

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

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.

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

Echoing Dr. Baldrige, Ekene says students of color need to see themselves "represented in history and in literature beyond topics like

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."