

VOICES

The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

by: The Touchstones Roving Reporter

This January, Noelle Richmond, who most recently served as Touchstones Board of Directors Vice Chair, stepped up to serve as the new Chair of the Touchstones Board. Noelle succeeds Debra Valentine, who retired after seven years of service on the Board. We want to share some of Noelle's passion for Touchstones and hope you, too, will be inspired and get involved!

What about Touchstones work in the world is most meaningful to you?

The fact that Touchstones enjoys active participation of so many enthusiastic people from diverse backgrounds gives me hope for our collective future. Knowing that Touchstones programs provide individuals from all over the world the opportunity to think about important issues, express themselves to others constructively and clearly, and listen carefully to try to better understand the ideas of others inspires me every day. The skills that people develop through their experiences with Touchstones make the world a better place for all of us.

What has been your favorite Touchstones experience so far?

I can truly say I have benefited from all my experiences in

Touchstones discussions, but one that stands out for me is my first experience at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women in Jessup, Maryland. During our weekly discussion program in the prison school, I was part of a group that explored readings from the Qur'an on forgiveness. The depth of honesty and insight expressed by the women in that session was profound for me.

What is your vision for Touchstones in the future?

Touchstones offers a uniquely valuable proposition—one that is available to everyone—to improve how we learn, live, and work together. As we embark on a new strategic planning period, we'll establish goals and priorities that reinforce Touchstones as a leader in transformational programs. Even in the face of major social and economic disruptions over the last four decades, Touchstones has adapted to meet emerging educational and social needs with highly effective programs and training. The organization's continued ability to productively manage uncertainties of the future remains vital to our success. Perhaps most importantly, the ongoing support of all our constituencies—students and

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Through inclusive discussion-based programming, Touchstones develops highly effective speakers, listeners, critical thinkers, and collaborative leaders.

LEADERSHIP

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schools, community program participants, volunteers, board and staff, as well as our donors and funders—will be critical to achieve planned growth. These elements are key to positioning Touchstones for a healthy and sustainable future in the years to come. I know all of us on the Touchstones board are excited to contribute to this vital work.

What can others do to bring Touchstones programs to new people?

There are many ways everyone can easily help Touchstones reach new people. Hosting a discussion among your friends is a way to let them experience the uniqueness and power of Touchstones programs first-hand. We held several "Touchstones & Tea" events in the past year and generated interest and new supporters. That model can be tailored to many other types of gatherings. Be creative and have some fun! Member of a book club? Ask your fellow members if they'd like to try a Touchstones discussion at one of their meetings. Inviting others

to attend the twice monthly online discussion groups, exploring the inclusion of Touchstones programming in your child's school or your alma mater, or contacting local community groups (senior centers, youth groups, or recreational centers) to learn if they might be interested in offering Touchstones programs are a few other ways to help bring new people into the discussion circle. If you're not fully confident about leading a Touchstones discussion yourself, the staff is here to help. Check out our website for one of the upcoming opportunities to build your skills as a volunteer or reach out to Jenny Walton, (jenny@touchstones.org), our Advancement & Volunteer Coordinator.

What else would you like to share?

I hope everyone reading this newsletter will take the time to reflect on how Touchstones directly impacts their lives and will then share that experience with others. It's a powerful tool for change and a proven win-win for everyone.

LEARNING WITH WONDER

by: Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director

In our last newsletter, we shared development plans for a new discussion program for students in grades K-2. *Wonderstones* is the newest addition to the world of Touchstones. It provides teachers and early elementary-age students with practice building a host of essential skills. Active listening, self-expression, self-regulation, cooperation, adaptability, forming and sharing ideas, self-reflection, problem-solving, and learning with others are vital competencies, even from the earliest years of schooling.

Like all Touchstones programs, *Wonderstones* approaches learning step by step—introducing a skill and providing structured and graduated practice. This allows students to strengthen the skill with real-world experiences that are engaging, thoughtful, and fun. Discussion topics in our Kindergarten volume include growth over time, autobiographical creativity, self-expression through art, individual

Me, the Little Bird, and the Bell

By Kaneko Misuzu (1903-1930)

*Even if I spread my arms,
I can't fly in the sky at all,
But the little bird that can fly
Can't run as fast on the ground as I can.
Even if I shake my body,
I can't make a beautiful sound,
But that ringing bell
Doesn't know as many songs as I do.
The bell, the little bird, and me,
We're all different,
And we're all good.*

and shared values, connecting to nature, explorations in science, and more. The short discussion texts represent a wide range of cultures including Eritrea, Greece, Chile, Japan, and the US. Selections in prose, poems, biography and autobiography, works of fine art, and informational science texts invite students to explore varied modes of human expression.

