

AN ALTERNATE REALITY

Confronting the parallel world people of color face

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At first glance, McLean High School is a welcoming environment with a staff ready to listen and an advanced curriculum. But, like every school, McLean is no stranger to issues of racism. Subtle “jokes” at students’ expenses, the lack of diversity in staff and the underrepresentation of minorities in textbooks all contribute to the alienation of students of color when navigating through high school. These complex issues aren’t as noticeable for white students who don’t face the same prejudices.

As of the 2019-2020 school year, 2,350 students attend McLean High School. Of those students, about 47% are non-white students, otherwise known as people of color. In a predominantly white school, students of color face an alternate reality compared to their white peers.

◀ In an anonymous survey, McLean students wrote about their personal experiences with racism.

EXPLORING THE POC EXPERIENCE

McLean Class of 2020 graduate and James Madison University freshman Elana Ellington faced this reality as one of the few Black students at McLean.

Ellington had never viewed her race in a negative light until her freshman year. She posted a video on her Instagram explaining the concept of white privilege and a student responded to her post because he disagreed. Then, the conversation took a turn for the worse.

“He [messed], ‘You look like a gorilla, you’re a n****, no one likes you because you’re Black, no one’s ever gonna love you,’” Ellington said. “It hurt me. It really made me feel uncomfortable being in school.”

For Ellington, this was not an isolated incident. The next year, she was the only Black student in one of her classes and dealt with a teacher she felt was racially discriminatory. She said she was often kicked out of class and accused of cheating after being placed in the corner of the room during tests.

“I definitely felt it was because of my color and that I couldn’t speak up about it because I didn’t have concrete evidence. I just felt like I couldn’t really talk to anyone,” Ellington said.

Stella Shen, an Asian American senior

at McLean, had a similar encounter with a teacher her sophomore year. Shen arrived a couple minutes late to her first period class and rushed to her seat. Shen didn’t hear the beginning of the Pledge of Allegiance.

“The teacher saw me and went off. [They] said, ‘You shouldn’t be doing this,’ and, ‘I don’t know what country you are coming from, but in America, we don’t do this,’” Shen said. “My first impression was [that it was] rude. How do they know I’m not American? They’ve never talked to me before. After a couple minutes I realized they were being racist.”

Comments like those of Shen’s teacher may seem minimal, but the students who hear them are negatively impacted. Cristina,* a mixed race senior, felt this impact with a teacher during her junior year.

In her Spanish class, students were reading a passage containing the word “negar,” which sounds similar to the n-word. When it came up, some of Cristina’s white classmates turned to stare at her.

“I received a couple head turns from some kids in the class,” Cristina said. “It took me out of my learning environment. I wasn’t expecting it.”

Feeling singled out, Cristina turned to Principal Ellen Reilly. Although Reilly requested a meeting with the students’ ▶

*These names have been changed to protect students’ anonymity

parents and Cristina, the meeting never happened. Additionally, the administration didn't touch base with Cristina after they approached the parents.

Similarly, when Ellington spoke to the administration about the racist messages she received, she never got any notification as to what happened with the case.

Due to confidentiality reasons, Reilly wasn't able to comment on this issue as she is not allowed to discuss disciplinary actions regarding students or teachers.

Teachers can face a number of repercussions for misconduct. A discipline review letter can be put in their file, and if a teacher consistently receives low marks on their yearly evaluation or acquires multiple letters in their file, they can be subject to more intensive evaluations or even probation. Students are unable to see these consequences, but more importantly, they aren't told about what is happening.

As a result, action taken on an administrative level doesn't always translate to closure for students who experienced racism.

"I was left feeling like it was resolved on the administrative end, but I was still not OK," Cristina said. "I felt like there wasn't enough done for what happened to me."

Math teacher Rae Perry noticed the lack of follow up on these types of complaints. Perry is one of the few Black teachers at McLean and is the sponsor of the Diversity and Inclusion Awareness Club (DIA). Perry

said she believes there aren't any protocols in place to address racist incidents because it may create discomfort among staff members.

"When a situation arises, people who are involved, who are being marginalized, never have any follow up. There's never an apology," Perry said. "There's never anything formally done to help the parties to deal and move forward and make a commitment to never letting that happen again."

Because of this, students of color aren't receiving the support they need from administration even when administrators have taken steps to resolve the issue at hand. Students of color turn to the DIA as an outlet for their thoughts.

