

The Highlander staff published “Coming Clean,” an in-depth report on race relations at McLean High School, to explore the intersection between our community’s racist past and the issues minorities still face at McLean. In 2019, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam was criticized around the country for having worn blackface in college. This hit close to home, as McLean students who had campaigned for him felt betrayed and were now calling for his resignation. Soon after, similar accusations began rocking all levels of government across the country. Our staff was saddened by the news but also inspired. We found out that we attended school in one of the last counties in the U.S. to desegregate, Fairfax County, Virginia, and we had a hunch that McLean High School, which was founded during the height of the local pushback against desegregation laws, had glossed over its past racist actions.

What we discovered shocked our largely liberal staff and school. The old yearbooks we scoured were filled with images of students in blackface, slave-themed parties and insensitive jokes about the Klu Klux Klan. While interviewing sources including students of color at McLean, Fairfax County’s first Black Supervisor and Black teachers who had taught at McLean after desegregation, our staff realized that our racial problems were much deeper than a few images. Years of housing discrimination and the ideological legacy of a segregated era had led to the astounding lack of diversity, inequality and sense of belonging many minority students felt.

After publishing the investigative story, McLean was buzzing. AP Government teachers used class time to discuss our findings. People were amazed, disheartened, uncomfortable and even offended. Yet, our staff achieved what we had hoped for—a conversation—the largest one *The Highlander* had sparked in years. This was the first time McLean’s racist history was seriously discussed, and in a year where school board election candidates faced scrutiny for trying to further desegregate Fairfax County’s schools, it was an important discussion to have. Administrators throughout Fairfax County heard rumors about the article before it was published and were worried about the negative attention it would receive. They even requested to see the article before it was published, which we declined. But in the end, they really appreciated the work our staff did, according to our school principal, and hopefully will remember the contents of the article when making race-based reforms. The effects of the article extended beyond our school and to the broader community; the multicultural studies curriculum resource teacher for the county requested multiple copies to be used as a professional development resource for elementary school teachers learning about cultural responsiveness and engaging with student voices as they confront this history.

More attention was brought to McLean’s initiatives to combat hatred, like our Combating Intolerance class and teacher-led Equity Team. And most importantly, minority students at McLean were acknowledged. For too long, our school has functioned in a bubble where a 3.2% Black population is thought of as normal. Now, McLean students and staff know the history behind their school’s low minority numbers and more about why their Black and Brown peers feel uncomfortable in the community. Education is the first step in the path toward change, and we hope our article will be a catalyst for real, long-term reform at McLean High School.

COMING CLEAN

EXPLORING McLEAN'S PAST

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HISTORY OF HATE

“Human bondage’ will be the order of the day April 1 as members of the Key and Keyette Clubs raffle themselves off as butlers and maids. Potential slaveholders will be able to buy an unlimited number of chances at ten cents.” This was in a March issue of the 1966 *Highlander* newspaper.

So went the proceedings of the McLean Key and Keyette Clubs’ slave auctions, held annually through the 1960s. McLean students were bid on and sold as “slaves” to raise money for the Key and Keyette Clubs, service-focused student organizations.

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the first slaves arriving in America, landing in Jamestown, Virginia. McLean was not untouched by slavery’s painful legacy. It may be hard to imagine this took place in the “progressive” McLean bubble we call home.

It was illegal to educate white and black students in the same building when Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) first opened in 1870, so schools were separated based on race, and there were a total

of 28 schools for white students and 13 schools for black students.

Luther Jackson High School opened in 1954 and was the only black high school in the county. A few months prior to Luther Jackson’s opening, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which led to the controversial decision to desegregate public schools nationwide.

Fairfax County schools officially became desegregated over a decade later, in 1965.

Daniel Richards, a former FCPS teacher and current McLean substitute, attended Luther Jackson High School. As a black student, Richards experienced integration firsthand when he entered Woodson High School late in his high school career.

