

THE HIGHLANDER

VOLUME 67 • ISSUE 3 • FEBRUARY 2023 • McLEAN HIGH SCHOOL • THEHIGHLANDERNEWS.COM • @MHSHIGHLANDER

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DECISIONS SET TO SHAPE
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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear McLean,

Happy New Year and welcome to another issue of The Highlander! After decades of debate regarding marginalized groups in college admissions, the Supreme Court will make decisions on two cases to decide whether or not to uphold the system of affirmative action. This issue's in-depth analyzes how this decision will affect different marginalized groups at McLean.

We also take time to remember the late Madeline Tarazi, a Highlander who passed away due to diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma (DIPG), a rare brain tumor. Help us honor her through celebrating her kind spirit and aiding her family in raising money for DIPG research.

Our news section explores FCPS Superintendent Michelle Reid's talk on inclusion and diversity, and our editorial discusses Virginia's new model policy on "sexually explicit" materials taught in schools.

On a more lighthearted note, be sure to check out a preview of TheatreMcLean's *Claudio Quest*, meet Athlete of the Issue Daniel Fimbres and get some winter outfit inspiration from some students who have exquisite fashion taste.

We have a wide array of articles, and we hope you find something that resonates with you.

Yours truly,

Omar Kayali, Nyla Marcott, Farah Eljazzar, Saehee Perez & Makda Bekele



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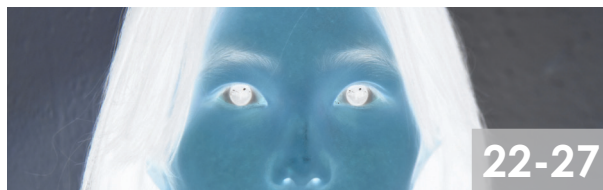
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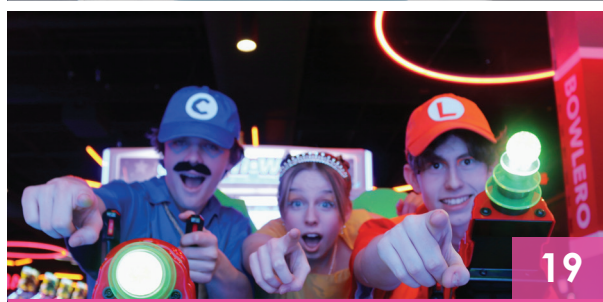
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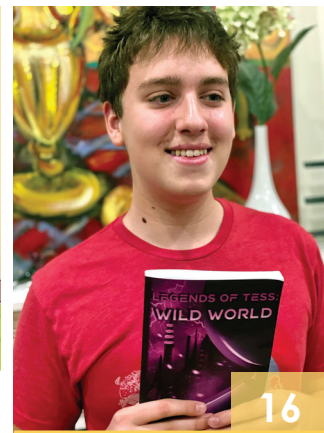
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'22, '21, '19, '15
Pacemaker Finalist;
'20, '17
Pacemaker Winner



'22, '20, '19,
'18, '17, '16, '14
George H. Gallup
Award



'22, '21, '20,
'19, '18, '00
First Amendment
Press Freedom Award



'22, '21, '19, '18,
'17, '16, '15, '14
VHSL Trophy Class;
VHSL Savedge Award



'23 Crown Finalist;
'22, '20, '17, '16 Gold
Crown Winner;
'21, '19, '18 Silver
Crown Winner

County plans to compensate students for lack of educational services

NYLA MARCOTT EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The FCPS COVID-19 Compensatory Education Plan (CEP) is designed to assist students with disabilities whose educational progress was impacted by virtual learning. The plan is the result of an agreement between FCPS and the U.S. Department of Education that requires FCPS to determine whether those with Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plans received resources to meet their needs during the period from April 14 to June 10, 2022.

“Students who have 504 Plans or IEPs generally receive some accommodations or services, and when we were closed, they were not receiving those...specialized services,” Assistant Principal Emily Geary said.

McLean’s Special Education Department faced multiple obstacles teaching students in Special Education Category B, which is defined by FCPS as “students with significant cognitive disabilities who are accessing an adapted curriculum.”

“We had [about] five kids who we would see them on screen, and then it was too much work for the parents to keep them there and was too much work for us...even to hold their attention,” said Mark Thompson, McLean’s Category B special education department chair. “[The students] need to be out...they are not paper-and-pencil students, they are not computer kids.”

In the coming months, McLean’s staff will be holding meetings with parents of all students with an IEP or 504 Plan to determine whether they feel their child lost educational resources and if they would like to be considered for services, such as additional instruction after school or on weekends. Monetary compensation may also be considered for some families.

“

ARE YOU GOING TO UPSET THE APPLECART BECAUSE YOU’RE GOING TO TRY TO PROVIDE SOMETHING THAT STUDENTS MAY OR MAY NOT BENEFIT FROM?”

- MARK THOMPSON

SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT CHAIR

“We are going to be speaking with all the families of our current students here, students who have graduated already or students who may have moved to another state or left [FCPS],” Geary said.

There is concern that the CEP may not be beneficial for all students.

“[Parents] set up routines, which is why they really did not want our services [during

virtual learning] because we were going to interrupt what they had established as the routine,” Thompson said. “We have to contact the parents...to see do they want [compensatory services]... Are you going to upset the applecart because you’re going to try to provide something that students may or may not benefit from?”

Parents have expressed concern regarding how additional educational time will be scheduled in students’ already busy days.

“There is a great point that there is no more room in the day,” said Office of Special Education Procedural Support Director Dawn Schaefer at the Jan. 10 meeting on the CEP. “It really is going to be very specific for each child and each committee to consider.”

FCPS has indicated that all meetings with parents regarding the CEP should be completed by the end of the school year. Each meeting will have various staff members present to ensure a range of perspectives. The groups will determine if students are owed compensation.

Although parents have access to FCPS’s agreement with the U.S. Department of Education and can view information regarding the steps that will be taken to determine students’ eligibility for compensation, some parents have noted that the complex language used to describe the process makes it difficult to understand.

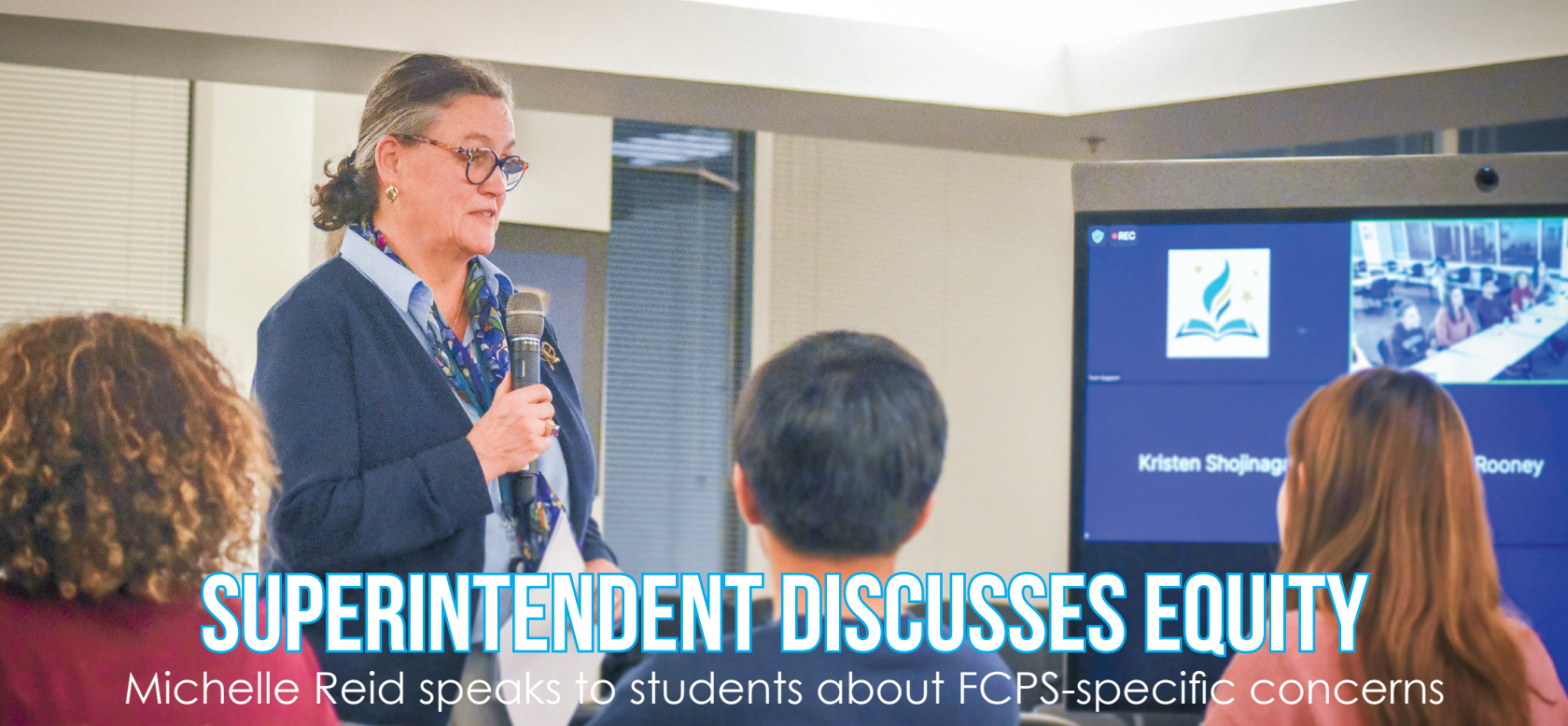
“This [policy] is very confusing. I am an educational consultant; I do this for a living, and I have no idea what my child is entitled to, so I really think that more transparency here could be helpful,” FCPS parent Colleen Paparella said at the Jan. 10 meeting.

While it remains unclear how many students will receive compensatory services and in what form they will be provided, staff continue to receive training on the CEP. McLean’s staff attended a mandatory training on Jan. 25 to provide them with an overview of the CEP and give them an idea of what to expect in the meetings they will be asked to attend in the near future.

“The biggest problem is how it is going to be done and by whom,” Thompson said. “You can tell us what we need to do, but the proof is always in implementation, and if you don’t have the staff, you don’t have the physical plan, or the kids don’t want to do it, what can we do?”



COMING BACK — Students participate in a Literacy Arts class created to teach art and English simultaneously. Educators created the course based on lessons learned during the Pandemic Period.



SUPERINTENDENT DISCUSSES EQUITY

Michelle Reid speaks to students about FCPS-specific concerns

TARA PANDEY FEATURES EDITOR

The Fairfax County Student Human Rights Commission (SHRC) hosted a Let's Talk! event with Superintendent Michelle Reid on Jan. 17. During the talk, Reid answered questions regarding equity and diversity concerns and discussed newly introduced FCPS policies.

"We want to provide a space for students to get in contact with the school administration," said McLean senior Cat Kanapathy, the SHRC vice president. "[We want them to] understand the policies that affect them and be able to have a voice in those policies."

Some of the topics that came up at the event included Gov. Glenn Youngkin's model transgender student policies that were introduced September 2022, the implementation of African American history classes and diversity as a whole in Fairfax County schools.

"We are a very diverse division, which is a huge strength [of ours]," Reid said. "The term [diversity] has been a bit weaponized, but equity to me is really about access, [making sure] courses are available to students regardless of their zip code so they have an equal opportunity to pursue whatever it is [they] want to pursue."

Reid shared some potential solutions for the teacher shortage, one of the most prevalent issues in county.

"We're recruiting heavily. We're working hard to retain staff," Reid said. "The budget I [proposed] last week increases salaries for

our staff, [including] our more experienced staff members."

She even turned the question back to the SHRC panelists, asking why they believed the student to educator pipeline was drying up and fewer students were pursuing education as a career.



WE CAN JUST THINK ABOUT EQUITY AS MAKING SURE EACH AND EVERY STUDENT HAS WHAT THEY NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL."

**- MICHELLE REID
FCPS SUPERINTENDENT**

"[Teachers'] salaries don't reflect the effort and the value that their work provides, and that turns a lot of people away from such a meaningful profession," said James Madison High School senior Mayra Rios, the SHRC president. "Once we start addressing that, start respecting our teachers and... raising their salaries, I think that will excite a lot more people."

Reid emphasized the importance of diversity in the FCPS community, drawing comparisons to her family life to encourage students to uplift and support one another.

"We need to think about equity as we think about love," Reid said. "I have four

children and...they argue about who my favorite is sometimes, but if we can just think about equity as making sure each and every student has what they need to be successful in their unique journey...lifting everyone up and not at the expense of someone."

Even before taking the position of superintendent, Reid faced criticism from FCPS students, namely the Pride Liberation Project, a student-led LGBTQ+ advocacy group. The group organized demonstrations protesting Reid last April and garnered 500 signatures for a petition against her appointment as county superintendent.

McLean hosted its own walkout on April 14, 2022, encouraging students to stay informed about Reid's perceived ineptitude. Their concerns were rooted in her performance at Northshore School District, a small district in Washington state, where she previously served as the superintendent. Whistleblowers and constituents criticized her for failing to address student concerns. However, Reid was confirmed as the new FCPS superintendent that same day.

Since Reid began her tenure as superintendent, she has taken steps to repair her image and connect with the FCPS community with events like this one that give parents and students the chance to express their concerns.

"Many students in FCPS had a negative perception of [Reid] because of the walkout and events that happened last year due to many people viewing her as unqualified," Kanapathy said. "I definitely [wanted] to hear her perspective."

BIG MACS TAKE BREAK TO RESTRUCTURE

McLeadership program shuts down for rest of school year

DANIA REZA ASSISTANT DESIGN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

After holding two connect groups this year, the McLeadership program was paused to allow time to restructure the program in order to make the group more beneficial for freshmen. McLeadership is a mentoring program in which selected juniors and seniors, known as “Big Macs,” are assigned to a group of freshmen or transfer students, “Little Macs,” to ease their transition into McLean.

Over the past three years, McLeadership made adjustments due to the pandemic which ultimately led to lingering problems with the program.

“2019 was the last time that the program ran efficiently,” said counselor Greg Olcott, the sponsor of McLeadership. “We tried numerous options to bring the program back but it’s been hard.”

During the 2020-2021 school year, McLeadership hosted the program virtually, but many freshmen did not attend the online meetings. The following school year, McLeadership brought in more Big Macs to mentor both the freshman and sophomore classes. Including two grades in the program resulted in unexpected obstacles.

“The majority of sophomores felt that they didn’t need [the program],” Olcott said. “This idea sort of bled into the freshmen

and the mentality and understanding of what this program is was kind of lost.”

This school year, Big Macs returned to mentoring only freshmen and transfer students. In the past, McLeadership worked with a company who taught Big Macs games to play with their Little Macs to engage their groups. This year, McLeadership did not work with the group.



THE MENTALITY AND UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THIS PROGRAM IS WAS KIND OF LOST.”

**- GREG OLCOTT
MCLEADERSHIP SPONSOR**

“We worked with a new leadership program, but Big Macs weren’t given explicit instructions on what activities to play with their Little Macs,” Olcott said. “Even though we tried to give them options, it just wasn’t as smooth as we had hoped.”

A lack of freshman cooperation presented a new problem.

“The first few connect groups were

chaotic,” Olcott said. “Students weren’t following directions from the Big Macs. They were being rude and disrespectful, even to the administrators.”

Some freshmen said the meetings would have been better if they were not held during Highlander Time.

“The Big Macs helped me when I transitioned into McLean, but I don’t think it was essential to have them,” freshman Ioana Stefanescu said. “I enjoyed meeting them, but I would rather have Highlander Time so I can get caught up with my classes.”

The McLeadership administration met to discuss the problems, leading to the decision to temporarily shut down the program.

“We believed that [McLeadership] wasn’t working the way we needed it to. The needs of our students have changed,” Olcott said. “We’ve got to figure out a different way to support our students.”

Executives, who are in charge of the Big Macs and known as “Execs,” also thought the pause would help fix various problems.

“There was a series of small issues and miscommunication that led to the temporary end,” senior Exec Sabrina Berry said.

Although Olcott said there is no definitive plan for how the program will be restructured, he hopes to return the program to its format prior to the pandemic.

“We do believe that the majority of students who come here as freshmen want this,” Olcott said. “We’ve thought about going down to the middle school and having students sign up for it.”

As well as addressing student needs, Big Macs and Execs hope to see new improvements to the group.

“I hope to see a McLeadership program that doesn’t randomly [pair freshmen and] Big Macs,” senior Exec Max Blacksten said. “Matching freshmen with students who share their interests would be more effective.”

The program is set to return for the 2023-24 school year.

“[The Big Mac program] has been a tradition here at McLean for decades,” Olcott said. “To see it end up where it is currently is really hard. We want to bring this back and will come up with new ideas to get it back to where it was.”



BONDING TIME — Little Macs gather in a giant circle to play Duck, Duck, Goose during connect groups on Sept. 8, 2022. The group has since been canceled for the remainder of the school year. (Photo by Nyla Marcott)

FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION EVOLVES

FLE Advisory Committee works to make curriculum more inclusive

JESSICA PUREVTUGS OPINIONS EDITOR | SOPHIA WEIL REPORTER

A familiar rite of passage for FCPS students, Family Life Education (FLE) has taught the basics of human growth and development for years. The FLE Curriculum Advisory Committee (FLECAC) is making efforts to change these lessons for the 2023-24 school year to make them more inclusive.

