‘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 tests.

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 own.

"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 increase 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 Zeideman and Nicholas Maistrellis, to market the Touchstones program.

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

"Touchstones is being considered for use in the county school system, school spokeswoman Jane Doyle said. "We have the Touchstones volumes in our inventory," she said.

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

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

Touchstones came about almost
accidentally. In 1983, Mr.
Comber, a Fulbright scholar and
1953 graduate of the University of
London, received a call from a
school principal in Hartford, Conn.
The principal sought to model a
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 read-
ing for all students.

"After weeks of evaluating
the situation, we decided that really
wouldn't work," said Mr. Comber.
"Students at the Hartford school
presented a wide range of ability
from below average to those who are
gifted."

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; stu-
dents worked as discussion lead-
ers and learned from each other.

"Poor readers learn to listen
more attentively, and they begin
interacting with the gifted stu-
dents. 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 an-
wers, they open up, even stu-
dents who usually do not partici-
pate," said Mr. Zeidman, who
was awarded a doctorate in philos-
ophy from Princeton in 1972. "The
students begin to realize that an-
wers 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 Pitts-
burgh Public School System, had
it introduced to some of his mid-
dle-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 be-
came incorporated. They charged
$1,500 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 mid-
dle schools Fallsstaff and Northeast.
Those programs are paid for by
grants from Citicorp Choice and
the A.S. Abell Foundation.

Programs also have been estab-
lished in Los Angeles and India.
Because of the corporation's
growth, Mr. Comber and Mr. Zei-
derman 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 touch-
stones as students learn to value
others' opinions."

"Children seldom get the oppor-
tunity 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 eighth-
grade who participated in Touch-
stones last year at Falstaff, said
the class helped her to express her
thoughts and feelings.

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