

# A TURNING POINT

**A****MID NATIONAL MEDIA** attention following a viral racist attack on Nov. 15, minority students spark community-wide discussion about how to combat underlying normalized racism at East moving forward through awareness, clubs and policy at the student, school and district levels.

“The video was just a turning point,” senior Jax Taylor, a Black student who spoke at the student-led walkout on Nov. 28, said. “If people never get called out, they’ll keep thinking that what they’re doing is OK. They might make fun of you, which sucks, and they might not change. But they could. We called someone out for making jokes at the walkout, and he apologized.”

During senior Natalia Rios’ sophomore year, a student told her she “crawled across the border and ran past border patrol” to get to East. She’s Latino and has been called a bea\*\*\* and alien in the halls. Junior Kevin Gomez received an anonymous voicemail telling him to “go back to where he came from.” Both Rios and Gomez spoke at the walkout and believe that racism stems from insensitivity about minority cultures.

“Other students think stereotypes are funny, but we take it seriously and get upset,” Gomez said. “If anybody doesn’t know why we are upset, they should ask us this question: ‘Why does this upset you?’ And we will explain. We want people to learn.”

Rios says the main issue at East is the lack of a support system for minority students. Though she appreciates existing programs like Race Project KC and Youth Equity Stewardship, she notices issues like low membership levels, lack of public promotion and inconsistency of events. English teacher and YES Sponsor Samantha Feinberg has been working to improve diversity, equity and inclusion programming at East since co-founding Race Project KC in 2014.

“Last year, [Race Project KC] was mostly Black female students,” Feinberg said. “Two years ago, we had more white students and were like, ‘Gosh, we need to get more students of color involved in this group.’

Usually we have five really interested people and then they each bring a friend.”

Rios and Taylor are currently working with other students and teachers to start a Multicultural Student Union, taking inspiration from Shawnee Mission and Olathe School District friends in Black Student Unions and Latinos of Tomorrow Clubs. Race Project KC’s goal is to educate students about local racial issues, but the MSU will be a safe space for students to celebrate their cultures and discuss personal experiences. Their ultimate goal is to start a program that will be passed down to underclassmen and sustained indefinitely, but they believe that will take more student support than they currently have.

“The lack of general student support, the lack of teachers of color, the lack of resources is frustrating,” Rios said. “We just want to have a safe environment for students of color where they can go to talk about issues. It wouldn’t be a group closed off just for people of color. We want everyone who cares about safety at school. We don’t really have the best way to go about it right now because it’s hard to get through to students in East’s culture.”

East’s culture is in the national spotlight after a video of a white student calling sophomore Brey Brown, who is Black, slurs and pushing her was posted on a Black news media outlet, the KC Defender, on Nov. 28. The Instagram post has over 23,000 likes.

Since then, outlets like NBC News and Daily Mail also covered Brown’s story after her nose was broken during the fight and she was suspended. The white male student’s disciplinary consequences within school are confidential, but he has since been charged with felony aggravated battery.

“If the school doesn’t want to have national media coverage, then they should’ve addressed the culture of racism decades ago and been more proactive,” KC Defender Executive Director Ryan Sorrell said. “Some [East] students told me that they’ve been called slurs and slaves at school since they were freshmen.”

The KC Defender has broken other stories involving racist incidents within local school districts like

Olathe, Park Hill and Lee Summit leading to policy changes, according to Sorrell.

“The media attention was a good thing because it encouraged students to stand up for themselves, even from different schools,” Brown said. “I’ve known about racism at East for years. Even my freshman year, I was walking in the hallways and heard people yelling racial slurs, like saying the N word with a hard R. This year, it’s not going to get swept under the rug.”

Rios, Taylor and other minority students are calling for the district to update their disciplinary policies. All SMSD administrators follow a standard disciplinary matrix listing offenses from Level 1 to 4 with recommended consequences ranging from “Informal Talk by the Staff Member” to “Expulsion.” According to Associate Principal Kristoffer Barikmo, the use of racist slurs currently falls under the Level 3.12 offense labeled “Significant disrespect, use of obscene or profane language (verbal or written) or gestures.”

“Racist slurs go so above and beyond ‘significant disrespect,’” Rios said. “Slurs go back to slavery, segregation, Operation Wetback, Latino lynchings. There’s history behind these things being said that runs deep that isn’t being taken seriously enough. We need to get through to the district to make sure that they’re reviewing their policies.”