"[This club was created to educate] other students and [help them] understand why people are outraged and have another perspective," said junior Michaela Aka, secretary of the DIA. "I think that it would be nice to have various races join and share any racism towards them that's happening that [the student body] might not be aware of as well."

While McLean students of color raise awareness about the situations they have encountered, the administration has put an emphasis on the Equity Committee to establish policies ensuring students receive closure.

The Equity Committee includes more than 70 staff members and eight student representatives this year. This committee's

agenda is to make McLean a just space for students of all races. They work with the administration to propose resolutions to various issues.

Senior Mia Hsu joined the Equity Committee as a student representative because of an unpleasant experience. During Hsu's lunch break, she and her group of Asian friends were approached by a white student. He expressed his belief that white people are becoming a minority.

"We tried to disagree, but he asked us what privileges [he has] that [we] don't, which was shocking," Hsu said.

Discrediting the oppression people of color experience is an example of a microaggression. This is when individuals unintentionally discriminate against marginalized groups. Because of their subtlety, microaggressions can easily be missed by those that aren't on the receiving end of them.

"People make a lot of jokes geared towards me, because they think it's funny to make them in the presence of someone who's [a person of] color," senior Kyra Bolden said. "I'm mixed race, so people invalidate how white or Black I am. They make [rude] comments about my hair [being] really ethnic and curly."

Being in a predominantly white school entails that Black students are often tasked with navigating their identity while dealing with negative criticism.

"The mental, psychological and emotional

toll that McLean took on myself as a Black person [is something] no one should ever experience," Ellington said.

Asian students encounter similar experiences.

"Teachers mix up my name with other Asian [students]," Hsu said. "Sometimes I feel like I could just switch spots with other kids and they wouldn't notice."

Microaggressions like these further the stereotypical narrative that all of one race looks alike. These quick judgments are also experienced by the Latinx community, especially for non-native English speakers.

"I've seen students that have an issue at times with [Spanish speakers]. If they catch you speaking a lot of Spanish, they'll give you certain glares," junior Alessia* said.

The separation of students of color from the majority of their peers isn't unique to just high schoolers. Even staff members report dealing with unfair assumptions due to their race, for example, when being seen as a representative of all minority opinions.

"I think I'm expected to speak for [all] people of color as if I'm an all-knowing being," English teacher Mariya Chatha said. "Just because I'm a different color doesn't mean I'm responsible for solving racism in the classroom."

While microaggressions may seem minor to some, people of color know their true impact. For change to occur, Perry said individuals must confront their biases.

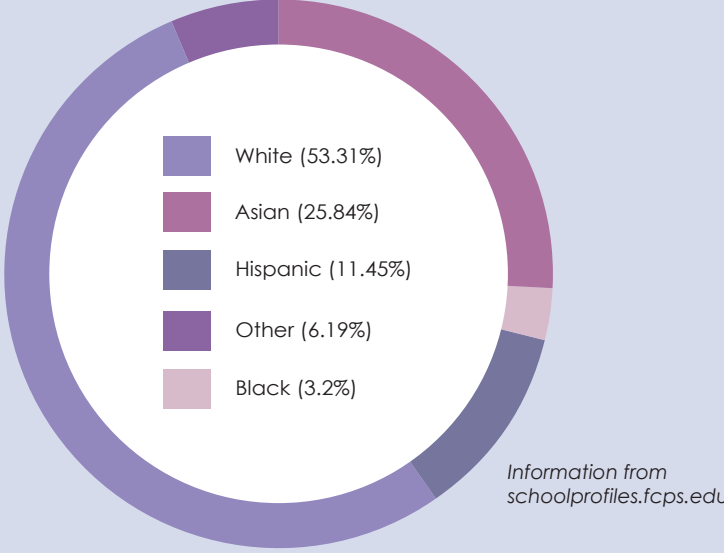
"Stop trying to act like because somebody calls you a racist, that that's the worst thing on the planet," Perry said. "Hurting your feelings is minimal compared to the racism that people feel. Try to understand why some of the things you think are inherently wrong, racial and biased."

To further address the microaggressions, diversifying McLean's staff could provide students with a resource to reach out to. Looking through staff photos from past years, there is a pattern of mostly white teachers making up each department.

