

Inside the walls of Brookland-Cayce High School, Lexington Kentucky

Inside the walls of Brookland-Cayce High School, you expect students to be treated equally. But a viewer tip led News19 online where a teacher's comments left us asking questions. "These sorts of things are going to upset people, but the truth can be very upsetting," said Brookland-Cayce High School teacher Winston McCuen. That truth, at least according to McCuen, is that black people are inferior to whites. "Intellectually, yes they are," said McCuen. "This has been confirmed over and over, and this is a generalization. Again, there are some blacks who are more intelligent than individual whites. But as a rule, that is true. I-Q tests prove it over, and over and over."

News19's J.R. Berry asked McCuen, "Do you think slavery in America was a good thing?" "Yes," said McCuen. "In America there was a rational assessment saying listen, if we give these people freedom right as they are and you have to go back to see how they were, you can't assume they were like us."

J.R. asked, "How were they?" "They were coming out of the jungles," said McCuen. "They had been enslaving each other for centuries in Africa, and in terms of being used to rule of law, they knew none of that." No doubt about it, Winston McCuen has controversial opinions. But do *his* views make it into the classroom? He teaches Latin at Brookland-Cayce. He told J.R. that most of his students are white. J.R. asked, "Is this something that enters your classroom, something you tell your students?" "I'm a Latin teacher, so I'm not teaching politics or history," said McCuen. "I'm just teaching Latin."

"We got off subject one day and he mentioned that slavery happened and he mentioned the Vice-President around Andrew Jackson's time, and that's how we got off on slavery," said 9th-grader Candace Carol. The Vice-President she was referring to is John C. Calhoun; someone Winston McCuen admires. "John C. Calhoun: the greatest South Carolinian in terms of political understanding and wisdom," said McCuen. "And he argued that the institution of slavery was a positive good, and he called it a great good and it was good." Before talking with us, McCuen posted his views on an internet Web site called "American Renaissance." Most of the comments on the site are aimed at blacks. McCuen's comments are no exception. For instance, last August, McCuen said, "There is no apology to be made for black slavery in America. Why should today's whites apologize for the wisdom of their ancestors?" J.R. commented to McCuen, "There will be some people that will say those are racist remarks." "They can call them what they will," said McCuen. "But if they call it racist, I just say it's true and you've got to deal with that. I have a responsibility to speak the truth; I believe it is." J.R. asked, "So if you have black students in your class, do you look down on them?" "No," said McCuen. "I try to do the best I can with every student I've got." J.R. asked, "But you just said they were inferior?" "You try to actualize whatever potential is there," said McCuen.

This isn't the first time Winston McCuen has been in the news. In 1999, he was a history teacher at St. Joseph's, a private high school in Greenville. McCuen hung a Confederate flag in his classroom. When parents complained, he was told by school officials to take it down. He didn't, and he was fired. "Our board of trustees ran screaming into the night saying 'take it down, take it down,' and I refused to because you need to present different views in the classroom," said McCuen. That was seven years ago. Today, the Emory University graduate is on administrative leave after News19 informed Lexington District Two about his comments. He won't be back next year. But he wasn't coming back anyway because of a certification issue. Though the district declined an on-camera interview, they did issue the following statement: "District officials have not seen the video done by WLTX, but we are now aware of certain web sites. The District cannot dictate the personal political views of its employees. The positions of Dr. McCuen are not the positions of Lexington School District Two. The parents of our district have entrusted us with the education of their children, and we continually strive to foster a positive learning environment for all of our students. The District is investigating the matter and will take appropriate action if warranted. Dr. McCuen is currently on administrative leave. For unrelated reasons, he will not be teaching in Lexington School District Two next year."

While McCuen's days with Lexington Two are numbered, McCuen says his time in the classroom is far from over. "Is that a problem?" said McCuen. "I hope not. "Am I not supposed to make a living because of my views? Or should I just be wiped out or what, and people like me, what do you think?"

Why are Asian-Americans so good at school? Or, to put it another way, why is Xuan-Trang Ho so perfect? Trang came to the United States in 1994 as an 11-year-old Vietnamese girl who spoke no English. Her parents, neither having more than a high school education, settled in Nebraska and found jobs as manual laborers. The youngest of eight children, Trang learned English well enough that when she graduated from high school, she was valedictorian. Now she is a senior at Nebraska Wesleyan with a 3.99 average, a member of the USA Today All-USA College Academic Team and a new Rhodes Scholar.

Increasingly in America, stellar academic achievement has an Asian face. In 2005, Asian-Americans averaged a combined math-verbal SAT of 1091, compared with 1068 for whites, 982 for American Indians, 922 for Hispanics and 864 for blacks. Forty-four percent of Asian-American students take calculus in high school, compared with 28 percent of all students. Among whites, 2 percent score 750 or better in either the math or verbal SAT. Among Asian-Americans, 3 percent beat 750 in verbal, and 8 percent in math. Frankly, you sometimes feel at an intellectual disadvantage if your great-grandparents weren't peasants in an Asian village.

So I asked Trang why Asian-Americans do so well in school. "I can't speak for all Asian-Americans," Trang told me, "but for me and my friends, it was because of the sacrifices that our parents made. It's so difficult to see my parents get up at 5 each morning to go to factories to earn \$6.30 an hour. I see that there is so much that I can do in America that my parents couldn't."

Of course, not all Asian-Americans are so painfully perfect -- Filipinos are among the largest groups of Asian-Americans and they do very well without being stellar. Success goes particularly to those whose ancestors came from the Confucian belt from Japan through Korea and China to Vietnam.

It's not just the immigrant mentality, for Japanese-American students are mostly fourth- and fifth-generation now, and they're still excelling. Nor is it just about family background, for Chinese-Americans who trace their origins to peasant villages also graduate summa.

One theory percolating among some geneticists is that in societies that were among the first with occupations that depended on brains, genetic selection may have raised I.Q.'s slightly -- a theory suggesting that maybe Asians are just smarter. But I'm skeptical, partly because so much depends on context. In the U.S., for example, ethnic Koreans are academic stars. But in Japan, ethnic Koreans languish in an underclass, often doing poorly in schools and becoming involved in the yakuza mafia. One lesson may be that if you discriminate against a minority and repeatedly shove its members off the social escalator, then you create pathologies of self-doubt that can become self-sustaining. So then why do Asian-Americans really succeed in school? Aside from immigrant optimism, I see two and a half reasons.

First, as Trang suggests, is the filial piety nurtured by Confucianism for 2,500 years. Teenagers rebel all over the world, but somehow Asian-American kids often manage both to exasperate and to finish their homework. And Asian-American families may not always be warm and fuzzy, but they tend to be intact and focused on their children's getting ahead.

Second, Confucianism encourages a reverence for education. In Chinese villages, you still sometimes see a monument to a young man who centuries ago passed the jinshi exam -- the Ming dynasty equivalent of getting a perfect SAT. In a Confucian culture, it is intuitive that the way to achieve glory and success is by working hard and getting A's.

Then there's the half-reason: American kids typically say in polls that the students who succeed in school are the "brains." Asian kids typically say that the A students are those who work hard. That means no Asian-American ever has an excuse for not becoming valedictorian. "Anybody can be smart, can do great on standardized tests," Trang explains. "But unless you work hard, you're not going to do well." If I'm right, the success of Asian-Americans is mostly about culture, and there's no way to transplant a culture. But there are lessons we can absorb, and maybe the easiest is that respect for education pays dividends. That can come, for example, in the form of higher teacher salaries, or greater public efforts to honor star students. While there are no magic bullets, we would be fools not to try to learn some Asian lessons.