The students plan to send a letter to the school board this week. Superintendent Michelle Hubbard believes that district administration’s role in combating racism is to work with the school board on policy and ensure that the student handbook clearly conveys that racism has no place in SMSD.

“I want to be very clear that the incident [in the video] is unacceptable and should never take place in our schools,” Hubbard said. “With that being said, we have to continue to look at our policies and our practices to ensure that they’re inclusive. I’m not saying that I believe our handbook is wrong, we’re going to need to dig into that deeper. I want to make sure that we have student, staff and community voices in that conversation. I anticipate that will happen through strategic planning.”

Students who planned the walkout are also calling for revision to the district’s

***Students, school administration and district administration grapple to combat the pattern of racism at East after a video of a racist attack on sophomore Brey Brown went viral nationwide***

discrimination policy called Board Policy AC, which outlines SMSD’s commitment to creating an environment “free from discrimination, harassment and retaliation.” The policy defines harassment as “a form of discrimination” including, but not limited to, name-calling, hostile actions and racist slurs. “Sexual harassment” is the only term outlined as a fully distinguished definition under “harassment.”

“Racism is a whole separate thing from harassment,” Rios said. “The district needs to make that clear, so that students know how serious racism is and the repercussions.”

Hubbard says that, if deemed necessary, practice changes could happen in the next few months but policy change would likely occur in August. She hasn’t received a list of demands from an East student group and believes that the district needs to “give East’s administration an opportunity to help solve this problem directly with kids they know and have a relationship with.”

Since the student-led walkout and Nov. 30 protest outside of the district’s Center for Academic Achievement, Principal Jason Peres has held meetings with student organizers to discuss ways to combat racism.

“To this point, we’ve sent out three community messages,” Peres said. “We need to do more than just talk about it. We’re focused on actionable steps at this point.”

Taylor, Gomez and others believe that East students become desensitized to racism at a young age, so they’re asking for East to send diverse high school representatives to give presentations at Indian Hills Middle School about why racism is unacceptable and how to denormalize it. Junior Sanaia Nelson, who is Black, has attended meetings with school

administration and is still frustrated.

“[Administrators] kept saying, ‘I hear you, and there’s nothing we can do,’” Nelson said. “There’s been many people before us asking for assemblies, class meetings and speeches about [diversity, equity and inclusion], but they keep saying it takes time. It doesn’t take 20 years to make an assembly against racism.”

She remembers the school-wide assembly raising awareness about fentanyl use last year and questions why an assembly raising awareness about racism hasn’t been given before. Also, she finds East’s response to racism lackluster compared to other high schools like those in the Olathe School District.

Following a viral racist incident at Olathe South in May, the district moved any harassment including racist “comments, jokes and slurs” from a Class II to a Class III offense — with mandatory law enforcement notification — in their Student Code of Conduct. The change was finalized by the school board on July 13.

“One of my questions [during a meeting] was, if Olathe was able to change their policies, and make the punishments for racism stronger, then why can’t we?” Nelson said.

Nelson, Rios, Taylor, Gomez and others are upset by the student body’s reaction to the movement as well. More than a dozen students anonymously left racist comments on The Harbinger’s Instagram livestream of the walkout.

“After the walkout, I saw screenshots from the livestream where other students were calling us the hard ‘R’ and saying things like, ‘Where’s police brutality when you need it?’” Taylor said. “These are people who go to my school, who are walking around me in the hallways. This is how they think? It’s unnerving and scary.”

An Instagram account called @smebarstool that shares weekly memes for 1,200 followers also posted a photo of Peres standing with students protesting in the background captioned, “Principal P standing on business” on Dec. 1. Rios was disheartened by the post.

“It starts with the jokes and



Review SMSD's disciplinary matrix established by district administration



Review SMSD's non-discrimination policy

SCAN FOR  
**POLICY**

SCAN TO  
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Explore the National Education Association's resource library about implicit bias and microaggressions

little things that might seem funny, but once you tolerate that, it leads to bigger situations, slurs, actual violence,” Rios said. “It always starts with the jokes. Even after the video went viral, to see students leaving comments, *still* not grasping the magnitude of the situation makes a lot of us almost want to give up. The support from South really helps, but I wish more of that support was coming from students within East.”