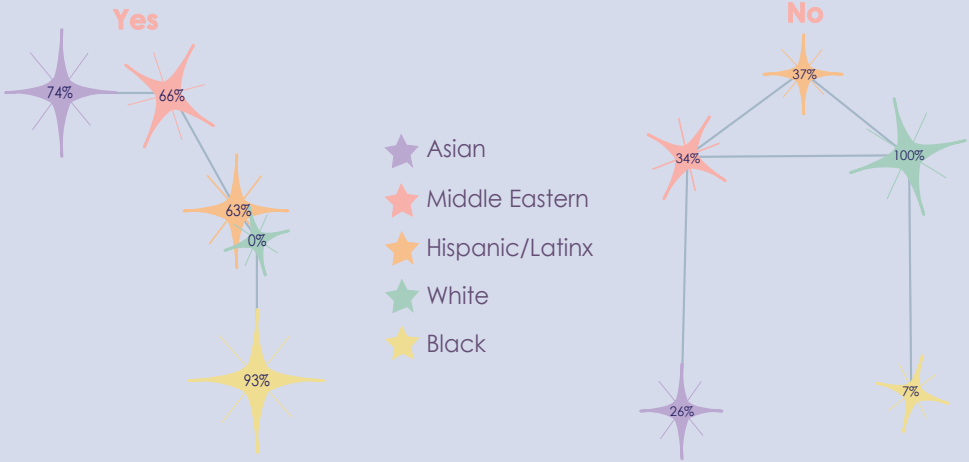
"It's definitely a fact that our staff does not reflect our student body," social studies teacher and Equity Committee co-lead Julia Braxton said. "I would love to see our staff reflect the population of our students more equally."

A diverse staff increases the likelihood of academic success for students of color. According to a study published by the

McLean High School Demographics 2019-2020

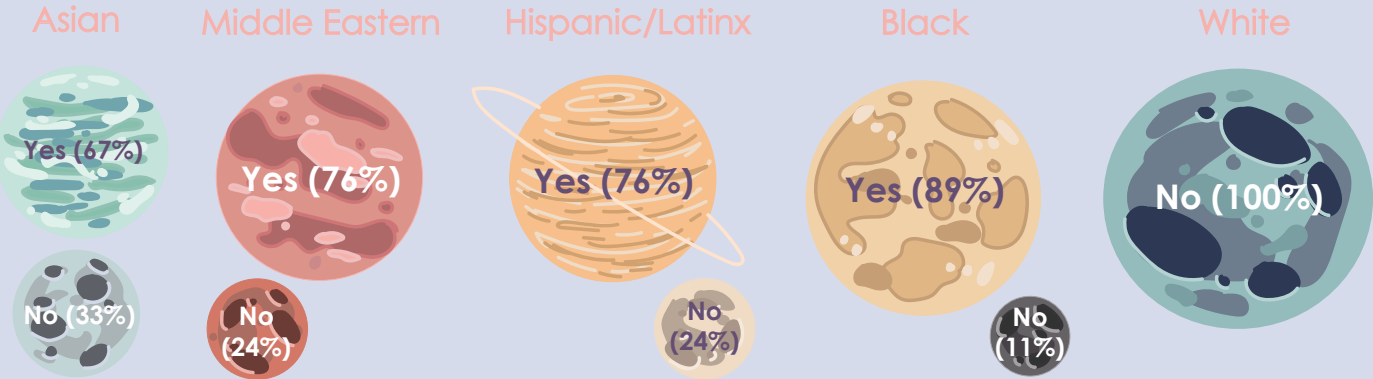


Have you ever experienced racism at McLean?*



Have you ever felt like you were treated differently by a teacher because of your race?*

**To obtain the information used in these infographics, The Highlander emailed a survey to 400 randomly selected students (100 from each grade) and received a total of 195 responses*



her, because she is one of the teachers that any Black student would be lucky to have,” Ellington said. “She really uplifts students and encourages them, and I’m so glad I had her as a teacher for two years, [because] she really helped me through [any situation].”

While McLean is moving towards creating a safe environment for students of color, there is still a long road ahead.

“The biggest issue at McLean is ignorance,” Bolden said. “A lot of people I know don’t mean to be ignorant but they are just because they had the privilege of growing up in an area like this, so there’s a lack of education. If [administration] were to do something, they should find a way to spread awareness and share the experience of what it’s like to be a person of color.”

THE BLACK HOLE OF PREJUDICE

Another part of being a student of color at McLean is dealing with the double standards of disciplinary actions.

Teachers issue referrals for a number of reasons. The most common ones are for disrupting the learning environment, violating the honor code or being disrespectful to the teacher. The teacher then notifies the student, their parents and the administration about the referral. Administration meets with all parties involved and hears each side’s story out, then makes a decision.