“We’ve been working on revising and adding objectives specific to consent, starting in kindergarten and through grade 12,” FLECAC Chairperson Carrie Reynolds said. “We recently changed to define two-parent families as mother and father to mothers, fathers, children and extended family.”

The proposed changes would include the exploration of gender identity and sexuality through the use of gender-neutral terminology. Terms such as “girl” and “boy” will change to “individuals assigned male/female at birth” within the FLE curriculum.

“There’s a lot of work being put into making FLE more inclusive and representative of our community,” said senior Casey Calabia, president of McLean’s Gender and Sexuality Alliance.

In the fall, the FLECAC released a public comment form open to Fairfax County residents. The Department of Education requires community input before recommended changes are voted on by the FLECAC and brought to the school board at the end of the school year. The main issue brought up by respondents is the topic of gender-combined FLE instruction.

“As a fifth grade teacher I notice how uncomfortable the girls are with each other and embarrassed to ask questions with the same gender [in FLE],” one respondent said.

In a poll from the FLECAC with approximately 2,600 respondents, 84% said they were against gender-combined FLE instruction, providing reasons such as discomfort and embarrassment, developmental differences between sexes and increased opt-out rates.

The FLECAC questioned the validity of these responses because 16% came from the same IP addresses and 14 non-binary respondents stated that they were against gender-combined instruction.

“We have to [implement gender-combined

instruction] well enough that it doesn’t create such a churn that we end up pulling back from it,” Superintendent Michelle Reid said. “We want to make sure that when we do it, we’ve done it well.”

Supporters say implementing gender-combined instruction will increase inclusivity and student comfort across the gender spectrum.



THIS IS NOT SOMETHING THAT’S GOING TO FIX ITSELF OVERNIGHT. WHILE THE PROGRESSION IS SLOW, IT IS ON [ITS WAY] UP.”

**- CASEY CALABIA
SENIOR AND GSA PRESIDENT**

“[The LGBTQ+ community doesn’t] feel safe in the FLE curriculum because they are not seen, heard and their questions are not answered,” said Vanessa Hall, a school board

representative on the FLECAC.

The changes could be an important step in the process of maximizing student safety. FLE program instructors emphasize the importance of creating a safe learning environment for students, especially when presented with information initially daunting and uncomfortable.

In a survey of 133 McLean students, 69.2% said they thought gender-combined instruction would improve the effectiveness of the FLE curriculum.

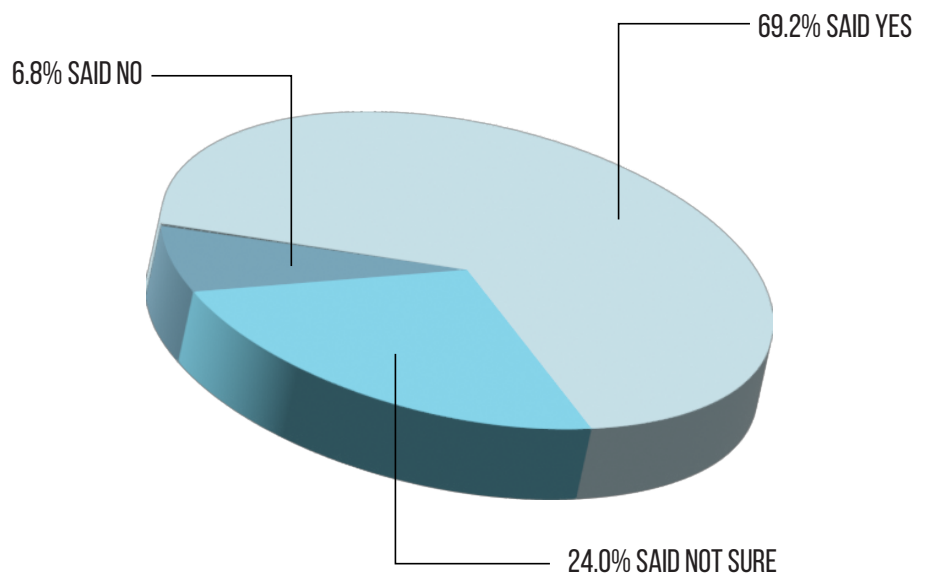
“Despite public blowback, the majority of advisory members are in support of this change, so there’s a good chance the policy will be passed within our committee,” said senior Jasmine Andresol, a FLECAC student representative. “We are optimistic that [curriculum changes] will be implemented into schools soon.”

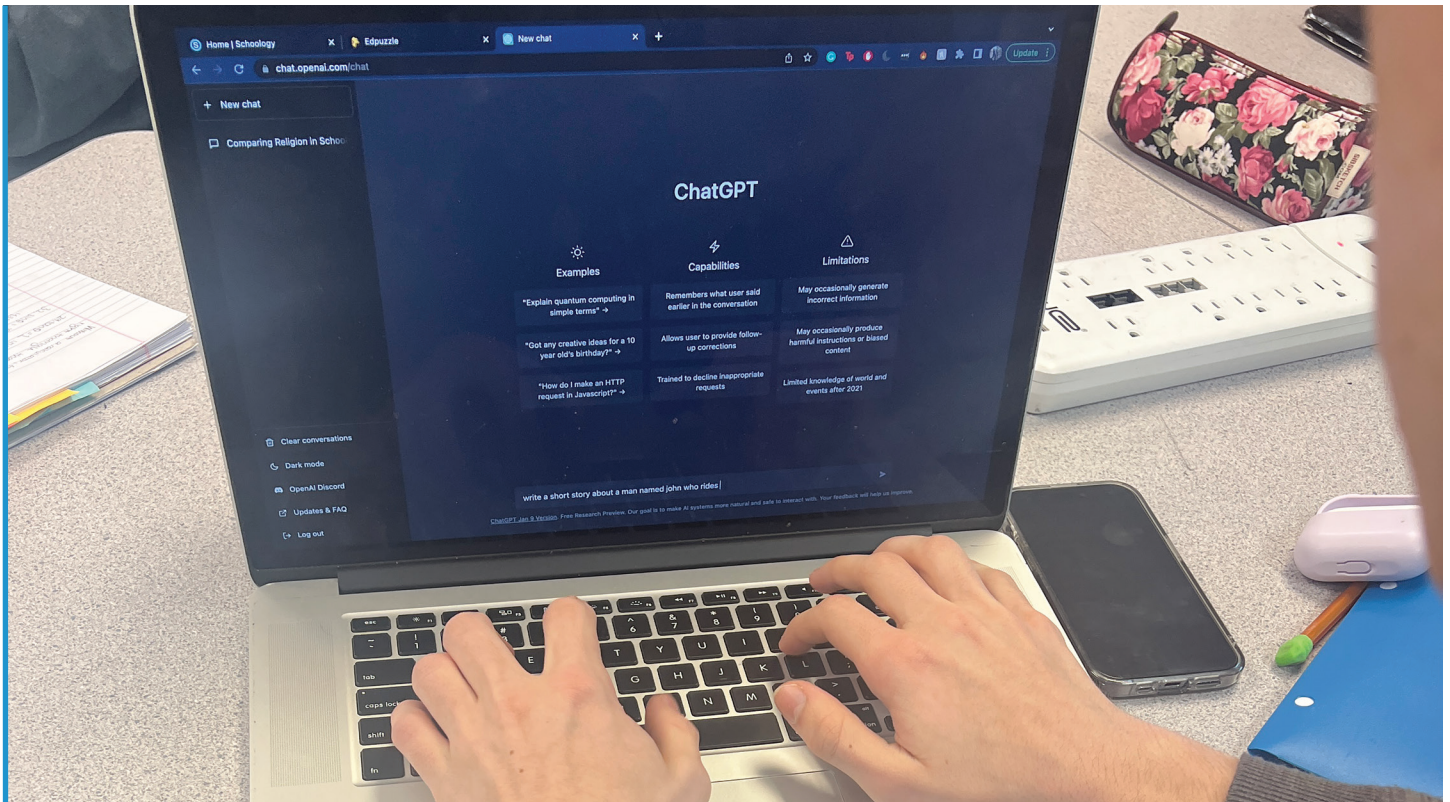
The potential revisions to the program could enable students across the county to reach a more complex level of understanding when it comes to their personal development and identities.

“This is not something that’s going to fix itself overnight,” Calabia said. “While the progression is slow, it is on [its way] up.”

DO YOU BELIEVE GENDER-COMBINED INSTRUCTION AND EXPLORATION OF SEXUAL IDENTITY IN FLE WOULD YIELD POSITIVE RESULTS?

IN A POLL OF 133 MCLEAN STUDENTS:





SOFTWARE SWINDLE — ChatGPT is new AI software that can generate responses to questions and even complete essays. The software, which is restricted on school computers, could change the face of education.

NEW AI THREATENS AUTHENTIC CLASSWORK

AI software ChatGPT poses threat to honest work in classes

SABRINA BOUGHANEM FEATURES EDITOR

ChatGPT is new, free artificial intelligence (AI) software that can answer any question posed by users. The software is unique in that it can bypass any plagiarism detector, threatening the authenticity of students' work. The rise of new software poses questions as to how classrooms will adjust to prevent cheating.

Students struggle to maintain their heavy course loads every year, at times resorting to cheating despite the honor code's strict prohibition of it.

"As cheating becomes easier and easier, honor codes seem to fade into a thing of the past," junior Kyra Macomber said.

Violations of the honor code are a concern in the short term, but as students

continue to use AI software, a long-term concern is that their work ethic will diminish as they become dependent on the work of others to get good grades.

"This software strips the ability for students to think critically. It inhibits their ability to think altogether," English teacher Elise Emmons said. "You come to school to learn, not to find ways to cheat the system. Ultimately, students are failing themselves by trying to find the easy way out."

Though the site is blocked on FCPS devices, students can still access the software on their personal computers, completing their work at home on the AI software.

"Plagiarism is already a problem for a lot of schools and students right now, especially

with increased access to the internet," junior Aidan Shaughnessy said. "This AI platform extends the problem even more because of how much access it has to so many sources and how it's able to create original work, which I think is really scary."

How schools will address these issues remains to be seen, as the only major step FCPS administration has taken is restricting the website on school devices, a weak blockade that many students have already found a way around. Although restrictions can be put in place in classrooms, work students complete at home or on personal devices cannot be regulated by schools, giving students free reign to use ChatGPT at home to complete their assignments.

"There are lock-down softwares that we could use in the classroom to block anything from being opened other than the student's document," Emmons said. "I assume that would be the next step. But this spans outside of just essays—everything students write at home could be compromised."

The site creates work that cannot be caught by databases such as TurnItIn, which flag plagiarized sources. The site's ability to circumvent such databases makes it more difficult for teachers to distinguish whether a student's work is their own.

"[ChatGPT is] essentially just a search engine that is able to actually correct itself and respond to very specific questions," Shaughnessy said. "It can definitely be a huge cheating problem and just another source to contribute to plagiarism."

Despite its downsides, AI software does have potential benefits for the classroom environment. For example, ChatGPT's search engine could aid students in research assignments.

"I think [the software] is beneficial in the fact that it just has a vast amount of knowledge and can answer any question in depth," Shaughnessy said. "It could definitely help with students getting the right resources. I know that the software also helps a lot with coding problems, so for computer science principle classes, it'd be really cool to see how the source can actually help with learning."

The software is fairly new to students and teachers, and the lack of knowledge about it makes using ChatGPT in the near future unlikely.

"At this point, I would say the pros heavily outweigh the cons," Emmons said. "I could see the potential of using it for editing or revising but would still be wary of using it altogether."

Students often resort to cheating out of desperation for answers as they struggle with balancing their workload and completing assignments in a timely manner. With the rise of technology and a year of school online, it is not uncommon for students to use online platforms to complete their schoolwork.

"Students have certainly used cheating platforms before, and I don't see them stopping anytime soon," Macomber said.

Students with several hours of homework every night are likely to try and find shortcuts in order to complete all of their assignments ahead of their deadlines. Students often express that they feel overwhelmed by assignments, and often resort to using AI to save their grades rather than focusing on fully understanding class content.

"Such an accessible tool will lead students to depend on AI to find shortcuts in completing their work, losing academic integrity," Shaughnessy said. "It is no doubt

that students have used similar tools in the past, as the pandemic introduced a whole new opportunity for students to use Google to cheat on tests as well as assignments... As search engines become more advanced, academic dishonesty will only become more common. Students will begin to depend on ChatGPT to complete their work instead of truly learning and growing as a student."



IT'S AN INCREDIBLE INNOVATION THAT WILL LIKELY CHANGE THE WAY WE DO THINGS... HOWEVER, THERE IS A LINE YOU CAN'T CROSS."

**- ELISE EMMONS
ENGLISH TEACHER**

AI software is prompting teachers to think about how comprehension, not perfection, can be emphasized.

"In order to uphold academic integrity, it is important that teachers continue to provide a helping hand in the learning process to allow an environment for students to truly be honest with the work they are

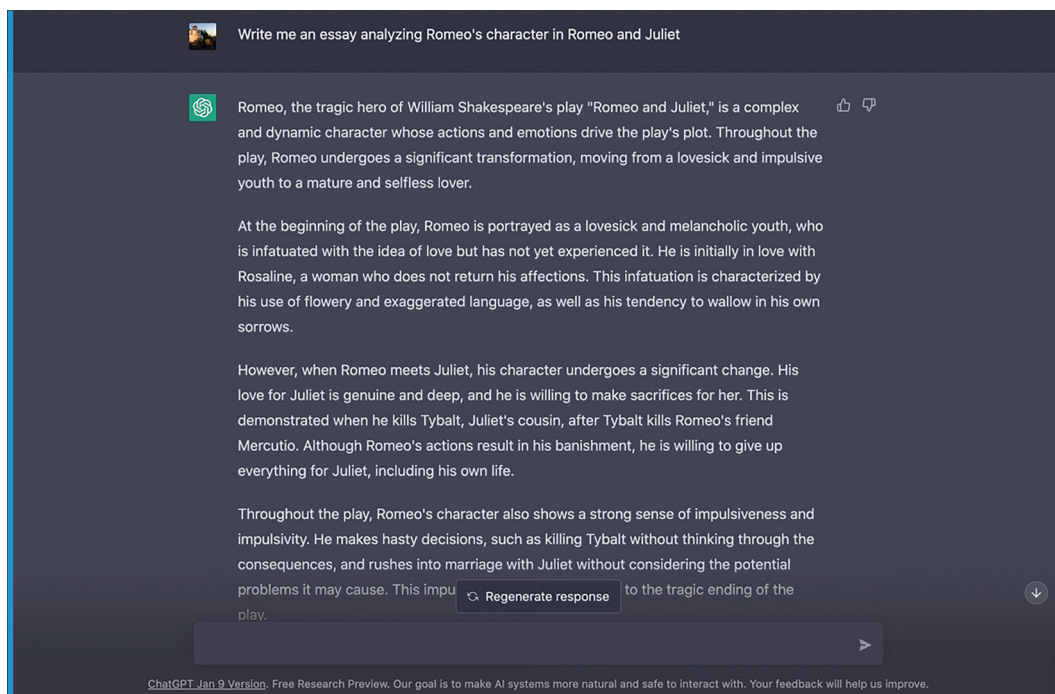
completing," Shaughnessy said. "Most of the time students resort to tools such as ChatGPT because they lack the proper process of learning in a certain class, thus teachers must rely on this process and give students the opportunity to trust themselves and the work they complete."

Although technology continues to play a big role in classroom activities, AI software is relatively unregulated and has mostly escaped the radar of administrators. Whether schools will try to eliminate them entirely from students' resources or simply restrict them for certain classes remains in question.

"[ChatGPT] can be helpful for students because even though it's not their original work, it can be used as an example for what to write," Macomber said. "If someone is really struggling on an assignment, they could use it to create a sample response and use it as inspiration for their own answer."

It is difficult to determine where to draw the line when using this kind of software in schools. Software like ChatGPT is uncharted territory for students, teachers and administrators, and only time will tell how it affects the educational process.

"As far as technology goes, it's an incredible innovation that will likely change the way we do things," Emmons said. "I think students should look at it and see what is possible. However, there is a line you can't cross. It shouldn't impact what they are being asked to do in the classroom."



AI IN ACTION — When asked to answer a typical English class prompt, ChatGPT crafts a unique response that cannot be flagged by plagiarism-detecting databases.

LONG-TERM FAILURE

FCPS fails to provide adequate long-term substitutes

ISABELLA DIPATRI MANAGING EDITOR | LIYAT AMMAN REPORTER

Over the past two school years, McLean administration has had a difficult time finding adequate and reliable long-term substitute teachers to fill the spots of teachers on leave. County-wide teacher and substitute shortages are continuing to impact the administration's ability to find qualified candidates that represent the school's academic level.

"Coming back from [quarantine], we have fewer options in a lot of ways than we used to," Assistant Principal Jeffrey Barham said. "The main culprit is that there's a teacher shortage overall, and it affects our subs and everyone else."

