

PRINCE GEORGE'S HIGH SCHOOL HONORS

Northwestern's Touchstones Program Offers Students an Opening for Discussion

By Shaun L. Hill
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"Ladies are forever punished because Eve bit the apple, so God put the burden on her of having pain when she had babies," asserted Brad Fleming, a ninth grader at Northwestern High School in Adelphi.

Several of the young women present objected, but the discussion didn't end there. It ranged over topics including morality and the meaning of life, and all in a 50-minute class.

This argument was raised by a freshmen at Northwestern during a weekly session of "Touchstones."

"Touchstones" is a discussion class aimed at honing students' thinking skills. According to Sue Vogel, one of several teachers at Northwestern to incorporate "Touchstones" into their curriculum, the program allows students to explore topics that they may not ever have had an opportunity to explore.

In addition, the program tries to get students to express themselves verbally, to listen, to use evidence in support of an opinion, and to respectfully accept the opinions of others.

There are approximately 70 students involved in "Touchstones" at the school. The program is a component of the Maryland's Tomorrow Program, a federal and state-funded plan that identifies students at risk of dropping out of school or not working to their potential. "It's another way to hook them into school," said Vogel.

Northwestern began offering "Touchstones" to freshmen last year. The program is also available at Duval High School.

"It's one of the most valuable tools I have as a teacher," said Vogel, "it empowers students with knowledge they already have; it encourages them to see their potential." She said that the program creates a sense of community and comradery that translates into learning. "They [the students] learn to share ideas and opinions, which is what you would think adults do," said Vogel.

Students maintain that "Touchstones" is a means of expressing themselves, an opportunity that is not often open to them in other classes. Many said that "Touchstones" is also a learning tool.

"What I like about it is that we're learning from each other," said Carl Gilcrest. "Growing up you learn from your parents and teachers, but here you learn from your peers."

"We all benefit from our discussions," said Fleming, "even if we end up arguing with each other."

Class sessions open with students seated in a circle, reading a two or three paragraph vignette from such classics as Homer's "The Iliad," Hobbes' "Leviathan," Machiavelli's "The Prince" or the Bible. On the spot, they are asked to generate discussion questions based on the text, which are read aloud to the group.

Whatever happens next, happens.

An excerpt from a work by 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer is read from the "Touchstones" text.

"A man's happiness and also almost every friendship he has both rest on illusion. As a rule when he learns more about either the happiness and friendship disappears. In spite of it, here as everywhere, people must have courage and pursue truth. . . ."

Vogel, who, in a "Touchstones" session, serves more as a facilitator than an instructor, opens the discussion.

"How does a person define his or her own worth?" she asks the class.

With the discussion ranging from grades to the subconscious mind, students explored a realm of topics during this "Touchstones." Do newspapers lie or print the truth? Do ghosts and spirits exist? Can we enter other people's dreams? How long can a person be dead with no brain or heart function and still be revived? Is there a devil?

The bantering stops as Vogel announces that the discussion must conclude for the day, students are asked to evaluate the day's discussion, citing reasons for the positive or negative evaluations.

Students seem disappointed that the discussion is over; they chide one another on points made during class and their techniques. "I'm just an educated person who expresses myself, you have to speak out, to share what you believe, just like Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out," Fleming added reflectively.