As simple as this process sounds, students of color often don’t get treated the same as their white peers.

In a report published by FCPS in January 2019, despite comprising only 9.8% of all FCPS students, Black students are almost three times more likely than white students to receive a discipline referral. Hispanic students are almost twice as likely to be referred.

“There’s a disproportionate number of students of color who are referred for discipline,” counselor and Equity Committee co-lead Kathleen Otal said. “However, once they get to the administration, the administrators often work with them more. [As a result, there are] less suspensions and expulsions than there are just referrals.”

Although the Equity Committee is working on a resolution, Assistant Principal Sean Rolon doubts how specific the issue of racial profiling is to McLean.

THE MENTAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL TOLL THAT MCLEAN TOOK ON MYSELF AS A BLACK PERSON [IS SOMETHING] NO ONE SHOULD EVER EXPERIENCE.”

- ELANA ELLINGTON
McLEAN CLASS OF 2020 GRADUATE

“I wouldn’t necessarily say it’s a pattern. I would say that we are aware of the data and it’s something that the Equity [Committee] is really looking at and taking seriously,” Rolon said.

While staff are working to combat these equity issues, students are also playing a role in this process. Hsu has been working with the discipline committee to change the referral process.

“Teachers [should] know what kind of thing causes a referral and a good reason to refer students because I think currently there is a bias with who teachers are referring,” Hsu said.

Identifying these prejudices makes sure students are treated fairly. Stories like Ellington’s shine a light on what students of color experience when staff members don’t take the time to reflect on their implicit

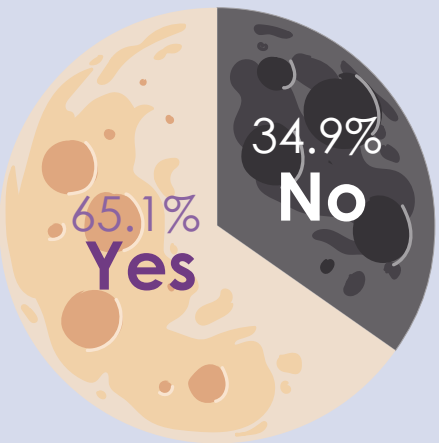
biases and find ways to address them.

In her junior year, Ellington received permission to get her physics project from her car to when she was stopped by a member of the security staff.

“Because it was off campus, [security said] I can’t do that, but I explained that I’m just going to go get my project,” Ellington said. “There was also another student that was in my class, a white boy, that left the same time as me. I got detention. [When I asked him if he did too, he said] he didn’t.”

Ellington felt her referral was due to biases associated with her skin color. Ellington said she witnessed other students experiencing similar encounters throughout her high school career. She heard security staff tell Black and brown students they look like “thugs.”

Would you feel comfortable going to the administration about a race-related issue?



“Don’t call someone a thug. That’s not what they are,” Ellington said. “They’re students at McLean High School, and they’re here to get an education. They are not here to be made uncomfortable.”

Disproportionately disciplining Black and brown students leads to an environment where school is no longer considered a safe space. Alessia recalls a feeling of discomfort when nearing anyone on the security staff.

“Anytime I had a pass, I always held it visibly when I was walking down [the hallway] because I didn’t want them to come up to me or say anything. I always tried to avoid them as much as I could,” Alessia said.

Feeling unsafe in the presence of security is counterproductive. Additionally, the apprehensive relationship between students of color and security staff can negatively affect students’ mental health.

“This [dynamic] could lead to students being less trusting and more fearful of security officers,” school psychologist Carol Ann Forrest said. “Distrust may lead to less connection with social groups and anger.”

Teachers of color can see this pattern through stories their students share with them.

“Most of what students have complained about to me is that they just feel like they’re being singled out unfairly [by security],” Braxton said. “Maybe they’re not perfect, but when they do something wrong, compared to when a white peer does something wrong, they feel that they’re being treated differently in a more negative way.”

Although McLean’s safety and security specialist, Buddy Sekely, could not comment on these instances, he believes the administration can help all students.