“Woodson High School wasn’t a very good year. There was a lot of racial riots and racial discrimination and all I wanted to do was to get through school,” Richards said. “You have to remember that I was nothing but a teenager myself. It wasn’t a good experience. I had some difficult thoughts going through my head.” ▶



THERE WAS A LOT OF RACIAL RIOTS AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS TO GET THROUGH SCHOOL,”

- DANIEL RICHARDS
McLEAN SUBSTITUTE

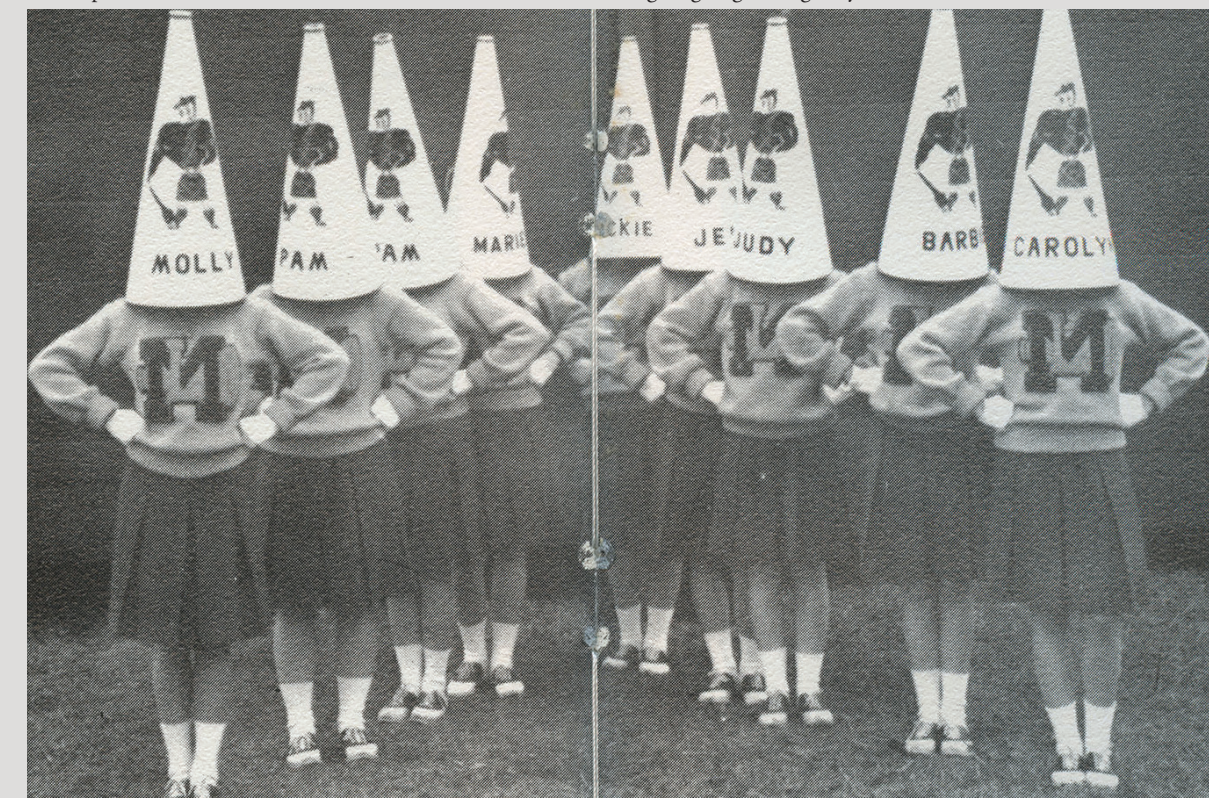
“POP ART”

A new way to review American Civilization - have a party and require each student to come as a character out of our heritage. This was tried, and proved to be a unique experience. Students came as immigrants, personalities out of history, characters from literature and as America’s myths and legends. This strange but true monodrama of Americanisms wandering through the party proved to be not only entertaining, but thought-provoking, too.



Photo illustration by Dana Edson

“The “characters” from UNCLE TOM’S CABIN.”



TEAM PHOTO — The 1965 McLean cheerleading squad takes their team picture with megaphones on their heads. The team mimics the Ku Klux Klan, a well-known white supremacist group. (Photo obtained via the 1965 McLean yearbook)

THE CLAN



Students integrating into McLean faced similar hardships, and these memories fill the school's yearbook, formerly known as *The Clan*.

SHAME OF McLEAN

In the 1962 yearbook, white girls dance in black face at a country-themed party. At the same party, a group of people in blackface sing "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," a song written and sung by James A. Bland, a black musician and songwriter.

In the 1965 yearbook, nine Highlander cheerleaders pose with white megaphones over their heads. Captioned as "The Clan," this photo appears the year FCPS desegregated.

In the 1966 yearbook, students participate in an American Civilization Party. A group of four students dress as characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel about slavery. Three students' faces are covered in black makeup. The fourth student is whipping one of the girls in blackface.

The Highlander staff recently discovered these photographs while investigating past discrimination at McLean, and members of the McLean community responded.