For teachers who had a planned leave of absence, such as for maternity or paternity leave, the quest to find a candidate began before the new school year.

"I looked all summer, and we just weren't getting qualified candidates," Barham said. "A lot of people that were subs know [about the] teacher shortage, and they started getting permanent positions."

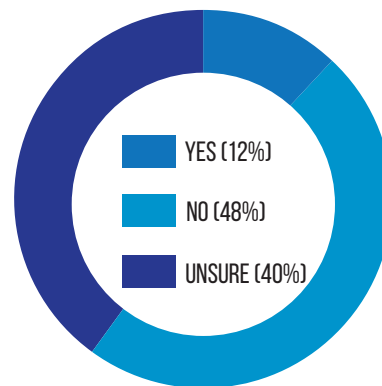
The applicant pool was slim. Barham struggled to find candidates that would be effective teachers to help students continue their education during a teacher's leave, which ended up being detrimental.

"FCPS seems to be treating these 'substitutes' as actual teachers—which could have damaging effects on students who wind up in classes taught by someone unqualified for their position," an anonymous respondent to The Highlander's survey said. "The failures of that substitute [have] become my own failures."

Maintaining academic rigor in the classroom is a challenge for substitutes who may not be certified teachers or experts in the subject, making it difficult for students to understand the class material. For some classes, students must also understand the content in time for end-of-year exams.

"I had to excel in my own way," said senior Faith Whare, who had a long-term

DO YOU THINK FCPS'S HIRING PROCESS FOR FINDING RELIABLE LONG-TERM SUBSTITUTES IS EFFICIENT?



INEFFECTIVE EMPLOYMENT — In a survey of 25 teachers and counselors, almost half of the respondents said they do not think the hiring process for long-term substitutes is efficient.

sub for her Pre-Calculus Honors class for two months. "[When I couldn't understand,] I kind of just gave up because we had to learn everything from videos rather than a teacher-led lesson, and we couldn't ask questions."



I KIND OF GAVE UP BECAUSE WE HAD TO LEARN EVERYTHING FROM VIDEOS RATHER THAN A TEACHER-LED LESSON, AND WE COULDN'T ASK QUESTIONS."

**- FAITH WHARE
SENIOR**

In the case of emergency teacher leave, the administration is tasked with finding a qualified candidate who can teach rigorous

classes within an even shorter timeline, which can be an almost impossible task.

"My classes are difficult, and it's hard to find, especially quickly," said math teacher Natalia Gorine, who left on emergency leave last school year. "It's hard to find someone to pick up the pieces. It would be nice to have someone overnight, but it's not possible. We have to be realistic."

While teachers are not responsible for finding their own long-term substitutes, putting the sole responsibility on school administrators means teachers may not know the qualifications of the people who are chosen to take over their classrooms and teach their curriculum. Still, administrators do what they can to maintain the quality of instruction McLean students are accustomed to in spite of the circumstances.

"I always want the best for our kids," Barham said. "I try to make decisions that are based on what's in the best interest of our students, and sometimes it's hard to give the best instruction when we don't have quality subs available."

PARENTAL ADVISORY: EXPLICIT CONTENT

FCPS implements policy on sexually explicit instructional materials

SOPHIA WEIL REPORTER

Gov. Glenn Youngkin and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) approved Senate Bill 656 in April 2022, requiring school boards across Virginia to ensure parental notification of sexually explicit content in instructional materials 30 days before they are used. FCPS will start notifying parents of explicit content at least 30 days before the start of the fourth quarter.

FCPS has put teachers in charge of identifying what materials may be deemed sexually explicit based on definitions of sexual material from the Code of Virginia.

“We create a list of books that we teach that we think aren’t sexually explicit, and then we create a list of [books] that we think may contain [explicit content],” said English teacher Bridget Donoghue, chair

of McLean’s English department. “Our secondary English Language Arts team is going to make the final decision based on the list that we submit.”

The bill emphasizes parental rights, promoting collaboration with educators regarding the content that children are exposed to in school.

“Parents are the main caretakers and are responsible for any minor children,” said Elizabeth El-Nattar, president of McLean’s PTSA. “I think it’s always good to let parents know what’s happening in school because they have the right to home-school their children if they disagree.”

While FCPS has previously instituted regulations on content, including an extensive approval process for books and disclaimers in class syllabi, the new policy will maximize parental influence and make the process of requesting alternative content more straightforward.

“[Parents can] fill out a Google form if they want to request a new text instead of just reaching out to the teacher, so it formalizes everything and makes it more transparent for parents,” Donoghue said. “We pick a text that has similar themes and similar content, minus the sexually explicit [content].”

Critics of the bill say that the censorship of specific content based on personal views should not be implemented in FCPS because it limits real-world exposure.

“If you can’t understand what other people have experienced, then it’s going to be really hard for you to get through your life,” said senior Sabrina Beadie, a member

of McLean’s Gender and Sexuality Alliance. “[Regulating content] is harming children because it narrows their worldview.”

In Senate Bill 656, homosexuality is considered an example of sexual conduct, and books can be considered sexually explicit if they include homosexual characters. The bill’s passing has sparked discussion on the sexualization of homosexuality.

“[The bill] reinforces the negative archetype of queer people being sexual,” Beadie said. “It’s ridiculous that [homosexuality] is over-sexualized, and it’s just an excuse for homophobic people to block it out of their kids’ lives.”

However, FCPS added a clause to the policy that rejects the inclusion of homosexuality as a form of sexual conduct to combat the VDOE’s stance on what is considered sexual.



EDUCATORS HAVE THE BACKGROUND THAT MOST PARENTS DON'T HAVE ON HOW TO EDUCATE THEIR CHILDREN.”

**- ELIZABETH EL-NATTAR
McLEAN PTSA PRESIDENT**

“This policy shall not be construed to require...the designation of instructional material as sexually explicit based solely upon the sexual orientation of the characters contained therein,” according to FCPS Policy 3290.

The supportive dynamic between administrators and teachers at McLean means the new policy will not undermine teachers when it comes to their lessons.

“At McLean, our admin trusts [teachers] to make good decisions about the books that we teach for our students and to choose high quality texts,” Donoghue said. “I think the county is just doing what they have to do because of the state of our politics.”

Even with the new policy in place, parents will still need to place some level of trust in their children’s teachers.

“I don’t think that any parents who are realistic believe that they should have 100% control of their children,” El-Nattar said. “Educators have the background that most parents don’t have on how to educate their children.”

**SENATE BILL
NO. 656**

- 1) 30-day notice for parents**
At least 30 days before instructional materials with “sexually explicit” content is used, a notice must be sent to parents identifying the materials and the specific content in question.
- 2) Right to request alternative materials**
Parents have the right to request alternative materials for their children.
- 3) Defining sexually explicit content**
The Virginia Department of Education defines sexually explicit content as descriptions or visual representations of “sexual bestiality, a lewd exhibition of nudity...sexual excitement, sexual conduct or sadomasochistic abuse.”
- 4) Defining sexual conduct**
Sexual conduct is defined as “actual or explicitly simulated acts of masturbation, homosexuality, sexual intercourse, or physical contact in an act of apparent sexual stimulation.”

VANDIVIER PERSEVERES

Junior leads effort to pilot epinephrine training

SAEHEE PEREZ EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Since she was young, junior Lauren Vandivier has spent significant amounts of time in the hospital due to her severe food allergies.

“There are people who can eat their allergen and just have a cough or a sore throat. For me, even the slightest bit of smelling or touching [my allergen] can trigger anaphylaxis, which is life-threatening,” Vandivier said.

Motivated by her own experiences and the lack of awareness surrounding treating severe allergic reactions, Vandivier began leading an initiative for epinephrine training at McLean last year. Epinephrine is a drug that delays the effect of an allergic reaction to give those experiencing a reaction enough time to seek medical assistance.

“I was talking to one of the administrators and they mimicked injecting an EpiPen in a dangerous place on the leg,” Vandivier said. “That concerned me because in the case of somebody having an allergic reaction, the only danger [should] be their allergic reaction and not a lack of knowledge from people around them.”

As a result, she worked with fellow juniors and members of the Committee on Raising Student Voices (CORSV) Alexia Bodet and Arav Mathapati to create a proposal for training McLean students to identify an allergic reaction and learn about EpiPens.

“A lot of people have their first ever allergic reactions at school and may not be able to recognize the signs of them or differentiate them from signs of another illness,” Vandivier said. “There are a lot of misconceptions about how to use EpiPens.”

Through the CORSV, the three juniors created a task force and presented their idea for an allergy awareness and EpiPen training to Principal Ellen Reilly.

“We all thought it was a really good idea, and we’ve been trying to get Fairfax County to [implement] something,” Reilly said. “Ideally...we put it on a platform for us to be able to send [the training] to [students].”

After their initial presentation, the task force proceeded to present their ideas to school board members, the Fairfax County Health Advisory Board and county delegate Rip Sullivan.

“SHE’S ESTABLISHED CONNECTIONS, AND I THINK IT’S GOING TO HELP MAKE THIS INITIATIVE COME TO LIFE.”

**- LIBBY SALOPEK
SENIOR**

“They told us that they loved our project and that we were really good at presenting, but they didn’t give us any further instructions on how to proceed,” Vandivier said.

Along with fellow CORSV members, Vandivier has continued to push the initiative at school.

“She was a sophomore last year, and I think she was bewildered that this could

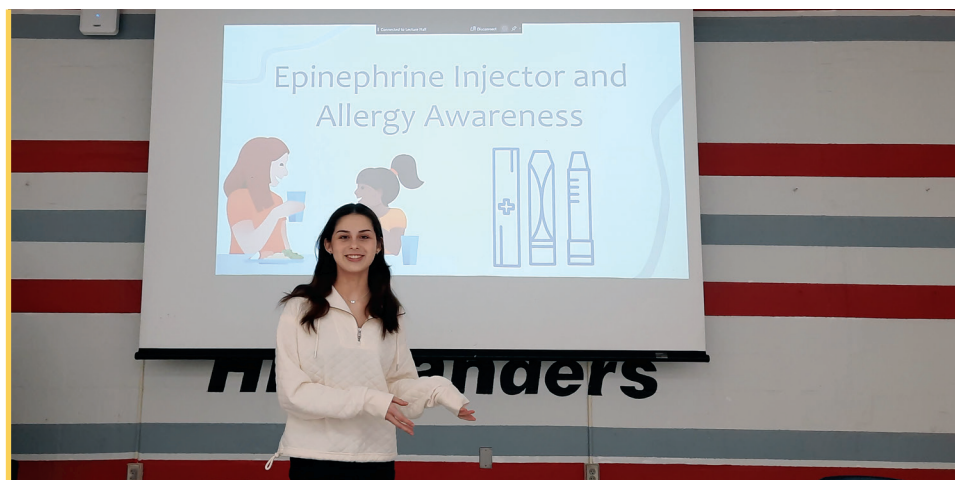
move forward,” Reilly said. “Now I see her one year later, she’s [matured]... I see her now taking more of the steps that she needs to take.”

Vandivier is currently working on planning the future steps of the initiative.

“She’s managed to create a reputation for herself—a good one,” said senior Libby Salopek, another Head Council member of CORSV. “She’s established connections, and I think it’s going to help make this initiative come to life.”

McLean is scheduled to pilot the training for students this spring. Afterwards, the training will be brought up to county and state executives again to be put under consideration for wider implementation next school year.

“The EpiPen initiative is a way for students who often feel unsafe at school because of their food allergies to feel as though their peers will have their back in case of a reaction,” Vandivier said. “It’s the manifestation of something I always wished I had in elementary and middle school, and I hope it will make a positive impact on students with food allergies at McLean.”



AN ONGOING MISSION — Junior Lauren Vandivier presents a brief explanation of the EpiPen initiative during the Committee on Raising Student Voices meeting held on Jan. 11. She hopes the initiative will help students with food allergies throughout Virginia.

10 Qs WITH JULIE GAMBOA

SCHOOL HEALTH AIDE

Reporting by Alex Kofinis & Elise Walker
Photos courtesy of Julie Gamboa



1 What is the best part about being a health aide at Mclean?

I used to do this job as a sub, and this was always my favorite school. I think the students here are fantastic, the faculty is wonderful, our admin is amazing and I really like this school and everybody in it.

2 What was the highlight of your 2022?

We took a vacation to Niagara Falls.

4 What is your favorite winter activity?

Skiing.

8 What is your spirit animal?

A butterfly.

3 What do you like to read?

Anything by Tolkien and classical authors like Shakespeare. My favorite book is *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

5 What is your biggest fear?

Heights. I do not do heights. I don't go on ferris wheels or anything else like that.

9 Who is your biggest role model and why?

My mom is my biggest role model because she was a military wife, and we moved frequently. I had three sisters, and my dad was gone a lot too. My mom kept us moving forward, she kept us together and she was always there supporting us.

6 What is your favorite vacation spot?

Hawaii.

7 What are your favorite Valentine's Day items?

Flowers and chocolate, especially Reese's and Lindt chocolate.

10 If you weren't a clinic aide, what would you be?

I couldn't even begin to think, but probably an author.



IN MEMORY OF MADELINE TARAZI

Student who fought tumor lives on through her impact

MINSONG HA NEWS EDITOR

On May 23, 2008, the world welcomed Madeline Lucia Tarazi's beautiful spirit. Madeline met and touched the souls of many different people in many different ways, but two words everyone used to describe her were "always positive."

"We have so many memories together, it's hard to come up with or even choose a favorite," said sophomore Emily Tarazi, Madeline's older sister. "She was bright, kind of sassy and always optimistic."

With just a one-year age difference, Madeline and Emily shared an unbreakable bond not just as sisters but also as friends. Their complementary personalities unified them. While Emily was more reserved, Madeline tended to be more extroverted.

"She was very friendly and outgoing," said Evelyn Tarazi, Madeline's mother. "She made friends easily because [of her] positivity and happiness."

Emily and Madeline shared many core childhood memories.

"I remember we would act together in funny videos, [dressing] up and acting as people like Justin Bieber for fake commercials or sports videos," Emily said. "And around November, we got to see *Hamilton* at the Kennedy Center. We watched the Disney Plus version during quarantine a million times and Madeline memorized all the song lyrics."

A lot of their memories were shared by sophomore Thamarie Pinnaduwege, who was close to both sisters. The three reunited at McLean High School after Emily and Madeline moved away from Virginia in their elementary school years.

"Madeline was the kind of person who would always make good jokes, make people laugh and make any situation funny regardless of what it was," Pinnaduwege said. "She was always the mischievous one. When we were little, we always [tried] to make slime with only hand sanitizer. It never worked, but it was still fun."

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic and socially isolated times, Madeline's positivity and empathetic personality reached others at Longfellow Middle School and McLean High School.

"I remember her being someone very sensitive to other people's needs," said Eugene Huang, Madeline's math teacher at Longfellow. "She always had good advice to offer everyone."

On Dec. 31, 2022, Madeline passed away due to diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma (DIPG), a cancerous brain tumor that usually occurs in children and is very hard to treat.

[MADELINE] WAS A TOUGH COOKIE WHO PUT UP A MEAN FIGHT AGAINST AN UGLY DISEASE."

**- MOLLY MCCOMISKEY
MADELINE'S NURSE PRACTITIONER**

"DIPG itself is very rare. Overall, there are about 200 kids diagnosed with DIPG in the United States per year," said Miriam Bornhorst, Madeline's primary attender and physician at Children's National Hospital. "DIPG tumors generally have a very poor prognosis."

Always a lover of learning, Madeline continued to stay on top of her education even after her diagnosis, when frequent treatments and doctor's appointments interfered with school.

"Madeline always made sure she came in for her French and orchestra classes, and she really was doing everything she could to keep up with those classes," said Lorraine Marshall,

Madeline's counselor at Longfellow. "She would ask her French teacher what she had missed and kept practicing her cello as much as she could. She said, 'I'm going to need these good grades in the future to do what I want to do.' She was just such a positive person and never let her illness get her upset."

Madeline's eagerness about learning extended past academics and into the arts.

"Madeline enjoyed being in the art room when she was at the hospital," said Molly McComiskey, Madeline's nurse practitioner at Children's National Hospital. "She was very creative and enjoyed making artwork and different types of bracelets and necklaces."

In addition to crafts, Madeline's favorite hobby was playing the cello.

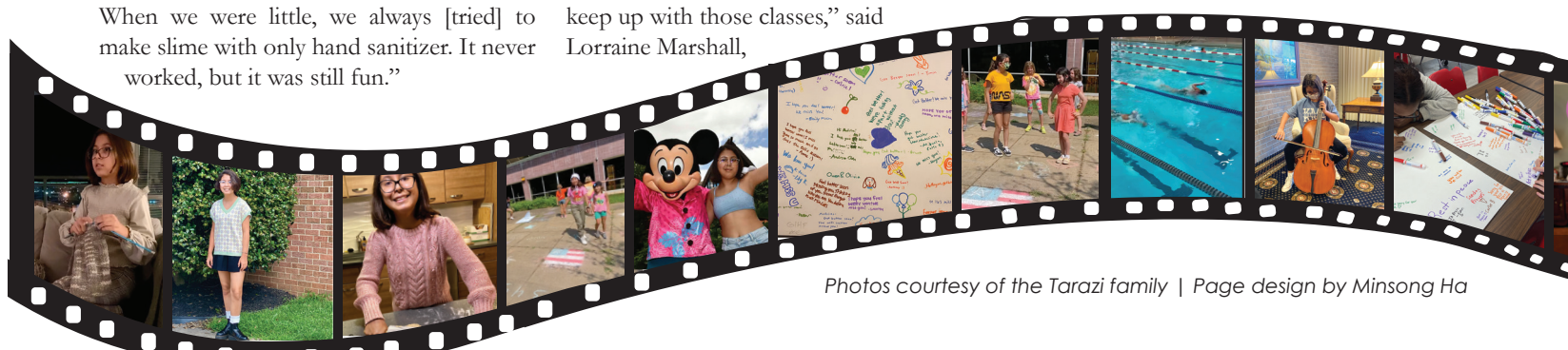
"She was always so excited about orchestra," said Starlet Smith, Madeline's orchestra conductor. "Even when she couldn't play the cello [after her surgeries], she would still come to our concerts, listen and write feedback about how we sounded."

Eventually, Madeline lost her ability to play the cello. But her love for the instrument forever remained, and Madeline sought out different ways to show her passion.

"She designed our concert programs," Smith said. "I would always send out an email saying, 'Hey, does anyone want to design our program?' and she was always the first one to immediately email me back with artwork."

Madeline and Emily connected through their love of music. At Madeline's Service of Remembrance on Jan. 14, Emily performed Chopin's Nocturne in E-flat major, honoring Madeline's life and their friendship.

"One thing that always struck me about Madeline was that she just had so much love for her family," Marshall said. "She was always so proud of her sister. From my [time] with Madeline, I could tell that...her sister,



Photos courtesy of the Tarazi family | Page design by Minsong Ha



Emily, really was her best friend.”

It was family Madeline truly depended on, from her grandparents “Teita” and “Jiddo” to her parents, older sister and younger brother, especially after her diagnosis in November 2021. Their close bond made it even more difficult for them to come to terms with her condition.

“Towards the end, she noticed that her symptoms were getting worse. It was hard for us because she would sometimes talk about death, but we wanted to keep her positive,” Evelyn Tarazi said.

DIPG’s survival rate is effectively 0%.

“A big part of [her fight] was that there is no cure or effective treatment for [DIPG],” said Jason Tarazi, Madeline’s father. “No child survives for more than two years or even 36 months. The average survival time from diagnosis to death is nine months, and Madeline made it for 13 months.”

DIPG research is severely underfunded, and funds for research are mainly raised through foundations or private donors.

“When people are funding research for cancer, what they think about is impact. It’s a lot easier to garner support when you say it’s going to impact many people,” Bornhorst said. “For DIPG, that’s not the case.”

Due to the unknowns and uncertainties of the illness and a cure, Madeline and her family were at first very disheartened by the shocking diagnosis. However, they learned to follow Madeline’s optimism.

“Initially, [Madeline] was probably very scared and unsure of what was going to happen. I’m sure her family

felt the same way,” Bornhorst said. “But over time, she participated a lot in her care, she was very positive and she had a great outlook on life.”

McComiskey, for whom Madeline was her first primary patient, witnessed all the ups and downs of Madeline’s condition and the courage Madeline showed in her long fight.

“The small things that we take for granted every single day, that sweet Madeline was unable to enjoy anymore,” McCormiskey said. “But it never stopped her from keeping her faith... She was a tough cookie who put up a mean fight against an ugly disease.”

Remaining positive against such a devastating disease was often difficult for Madeline, her team and her family.

“At the end, Madeline said, ‘Mommy, I can’t live like this.’ How could a person like Madeline...with so much life and so much energy not be able to walk or use her hands?” Evelyn Tarazi said. “All she did was sketch, paint, bead, bake and knit. But she couldn’t do any of that anymore.”

Even under the worst circumstances, Madeline showed great bravery.

“Madeline was very, very strong and always had hope and faith. She [would] go to MRIs with no sedation or anything,” Evelyn Tarazi said. “She said, ‘Mom, I don’t want you to take me to the doctors. I want to do it myself.’ The doctors told her she could [write with] her iPad, but she said, ‘No, I want to write myself. I want to use my hand to write.’”

Following Madeline’s death, the Tarazi family decided to donate Madeline’s brain and spine to Children’s National Hospital to provide tumor and tissue samples that will aid DIPG research.

“The [Tarazi family’s] decision to donate her brain and spine will help us figure out why the tumor wasn’t responding to certain treatments,” Bornhorst said. “It also gives us a resource to look at new therapies. We can try different drugs, treatments and options.”

The Tarazi family has asked others to join the cause through donations in lieu of flowers or gifts. They have raised more than \$17,000 as of late January.

“All of the fundraised donations will go to our primary research labs where they study DIPG and immune cells, the tumor composition, genetics of the tumors and how to develop new therapies,” Bornhorst said. “We’ll be able to use the donations to not only figure out what happened but also how we can come up

with new treatments for kids in the future, so it’s very impactful.”

Hopefully, donations will help create a brighter future for those with DIPG.

“[DIPG] doesn’t typically catch the attention of the NIH or [other organizations],” Jason Tarazi said. “That’s why research efforts through private foundations or hospitals like Children’s National Hospital [are essential].”

Monetary donations are not the only way to show support for DIPG patients and Madeline Tarazi.

“People can help support DIPG research just by raising awareness, whether it be in their school or for adults or different organizations,” Bornhorst said. “They don’t have to be through donations—just getting involved can definitely be a big step.”

Madeline will forever remain in the hearts and memories of her friends and family.

“Her illness was devastating and DIPG needs to be better known, but it’s important to remember the things that she really [loved],” Jason Tarazi said. “Like her friends and family, the cello and arts, sketching and drawing and so much more.”

THE TARAZI FAMILY'S FUNDRAISER FOR DIPG RESEARCH

140+ PEOPLE HAVE DONATED

17K+ RAISED BY DONATIONS

DONATION LINK:



SENIOR CREATES NEW WORLDS

Vachel Thevenot publishes multiple science fiction novels

MARIA SAUCEDO REPORTER

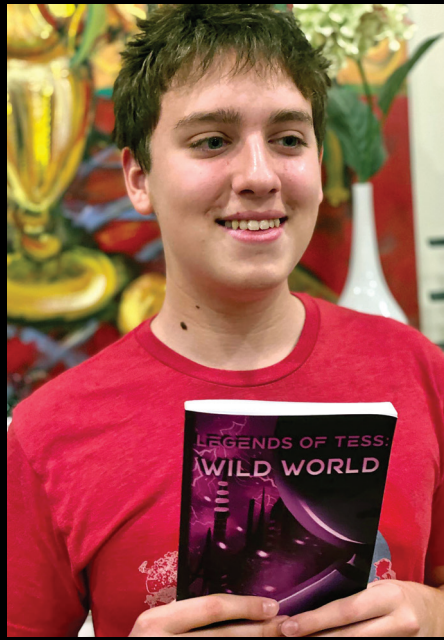
Senior Vachel Thevenot often engages in creative activities, whether it is developing board games with his friends or working on his passion of building extensive worlds in the form of fictional novels. His dedication to creative writing has allowed him to publish two science fiction novels.

Vachel works on his writing during any free time he has at school—after finishing a test early, during Highlander Time or even between classes.

“Vachel is a really creative kid. He’s written two books and is working on his third,” said senior Noah Salinas, a close friend of the young author.

He published his first novel, *Legends of Tess: Wild World*, in 2020 after working on it for a year and a half. His work, however, did not receive much attention because virtual learning made it difficult for him to tell peers about his book.

“All I could really do was to tell people by typing a message in the online school chat,” Thevenot said.



AWESOME AUTHOR — Senior Vachel Thevenot has published two books during high school. *The Shades*, his second science fiction novel, was published on Dec. 23, 2022. (Photo courtesy of Vachel Thevenot)

Vachel first began writing books when he was in elementary school.

“He wrote two books called *Robot Ors*, and they were graphic novels,” his mother, Sytera Thevenot said. “They were literally stick figures with dialogue underneath them.”

“

I FEEL THE MORE BASED IN REAL SCIENCE MY SCI-FI WRITING IS, THE BETTER [THE NOVELS ARE].”

**- VACHEL THEVENOT
SENIOR**

Vachel became increasingly committed to writing as he got older. With his growth, his books expanded from graphic novels to long-form writing.

“I started writing my first book on the first day of ninth grade,” Vachel said.

The book is set in Tess, a utopia where some are born with unique abilities. Despite the large number of people with special powers, the powerless Eon Uriat suddenly becomes the only one who can save the world.

“Halfway through ninth grade, I was seven chapters into the book,” Vachel said. “I [thought writing it] was really fun, so I got into it, and then I haven’t really stopped since.”

The book was inspired by games Vachel and his friends played when they were students at Haycock Elementary School.

“[My friends and I] pretended to be superheroes and stuff like that,” Vachel said. “Legends of Tess, an imagination game we specifically liked, has a really interesting story to it.”

After the publication of his first book, Vachel began writing *The Shades*, which is based on a colony on the planet of Manin, which experiences annual storms with mystical qualities called The Shades.

The story follows an orphan named Azer

as he gets to know more about his mysterious life on his planet. The story’s inclusion of annual storms was not a surprise for Vachel’s parents, as he has shown a passion for meteorology from a very young age.

“He reads a lot of news, space and physics [news] in particular,” his father, Chad Thevenot, said. “He would watch a lot of weather-related videos, specifically tornadoes.”

Vachel received assistance from his father, who helped him edit the grammar of both books. Vachel also had the opportunity to work with a professional editor.

“I got help from Book Baby, which is a hybrid publisher,” Vachel said. “[A hybrid publisher] is the halfway point, so that you have some help along the way. It’s more professional formatting, especially in terms of editing.”

The Shades was published in December and is available as a paperback or an e-book.

In the future, Vachel will continue writing as an extracurricular activity. He plans on studying aeronautical engineering at college, where he hopes to learn about real-life concepts like developing spacecraft—the kinds of things that often come up in science fiction.

Vachel will pursue one of his biggest academic passions in college—the same topic that got him into literature in the first place—and spin it into new sci-fi novels as he continues his writing career in tandem with his pursuit of engineering.

“It’s going to be challenging for him, to have the time, space and energy to write, but I know he will continue to do it,” Sytera Thevenot said. “At this point, it’s in his blood.”



M C M A T C H M A K I N G

The Highlander staff sets up two juniors on a bowling date

MADELEINE STIGALL MANAGING EDITOR | MAKDA BEKELE DESIGN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In December, The Highlander staff sent out a survey in order to match two McLean students together in time for Valentine's Day. The survey asked for ideal dates, pet peeves and favorite songs and movies. Based on these responses, two candidates were selected to go on a date in order to test if their complementary qualities would create a lasting relationship.

Juniors McKartnee Johnson and Drew Lineweaver were set up on a bowling date. It turned out they were already friends before their night at the bowling alley, and the two found it hard to move out of the friend zone. While no sparks flew on this date, they both remarked that they had a nice time out with each other.

COMPATIBILITY



AWKWARDNESS



ROMANCE



MCKARTNEE

"Drew and I have been friends for a while, so I feel like we are generally on the same wavelength."

"He may or may not have crushed me when we went bowling, but despite the tragic loss it was still super fun."

"It was a fun time, and I am so grateful to have a friend like him!"

DREW

"We have been friends for a while so we both knew each other pretty well."

"It was cool. We just talked and bowled for a while."

"We thought it was fun, but we'll probably just stay friends."





MELISSA DULUC
AP SPANISH AND SPANISH 2

ANDREW GARFIELD

"I just love his looks, and I think he's a great actor who can play many different roles really well."



FACULTY
SHARES
CELEB
CRUSHES



KHUSHI RANA ONLINE MANAGING EDITOR

SANDRA CHENG SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

SHAILENE WOODLEY

"Have you ever seen *The Spectacular Now*? Oh my god, the way Shailene Woodley played Aimee Finicky—whew! She is probably one of the best high school interpretation roles I have ever seen on film. That movie probably came out when I was a senior in college, and I saw it, and I was like, 'Oh god, that's my girl.'"



BILLY THOMAS
PHYSICS

CHANNING TATUM

"He's hot."



RENEE YATES
ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS ATTENDANCE

RYAN REYNOLDS

"He's just got a lot of handsomeness and charisma which I think is too hard to pass up, so he's got to be my favorite."



MATTHEW CHRISTIANSON
PRECALCULUS & ALGEBRA II

CHRIS EVANS

"When I was a nanny right out of college, I had three boys I was a nanny for, and they were absolutely obsessed with Captain America. We probably saw *Winter Soldier* 27 times, so I had a lot of familiarity with Chris Evans. He was always on my mind, so he is the first person to come to mind."



LINDSAY BOERGER
US VA HISTORY & FILM STUDIES

N/A

"I think celebrity crushes are immature and childish, and I have never once had a celebrity crush."



CHRISTOPHER DOBSON
PHYSICS

CHRIS EVANS

"He's very talented, he seems like a good person and he loves dogs, so that's a win-win."



AMANDA WILLIAMS
WORLD HISTORY & AP GOVERNMENT

JENNIFER ANISTON

"Growing up as a kid in the 90s, she was the woman to have a celebrity crush on, and I think it's stuck ever since."



RYAN ABRAMS
WORLD HISTORY I & AP ECONOMICS

KATE UPTON

"She's really hot."



MATTHEW KELLY
INSTRUCTIONAL ASSISTANT



CLAUDIO'S QUEST TO MCLEAN

TheatreMcLean performs first amateur production of musical

TARA PANDEY FEATURES EDITOR | DALIA FISHMAN REPORTER

Claudio Quest, TheatreMcLean's second production of the year, is a musical spoof of *Super Mario Bros.* and a conceptually novel production for the cast and crew. The storyline about two brothers from the Eggplant Kingdom, Claudio and Luis, on a mission to save Princess Poinsettia from the evil Bruiser will sound familiar to fans of the classic video game, but the play goes deeper than that.

"It's about finding the confidence within yourself and not falling into the label that's been given to you," theater director Phillip Reid said. "It's just super fun and ridiculous, and sometimes we need that."

What makes the musical stand out is that TheatreMcLean will be the first high school to ever perform it. Reid previously saw it professionally performed and helped adapt it for a high school stage.

"It's fun to pioneer [the play]. Since we don't really have much to go off of, we can experiment with it on our own," said junior Nathan Bass, who plays Luis. "We can work with the writer, which is something that you don't really get to do with any other plays or musicals. It also means our vision of it can constantly shift because there hasn't been just one way to do it."

As TheatreMcLean's rendition is the first amateur production of the musical, the preparation process came with unique challenges. Reid had to alter the script to accommodate high school audiences.

"It was written for [adult] audiences... [which means] there was a lot more fun that they could have with adult humor. So we toned that down a bit," Reid said.

Additionally, there was no musical soundtrack to the show, meaning cast members had to learn their singing parts through an instrumental track.

"There's been moments where [the music] doesn't make sense to me, and then I listen to it with the track and I'm like, 'Oh I understand this track now, I understand the rhythm,'" TheatreMcLean's musical director Doug Ullman, Jr., said.

"It's just super fun and ridiculous, and sometimes we need that."

**- PHILLIP REID
THEATER DIRECTOR**

With the musical's video game setting, *Claudio Quest* has a very distinct look, both in its characters' makeup and its stage props.

"Our makeup heads designed personalized eye makeup for each character. For example, [Princess] Fish has this cute, bubbly eyeshadow," said senior production stage manager Becca Sullivan. "There are so many [big] props. The paint [crew] has a lot to do—since it's a video game, they have to paint each brick."

The play is set for Feb. 10-12 and will be

held in McLean's black box, as opposed to the traditional auditorium location.

"It's a far more personal feeling for the audience, especially since it's a video game musical," Bass said. "It makes them feel like they're playing as they watch."

Reid chose the show because of his preference for shows that push boundaries. A musical designed for the black box, a tech-heavy production and a spoof of a classic video game are all innovative features of the production. However, Reid's motivation to put on the play ultimately stems from how much he enjoyed watching it in person.

"I had a blast watching it. I want to bring that same energy to people who watch it now," Reid said. "I want to continue to let people in on the fun."

The unique experience provided by TheatreMcLean has garnered attention around the school, and those involved with the play are excited to see public reactions to the final product.

"This show is unlike anything TheatreMcLean has ever done before," said senior Miranda Simpson, who plays Princess Fish. "It's so animated. It's so much work physically. We put so much into it, and it's going to be such a great performance."



Claudio Quest
Feb. 10-12
theatremclean.org

WINTER À LA MODE

Students share their favorite winter styles

ODILE DE VACHON REPORTER

Winter is here. It's time to dig out your most obnoxious puffer coat from the depths of your closet. This year, we're leaving the long underwear in 2022 and providing you with more fashionable options. Follow these tips to have your warmest and trendiest winter.

"It took me some years to develop my own winter style," junior Neyla Benomar-Iza said. "Layers are important... I style outfits with basic pieces of clothing and add accessories. My favorite winter trend is probably long coats and boots. You always have to be comfortable."