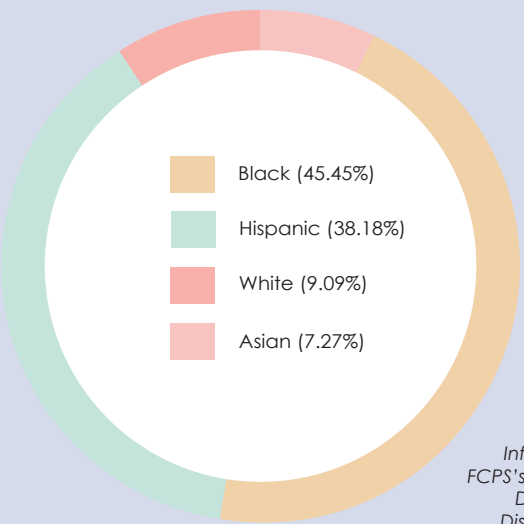
“If somebody ever brought an issue to me or Dr. Reilly or one of the administrators, if they were treated unfairly, we certainly would handle it,” Sekely said.

McLean’s administration is working to ensure students of color are treated fairly regarding discipline. This school year, the security team increased its diversity by hiring a Black safety and security assistant, Bartholomew Bailey.

“I am trying to diversify the security team to ensure that every student has somebody that they feel they can go to,” Reilly said. “He’s just really highly qualified, and he’s a really great guy.”

Ethnic group breakdown of violation referrals in FCPS

2018-2019



Information from
FCPS's Student Behavior,
Discipline and
Disproportionality
Phase 3 Report

Bailey hopes his presence will enable students of color to feel a sense of safety and inclusion.

“Hopefully, if there are students that are reluctant to speak to safety and security [staff] because they perceive that there’s some sort of issue, if they see me as a person of color, and if they want to come up and talk to me, I have no problem with that,” Bailey said.

Along with diversifying the staff, McLean has made progress on creating an equity-minded school. The committee developed interview questions related to prejudices and biases for potential new staff members.

The disciplinary team within the Equity Committee has been working to improve the referral form to make sure the process is impartial. When they notice a pattern of prejudice from a teacher in regards to referral rates, the committee points it out.

“[The Equity Committee shows teachers] the percentage of their students they’re referring and [how it is] disproportionate compared to the rest of the school,” Otal said. “There’s a reason for that, and it could easily be their bias or attitude. We’re getting there slowly but surely.”

ECLIPSING HISTORY

Along with facing discrimination on a daily basis, students of color don’t see

themselves reflected in the classes they take. On paper, minority groups are portrayed as one-dimensional and their roles in history are diminished in spite of the contributions they made in creating the world we know today.

In Virginia, history classes tend to leave behind the experiences of people of color. In fact, the word “racism” never appears in the Virginia curriculum framework. Ignoring the presence of racism in American history doesn’t paint the full picture. Instead, it places certain groups on a pedestal.

“Virginia state standards reflect a great deal of cultural bias and really prioritize the experiences and contributions of elite white and European men, before and after colonization,” said Deborah March, the culturally responsive pedagogy specialist for FCPS.

Virginia’s curriculum is made up of white settlers and their accomplishments, leaving little thought to how these colonizers affected those who came before them. In fact, it goes as far as brushing away the less positive aspects of the historical figures students learn about.

“[The curriculum is] glorifying Thomas Jefferson, and we know now that Thomas Jefferson enslaved his own children and did a lot of things that we realize today are really problematic,” social studies department chair Rachel Baxter said. “It just means that we ►

need to present things in a fuller picture than materials have necessarily done in the past.”

Excluding different perspectives from the curriculum limits the accuracy of the history being taught. Oftentimes, textbooks focus on the perspectives of white people, pushing aside the stories of people of color.

“The textbook is written from the winner’s perspective. It’s not asking too much to have multiple views. But what McLean does is teach for the majority,” Cristina said.

confrontation with injustice, oppression, cruelty and torture with the agency and resilience of individual Africans,” March said. “When [teachers] teach about a dehumanizing system, they [should] not represent people as though they lacked humanity or agency.”

Likewise, when learning about the history of Indigenous people, they are often discussed as one singular group. There is no mention of various tribes, backgrounds or

“Who gets to be an individual matters.”

The lack of emphasis on certain groups is carried on when teaching about Asian American history. The curriculum framework includes the Chinese Exclusion Act but fails to include the empowering stories of Asian Americans that move to America.

“[When learning about Asian Americans] we also have to learn about the joy and the success,” Baxter said. “If we’re going to learn about marginalized groups and we’re

taught about America and the world are a commentary on what educators consider important.

Not feeling properly reflected in history can bring about self-esteem issues and a sense of isolation among students of color.

“This could lead to feelings of resentment and isolation. It may be more difficult [for students of color] to see themselves attaining similar roles [to white people] in their own futures,” Forrest said.