BLACKFACE PERFORMANCE —

Students sing the song "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" at a school party. The song was written by black singer-songwriter James A. Bland. (Photo obtained via the 1962 McLean yearbook)

"I'm not surprised, and that's a really sad statement I just said," Principal Ellen Reilly said. "I'm not surprised. I'm disappointed."

Students of color were also not shocked by the photos.

"I'm not very surprised, to be honest, because of the area we are in. It's not even just a McLean thing—it's not surprising to see that anywhere in the United States just because that was a very, very big part of our history," senior Maeron Kebede said. "So, me seeing someone wearing blackface at my school is not surprising, which is kind of sad, but it's true."

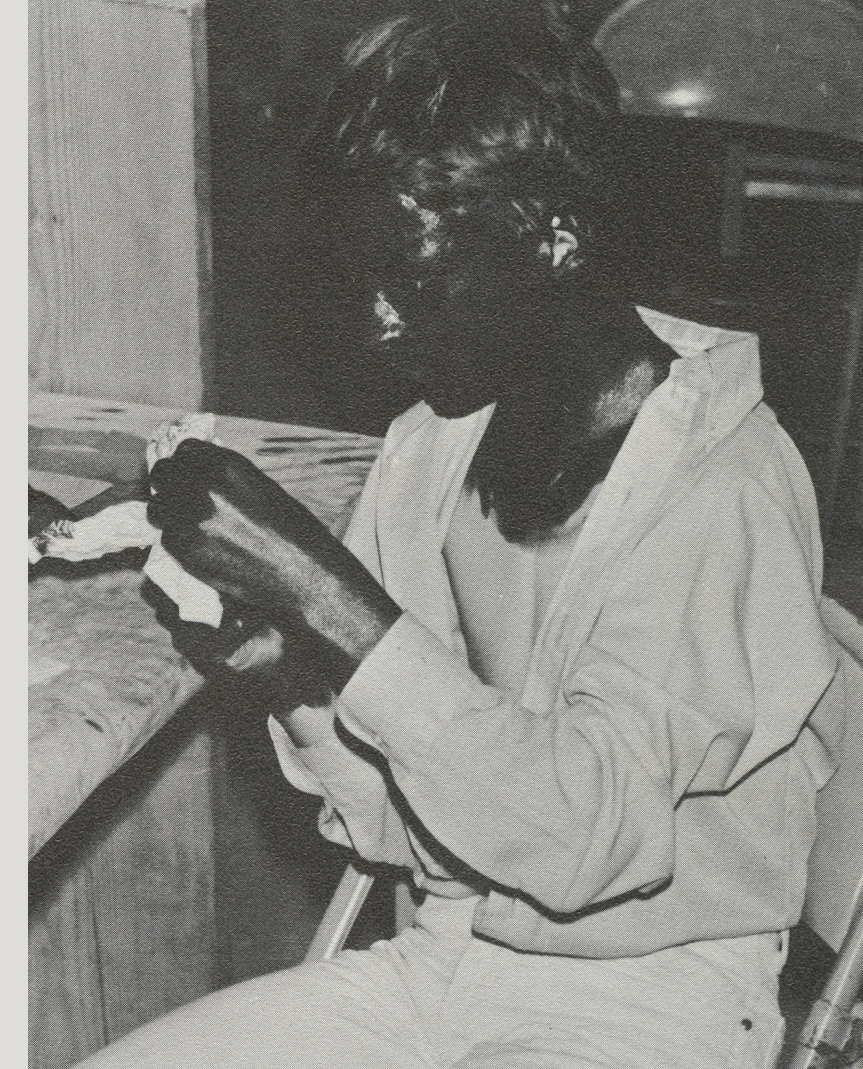
Ironically, those same yearbooks feature feminist clubs and even an annual foreign exchange program. German and Swedish students were hosted by McLean families, who showed them American culture, while they shared their own cultures. McLean students also traveled abroad to learn in foreign environments.

"My adjustments to a foreign family and a foreign life were not as jolting as many have encountered, because West-Berlin is probably the most American city on the other side of the ocean," wrote Richard Henninger, McLean's American Field Services Student to Berlin in 1962. "The problem of Berlin is in the realization of our divided world."