Photo courtesy of Neyla Benomar-Iza



Neyla Benomar-Iza



Eva Melnichenko

The long coat remains essential. They make any outfit chic and are appropriate for any occasion. Who says Hot Girl Walks are only for the summer? Throw on your insulated accessory and prepare to strut through the neighborhood. Overheating? Wool sweaters and turtlenecks are also a safe choice.

"I love to style my winter outfits with cargo pants or jeans with a sweater—something that's cute but simple," sophomore Eva Melnichenko said. "One of my biggest fashion inspirations is Rachel Green. Just wearing something simple and colorful can bring out your whole look."

Photo courtesy of Eva Melnichenko

Struggling for fashion inspo? Never doubt the most powerful tool a person has for making fashion choices: Google. You can find outfits on Pinterest, Instagram or TikTok. With practically every era's fashion trends back in style, movies and TV shows are fair game for finding ideas.

"I watched the movie *Dead Poets Society* and decided to get more into sweaters and khakis. Those are my main two pairings," senior Wyatt Lahr said. "I like to play with contrasts and layers—if I have a dark green sweater, I might pair that with a white button-up."

Photo by Ty Goss



Wyatt Lahr

IMMERSED IN VERSE

Freshman Aashna Kapur turns to spoken word poetry for self expression

ADDIE HARRIS REPORTER

Stepping up onto the small stage, lights beaming brightly into her face, she surveys the audience, one larger than any she has faced before. Despite her anxiety, freshman Aashna Kapur pushes forward, determined to share the most honest version of herself on stage through spoken word poetry.

Spoken word is an outlet for raw creativity which is cathartic for both Kapur and her audiences.

“I want to be able to translate what other people are feeling into words,” Kapur said.

Kapur discovered this empowering form of expression in seventh grade when she joined the Creative Writing Club at Longfellow Middle School and was encouraged to explore writing as a creative outlet. Social media also introduced her to spoken word, exposing her to poets such as Sarah Kay, Maia Mayor and Blythe Baird.

“In the beginning, when I was writing in the club, I would write based on a prompt,” Kapur said. “That’s why I don’t want to take creative writing classes [anymore]. When I write, I try to do it the way Blythe does and talk about personal experiences.”

Her first performance in front of a large audience was at the September 2022 No Shame show, a monthly student-led talent show run by TheatreMcLean. She recited her poem “I Want,” inspired by the title of Mayor’s “I Want to Be,” leaving the audience stunned by her performance.

I want my life to be an Oscar-winning movie that I've directed, produced, edited and starred in/ I want talent to seep out my pores and effortlessly roll off my back, glistening like gold on my body

The vulnerability displayed in Kapur’s work is a crucial part of how she stands out as a writer and performer.

“She just knows herself so well,” freshman Mia Mortman said.

Kapur’s creative process isn’t structured.

Her works begin as words, phrases or titles jotted down in her notes app for her to build on later.

“I don’t even work in order most of the time—sometimes I’ll finish the end, or I’ll finish the beginning, or skip the middle and then come back to it,” Kapur said. “The goal when I write is to not set any limits for myself.”

I WANT TO BE ABLE TO TRANSLATE WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE FEELING INTO WORDS.”

**- AASHNA KAPUR
FRESHMAN**

Once she has completed a rough draft, Kapur takes her piece to her English teacher Amber Smith for advice and edits.

“She’ll sit with me while I read through her work, and then I ask some questions, and tell her about my impressions... I’ll give her some suggestions of what I think might work, and it’s of course up to her whether or not she tries them,” Smith said. “Questions are the first step because I need to know what her responses are—that’ll give me a clear understanding of where she’s headed with the message, or the image, or the tone that she’s trying to create at that point.”

As far as organization goes, Kapur is not bound to a specific format in her writing.

“It can be very all-over the place, and I don’t focus on structure. I don’t focus on forcing anything, I just do what feels natural,” Kapur said.

Although she has no plans to pursue spoken word as a professional career, she plans to continue it for herself as it

is a valuable form of expression in her life.

“I don’t want to take it that seriously, because then I’m not doing it for me anymore, I’m doing it because I need money, and I want to win, because I want the applause,” Kapur said. “That’s not the right reason. I do it because it’s self care, it’s freeing, it makes me feel better and also helps me understand who I am.”

The self-insight of her work is part of what makes it connect with listeners.

“The great thing about [Aashna’s] poetry is it’s so vulnerable and so personal, yet everyone can relate to it because she’s just relying on emotion,” Mortman said.

Kapur’s emphasis on emotion has a unique impact on her community.

“[Aashna’s poetry] makes people aware of some of the issues or feelings that people her age have,” Smith said. “What makes it in particular so powerful is that she’s not afraid to share what’s deeply personal to her.”

I want my name in lights, resembling a constellation with its immortality and the sheer weight of its starlight/ Immortality. I want to live forever in the minds of the youth, impact others in ways no one else could



ART FROM THE HEART — Aashna Kapur performs her poem “The Girl I Am.” Prior to performing at TheatreMcLean’s No Shame shows, Kapur spends about a week writing each poem.



[AFFIRMATIVE ACTION] WORKS FOR WHOEVER IS LEAST REPRESENTED IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS OR LEAST REPRESENTED IN THE SCHOOL.”

- MARINA QU
HARVARD STUDENT

COLOR

LOOMING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION DECISIONS

MADELYN FREDERICK
SPORTS EDITOR

MINSONG HA
NEWS EDITOR

FARAH ELJAZZAR
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ZAKAREYA HAMED
OPINIONS EDITOR

MAKDA BEKELE
DESIGN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



“[UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS] DON’T HAVE THE RESOURCES TO BE AS SUCCESSFUL.”

- MARY BARNES
McLEAN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SPECIALIST

When senior Jessica Lin logged in to Common App for the first time, she was excited to begin her college application process. As an accomplished student, she had no issue entering her standardized test scores, transcripts and personal essay, but then she was faced with a part she’d been dreading: “Please indicate how you identify yourself.”

As an Asian American, Lin had been advised not to emphasize her racial identity on college applications because Asians are perceived to be higher achieving and thus held to higher standards when competing

for admission at prestigious universities.

“When I was first drafting [my college essays] I remember someone saying, ‘You might want to steer away from writing about your Asian culture because you’re enhancing the stereotype’...even though it was inherently a part of my [identity] that I wanted to showcase,” Lin said.

For students like Lin, the impact of identity is a shared concern. In recent years, affirmative action has taken center stage in debates over equity within college admissions.

Affirmative action originated in the U.S. during the 1960s under President Lyndon B. Johnson, following pressure from the civil rights movement. Cemented in Executive Order 11246, the policy was initially designed to aid underrepresented groups in admissions to previously predominantly white colleges and companies.

“[Underrepresented students] don’t have the resources to be as successful,” McLean College and Career Specialist Mary

Barnes said. “They not only do not have the financial options but [also may struggle with] the time, because they may be working or they’re taking care of younger siblings, so they can’t do that college prep class.”

Despite being repeatedly challenged, the constitutionality of affirmative action has historically been upheld. Most notably in 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the University of Texas in a case in which a white student claimed she was denied admission as a result of her race. The court declared that diversity is a “compelling government interest” and race could be used as a legitimate factor in admissions.



“WITHOUT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, THERE’S NO GUARANTEE THAT COLLEGES WILL TRY THEIR BEST TO CREATE A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY. THE NATIONAL RATES OF MINORITIES ATTENDING COLLEGES MIGHT VERY WELL DECREASE.”

- JIAYIN ZOU
JUNIOR

Schools ranging from Fairfax County Public Schools’ (FCPS) Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJHSS) to Harvard University and the University of North Carolina (UNC) have become tangled in the debate.

Two new cases concerning Harvard and UNC were brought to the Supreme Court in January of 2022 after Students for Fair Admissions, an activist group, challenged the legitimacy of affirmative action as a part of the college application process. The court is expected to reach a decision in the spring or summer of 2023 concerning the legality of affirmative action in universities across the U.S.

Critics of the policy believe affirmative action results in special treatment based on race or gender. They also argue that such policies lead to so-called ‘reverse discrimination,’ and that individuals from majority groups are unfairly disadvantaged.

Marina Qu, an Asian American McLean graduate and current

sophomore at Harvard, has observed the controversy through the eyes of both a high school and college student.

“[Affirmative action] works for whoever is least represented in the college admissions process or least represented in the school,” Qu said. “[The system] doesn’t necessarily work for anyone specifically, but it’s rather about bringing up the percentage of students who are underrepresented.”

Prominent organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, along with other activists, have asserted that affirmative action is designed to ensure equal chances of success and is not correlated with discriminatory practices.

“Without affirmative action, there’s no guarantee that colleges will try their best to create a diverse student body,” junior Jiayin Zou said. “The national rates of minorities attending colleges might very well decrease.”

A DIVIDED PRESENT

The college application process is one of the most stressful times for seniors across the nation, especially in a demanding environment like McLean. From standardized testing to numerous supplemental essays, admissions processes have evolved to be more competitive than ever before.

Supporters of affirmative action often argue that as a result of racism, sexism or other forms of prejudice, affirmative action is one of the few viable options to help minority groups obtain higher education.

“For years now, [schools have] been working hard to create more diversity in the incoming classes—and without having that [identifying information], I’m not sure how they’re going to be successful,”

Barnes said. “I know that diversity is important and produces success, whether it’s on a corporate board or

in leadership roles. If we reduce diversity coming into the schools, then the diversity coming out of the schools is also smaller, which then impacts institutions down the road.”

Students have had mixed responses to new equitable admissions policies and the potential Supreme Court overhaul of affirmative action. Those opposed to the system argue that the college admissions process should be centered around merit rather than prioritizing racial diversity.

“I know [most universities] got rid of [standardized testing],” Lin said. “I think obviously standardized testing is very debatable, but in terms of [setting] a baseline, we could implement it back [into the college admissions process].”

Holistic review aids universities in

THE BIG QUESTION — From Common App to other application portals, students are often prompted to select their racial identity. Identification helps schools determine whether their admissions decisions are diverse. Such data can be used to prevent discrimination and ensure schools foster diversity. (Photo by Zakaraya Hamed)

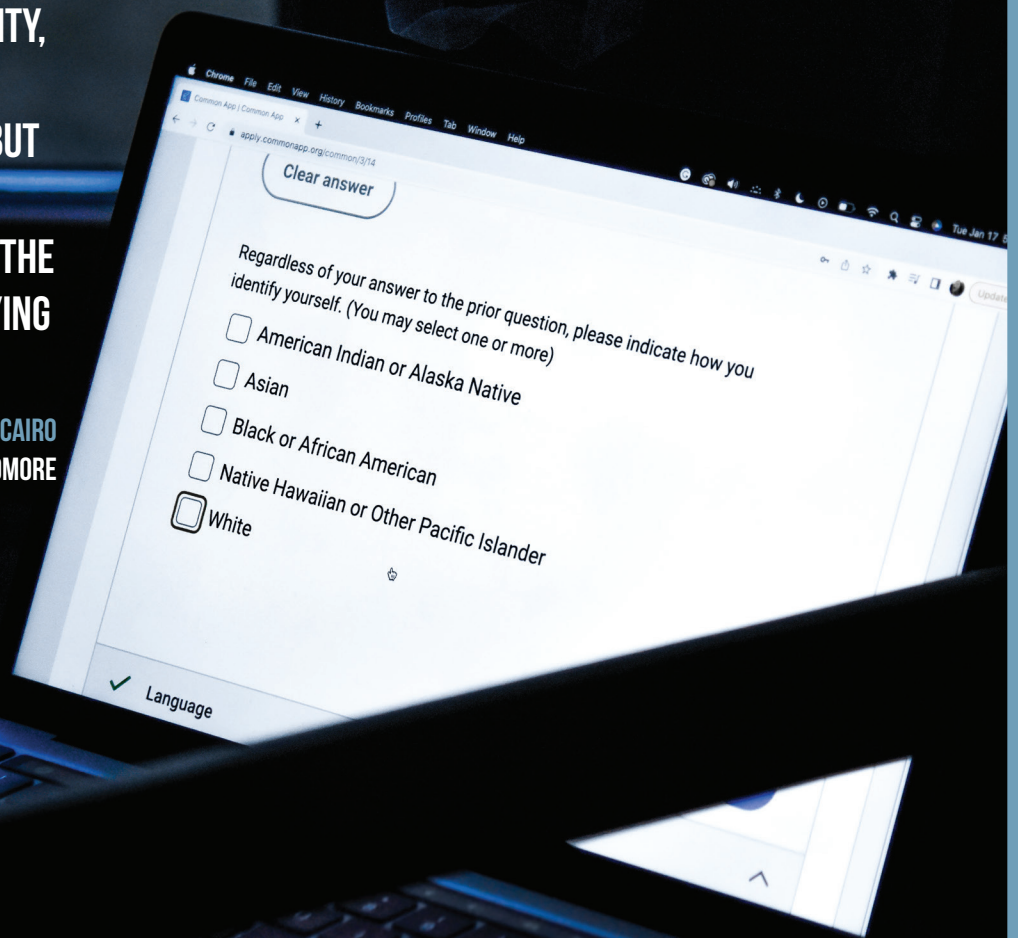
eliminating the possibility that a single factor will determine an applicant’s admission decision. Universities claim that affirmative action works in conjunction with this system, ensuring that candidates are not only qualified but also represented.

“Communities are being told they only got [into colleges] because of their race or gender and that if they weren’t marginalized, they wouldn’t have gotten certain [achievements],” said sophomore Alexis Cairo, a Black Student Union officer.



COMMUNITIES ARE BEING TOLD THEY ONLY GOT [INTO COLLEGES] BECAUSE OF THEIR RACE OR GENDER...IN REALITY, THEY’RE DESERVING NOT BECAUSE THEY’RE BLACK BUT BECAUSE THEY’RE JUST AS GOOD IF NOT BETTER THAN THE NEXT PERSON WHEN APPLYING TO THESE UNIVERSITIES.”

**- ALEXIS CAIRO
SOPHOMORE**



"IT'S NOT JUST HARMING KIDS WHO HAVE BEEN MARGINALIZED. IT'S HARMING ALL OF US, ALL OF OUR KIDS." - KATHLEEN OTAL

"HARVARD WOULDN'T BE HARVARD IF IT WEREN'T AS DIVERSE AS IT IS NOW... HARVARD IS ALREADY TAKING A LOT OF STEPS TO BRING HIGH ACHIEVING STUDENTS, NO MATTER THEIR RACE." - MARINA QU

"IF WE DON'T HAVE PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS IN HIGHER-LEVEL EDUCATION, THEN THE PEOPLE WHO LEAD OUR SOCIETY WILL NOT KNOW HOW TO RESPOND TO THE DIVERSE POPULATION OVERALL."

- JIAYIN ZOU

"IN TEXAS, THE TOP 10% [PER HIGH SCHOOL] GET INTO ANY PUBLIC UNIVERSITY OR TOP UNIVERSITY IN THE STATE. SO THAT HELPS. BECAUSE IF YOU HAVE SOME HIGH SCHOOLS THAT ARE MORE UNDERREPRESENTED, THEY'RE STILL ON EQUAL FOOTING." - MARY BARNES

"In reality, they're deserving not because they're Black but because they're just as good if not better than the next person when applying to these universities."

Universities argue it is necessary to maintain mandated equity policies such as affirmative action because of the need for minority access to higher education amid generations of systemic inequality.

Following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, McLean counselor Kathleen Otal took matters into her own hands to research and unpack the impacts of racism from the perspective of a student counselor.

"I wrote a book to get to the real root of what I think the problem is," Otal said. "The first part of the book is about 'what is racism?'...because I never really interacted with anyone different from me growing up in Buffalo, New York."

Otal sought to dig deeper into how historical racism influences the education inequality many groups experience today. She applied her research to understand how inequality in education came to be, finding a central answer.

"Racism is the root of the problem," Otal said.

Otal began implementing her knowledge regarding racism and education inequality to her work with high school students seeking higher education, regardless of race.

"If you have experience with kids from different cultures, races, ethnicities and ability levels, you're going to be able to be more successful in your career and in life," Otal said. "It's not just harming kids who have

been marginalized. It's harming all of us, all of our kids."

While most agree that diversity is important in schools, how to carry out ensuring that diversity is more complicated. Critics of the system believe that affirmative action turns into racial prioritization.

"I know that people from my community, the Asian American community, are having a really tough time getting into college," Lin said. "I understand the purpose of affirmative action...but I feel like

it's just a Band-Aid solution that isn't really working out, as we can see with the lawsuits."

In Fairfax County, the new admissions system at TJHSST has come under criticism. In 2020, the county announced the elimination of the standardized test requirement for admission to the school and the

implementation of holistic admissions. In the following year, the Asian American population dropped from 73% to 54%, with critics alleging the system to be biased against Asian Americans.

"The people that I'm friends with seem to be just as driven as the upperclassmen [admitted through pre-equity admissions]," said TJHSST sophomore Neha Chandran, who was part of the first newly admitted class after the school's admissions change. "[The underclassmen] are just as passionate and studious as upperclassmen who are there due to the past admission system."

I FEEL LIKE IT'S A BAND-AID SOLUTION THAT ISN'T REALLY WORKING OUT, AS WE CAN SEE WITH THE LAWSUITS."