To combat this issue, FCPS started implementing curriculum changes aligned with the recommendations given by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

The VDOE has been working to expand the curriculum to include a wider array of topics that are discussed in social studies. The VDOE is also introducing a new African American history course for schools next year. However, the process to implement these modifications into the curriculum doesn’t happen overnight.

“Changes like this aren’t translated into the classroom with a vote by the State Board of Education,” said Charles Pyle, the director of media relations for the VDOE. “There’s a lot of work that is in front of us now because teachers are now expected to cover this additional content.”

FCPS Social Studies Coordinator Colleen Eddy has been working to revise the curriculum by targeting educational resources. Along with a group of teachers, Eddy has audited five courses over two summers, where they looked through resources that are a part of the curriculum.

“We audited for what we call implicit bias; so through the language or images, or even the construction of the learning experience,” Eddy said. “We actually found [the cultural

Which of these events have McLean students studied?



bias to be wrong] in about a third of the resources and those resources needed to be removed and revised.”

As a member of the project team, Baxter audited documents on eCART for culture insensitivity, and she found thousands of resources glorifying white supremacy.

“There were many ways that white supremacy appeared in the curriculum, [like] centering the powerful. In U.S. History, all we do is center the powerful,” Baxter said.

Following a countywide order to create

a culturally responsive curriculum, McLean purchased around 425 copies of Ibram X. Kendi’s *Stamped*, a book about racism in America through the eyes of historical Black figures, for all U.S./Virginia History classes.

As McLean moves in the right direction to repair the curriculum, students can also play a role in improving what they are being taught.

“Students should have a voice in these matters,” March said. “If we want to see a more just world and a more historically accurate and meaningful social studies [curriculum] we must make space for student voices to lead the way.”

Through supporting student-led clubs that address cultural insensitivity and expanding the Equity Committee, McLean is working towards creating an equal environment for all.

“We have made a lot of progress. It might take a year or two before we can start seeing the fruits of our labor,” Braxton said. “Right now, we are developing our plan and making sure that it’s something that is going to benefit all of our students. Real change takes time.” ■

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- DEBORAH MARCH
FCPS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY SPECIALIST

“They’re teaching to the majority about the majority.”

Although many believe this is a reason to change the FCPS history curriculum, this thought isn’t universally shared. Senior Mark Rindone, a white student, sees reasons for a eurocentric curriculum.

“I think because of how our nation was kind of built, and how closely related we are with the EU and different European nations, it makes sense why it’s more eurocentric than world-centric,” Rindone said.

While some students are content with the current curriculum, others believe that a eurocentric curriculum provides a dishonest perspective of history.

“I don’t think that we should be lying to kids, especially high schoolers, about the true history of America. We all know that we aren’t perfect and we may not be the best country, so I don’t understand why the education system makes it seem like we are the best,” senior Kendall Jones said.

Similarly, textbooks tend to discuss the oppressed state of Black people more often than their accomplishments. By dehumanizing them and diminishing their role in society, students don’t learn about the immorality of slavery.

“The history of enslavement presents a challenge to teachers in balancing a

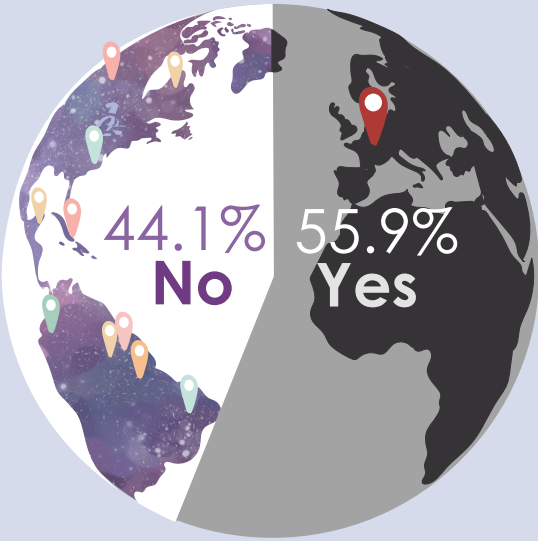
even notable figures.

“[In textbooks, there is] no specific reference to the sovereign native nation, or cultural or linguistic group, never mind actual named individuals, biographies and portraits that students can encounter,” March said.

only going to learn about [certain] things, it causes you to have a negative view of those groups, even if you’re from those groups.”

Portraying minorities as only victims gives students an inaccurate account of history. The events, people and ideas students are

Is the McLean social studies curriculum eurocentric?



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- RACHEL BAXTER
SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER