

## ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY SCHOOLS

## Touchstones education gets students involved

*Discussion groups instill confidence*

By Monica Norton  
Staff Writer

The thought of secondary school students using a passage from "The Iliad" as a basis for discussions about why some people would leave their families and go to war may seem foreign.

And the thought that the students leading that discussion were once labeled "bad kids" seems even more unlikely.

But at Touchstones, a reading and discussion group created by three tutors from St. John's College in Annapolis, the "bad kids" mix with the "good kids" for what one of its founders calls "a very powerful situation."

"It's not useful to think of students as strong or weak," explained Howard Zeiderman, one of the creators of the program. "All students have strengths and weaknesses. Touchstones enables all kids to participate in the classroom."

Mr. Zeiderman, 48, along with Geoffrey Comber, 62, and Nicholas Maistrellis, 52, created Touchstones in the mid-1980s to aid all kinds of students. Now, it is being used in 24 states and four foreign countries, as well as several schools in Anne Arundel County.

"We find that when you group [students] together it's a very powerful situation," Mr. Zeiderman said. "It's a surprise to teachers that kids who have not been involved often do better than the students who are gifted."

Mr. Zeiderman and his colleagues — now on leaves of absence from St. Johns — based the program on one they created for a magnet school in Hartford, Conn.

They wondered if the discussion skills students use in the classrooms at St. John's could be developed for



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Touchstones' directors are (clockwise from upper left) Nicholas Maistrellis, Howard Zeiderman, Geoffrey Comber and Thomas Wilson.

use among younger students. The problem with education in the United States can't be cured with additional hours in school, or gadgets

such as televisions in the classrooms, all three have argued.

"Each of these might have a role to play within an educational envi-

ronment, but they are merely peripheral and external aspects of a crisis," Mr. Zeiderman wrote in a February Touchstones newsletter.

Because teachers think of students as passive receivers of information and skills, the students become dependent on their teachers and work because of trust, fear or short-term rewards, Mr. Zeiderman and his colleagues reason. Students must be able to feel that they have some say in their education, they argue.

"What we're trying to do is to get the students to feel [the learning process is] their own," Mr. Comber said.

To give the students that feeling, Mr. Comber said, Touchstones changes everything from the set-up of the classroom to the way lessons are taught.

"We like students to sit in a circle in open chairs so that they have a sense of being vulnerable," he said. "We don't want them to have any tables to hide behind."

The teacher reads a short text from the Touchstones guidebook then hands out readings for the students to discuss in small groups.

"Even the most shy and turned-off student will say something in a group of two to four people," Mr. Comber said.

Later, the students rejoin their circle and begin a discussion of the topic.

"Some are [resistant] to the idea of being able to express their opinion," Mr. Zeiderman said. "They don't believe it because it's not something they're used to."

But once the students begin discussing the various texts, trying to relate the readings to their own lives, a change occurs, Mr. Zeiderman said.

"I think it changes their own attitudes and perceptions about their abilities," he explained.

Mr. Comber added, "The students begin to see themselves as someone with something to contribute."