'Touchstones' puts students, teachers on fair ground

Touchstones peddles the art of intelligence

By Karen Welsh Martin

Contributing writer

It sounds like the perfect class: no right or wrong answers and no preparation required.

Teachers abdicate their role of authority in the classroom, and even students who cannot read benefit.

And best of all, there are no

Touchstones, a discussion class created by three St. John's College faculty members, is teaching more than 20,000 children nationwide to teach themselves, to learn to think responsibly and develop a greater understanding of students of different backgrounds.

In the program, students are introduced to classical works of literature and science through short readings by the teacher. Afterwards, the group - and here the teacher is just one among equals - discusses what they've just heard.

Touchstones aims to have children learn from each other, to increase their awareness of the world around them and their tolerance of views different from their

"The purpose of Touchstones is not to teach students the contents of the readings included in the program, although that might happen, but to enable a group to in-



Howard Zeiderman, Nicholas Maistrellis and Geoffrey Comber, (left to right) who created Touchstones, bring the Classics to public schools.

crease its sense of community and its ability to reach a more productive interpretation of the texts," said Geoffrey Comber, who formed CZM Associates in 1984 with

Howard Zeiderman and Nicholas Maistrellis, to market the Touchstones program.

Although all three men are tutors at St. John's, the program is not affiliated with the Annapolis

Touchstones is being considered for use in the county school system, school spokeswoman Please see TOUCHSTONE, Page 4

Jane Dovle said.

"We have the Touchstones volumes in our inventory," she said,

St. John's trio sells program that teaches. . .thinking

TOUCHSTONE

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"and our office has recommended the program for at-risk students at several schools."

Touchstones came about al-Comber, a Fulbright scholar and 1953 graduate of the University of London, received a call from a The principal sought to model a are gifted."

public middle school after St. John's College, whose curriculum puts a strong emphasis on the Great Books, a list of more than 130 books that are required reading for all students.

"After weeks of evaluating the most accidentally. In 1983, Mr. situation, we decided that really wouldn't work," said Mr. Comber. "Students at the Hartford school presented a wide range of ability school principal in Hartford, Conn. from below average to those who

Instead, the professors created a program where a teacher would read a two to three minute excerpt from such classical works as Homer's "Iliad" or Aristotle's "Physics." Afterwards, teacher and students would discuss as equals what they had read. The teacher gave up the authority role; students worked as discussion leaders and learned from each other.

"Poor readers learn to listen more attentively, and they begin interacting with the gifted students. The result is that they learn to respect each other's opinions," Mr. Comber said.

"When the students learn that there are no right or wrong answers, they open up, even students who usually do not participate," said Mr. Zeiderman, who was awarded a doctorate in philosophy from Princeton in 1972, "The students begin to realize that answers don't need to come from the teacher, but that they can think them out within the group."

After the Hartford program was established, Richard C. Wallace Jr., superintendent of the Pittsburgh Public School System, had it introduced to some of his middle-school students. Pittsburgh's schools had been awarded grants to use for "critical thinking" program, and Mr. Wallace thought the Touchstones project would be appropriate.

By this time, Touchstones became incorporated. They charged \$2,500 for teacher training and follow-up visits.

After Pittsburgh, the tutors set up the program in rural Alabama and on an Indian reservation in Arizona.

In January, Touchstones was introduced at Baltimore City middle schools Falstaff and Northeast. Those programs are paid for by grants from Citicorp Choice and the A. S. Abell Foundation.

Programs also have been established in Los Angeles and India. Because of the corporation's growth, Mr. Comber and Mr. Zeiderman will take time off from St. John's this fall to concentrate on the program.

Why the name "Touchstones?"

"A touchstone was the stone once used by jewelers to match the value of other stones and precious metals," Mr. Comber said. "The texts that are used serve as touchstones as students learn to value others' opinions."

"Children seldom get the opportunity to express their ideas on something, and they are used to an answer being either right or wrong," said Anita Martin who works with seventh-graders on the Touchstones project at Falstaff Middle School in Baltimore City.

"In Touchstones, we all learned to see another side of everyone's personality. We talked and the students were open and receptive to everyone else's ideas."

Gillian Franklyn, an eighthgrader who participated in Touchstones last year at Falstaff, said the class helped her to express her thoughts and feelings.

"Before Touchstones, I never realized that I could read aloud so well," Gillian said. "As a result of the class, I am considering entering a dramatic reading contest at school."

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