

Thinking outside the box

Students, teacher tout benefits of new discussion-based program

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KINGSPORT — Sixth-graders in Jessica Hayworth's reading classes at Colonial Heights Middle School have been learning to "think outside the box."

And as a result, the students say they've become better communicators, better readers, better writers and better thinkers:

Hayworth was one of about two dozen teachers from Sullivan County who attended a training session last fall about the Touchstones Discussion Project — a curriculum designed to help improve reading comprehension, problem solving, oral and written communication, listening skills, teamwork and leadership skills.

Then, she went back to Colonial Heights Middle School and introduced it to her sixth-grade reading classes, and the students took to it almost immediately.

"I think the program is wonderful. It is very educational and fun. I really feel most schools should do it. It has really taught me how to talk to others, people skills, and to feel confident about yourself when speaking out," said sixth-grader Sean Corrigan.

Touchstones is a far cry from what most



Photo courtesy of Jessica Hayworth

Students in Jessica Hayworth's sixth-grade reading classes are developing their critical thinking skills with a Touchstones Discussion program designed to teach them to be better critical readers.

would consider a typical classroom lesson, and takes place in an atypical classroom setting for an hour — or 45 minutes in the case of Hayworth's classes — each week.

Everyone, including the teacher, sits in a circle. There is no preparation required of the student outside of class. When the discussion begins, they don't raise their hands or get called on to participate. Instead, they must find the right time to chime in and share their opinions — and be respectful in doing so.

"I have been very excited with the program," Hayworth said.

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"The students have really taken to it. They love the fact that in the circle, I am their equal. They can agree or disagree with my opinion. It allows the students an opportunity to let their opinions and ideas be known," she said.

Touchstones uses short literary passages, some modern and some ancient, to introduce challenging ideas for discussion.

"They are truly challenged by it. It not only teaches them critical thinking skills for higher test scores, but also life lessons," Hayworth said.

"The stories we read teach us something about life," said sixth-grader Kristie Ford.

The carefully compiled and edited passages help individuals learn to cooperate, solve problems, take responsibility and lead others.

"I like the program because it teaches us to communicate with other students. People I normally wouldn't be talking to, I talk to them during the discussion. I have really gotten to know other people this way," Ford added.

Students work individually, in small groups and as a class on the lessons — each finding something that appeals to them along the way and learning about themselves as well as each other.

"It is fun because we get to express our opinions. We get to learn things about our classmates that you wouldn't already know," sixth-grader Graham Wither- spoon said.

Best of all, Hayworth said, students who are more verbal that might not necessarily stand out ordinarily really had the opportunity to shine and did.

And though she hasn't examined them yet, Hayworth is eager to see if the project she plans to continue in her classroom next

year for the reasons she can see has made a difference in her students' test scores as well.

Sullivan County Schools are the first district in Tennessee to implement the Touchstones Discussion Project systemwide. Graham Leonard, who has spent

most of his life as an educator including 35 years in the Middle East, raised the money to cover the books and training materials for the project in Sullivan County and said last fall that he hopes to introduce it to all area school districts within the next few years.