On Nov. 30, Shawnee Mission South senior Ace Cofield organized a walkout in support of Brown with more than 1000 student attendees who were all excused from class by their principal without prompting, according to Cofield. The fewer than 200 students who attended the East walkout the week prior received absences from their classes.

“The video was disturbing,” Cofield said. “I couldn’t just go to school like nothing happened. It started self reflection for a lot of people at South. It’s [East’s] fight but we’re a community and will stay in support of the East students.”

Cofield feels safe at South partly because he feels comfortable confiding in many of his teachers, both Black and white. Taylor wishes there were more Black teachers at East.

According to the district’s Employee Demographic Dashboard, 95% of certified SMSD employees are white. Out of 2,113 certified employees, 29 are Black, 53 are Hispanic and 23 are Asian or Pacific Islander. Hubbard says that the district is committed to hiring diverse teachers through initiatives like Grow Your Own — a program encouraging alumni to teach in SMSD post-college graduation.

“We’ve had a huge effort on [hiring diverse teachers] for the last two or three years and we will continue that effort,” Hubbard said. “But every school district is saying that and so we’re all competing for the same candidates. And if you look at college graduates, there is just not a large number of diverse candidates.”

School Board President Mary Sinclair recommends that students send grievances, demands or other messages to Peres or email them directly to a board member. She believes that the Board’s role in combating racism is to “continuously filter decisions through the lens of diversity, equity and inclusion,” while ensuring that equitable policies are in place and consistently being followed.

“When it comes to the development of a discipline matrix and policies, as a volunteer board member, I think it’s super important that I rely on the professional educators and the process in the district to see whether or not a change needs to be made,” Sinclair said.

Both Sinclair and Hubbard urge students to provide input for SMSD’s new Strategic Plan that will serve and guide the district from 2024 through 2029. Development begins next month, and students

and their families can apply to serve on the steering committee via Google Form open Jan. 4–12. Sinclair hopes that students will also voice concerns in a ThoughtExchange survey that will be sent via email in January.

“Strong affirmation from our community that we need to continue this work in diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging is important,” Sinclair said. “I’d hope that that remains a really critical priority for our community and it’d be very valuable to hear that [in survey results].”

In the meantime, East’s Student Body President senior Jack Kessler is “sickened by the blatant and disgusting displays of racism and prejudice that have been displayed by students at East,” but he has hope that students can come together to support those who do not feel safe at school.

“[StuCo is] talking about plans for the day Brey returns back to school to have stickers to hand out to students and have chalk on the entrances and make a supportive environment to make her feel welcome back,” Kessler said.

Student Body Secretary senior Nora Hill reached out to Taylor personally to ask what StuCo can do to combat racism following the walkout.

“StuCo’s Instagram started getting comments from people nationally who don’t go to East, even some random guy in Portugal, saying that we’re all racists here,” Hill said. “I started hearing people at school talking about how they couldn’t believe that people who get chosen for dance courts and in leadership positions at East have said nothing. That’s when I realized that as a senior leader of East, I can’t stay silent. Student leaders need to be advocates and teach others that words matter.”

Rios hopes students will be more willing to listen and less defensive if confronted about racism. Taylor believes it’s hard to react to racism because any reaction can come off as “incorrect,” and he worries about coming across as “aggressive” or “angry.” Brown agrees that there’s no easy way to react to racism, and she believes that she shouldn’t have been suspended for acting in self defense.

“I don’t want to come back yet because I don’t feel safe at all at school,” Brown said. “I don’t feel comfortable.”

Rios ultimately believes that administration and adults can only do so much to combat racism, and students need to consciously bring change.

“I’m so open to answering any questions from anyone talking to anyone and wanting to help,” Rios said. “If anyone has any questions, they can go to anyone who helped with the walkout for sure and ask. We want to talk and help students understand. This isn’t a ‘us versus the community’ type of thing. This is a ‘please have our backs and stand with this’ thing.”



**LEFT** Sophomore Brey Brown and her family face local newscasters at the student-led protest on Nov. 30.  
**BELOW** Junior Kevin Gomez is interviewed by Fox4 news.  
photo by **amelie wong, clara peters**