**- JESSICA LIN
SENIOR**

DARK FUTURE

As a decision by the conservative Supreme Court looms, the likely rulings point toward the drastic changes a future without affirmative action could hold.

In 1997, the University of California system (UC) formally removed affirmative action from its admissions considerations—a shift that hurt the Latino student population. Between 1997 and 2019, UC's Latino student population decreased by 17.81%, despite a dramatic increase in young Latinos in the state over the same period. African American students faced similar declines, and by 2006,

just 96 of 5,000 freshmen at the

“YOU CAN LEARN SO MUCH JUST FROM THE CONVERSATIONS YOU’RE HAVING [WITH STUDENTS OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS].”

- MARINA QU
HARVARD STUDENT

school were African American.

California's replacement of affirmative action with holistic admission processes largely altered the higher education landscape in the state, creating an opportunity gap and setting precedent for other prestigious universities to follow.

According to The Harvard Crimson, Harvard's Black student population would likely decrease by 50% upon a ruling against affirmative action. Similar trends would be seen across other Ivy League universities.

“Harvard wouldn't be Harvard if it weren't as diverse as it is now...Harvard is already taking a lot of steps to bring high-achieving students, no matter their race,” Qu said. “You can learn so much just from the conversations you're having [with students of different backgrounds].”

Members of minority groups worry that a future without affirmative action could be detrimental as they pursue higher education and employment. Their concern lies in that the policy has been so often challenged and its future remains uncertain.

“AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AT ITS VERY CORE IS AN ATTEMPT TO LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD FOR THE DISADVANTAGED.”

- ALEXIS CAIRO
SOPHOMORE

“I think undoing the very practices that allow our communities to be diverse and progress will lead to an unfavorable time to come,” Cairo said. “Affirmative action at its very core is an attempt to level the playing field for the disadvantaged.”

Ensuring diversity is not solely a controversy seen in higher education. As the Coalition for TJ—the parent-led movement making efforts to revert the admissions process at TJHSST—continues to accuse FCPS of racial balancing, the concept of equity in education is growing within primary, middle and high schools.



1960

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON ENFORCES EXECUTIVE ORDER 11234, CREATING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOLLOWING PRESSURE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1997

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SYSTEM FORMALLY REMOVES AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FROM ITS ADMISSIONS CONSIDERATIONS, PRIMARILY HURTING LATINO STUDENT POPULATIONS

2013

SUPREME COURT RULES IN FAVOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AFTER A WHITE STUDENT CLAIMED SHE WAS DENIED ADMISSION AS A RESULT OF HER RACE, RULING THAT RACE COULD BE USED AS A FACTOR IN ADMISSIONS PROCESSES

2016

IN FISHER V. UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, THE SUPREME COURT RULES IN FAVOR OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION UNDER THE IDEA THAT DIVERSITY IS “IN GOVERNMENT INTEREST”

2022

TWO CASES CONCERNING HARVARD AND UNC ARE BROUGHT TO THE SUPREME COURT AFTER AN ACTIVIST GROUP CHALLENGES THE LEGITIMACY OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AS A PART OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS—THE COURT IS EXPECTED TO REACH A DECISION IN THE SPRING OR SUMMER OF 2023

A GRAY AREA

Affirmative action and equity in admissions have been a subject of discourse for decades. Various solutions have been proposed to refine the education system, with the goal of supporting as many groups as possible.

Some believe that broad state-focused policies will help ensure admissions equity, especially when different areas have distinct racial and socio-economic demographics.

“In Texas, the top 10% [of students per high school] can get into any public university in the state,” Barnes said. “That helps because if you have some high schools that are more underrepresented, they’re still on equal footing.”



I THINK WE NEED TO STICK WITH WHAT WE HAVE AND CONTINUE TO ALWAYS REFINE IT AS WE GO.”

**- ALEXIS CAIRO
SOPHOMORE**



Suggested solutions rarely advocate for the abandonment of affirmative action, but rather suggest implementing alterations and additions to it. As conversations on racial equity continue to evolve, promoters of the

system propose it evolves too.

“I don’t think what we have today is broken,” Cairo said. “I think we need to stick with what we have and continue to always refine it as we go.”

The issue regarding how to mend the wound of persecution lives on today, as institutions from colleges to corporations become entwined in the movement for equity. Universities are working toward building equity while rewarding academic achievement to ensure that classrooms are filled with diverse, qualified students. Yet, many of these institutions have yet to make tangible advances.

“There’s always a need to have a balance between equity and equality, but the world is never fair,” Qu said. “You can never have a system that will work in favor of everyone.”

UNRULY HIGHLANDERS TAKE THE STAGE

UnRuly Theatre Project helps students explore the art of improv

TY GOSS REPORTER

As the players take the stage, the atmosphere is anything but typical. There is no auditorium, no swath of viewers patiently waiting for the curtains to raise. Instead, the patrons of Old Firehouse gather with anticipation as they await the UnRuly Theatre Project's improv performance. With a flair that delights the audience, this student-run troupe has become a staple of the McLean art community.

Improv does not have as definitive of a structure as traditional theater, giving each artist creative freedom.

"The most obvious difference is improv theater doesn't have a script or blocking," senior Jack Abba said. "[There's] nothing to go off of in terms of what you're acting out."

In improv, scenes are referred to as games, reflecting the relaxed nature of each performance.

"[We] think of them like board games," junior Rafik Hanna said. "There are separate games, and each game has its own rules."

Improv games are entirely unique to each performance, adding a layer of nuance to each. There is very little communication between performers before each game, meaning every scene is crafted in the heat of the moment. As a result, improv demands actors that are quick-witted and imaginative.

"It's straight out of your head onto the stage," Abba said. "In that sense, it becomes a lot more of a flow of consciousness."

Another contrast between traditional theater and improv is that improv focuses on building a tangible connection between the actors and audience through deliberate dialogue and actions.

"A lot of shows we do involve talking to the audience and getting to know them," Abba said. "That isn't really seen with a normal scripted production."

The group performs two types of improv: long-form and short-form.

"We mainly do long-form improv, which consists of longer games around 20 to 30 minutes, where we establish a scene and we have a joke, and it's a running joke throughout all the different scenes," Hanna said.

Although the performances may be spontaneous, the performers still maintain order.

"If someone introduces something into the scene, the other person can pick up on it and the meaning behind it, and then they take the scene in a way that makes sense," Hanna said.



**IMPROV THEATER
DOESN'T HAVE A SCRIPT
OR BLOCKING... IT'S
STRAIGHT OUT OF YOUR
HEAD ONTO THE STAGE."**

**- JACK ABBA
SENIOR**

One element which is vital to every scene is the improv philosophy of "Yes, and?" which dictates that performers never contradict a concept introduced by another performer.

"Your partner will lay down a premise for a scene, and you have to accept that and add onto it," Hanna said. "You have to do both

really well [or else] the scene is very stale."

Due to the lack of continuity in improv, UnRuly Theatre requires frequent practice. Practices are held at the McLean Community Center, where the team rehearses by playing games, which could be anything from telling the improvised story of a bear hunt or creating a tale about Rumpelstiltskin in a noir style.

Practices also include mime games, with members pairing up and silently delivering a cohesive story. The troupe's bonds shine especially bright during these games, as each pair delivers a concise story that remains comedic, despite the lack of verbal communication.

"It's all very chaotic, but in a very fun way," Hanna said.

While serious effort is placed into the practices, performers believe it is important to always have fun.

"My character is the helpful first mate on the ship, so when I saw that the ship was failing, I stepped up to do my job," Hanna said. "When [my partner] turned the ship, it was fun to pretend to topple over."

The effects of the UnRuly Theatre Project go beyond the stage, as the lessons actors learn bleed into their personal identities.



BIG KAHUNA — At a rehearsal for the UnRuly Theatre Project, McLean junior Jackie House helps Herndon junior Tommy Maxson reel in a mega-fish as Herndon senior Andrew Landrum watches. (Photo by Ty Goss)



WINNERS' CIRCLE — Junior Rafik Hanna poses with trophy from an Improvcon competition. The UnRuly Theatre Project won first place at the event despite competing against multiple adult groups. (Photo courtesy of Rafik Hanna)

“It taught me to be more me,” Abba said. “In freshman year, I was slumped over and hidden away. Now I’m a lot [more confident] in terms of my energy.”

On top of bettering performers’ self-image, improv teaches performers valuable life skills.

“Improv has helped me in a lot of areas,” Hanna said. “You’re learning how to be confident.”

The program provides its members with a safe space to learn and grow, an aspect of the troupe that members greatly appreciate.

“The fact that you’re able to do this in a setting where it’s OK to practice and make mistakes is very fun,” Hanna said.

Members of the UnRuly Theatre Project are paid by the state for their talent and contributions to the arts. Still, the UnRuly troupe is more devoted to their performances than any financial incentives.

“[I heard] it was a paid acting opportunity, and I didn’t have any money, so I decided to try it out,” Abba said. “Then, it became more than just something I could get money

for doing. It was almost like I was inspired to join it twice.”

The troupe’s tight bond goes beyond performing, as they build upon their relationships during every rehearsal.

“We’re like a family because these are the people we spend six hours with every single week,” senior Nathan Kulp said. “[We’re] doing nothing but trying to [form a] connection.”

Working with the UnRuly Theatre Project gives actors the chance to embrace themselves and grow as people. Improv is an art form that allows for one of the freest styles of creative expression possible, enabling and inspiring every member to push beyond their comfort zone so they can truly explore themselves, both as artists and as individuals.

“[At first] I was like, ‘Oh, this seems like something cool. Maybe I’ll go out for it,’” Abba said. “Then, callbacks for the auditions

[happened], I was like, ‘This is different than what I thought it was going to be. This is something I might have some sort of future in.’”

The UnRuly Theatre Project has already won awards for their performances. The group most recently won first place at ImprovCon in May 2022, a Northern Virginia improv competition. McLean’s troupe stood out for being the youngest of all teams at the competition, a trait of their group that routinely makes them distinct from their competitors.

“When we compete, we compete against adult groups,” Kulp said. “We were the only youth group, and we came out on top.”

Whether they are winning awards or performing at Old Firehouse, the UnRuly troupe remains grounded in their mission to bring entertainment to the McLean area through the lens of onstage performances.

The UnRuly Theatre Project has provided its members with experiences they will cherish for a lifetime. While the actors’ time in the program will eventually come to an end, the lessons they have learned both about the art form and themselves will be carried on by each and every member well past their last time performing onstage.

“The [UnRuly Theater Project] community doing performances hopefully will [inspire] teenagers,” Hanna said. “Later, they will become helpful members of the McLean community.”

by the [time]

UNRULY THEATRE PROJECT'S UPCOMING PERFORMANCES

FEBRUARY 17 [WITH HERNDON IMPROV GROUP] @ ARTS HERNDON
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New content policy will not benefit students

The staff editorial represents the opinion of the majority of The Highlander editorial board

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) instituted a new model policy in August regarding inappropriate content in school texts. The policy requires teachers to inform parents at least 30 days in advance about any sexually explicit content in their children’s curriculum. This constraining attitude toward content is troubling, and it opens up the risk of more content limitations being implemented in the future.

The policy, which outlines a bureaucratic process by which books must be judged, will be implemented in FCPS before the end of the school year.

“First we have to get [a text] approved by our school, and then we have to send a list of books to the Central Office,” English teacher Michael Enos said. “[They] draft a template for the letters that we have to mail out [to parents] within 30 days of teaching it.”

What’s appropriate for a high school student is subjective. No committee can anticipate the reaction of every person in a school system. Moreover, trying to please every family in the county goes against the purpose of education. Schools like McLean take pride in their students’ willingness to take on challenging work. Although challenging

students often comes in the form of difficult exams or homework assignments, challenges in the form of uncomfortable or upsetting content should not be overlooked. There’s a difference between damagingly disturbing content and content which forces students to face undeniable truths about the world.

“The books that are always on the banned books list are some of the best books,” Enos said. “I wonder where this is going as far as what we can teach if things have to be so clean and [students] aren’t getting the nuances and complexities of life that are valuable lessons.”

Texts in English classes aren’t chosen to test the limits of free speech; they’re chosen for the meaning they carry. Fairfax County residents have shown faith in school faculty through their votes and continued enrollment in public schools. Teachers are professionals who spend years of their lives learning how to teach students. They should be trusted to fill their curriculum with books that benefit students.

That doesn’t mean parents shouldn’t be involved in their children’s education, but before implementing restrictive content policies, the county should encourage parents to take advantage of the resources already available to them. Course curriculum can be accessed through syllabi. Parents should absolutely play a role in their children’s education, but that role shouldn’t be to

judge whether every new text is appropriate or not based on a list of out-of-context instances of sexual content. It should be to have conversations with their child’s teachers about what’s being taught in class. By implementing this policy, the county is taking away important responsibilities of involvement parents have.

“In our syllabus, we list the books that we read every year and have links to where students or parents can read the summaries, [and there is a] syllabus signature sheet they’re supposed to read and sign,” Enos said. “I wonder if this letter will cause alarm bells in [parents’] minds and make them think, ‘This is a terrible book’ when it might not be... I wonder if we’re inviting more resistance to [what we teach].”

The model policy is just the latest example of attacks on literature in Virginia schools. In 2021, an FCPS parent requested that two books focused on LGBTQ+ issues, *Gender Queer* and *Lann Boy*, be removed from school libraries. Book censorship in the U.S. is closely tied with a bigotry that should never enter public schools. Pen America, a nonprofit organization focusing on free expression in literature, reported in September 2022 that out of 2,532 nationwide book bans from July 2021 to June 2022, 41% featured LGBTQ+ themes or characters, 40% featured characters of color and only 22% of the titles actually featured sexual content.

By and large, the book censorship wave isn’t a campaign to protect kids—it’s one to indoctrinate them. Often, conservative parents find texts with progressive themes threatening, and under the guise of keeping their children safe, they marginalize vulnerable groups and radicalize education.

FCPS’s recently adopted sexual content policy is largely the same as VDOE’s model, but it includes a clause specifying a text cannot be considered “sexually explicit based solely upon the sexual orientation of the characters.” Though a vital detail to include, the county should be resisting the policy as a whole since it sets a precedent for the sterilization of education. School is meant to expose people to new ideas. If FCPS students aren’t being challenged by what they read in class, the system is failing.



VALUE ALL FINE ARTS EQUALLY

Recent honors designations are good but not enough

OMAR KAYALI
WEBSITE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



For years, FCPS has not given fine arts courses the credit they deserve. Students who dedicated time, energy and effort into perfecting a craft and putting it on display for their community to enjoy were not even afforded an honors designation. This year, however, the county made a crucial first step in solving this issue—starting with the 2022-23 school year, upper-level band, orchestra and theater classes were all given an honors status which results in a 0.5 GPA boost.

Band, orchestra and theater are all deserving of the honors designation. However, they are not the only fine art courses worthy of the boost. None of the journalism courses (print, broadcast and yearbook) were afforded the same honors designation, despite checking many of the same boxes as the performing arts.

According to Director of Curriculum and Education Colleen Eddy, the classes were given boosts because each course fosters specific technical skills that students can use in their lives beyond high school while engaging in college-level experiences. The courses also open the door to university requirements and scholarships that can help students pursue careers in fields they are passionate about.

Every journalism course requires specific knowledge of programs and equipment that are used in professional settings. Photos and videos are necessary in all three classes, and each class has a unique method of writing and editing that students learn. Adobe InDesign, Photoshop and video editing software are all taught on a college level, and journalism scholarships are available for students pursuing a career in the field.

“I’VE HAD A NUMBER OF STUDENTS COME BACK AND TELL ME HOW THEY WERE ABLE TO USE INDESIGN OR PHOTOSHOP ON THE JOB OR FOR AN INTERNSHIP...”

- DANIEL REINISH
MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL
JOURNALISM ADVISER

A 0.5 boost to someone’s GPA may not seem significant in a student’s gradebook, but the value an honors boost has goes beyond report cards. The real advantage of an honors designation is the value it places on fine arts; in a county that puts heavy emphasis on STEM courses, fine arts courses round out a

student’s education and teach them practical life skills, such as working in a team setting while still managing individual responsibility, or technical abilities useful in jobs, such as using Adobe Creative Cloud and developing writing and communication skills.

“I’ve had a number of students come back and tell me how they were able to use InDesign or Photoshop on the job or for an internship and how impressed their managers were,” Marshall High School journalism adviser Daniel Reinish said.

Each class also teaches students the ethics of their field and progressively introduces information to the students, taking time to make sure students understand the nuances of how a publication staff works.

Print journalism and yearbook specifically run businesses that function entirely on their own. Outside of learning the mechanics of writing and design, students sell ads and advertise their products to their community while balancing printing costs. Broadcast journalism also functions independently, requiring students to seek out newsworthy topics and produce news packages and live shows, all with professional grade equipment and high-end video editing software. By the time a student reaches a higher-level journalism course, they have had experience working with professional equipment and software to produce fully finished products for their community to benefit from. That level of dedication and commitment is worth honoring.

