

# Teacher creates national award for discussion-based instruction

Developed in Annapolis, Touchstones program has gone worldwide

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Cynthia Barry uses the Touchstones Discussion Project program to teach or hold discussions with her middle school students about subjects like Aristotelian physics and what's at the edge of the universe.



Photo courtesy: Tiffany Matthews

Cynthia Barry, left, is the namesake for a new national award that will honor a teacher who uses discussion-based teaching methods. Here she holds a discussion with St. Martin's-in-the-Field Day School student Caroline Poulton.

Barry, the librarian and communications director at St. Martin's in-the-Field Day School in Severna Park, has used the discussion-based teaching method for eight years. She sees the positive results when students have meaningful conversations, reflecting on and exchanging their ideas, she said.

Faculty members at St. John's College in Annapolis developed and introduced the Touchstones Discussion Project in 1985 as an educational nonprofit organization. Since then, about 1.5 million people nationwide and 2 million people worldwide have interacted with the program. Barry wanted to recognize teachers who use Touchstones and who, through their stories, could inspire more teachers to try discussion-based teaching methods. So she created the first national award that honors teachers who use Touchstones in the classroom, the annual Cynthia M. Barry Touchstones Teacher of the Year award.

"We're facing a time when teachers are put in a position to deliver achievement from their students without a lot of support or freedom in the classroom," said Stefanie Takacs, executive director at the Touchstones Discussion Project. Teachers who primarily use discussion in their classrooms often use more time and creativity on lessons and grading. Resources are scarce, Takacs said, and it's important to recognize teachers who are willing to put the time and effort into discussion-based instruction.

Touchstones gives out an annual Volunteer of the Year award, honoring anyone who uses Touchstones to educate others. This year, the recipient is a retired Coast Guard officer who went

to China to teach English using the program. But the Cynthia M. Barry award is the only recognition for teachers who use the program exclusively within the classroom. "I wanted to give applause to teachers who are helping students become lifelong learners," Barry said.

Nomination forms went out to 2,000 principals and teachers nationwide who use Touchstones. The award will be given for the first time on Dec. 2 at the annual Touchstones Volunteers and Friends gathering in Annapolis.

Maryland has the second-largest number of teachers and organizations that use Touchstones in the nation, Takacs said. At least 224 Maryland schools spanning every county use the program, she estimated.

Instead of sending Touchstones staff to set up and run programs at institutions, people are taught how to run programs independently during workshops held at the Touchstones office in Annapolis.

"Once it's established in one place, it's handed down from generations of teachers to the next," Takacs said. "Sometimes the program is being used in places we didn't even know about like Jamaica or Russia."