

# Ashland Daily Tidings

By Denise Bgratta  
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 in-born?" 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 of a word."

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

The level of discussion might be expected in a college philosophy class or graduate school setting — not from 14- and 15-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 here 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 for focus. 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 about just what they saw 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 learners. Then, he says, kids make choices to take care of their own learning — and life.

"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."

Gabriel says that with the self-learning emphasis there is a lot of freedom to succeed — and to fail — but the students always come through, even the traditionally "weaker" students.

"The bottom line is, there is no bad kid," said Gabriel. "They all have a story like you and me."

Because there is ample opportunity for students to lose motivation, Gabriel and McBaine try to keep their curiosity level up by finding the right "angle" and reinforcing it with projects.

"We do various activities that correlate with the subject, like pot-lucks, making paper and performing plays. Whatever it takes to be different to make it different," said Gabriel. "You don't bribe the kids, but you do whatever it takes to get them to learn."

McBaine says there are still certain absolutes, like teaching vocabulary and writing, but he tries to keep them relevant to the students.

"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."

## Touchstones expand learning