Even if quality should be a factor in giving a class an honors boost, journalism programs throughout FCPS have proven their merit. Eleven out of 28 FCPS schools earned either trophy class or first class rankings in at least one form of journalism in the 2022 Virginia High School League (VHSL) awards. Not all schools entered the VHSL competition, but for awards given to schools in the entire state of Virginia, that many FCPS schools receiving such high honors is significant.

Giving performing and musical arts an honors boost is a good first step to properly valuing fine arts, but it isn’t enough. FCPS must begin equally valuing all fine arts to give their students the freedom to pursue interests, fulfill their passions and develop real world soft skills.



WINNING STREAK — McLean, Marshall, Chantilly, Annandale and Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology are just five of the 11 FCPS schools whose publications earned trophy or first class rankings from the Virginia High School League in 2022, yet none of the students who worked on these newspapers, newsmagazines, websites and yearbooks received an honors boost for their efforts.



SATIRE

SLEEP IS FOR THE WEAK

Seven tips to become an academic weapon

AILEEN WU REPORTER

Sleep deprivation is the universal scapegoat for academic ineptitude. Students often blame their plummeting grades, poor mental health and loss of sanity on a lack of sleep. Students also procrastinate on homework, negotiating for more time, which is disrespectful to teachers, all of whom understand the importance of skipping sleep for an education. Luckily, high schoolers can easily do well in classes while achieving a healthy balance between sleep, school and everything else—just follow these seven simple guidelines:

1. SLEEP IS A REWARD, NOT A NECESSITY

There is no science indicating that a healthy amount of sleep can boost your immune system, increase your productivity and improve memory. What is the real necessity? Extraordinary productivity. Only after students complete their seven hours of homework, six-hour sports practice, volunteer work, cure cancer, discover a habitable planet and reverse global warming should they rest.

2. HIGH SCHOOL IS A FULL-TIME JOB

Students should leave time for absolutely nothing else, especially a social life. High schoolers have ample opportunity to socialize during their 30-minute lunch break! Time is limited, and life is the ultimate race. Don't waste time on anyone else's schedule, focus on your own. It runs 24/7.

3. PULL ALL-NIGHTERS

Join the ranks of the sleep-optional. Normalize Two-Hours Tuesday and Sleepless Sunday. Students must train themselves to stay awake and active throughout the night. Pro tip, try progressive overload—stay up until 12 a.m., then 2 a.m. and so on. Your efficiency will improve over time. For now, consuming raw coffee grounds and duct taping your eyes open is sufficient to obtain temporary clarity. Soon enough, you'll be turning in your assignments before sunrise!

4. DON'T LET THIS AFFECT YOUR PUNCTUALITY

It doesn't matter that high school starts as early as legally possible. Students should always arrive at their first period class awake and eager to learn. Fuel yourself with black coffee, energy drinks or whatever it takes to have you in your seat by 8:10 a.m. and not a second later.

5. MULTITASK

Completing tasks one-by-one is an utter waste of human potential. It's time to push the limits of human physiology. Eat dinner on the bike ride home, write that essay during sports practice, complete your required reading in the shower, work on math homework during English—do whatever it takes to attain a state of optimum efficiency.

6. FORGO BATHROOM BREAKS

Teacher not letting you go? School bathroom hasn't been renovated since Prohibition? That's not an issue—peeing isn't a basic human function anyway! In fact, ignoring the call of nature can actually encourage a prolonged attention span and improve knowledge retention. Time spent in the bathroom is time wasted. Consider using these additional 15 minutes to study.

7. LEARN BRAILLE

In this prime era of your life, time is everything, and studying is an exorbitant waste of time. Students should speed through their homework without comprehending the material. To streamline study habits, students can study multiple subjects at the same time. One way to do this is to convert half of your textbooks to Braille. This means that you can read two books at a time with your eyes, and two more with your hands. Anything less is pure laziness, and you'll never get into college with that attitude.

CROSSFIRE:

Lack of learning on snow days is detrimental

SANDRA CHENG
ONLINE FEATURES EDITOR



Flushing ice cubes down the toilet, flipping pajamas inside out or tucking a spoon inside a pillow are superstitions used by students hoping for snow days. Whenever snowfall hits Fairfax County, excited students repeatedly refresh the FCPS home page in hopes of finding a school cancellation alert. While both students and faculty members find pleasure in days off, numerous snow days can disrupt success in learning. After the developments made during pandemic learning, using virtual learning methods to carry on instruction is most productive during snow days.

For the 2022-23 school year, FCPS has kept the policy of having a traditional snow day on the first five snow days, meaning instruction will be canceled for the day. After the five days are up, FCPS will use virtual learning programs like Zoom on days that weather constrains student access to school.

The policy is of utmost benefit to students as it takes care of concerns regarding learning in the event that snow cancels school for an extended period of time. Retaining some form of tradition in snow days keeps a sense of winter normalcy, as students will be able to enjoy the snow without the added stress of missing schoolwork.

“It feels like you have to have a certain policy to make up school days after a certain period of time [in case] you have some freak year where you miss weeks due to the weather,” science teacher Austin Blackford said.

Virginia law requires that the standard school year has 180 instructional days or 990 instructional hours. In past years, when FCPS’s built-in snow days were exhausted, additional days were added at the end of the school year in order to fulfill learning requirements. While students rejoiced over missed days of school caused by snow days, they had to make up for those hours of learning later on. Virtual learning on snow days ensures that the standard school year

calendar is retained, allowing summer break to exist in its entirety.

“I would not want to have a short summer,” junior Alexander Dubasov said. “I feel that summer is very important to recharge for the next school year.”



“I’LL BE STUCK INSIDE ANYWAYS, SO IT’S BEST IF I MAXIMIZE MY TIME TO BE PRODUCTIVE AND LEARN.”

- ELIZA BALL
SENIOR

The virtual learning policy ensures that necessary education will still be covered. In AP or dual enrollment classes, challenging curriculum makes it difficult for students to keep up with work. The fast-paced programs do not have room for students to miss instruction, and when too many days are taken off because of snow, students are forced to work harder to catch up and learn material in preparation for the AP exam. While days can be added at the end of the year, AP exams are standardized and cannot be delayed.

“If you miss a school day, you’re going to fall behind on how much learning you need for the AP exam,” Dubasov said. “Virtual learning is a good way to get that learning in [during times] that you’re not able to go to school.”

Learning during COVID-19 allowed students and teachers to become familiar with online platforms, so the hassle of having to make the adjustment is already handled.

“The pandemic helped me figure out what it looked like to plan a virtual lesson, how much of it should be direct instruction versus giving students stuff

to do independently,” Blackford said.

The pandemic allowed learning to be easily facilitated through a computer. Students have learned how to properly engage in class over Zoom or Google Meet and are accustomed to online learning platforms such as Pear Deck, Padlet and Jamboard.

Naturally, virtual learning will come with difficulties, such as making sure that students are paying attention and participating. A virtual learning snow day will not be as beneficial as an in-person one because of the shortened periods and limited social interaction. Although classes that center around hands-on activities will struggle without the tangible aspect that comes with in-person lessons, time spent learning is still precious, even if that time is spent in a virtual classroom.

“I’ll be stuck inside anyways, so it’s best if I maximize my time to be productive and learn,” senior Eliza Ball said. “It’s convenient because I have access to my computer and nowhere else to go.”

When it comes to succeeding in rigorous, competitive classes, having some kind of learning is better than having no learning at all. It is imperative that FCPS keep the five-day policy to give students the opportunity to enjoy the snow without falling behind on schoolwork.



SHOULD VIRTUAL LEARNING BE REQUIRED ON SNOW DAYS?

Virtual learning is pointless on snow days

KHUSHI RANA
ONLINE MANAGING EDITOR



A relaxing day to sled with friends at the neighborhood hill sounds appealing enough, but that's not the only reason that preserving snow days is essential. Canceling school completely regardless of the number of prior snow days should continue to be the policy for FCPS.

FCPS's current policy, which was introduced last school year, gives students the first five snow days off, and on any subsequent snow days, students are required to attend synchronous online learning. The policy ensures that students do not miss too much school, causing gaps in the set curriculum. However, there are several factors that the county should take into consideration, including students' ability to access online learning.

"It's really great that the county provides us with laptops, [but] it doesn't take away from the fact that there are a lot of people in underdeveloped areas across the county that don't have access to Wi-Fi," senior Calvin Thinley said. "I have a friend from another school in FCPS who had to walk two miles to find Wi-Fi on a virtual day since he couldn't drive because of the weather conditions."

Students without a reliable internet

connection at home are placed under pressure to attend school as attendance is not optional. When they do put in the effort to join a virtual class, the effort is often not worth it due to the multitude of technical difficulties that accompany virtual learning.

"We haven't had many virtual school days, but when we do, something always goes wrong," Thinley said. "It could be a glitch on Zoom, someone's Wi-Fi not working or an inability to share the screen."



WE HAVEN'T HAD MANY VIRTUAL SCHOOL DAYS, BUT WHEN WE DO, SOMETHING ALWAYS GOES WRONG."

**- CALVIN THINLEY
SENIOR**

According to research published by Frontiers, 67% of students heavily struggled with online schooling due to drastic shifts in class formatting, ineffective study habits and a tendency to lose track of time during their sessions.

Having students learn virtually on snow days with numerous distracting factors is ultimately a pointless endeavor. Computers and phones provide many opportunities for interruptions that are not class-related, including playing games or doing work for other classes. Although there are also distractions in person, it is much easier for students to get away with slacking off when the teacher cannot see what students are doing.

Other people in the home can also cause distractions. Some students must help care for their siblings or other family members, while some teachers may be dealing with their own children at home.

"Snow days are the universe telling us to take a day off," AP Biology teacher Julia Murdock said. "When I put myself in a student's shoes, I find it very difficult to stay in the game and not get distracted."

It is challenging to have a worthwhile virtual learning experience, which is why FCPS should consider reverting to the former policy.

"We managed on Snowmageddon when there were almost two and a half weeks lost, and they didn't change the [AP Biology] exam date," Murdock said. "Because there were so many snow days, I had told them to do the cell division unit at home since it's an easy unit. I didn't test it, and then when we returned [to school], we went to the harder stuff."

For those worried about students missing vital curriculum, the most productive option would be if teachers assigned asynchronous work through online classrooms such as Schoology for students to complete independently. Not only would this method take away the pressure of having a designated time to complete work, but it would also allow students to work to the best of their capabilities. For instance, a student whose Wi-Fi is not cooperating at 8 a.m. during virtual learning class time might have trouble completing work by the assigned time, but they would still have the chance to complete it later on.

Synchronous learning via Zoom requires additional work on technological aspects that wastes time, and that effort would be better placed into productive in-person curriculum scheduling.

"I believe virtual learning is not effective whatsoever," Thinley said. "I miss the days when we could work on our own time. It is not only stress relieving but also beneficial towards those who aren't as privileged always to have technology access."

FCPS must consider returning to the old snow day policy, as it allows students to do work independently and avoids the technological issues that come with virtual instruction.



FCPS WEBSITE BLOCKING IS INEFFECTIVE

Firewall, YouTube restrictions hinder learning



AARON STARK FACT CHECKER | KATE BURKE REPORTER



Using FCPS computers is a nightmare. The excessive website blocks placed on the devices ensures that productivity comes at the price of sanity. Nothing is safe from the blocks—music, databases and sometimes even FCPS’s own websites are affected.

Over the last few years, FCPS has issued each student a laptop to accommodate the shift to a digital world inside classrooms. However, because of the 2001 Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), all FCPS devices are required to filter out any websites deemed harmful to minors, including pornographic content or content that incites violence or crime. While this is necessary, FCPS often inaccurately identifies which websites to block.

FCPS regularly blocks websites that are helpful or even necessary to completing schoolwork. Earlier in the year, FCPS blocked CodePost autograder, which computer science courses like AP Computer Science A used for assignment submission. This caused frustration and difficulties in the classroom because teachers were forced to create their own autograding “testers” to grade students’ code. Unfortunately, these testers were not as effective as CodePost.

“It definitely affects the students’ ability to submit code, which was much more convenient and faster for [students] when CodePost was unblocked,” Computer Science teacher Natalia Gorine said.

FCPS also blocks videos used for instruction and studying on YouTube. For example, many videos on the highly popular science and history channel Crash Course are blocked on FCPS devices. This can create learning barriers, especially when teachers use YouTube videos as part of their lessons, because students might not be able to replay the video to catch anything they missed if the video is blocked.

“The county said we can’t use [certain resources], and the rest is our personal problem,” Gorine said. “I am happy to teach my students, but I need support from the county as well.”

Students who listen to music while

working are often prevented from doing so. Spotify is blocked, as are many non-explicit songs on YouTube. In the past, students could simply use their phone for music instead, but new FCPS policies banning the use of phones in the classroom remove that option. This poses another challenge to students who use music to help them study or get work done.



I AM HAPPY TO TEACH MY STUDENTS, BUT I NEED SUPPORT FROM THE COUNTY AS WELL.”

**- NATALIA GORINE
COMPUTER SCIENCE TEACHER**

“I listen to music while I work. It helps [keep] me focused and [adds] some background noise,” sophomore Daniel Campos said. “Music also just helps establish a rhythm so I get work done faster and with more motivation.”

The problem is exacerbated by the inconsistency in blocked websites. For

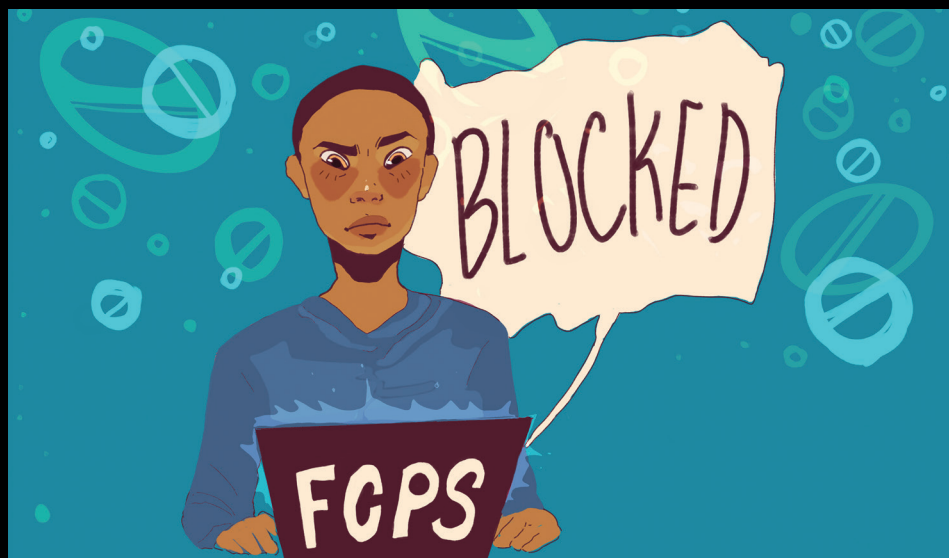
example, a website might be blocked only to be unblocked within the hour. This is frustrating since students can never be sure whether or not a website is blocked.

Even though the FCPS firewall can help certain students eliminate distractions, it is a burden for students who don’t need restrictions to stay on task. Additionally, while restricting access to inappropriate sites is important, especially for younger students, blocking sites necessary to productivity does more harm than good. Students should be trusted with their own digital responsibility.

Currently, FCPS’s Instructional Services Department decides what websites to block, but individual schools can refine the block list through their ability to add or remove URLs from their customized list.

“If we see something that is inappropriate, we can put in a ticket to IT,” Assistant Principal Emily Geary said. “They can review it to see if they want to block [or unblock] it.”

Students should be granted the ability to request that websites be unblocked to help McLean build a block list that makes sense. In the meantime, FCPS should remove blocks on any websites that are commonly used for learning. These changes will ensure that students aren’t blocked from receiving the education they deserve.





MCLEAN WRESTLING ADDS TO YEARS OF DOMINANCE

Highlanders keep up great reputation with strong performances

DOMINATING THE DUAL — Junior Will Olson grapples with a Yorktown High School wrestler during the Jan. 11 Dual During School. Olson pinned his opponent in the second period and won the match. (Photo by Ty Goss)

THOMAS HAM REPORTER

McLean’s varsity wrestling team had a strong start to their season, dominating their first seven matches to begin the year undefeated. The team features a strong mesh of district champions, regional and state winners and first-year wrestlers.

“A fundamental aspect of wrestling is that you’re supposed to impose your will on the other person,” said senior Stefan Jafari, a first-year wrestler. “You just have to worry about doing the right thing.”

The team won all of their matches early in the season thanks to the guidance of senior captains like Luke Dettleff and Boss Chandmani. Although injuries have impacted wrestlers such as Chandmani and senior Norbu Papa, members have still worked to provide a crucial role in the team’s success through their leadership.

Chandmani is constantly coaching from the sidelines or helping out wherever head coach Ken Jackson needs him. Papa, who is out with a knee injury, has also offered his help to the team.

“I’ve already been trying to help out my coach. The first few days, I was [doing] attendance and [acting as] the team manager,” Papa said. “Boss is always trying to help people out, and I’m also always trying to help [where I can].”

Each member of McLean wrestling plays a different role. The team is a tightly knit machine, and each wrestler is distinguished by their hardworking attitude.