As we now prepare this volume for publication, we're excited to share more anecdotes from Giuliana de Grazia, who was one of several educators piloting the program this past fall and winter. Giuliana is a Montessori teacher, administrator, and Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pennsylvania who researches how young children's learning is—and is not—shaped by adults. The first lesson presents the Touchstones Ground Rules to the students. In our first story about this pilot, we shared how Giuliana and her class spent extra time on this rule: Listen carefully and do not interrupt. She had

This poem from Japan invites students to embrace individual skills and talents while valuing those in others.

been surprised to discover what her students thought it meant to “listen.” They believed it had to do with following directions, as in “I need you to listen to me” and “you’re not listening to me,” phrases they all had heard many times from care-givers and teachers! In that discussion (and each of the following lessons in the volume), the students investigated listening as an activity of learning and discovery. They focused on

ideas, questions, and opinions shared first in pairs and then with the full class.

Later, in Lesson 4, students are introduced to the concept of cooperation. “They didn’t know this word.” Giuilana documented. “One child thought it was to follow parent directions, like ‘I need you to cooperate. Put your shoes on so we can get out the door.’” The second half of this *Wonderstones* program explicitly teaches practices of cooperation. And it

immerses students in experiential learning, as they discover the broad world and benefits both of active listening and working productively with others.

These examples are among many from piloting teachers that illustrate the distinct type of student learning fostered in *Wonderstones*. It’s been said many times that Touchstones discussion curricula are the best “thinking” programs out there, and the feedback agrees.

AT THE HEART OF TOUCHSTONES

From the Field



At Touchstones, we use a train-the-teacher approach to support continuous professional development in the classroom and beyond. With a combination of presentations, workshops, observations, and coaching, we prepare and guide new Touchstones discussion leaders as they get started. Every leader then uses a detailed and instructional Touchstones Teacher’s Guide and accompanying Student Editions to implement the program of their choosing. This combination ensures educators have the know-how and effective tools for teaching students to be active and cooperative participants in inclusive, respectful, and collaborative discussions.



Every Touchstones program is designed to teach specific and essential skills students need to thrive and grow in school and work. Perhaps more importantly, these skills are crucial for day-to-day successes in life. Learning to listen actively and speak with intentionality in ways that help advance understanding are two vital skills developed in Touchstones. Those capabilities alone don’t suffice. People also need to think reflectively and work cooperatively to solve simple and complex problems. They need to be confident and self-aware enough to offer ideas, opinions, and questions—while being willing to investigate and integrate different approaches from other people. Ultimately, collaborating and sharing responsibility for personal and group outcomes are additional competencies we all need. In Touchstones, helping people teach and apply these



Volunteer Craven Engels leads a new-student Touchstones orientation at Washington Latin’s Julia Cooper campus.



interdependent sets of skills is the heart of what we do.

Here’s a snapshot of several current partner sites and how they are using Touchstones programs to advance their constituents’ abilities as life-long learners and collaborative leaders.

Learning Community Charter School – New Jersey’s most diverse K-8 charter school (located in Jersey City) embeds Touchstones programs—from *Wonderstones* to Touchpebbles to Touchstones—with weekly classes in all grades.



AT THE HEART

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St. Jerome Academy, Diocese of Washington, DC – For more than 15 years, Touchstones program have been part of the school's K-8 educational mission to form students' minds and characters through an integrative, classical curriculum.

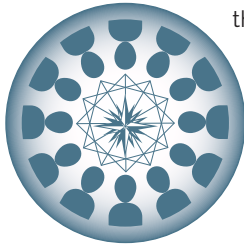
University of Nebraska, Lincoln – The College of Arts and Sciences offers students in their senior year an experiential learning course using our semester-long program, Mapping the Future.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas – All students in the College of Education first- and second-year seminars, plus veterans and military family member students, participate in semester-long programs that integrate Touchstones programs designed to support student success.

Washington Latin Public Charter School – At one of DC's most successful charter schools, each Wednesday, every student in grades 5-9 engages in weekly Touchstones classes.

You-Need-A-Budget (YNAB) – This 200-person online financial literacy company uses Touchstones to strengthen interpersonal communication across teams.

Here's what one participant at YNAB, our newest partner in the group, shared they had learned in a 10-week Touchstones program, "I improved my active listening and questioning skills, practiced leadership and collaboration, and got to know my colleagues better, all at the same time. Win-win-win!"



DID YOU KNOW?

Touchstones is able to partner with schools and organizations of all types by meeting their individual needs. While some partners have adequate funding to purchase Touchstones training and books, others do not. **Charitable gifts of all sizes ensure we never have to say no to an educator or volunteer who wants Touchstones to help them build a stronger and more inclusive community and world.**

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