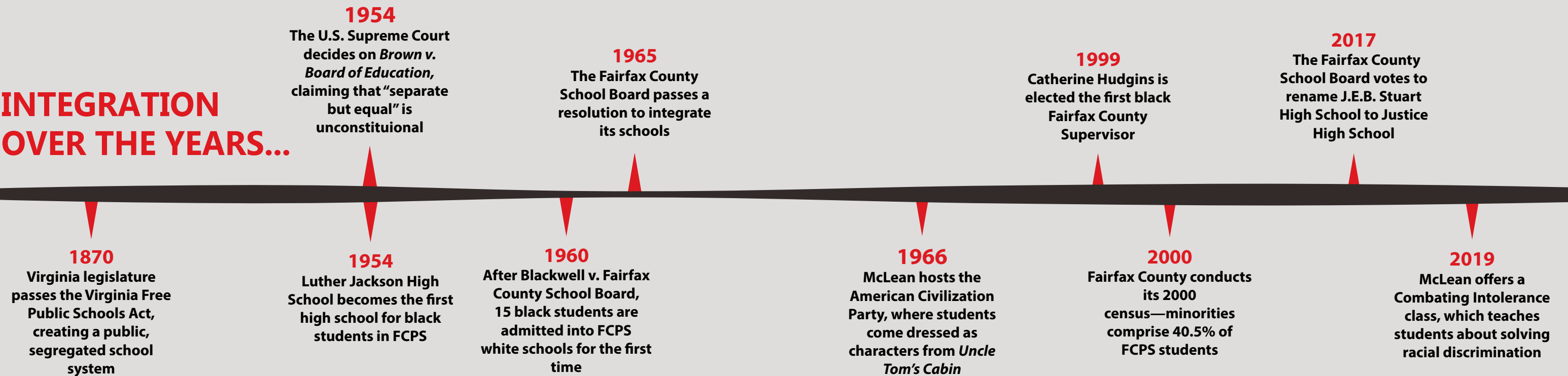
American students saw the injustices in the world, but failed to ▶

OPENING NIGHT —

A male student applies blackface for a theatrical performance. McLean was putting on a play called *Finian's Rainbow*. (Photo obtained via the 1969-McLean yearbook)



INTEGRATION OVER THE YEARS...



see the injustices in the U.S. Their sense of patriotism blinded them from the truths of discrimination and hate in their nation, but the 1960 U.S. Presidential Election changed the course of discrimination in America.

Senator John F. Kennedy, a pro-civil rights candidate, promised new opportunities for African Americans. The senator was publicly endorsed by Martin Luther King Sr. and emerged as the president-elect in November 1960 with 70% of the African American vote.

McLean's predominantly white district voted for Kennedy. The school system was segregated during the 1960 election, yet they still voted for a progressive democratic president, a step toward integration.

After integrating in 1965, Fairfax County changed laws surrounding race. This was a transformation that provided black people with more opportunity to join the FCPS workforce.

LEGACY

Richards witnessed the lasting roots of segregation and discrimination during his time as a McLean teacher from 1980 to 2001.

"When I started McLean High School in 1980, they were racist," Richards said. "I'm talking about the staff. I was called the N-word several times, but I never reported it. That was for my own survival."

During the 21 years Richards worked at McLean, attitudes toward race changed, but many of the mechanisms which maintain racial divides stayed in place.

The first black Fairfax County Supervisor, Catherine Hudgins, sees the lack of affordable housing in the county as a main cause of persistent school segregation. Lower income black families are driven away from moving to McLean due to expensive housing, which impacts the number of black students at the school.

"[Fairfax County] failed to tackle the affordability of housing," Hudgins said. "One of the most difficult jobs we have is trying to create diversity. Our communities are segregated all over this county, and I think some places still have the intent to be so."

Inequitable real estate practices in McLean, including racist housing contracts, have deterred black families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, from moving into this area.

"My uncle was going to buy a house right across from McLean High School, maybe 15 years ago, and he loved it," Kebede said. "It was perfect, but in the contract from 100 years ago, it said no black person could own this house. He could have bought it if he wanted to, but he just felt like he couldn't at that point, because he didn't want to be in a house where someone didn't want him to be."

McLean's lack of diversity is not only affected by these invisible boundaries, but also by the attitude of community members, according to Hudgins.

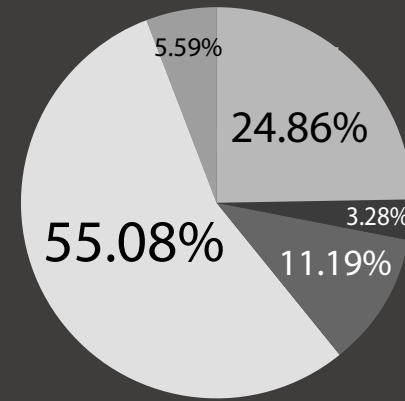
"McLean likes to pretend that if you have lots of money then you have a lot of [moral] character, and that isn't the case," Hudgins said. "It's very hard to fight such a powerful area that continues to have that old mindset."