“Everyone is giving it their all, and we’re all very committed to working very hard every day so we don’t have to worry about anyone slacking off,” Jafari said. “A team is only as good as its weakest link.”

“WHENEVER COACH ASKS US WHAT OUR MOST IMPORTANT MATCH IS, WE ALWAYS SAY THE NEXT ONE.”

**- LUKE DETTELEFF
SENIOR**

For McLean wrestling, success is simply the standard. Jackson demands a high benchmark for the team, keeping up the tradition of winning.

“Whenever coach asks us what our most important match is, we always say the next one,” said Dettleff, a cornerstone of the team.

Senior Night on Jan. 4 was a particularly

memorable success for the Highlanders. Dettleff went 2-0 in his evening duals against Herndon and Wakefield. Seniors received flowers and had their pictures taken before they took the mat for their matchup of the night.

After the event, the team’s focus shifted toward the Liberty District tournament and the Highlander Duels.

“Coach [Jackson] told us [being] hot right now, doesn’t mean anything,” Papa said. “We still have to go to districts and states, and our coach wants us to keep the same energy [we have right now].”

Hard work and consistency are the keys to the wrestling team’s mission. The wall outside of the wrestling room displays a legendary quote: “Hard works beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard.” For some students, the team motto might simply be a nice saying, but for McLean varsity wrestling, it’s a code.

Even with the high standards, the team is ready for the challenges that await them. Every last member of the team is ready to face any opponent. Jackson and his team plan on succeeding deep in the postseason, and after their perfect start, the team is prepared for the challenge.

“Everyone on the team is super hyped right now,” Papa said. “The first victory was a total wipeout. Our mood is insane.”

RAPID PACE LEADS BOYS BASKETBALL TO SUCCESS

Highlanders use speed, high energy to win games

TANNER COERR MANAGING EDITOR

On the evening of Dec. 16, the final night before winter break, McLean students and faculty gathered in droves at Langley High School to watch the McLean basketball teams face the Saxons. The night ended with the boys team defeating their rivals in an impressive 15-point victory, the first victory in the team's season sweep against their rivals. The win was another success for the team whose high-octane playing style led them through a strong season.

"We are definitely trying to play faster than we have in years past," head coach Mike O'Brien said. "We started implementing [our style] last year, and we've done really well in transitioning into our offense off the fast-break. The kids have done better than I expected them to do with our changes of styles and defense."

While McLean's offense has been effective, the Highlanders pride themselves on their performance on the defensive side of the ball. The intense pressure placed on opponents by players like senior guard Jakob Luu, who uses his speed to cause turnovers all over the court, is the basis of McLean's

defensive method. McLean employs players such as 6'3" senior Quinn Sullivan and 6'4" junior Isaac Bell to use their large wingspans and attack passing lanes, preventing opposing offenses from getting into a rhythm.

“YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING WHEN YOU'RE IN GAZELLE MODE. EVERY GAME WE GO OUT THERE AND WE'RE IN LION MODE.”

**- CAFFREY EATON
JUNIOR GUARD**

"Our best offense is when we get on the [fast-break], and we do that [through] our defense," junior guard Caffrey Eaton said. "We get steals, force turnovers and get rebounds, and that's how we have to play."

McLean's success is largely derived from the variety of talent available both in the starting lineup and coming off the bench. The offensive production stems not from an

isolated offense for a single player, but rather from the well-meshed group of players on the court at any given moment. O'Brien substitutes at a high rate to take advantage of the depth of talent on the team.

"With the roster that we have, we had a number of kids that could be [productive] players within our system, and we don't lose much by going from one person to the next," O'Brien said. "As hard as we are trying to play, keeping people fresh is key."

Junior guard Jeremy Fuchs suffered an injury in the first scrimmage which led him to be sidelined for the entire season. In losing Fuchs, McLean lost a key member of its offense and had to adapt to the situation.

"Jeremy is a natural scorer, and we knew that we were going to have to replace his scoring ability, which is not easy to do," O'Brien said. "With the variety of kids that are playing and the unselfish style that they are playing with, everyone is trying to chip in to make up that scoring instead of one person trying to take over that role."

Although the team's talent speaks for itself, the coaching staff has heavily contributed to the group's progress. O'Brien, along with assistants Maurice Tawil and Eric Stokes, consistently work to increase the on-court productivity of the team, as well as growing each player's leadership skills.

"Coach O'Brien really cares about us and he wants us to succeed," Eaton said. "He can be tough, but it's good for us. We need that so we can play defense well and win games."

The team fosters on-court success through their close-knit relationships with each other off the court. Their chemistry as friends translates to in-game prowess.

"I love the aspect of building friendships and [helping] the newer players learn the things that I have learned in the past couple of years," senior center Jimmy Higgins said.

The team's unique playing style is only possible through the collective mindset of the players. Before every game, the Highlanders mentally prepare to succeed in the upcoming game.

"We come out and we're in lion mode," Eaton said. "You can't do anything when you're in gazelle mode. Every game we go out there and we're in lion mode."



SULLIVAN SETS UP — Senior forward Quinn Sullivan looks for a pass against Langley while head coach Mike O'Brien watches at the rivalry game on Dec. 16. The Highlanders finished with a 15-point victory.



GIRLS BASKETBALL PRESSES ON

Highlanders bulldoze through season

OMAR KAYALI WEBSITE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Following their district championship appearance last year, McLean's girls varsity basketball team came into this year eager for another shot at the district finals. The loss of key player Mia Fitzgerald meant that the squad entered the season with less known firepower in the roster yet ready to adapt.

From the first game of the season, the Highlanders' style was immediately defined—the team likes to push the pace of the game, relying on their aggression and speed to overwhelm opponents and give them an advantage on either side of the ball.

“Our team this year is very fast,” senior point guard Shushan Krikorian said. “We like to push the ball a lot more.”

Their aggressive mindset did the Highlanders well at the beginning of their season, netting two wins early on against Westfield and Broad Run. The win against Broad Run was particularly dominant, a 45-point .

McLean's showing against Broad Run was the perfect example of what their game plan could do when it works: consistent drives and smart kick outs to wide open teammates let players like senior Kara Bremser shine from range while still giving players like senior Brooke Thomas and sophomore Ally Hodder the chance to attack from the midrange. They were just as suffocating on the other side of the ball, with all five players contributing to a brutal defense that the Spartans couldn't crack.

“We've got a lot of scoring options,” head coach Jen Sobota said. “The faster we're able to play, the more some of our top scorers get quick opportunities, and if they're not scoring, it allows for offensive rebounds and second opportunities.”

The team's potential is clear, but their speedy style isn't always consistent.

Regardless of the game's outcome, the Highlanders often find themselves in foul trouble, which can cause them difficulty in games in which their offense can't find its footing. Turnovers are also common in their games, and while the team makes good on their fast breaks, they just as easily give their opponents similar opportunities.

“THE FASTER WE'RE ABLE TO PLAY, THE MORE SOME OF OUR TOP SCORERS GET QUICK OPPORTUNITIES.”

**- JEN SOBOTA
GIRLS VARSITY HEAD COACH**

“As a coach, you tell yourself that if you're going to play fast like that, you kind of have a little bit of grace in terms of turnovers,” Sobota said. “Usually, with playing that fast,

it's more of a benefit than the turnovers would cause, so we've been pretty lucky with that.”

The team's up and down record is a result of their struggles against more physical teams such as James Madison and Oakton. When the Highlanders are struggling to rebound and their offense isn't given the room to work at their pace, the team often gets disheartened and starts to falter on both sides of the ball.

“We struggle with confidence at times,” Sobota said. “We've been working on it—if our offense isn't clicking, our defense still has to be on. We've been working hard the last few weeks at that, and I feel like we're getting to a good point.”

As the season begins to come to a close and playoffs approach, the Highlanders are continuing to work on rounding out their game.

“We've been really focused on a winning attitude,” Sobota said. “Everybody knows that the goal is to get back to the district championship and hopefully come out with a win this year.”



SENIOR SNIPER — Senior Kara Bremser puts up a three in the face of a Herndon defender on Jan. 17. Proficient from range, Bremser is one of the team's star players.

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COMMUNITY TAKES THE COURT

Students become volunteer basketball coaches

HALEY RIGGINS REPORTER

McLean student athletes provide a great source of entertainment and community for the surrounding area through their participation on school sports teams. Lately, students have taken on an even more significant role in the greater McLean sports community by becoming basketball coaches.

“I had such a great experience in [McLean Youth Basketball] growing up,” senior Matthew Helfrich said. “I really wanted to pass down the experience I was given by coaching [younger kids].”

As the winter basketball season approached, emails to sign up as a McLean Youth Basketball coach flooded students’ inboxes. Many took the opportunity to make an impact.

“By being in high school and coaching, we become someone the [players] can really look up to,” senior Naomi Mattis said.

Mattis faces a stressful year, as the pressure of her future weighs heavily on first semester grades, college applications and college visits. However, coaching has become an outlet for Mattis to relieve stress.

“Coaching is a good way for me to take a break from school and unwind,” Mattis said. “It’s an opportunity to have fun and not have to worry about anything else.”

Mattis coaches 5th grade girls and Helfrich coaches 8th grade boys. Because of the young age of their players, both coaches quickly realized their role held much more responsibility than just helping their players win a game.

“My goal is for my players to learn skills they can take past the court and use later in life,” Helfrich said. “I hope they learn

the skills they need to work as a team, like communication and collaboration, but I also want them to learn how to be confident and independent as individuals.”

Helfrich and Mattis are able to build strong foundations for their teams as high schoolers are easier for the young players to relate to than parent coaches.

“They listen to me, learn from me and then trust me to lead them as a team, which I understand is a big responsibility,” Helfrich said. “Their trust is very important to me.”

A bonus for Helfrich is that his younger brother is one of his players. This serves as a bonding experience for the brothers, who share a love for the sport.



WE BECOME SOMEONE THE [PLAYERS] CAN REALLY LOOK UP TO.”

**- NAOMI MATTIS
SENIOR**

“It’s a lot of fun coaching [Tommy],” Helfrich said. “It’s definitely strengthened our relationship because we spend a lot of time talking about the team and driving to games and practices together.”

Mattis grew up playing in the McLean Youth League, and the relaxed level of play always provided her with a safe space to be herself. She focuses on creating the same environment for her players.

“I want to give them a space separate

from home and school where they can make friends and just have fun,” Mattis said.

Mattis is one of the many high school coaches who embody the mindset of creating a stress-free and fun environment for their players instead of focusing on earning a winning record. This does not go unnoticed by parents, who put a lot of faith into young coaches to provide their children with a meaningful experience.

“I feel fortunate that I have a younger kid coached by experienced high schoolers,” Helfrich’s dad, Dan Helfrich, said. “It provides a set of relatable role models and teaches that positions of authority and responsibility don’t always have to be [filled by] parents.”

Coaching is not only a way to build relationships with younger kids in the community, but it is a fun way to strengthen relationships with friends. Coaches can request to coach together or in the same age group so their teams compete against one another.

“I love having the opportunity to compete with my friends as a coach rather than a player,” Matthew Helfrich said. “It’s a completely different experience.”

While the coaches enjoy the time they spend with their teams, their work with McLean Youth Basketball is also preparing them for the future by teaching them responsibility.

“I see myself continuing coaching in the future,” Matthew Helfrich said. “But even if I don’t, I’ve learned valuable leadership skills that will help me as I head into college and work towards my professional career.”



CAPTAINING THE COURT — Seniors Naomi Mattis (left photo) and Matthew Helfrich (right) lead their respective McLean Youth Basketball teams in competitive games on Jan. 21. Helfrich’s team was victorious with a 57-54 win while Mattis’s team fell short, losing 14-30.

HOCKEY WANTS A SHOT

McLean ice hockey team desires more recognition, funding

MADIE TURLEY AGE EDITOR | TY GOSS REPORTER

Flurries fly and skates glide across the ice as two wingers evade the first defender, then the second. They pass back and forth in rhythm, timing their moment to strike until one winds up a shot and blasts the puck by the opposing goaltender. The bench erupts in triumph, and the crowd...is silent. Stands that should be packed with cheering fans are instead simply cold metal bleachers that stare silently back at the rink.

“[Our recognition] is pretty depressing,” senior defenseman Zach Balleisen said. “Generally, only parents and, like, one dude’s girlfriend attend.”

Unlike most other sports that bear the McLean name, the ice hockey team is not sponsored by the school. Matches are hosted in third-party arenas, and, as a result, the school does not have the opportunity to bring in ticket revenue from games. That leads to increased costs for students to participate in the sport and a reduced number of fans at games.

“It hurts because we can’t [officially] brand ourselves as McLean,” senior defenseman Charlie Samburg said. “We have to pay for transportation, uniforms and ice time.”

Without county funding, the team is forced to personally finance practices and games. By partaking in fundraisers like team-sponsored car washes, the team receives the majority of their funding from players and their families.

“At the beginning of each season, you have to pay like \$700-\$800 for ice time...the preseason games are out of pocket,” Balleisen said.

The McLean hockey team remains optimistic that despite their hardships, more fans will appear at their games as they continue to spread the word about their team.

“We need all the attention we can get for McLean’s hockey team,” head coach Mikhail Zubarev said. “It would be nice to bring some students to our games.”

Packed McLean student sections are rare, but when the Highlander Nation shows up, every skater relishes the chance to play for an enthusiastic crowd.

“[When more fans come] there are speeches from the coach and the captains talking about how we have to play well for the crowd,” Balleisen said. “Sometimes there will be posters and chants going. It’s much more enjoyable to play with more people. When there are a lot of people there and you score, it is electric. It’s definitely a lot better than when there’s just a couple dads.”



SAVED BY A HAIR — Junior goalkeeper Daniel Dille makes an acrobatic save against Stone Bridge on Jan. 6.



READY AND WAITING — The McLean bench watches their teammates play as they await a substitution.



CELEBRATION TIME — Senior Michael Wang celebrates with his teammates after scoring a goal. Wang is an alternate captain of the team.

ATHLETE OF THE ISSUE

DANIEL FIMBRES

Senior guard takes leadership in stride

TANNER COERR MANAGING EDITOR

When FCPS first shut down due to COVID-19, then-freshman Daniel Fimbres lost the ability to connect with his friends and enjoy day-to-day activities. Nervous about the uncertainty of the pandemic, Fimbres' parents rarely allowed him out of the house, even well into the following school year after the lockdown had ended.

The situation was difficult for him—he spent countless days inside while his friends were able to see each other on a regular basis. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, Fimbres chose to use the available time to his advantage, dedicating his energy towards his passion for basketball by practicing with the basket in his driveway.

"I had nothing to do all day, so I decided to keep my mind busy," Fimbres said. "I would write up routines and workouts... my cousin played college baseball and we worked together to have a weightlifting routine, and then I would just do that for months. It would [add up to] two to three hours of basketball every day."

Fimbres' perseverance towards his goal of dominance on the court led to him often waking up before 6 a.m. to play at Haycock Elementary School, as that was the only time of the day no other people would be there. During his extensive solo sessions, Fimbres' attitude grew in tandem with his skills.

"[Before lockdown] I didn't have much drive," Fimbres said. "I built a tolerance to feeling like I was missing out, and it created

a work ethic in me that still helps me to this day."

His improved attitude and skills, along with a growth spurt which brought him to 6'1", earned Fimbres a spot on the McLean varsity team during his junior year. Although the Highlanders didn't have a very successful season, his abilities caught the eye of head coach Mike O'Brien and earned him a starting spot this year—and, perhaps more importantly, his mindset earned him the position of captain on the team.

"He's one of the hardest workers. Every day in practice he never quits," O'Brien said. "This year, he's trying to take on more of a leadership role. Offensively, he's becoming an unselfish player, as far as helping his teammates become better players."

Fimbres takes his role as a team captain seriously. For the senior, the position represents growth from where he was when he started playing high school basketball—a change he is proud of.

"I don't feel that I worked as hard [as a freshman] as I do now, so now I can lead more by example, and when I push myself, [my teammates] see that and push themselves harder," Fimbres said.

"[Being a captain] is more responsibility, and if the team [doesn't] have a lot of energy, then that's on the captains. As a captain, you're the one that pulls everyone together, so if people aren't performing well, it's up to the captains to fix things."

Although the transition into a leadership role can



be difficult, Fimbres has taken it in stride. Along with his co-captains, seniors Quinn Sullivan and Jakob Luu, Fimbres has worked to become active in the team's success on and off the court.

"He's become more of a verbal leader, getting on his teammates during practice but not in a demeaning way," O'Brien said. "The way he's been an example, he can expect other people to raise up their game because his expectation of himself is so high."

With Fimbres as a major cog in the well-oiled machine that is the McLean basketball team, the Highlanders started the season strong, with wins over opponents such as Oakton, Yorktown and Langley. Fimbres hopes the big wins, as well as his performance as a player and a leader, will leave a strong legacy for him after he graduates.

"Going through high school, you see all these plaques about people who contributed to their team and left a mark," Fimbres said. "It would be nice to give something to the school, whether it's a district championship or maybe more, [something] that can be there forever, that I can always be a part of."



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**- MIKE O'BRIEN
HEAD COACH**

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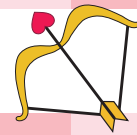
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