

## Touchstones brings unique way of learning to schools

Thursday, September 09, 2004

By **CARMEN MUSICK**

*Times-News*

BLOUNTVILLE - After spending most of his life as an educator, including 35 years in the Middle East, Dr. Graham Leonard discovered that discussion-based methods of education empower students to read, write and think more effectively than other approaches. Now, he's bringing the methods he introduced to the West Bank and Gaza back home to students in Northeast Tennessee.

Leonard, a candidate for U.S. Congress in the 1st District, presented the books and training materials for the Touchstones Discussion Project to Sullivan County Schools Wednesday. Though Touchstones is used in individual classrooms elsewhere, Sullivan County is the first school district in the state to implement the unique discussion-based education curriculum systemwide.

"This program uses discussion to teach students important skills that will translate through all of their classes," Touchstones instructor Dan Sullivan said.

Sullivan outlined the program to nearly two dozen fifth- and sixth-grade teachers from the county's elementary and middle schools during a training session Wednesday at the Department of Education.

"One of the things that's most surprising is how many students who otherwise may not perform too well can thrive in this environment, and it can be a bridge for them to start, hopefully, becoming more engaged in all of their school work," Sullivan said.

Touchstones uses short literary passages, some modern and some ancient, to introduce challenging ideas for discussion. For one hour each week, students work individually, in small groups and as a class on each lesson. The carefully compiled and edited passages help individuals learn to cooperate, solve problems, take responsibility and lead others.

"We use it from second through 12th grade. We use it in prisons, senior citizen centers and in government agencies. It's also used in China in colleges. It's used in Haiti to teach adult literacy. And one of the things I find very amusing - and they never really believe me when I tell them - is the government office people are no better than the third-graders when they start out," Sullivan said.

Teachers said they believe the program will be especially helpful in the classroom because it will encourage every child to be an active learner no matter how that student learns best.



Dan Sullivan, a Touchstones instructor, conducts a training session with fifth- and sixth-grade teachers in the Sullivan County school system at the central office in Blountville Wednesday. David Grace photo.

"It's giving them a voice, and it's making them proactive in their learning. My kids love to discuss. They're going to eat this with a spoon," said Rock Springs teacher Allee Hopkins.

Colonial Heights' sixth-grade teacher Jessica Hayworth said the program - which touches on art, science, mathematics and a variety of other subjects - will reach children with varying interests and allow each of them to feel important.

"Teachers become aware of strengths and weaknesses of students that they weren't aware of before. Students become more self-aware of how they are as students. And it certainly builds respect," Sullivan said. "It really intends to make everybody a co-leader in their own education."

The Touchstones project provides comprehensive training, materials and facilitators to schools and school districts committed to helping all learners reach their highest potential. The program is designed to help improve reading comprehension, problem-solving, oral and written communication, listening skills, teamwork and leadership skills.

Carol Briggs, testing coordinator for Sullivan County Schools, said she is excited about the program because it will help teach children to think on their feet - a skill they'll need on tests and in life.

"You give me a student who can read the question and think it through, think about the question, think about the possibility of the answers, and that's the student that's going to do well on these tests," Briggs told the teachers.

Leonard, who raised the money to bring the program to Sullivan County Schools, hopes to introduce Touchstones to all area school districts within the next few years.

"I want to start it in every school district in Northeast Tennessee because I think it is one of the keys to helping us having an education that excels for the 21st century. We've always had good schools in East Tennessee because we've had good teachers. We've had better schools than we've paid for," Leonard said.

"But in order to excel so much that other industries will want to locate here, we have to have a work force that excels at learning. This teaches you to learn how to learn. Most people will have to change jobs three or four times in their lives in the 21st century. If they learn how to learn now, that's the important skill. That's THE skill for jobs," he said.

The county will introduce the Touchstones program in some fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms at each school this year and hopes to expand its program next year and eventually offer it at all grade levels

***Copyright 2004 Kingsport Times-News. All rights reserved. This material must be credited to the Times-News when redistributed or broadcast.***