of Blackness in order to include it," says Dr. Baldrige.

Echoing Dr. Baldrige, Ekene says students of color need to see themselves "represented in history and in literature beyond topics like slavery and segregation." Even when schools do cover such topics, they're usually glossed over or watered down in the curriculum, she says. "We need to see ourselves represented in the classroom." And so the teens are among a growing group of Black and Indigenous students fighting to normalize their histories in school lesson plans. They are fighting for emancipatory education that centers their lives, histories, and voices.

How Parents Can Be Allies

The political pressure outside of the classroom can't be ignored either. Students are not only up against their local community school boards, but also the federal government, as the Trump administration works to condemn educators, journalists, and scholars who confront America's so-called exceptional history.

"There's always a risk," says Dr. Baldrige. "We have to be allies to young people, we have to step in and make sure we protect young people at this moment." Vilson adds, "We have to partner up [across generations] to build a better world around us as burgeoning ancestors. We have no option."

Nene and Ekene are no doubt taking a risk by openly identifying themselves in their social media movement as opposed to the many who choose to remain anonymous. "In the beginning, we definitely got a good amount of hateful comments and hateful messages," says Nene. "That didn't discourage us. Because of overwhelming support, we felt it was OK to reveal our identities."

The Okolo sisters agree with the experts that parents and other adult allies must step up to support young people's advocacy efforts, especially now in such a politically charged moment. "It's important for parents and adults to educate themselves on these topics regarding racial justice," says Nene. Ekene adds, "Parents should start having conversations with their kids about culture and race, and respecting others. It's never too early to teach kids about different races and different cultures and respecting other people from different backgrounds."

Perhaps that's one lesson parents and other adults can take away here: As young people of color fight to learn and hold schools accountable, adults across all racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds must join in the fight. "Angry parents can do a lot of good—just like angry students can do a lot of good," says Dr. Baldrige. "I encourage parents to knock down doors with students."