By Denise B partir
Of The Tidings
In a brick-clad classroom under the shimmer of florescent lights, more than 50 students cluster into small groups. The wall clock slowly ticks off the minutes until break time, but no one seems to notice as they eagerly lean toward each other in expectation. A question begins the discussion.
"Are we taught hate, or is it inborn?" asks one young man.
"I think we learn it from our parents," answers another.
"Would we know how to hate if we were the only person on the earth?"?
Still another student responds with, "We try something and find we dislike it, then we say we hate it. I think hate is too strong a word."

The discussion of hate and war continues for ten minutes until the bell signals the end of class time. Some students visibly exult, but others move to the corner to talk further about issues raised by Thomas Hobbes' classic, "Levithan."

The level of discussion might be expected in a college philosophy class or graduate school setting— not from 14- and 5-year-olds studying English and global studies at Ashland High School.

The students are part of a new and innovative curriculum called Touchstones that is being used in area schools to develop and enhance skills needed to meet the requirements of the 21st Century Schools program.

Touchstones is a discussion workshop directed at refining students' communication and critical thinking skills. Excerpts from preselected texts — such as those by Aristotle, Kant, and Lao Tsu — are read aloud in class. Students then form small groups to formulate questions stemming from the readings. They then form a larger group, present their questions to each other, and follow the discussion in whatever direction it goes.

"Touchstones gets kids to talk. It moves them to open up," said Bill Gabriel, one of six teachers at the high school who uses the program.

"Gabriel, along with teacher Butch McBaine, teach the ninth grade global studies/English block and use "Touchstones", as part of their weekly curriculum. Used successfully as a pilot program last year, it is now a required activity for all ninth graders.

AHS Principal Mary Cornish instituted the program after having witnessed its success with students in New Mexico.

"We started it there because it is so good for the kids," she said.

"It's a chance for kids to get exposed to the great thinkers."

Cornish says the program trains children to communicate in a systematic and formal way, with the text as a focal point. Reading the classics and formulating questions without teacher direction has created high student interest.

"It's a chance for kids to talk to each other more than they do when they see on MTV last night," she said.

Gabriel says the program has enhanced learning throughout the classroom. Students have started taking responsibility for their learning in other areas.

"Touchstones have changed the nature of the class," he said.

"The kids now begin to take every question very seriously. They have come to realize this is their time; they are either wasting it or not."

The whole focus, Gabriel says, is to get students to be self-taught, vocabulary and writing, but he learns. Then, he says, kids make choices to keep them relevant to the choices to take care of their own students.

"You see a tremendous difference with kids when they get involved in school," said Gabriel.

"They get plugged in and are successful. It's what gets the kids fired up."

"We're still learning, but we're getting there," he said. Probably the greatest factor in the success of Touchstones is student enjoyment. In the words of one ninth grade student, "Touchstones are cool."