Reilly disagrees with this statement.

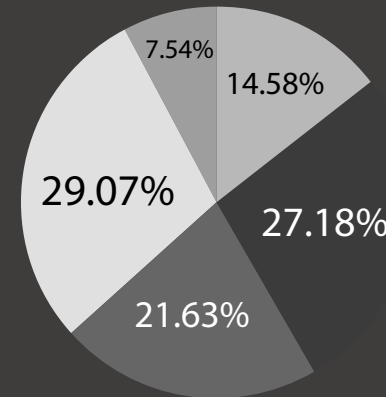
"I think we're one of the most diverse schools there is. You look around, and it's diverse. We do a nice job of welcoming people," Reilly said. "There's this assumption that we have so many rich kids walking through the hallways. I don't see that at all, and I find that to be offensive that somebody would say that about our community."

DIVERSITY

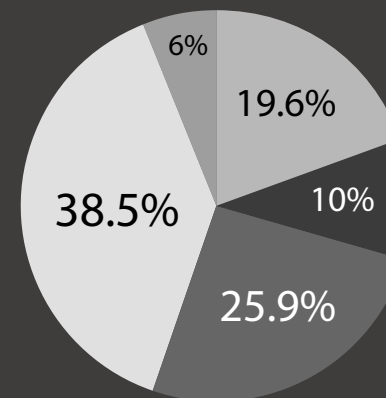
McLean High School



Hayfield Secondary School



FCPS Schools



White
 Black
 Asian
 Hispanic
 Other



IF YOU'RE A KID WHO TAKES MOSTLY AP CLASSES, YOU'RE PROBABLY NOT RUNNING INTO A TON OF STUDENTS OF COLOR. STUDENTS AND TEACHERS WILL WALK INTO CLASSROOMS AND KNOW BASED ON THE RACIAL MAKEUP OF A CLASSROOM IF IT'S AN HONORS CLASS, AP CLASS OR NOT,"

- JULIA BRAXTON

COMBATING INTOLERANCE TEACHER

The numbers prove McLean's socioeconomic and racial diversity to be limited. Only 6% of students are on free or reduced lunch, compared to 28% of all FCPS students, according to *The Washington Post*. McLean is 55% white and only 3% black. McLean and Langley High Schools have the lowest racial diversity in Fairfax County.

The FCPS website states that the school system in its entirety is 38.5% white and 10% black. Hayfield Secondary School is the most diverse school in the county, with almost 29% of the student body comprised of black students, and just over 29% comprised of white students.

Even classrooms in this county are segregated. Only 6% of black students take AP courses in FCPS, and white students are 2.2 times more likely to take AP classes than their black schoolmates, according to ProPublica, an independent, nonprofit newsroom dedicated to investigative journalism.

"If you're a kid who takes mostly AP classes, you're probably not running into a ton of students of color. Students and teachers will walk into classrooms and know based on the racial makeup of a classroom if it's an honors class, AP class or not," Combating Intolerance co-teacher Julia Braxton said. "I wish there were more opportunities for students to self-integrate and interact with other students who are not like them."

Moving forward, McLean plans to do exactly that.

Combating Intolerance, a new class this year, raises social awareness about racial divides in our community. Combating Intolerance students are planning nights to discuss the ongoing, covert racism at McLean with local and state officials.

"[We are planning a night] where students are able to dispel these different stereotypes that affect them, or affect marginalized groups," Braxton said. "That is one way that we are actually combating intolerance in this class."

Rachel Baxter, Braxton's Combating Intolerance co-teacher, leads McLean's Equity Team with counselor Kathleen Ota. This group is new this year and is working with the teachers and staff to shed light on classroom issues regarding race.

"We're looking at our unconscious bias, and we're starting that with our teachers. [That bias] is sometimes out of lack of

understanding," Reilly said. "Our Equity Team is bringing that to us. We are working on that."

While there is still work to be done to solve racial inequality at McLean, the changes being made indicate the school is heading in the right direction. Richards recognizes this as well.

"I have seen blackface, I have seen the yearbooks, I have seen a whole bunch of things, and all they tell me is that things have gotten a lot better. I can laugh and joke at McLean, while at other schools you can't laugh, you can't joke and you can't play," Richards said. "I love the atmosphere at McLean." ■

THE LIFE OF THE PARTY —

Two McLean students dance at a Southern-themed school party while wearing blackface. (Photo obtained via the 1962 McLean yearbook)

