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Based on those and other positive outcomes, this fall the school is expanding Touchstones throughout the middle and high school grades. They are also hoping to host Touchstones workshops in 2020 for teachers from across the region. Stay tuned for more from Bangkok!

Stefanie Takacs, MS.Ed.
Executive Director

The Touchstones Discussion Project is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization to which donations are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. The NEH-funded Touchstones program, in collaboration with the Maryland Humanities, explores a world that requires a new set of skills to address some of this urgent need, but there is a lot of work yet to be done.

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May 2019
Our Future is New

Howard Zeideman, Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs

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Recently, we were hired to develop and run a customized Touchstones program within a large corporation to help a senior management team focus on developing some of these key skills. The team’s leader recognized she wasn’t tapping into the full potential represented within her managers. There were members of her group who always spoke in meetings and others who were much quieter. Some rarely spoke at all, and yet each was a valued member of the team. What, she wondered, did they need to learn to do differently to make sure everyone’s voice and ideas were available and accessible to the entire team?

Over four, five-hour workshop sessions, each member of the team worked on active listening and what it means to be a Touchstones-trained leader. They practiced the skills needed to share leadership in a 21st Century world that requires them. We envision a world where people collaborate and share leadership to resolve complex local and global issues. Our mission is to develop highly effective speakers, listeners, critical thinkers, and collaborative leaders through inclusive discussion-based programming.

Connect with us: www.touchstones.org  Touchstones Discussion Project  @Touchstones

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the group, many had practiced running Touchstones discussions—sharing responsibility for leading and bringing in all members of the team. Since then, that group has integrated their Touchstones practice into their monthly staff meetings, rotating leadership month to month to ensure their continued development.

Next month, we’ll run similar leadership development programs at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas within the Emergency and Crisis Management Master’s of Science Program. The participants are enrolled in a blended learning program, which brings them to campus several a time to work together in person. Touchstones will be a central part of building connections and trust within the cohort, as part of strengthening participants’ abilities to collaborate across key leadership positions even in times of great uncertainty.

We’ll also be traveling to Montgomery, Alabama to provide professional development and leadership training for members of the Community College Association of Alabama consortium. As that organization looks to foster future leadership from within its younger managers, Touchstones will feature as a primary tool for augmenting existing skillsets.

Spring Cleaning and a New Look
Jennifer Macris, Advancement Coordinator

We’ve done a little (OK a lot off!) spring cleaning here at Touchstones and we’re proud to share the fruits of our labors with you.

Touchstones has launched a new website, and we think you’re going to love it! It’s cleaner, easier to navigate, and puts information more readily at your fingertips. Our successful programming, curricula, and trainings haven’t changed, but now you can explore our books and research more interactively. And of course, it’s still filled with in-depth information and resources for those interested in exploring more fully how Touchstones develops critical thinking skills and collaborative leadership.

Those who choose Touchstones for their teaching already know that people of all ages need to learn, and practice often, how to really listen to others—especially those with differing points of view. It’s not easy or simple to share one’s own ideas within a group and to make sure other perspectives are welcomed and heard. But we know it’s possible, with 35 years under our belt (yes, that’s a long time!) and more than 5,000,000 people already part of the Touchstones family. And we aren’t stopping until everyone has access to Touchstones.

We hope you’ll enjoy how our new website showcases Touchstones many great benefits and will share your feedback! Write to us at schoolprograms@touchstones.org and let us know what you think.

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It’s fascinating to me that our materials are used around the world. I have enjoyed working with educators in Canada, Spain, Australia, Guadeloupe, and China, and I am currently working with a teacher, Michael Purser, in Thailand. Michael teaches at the Thai Chinese International School in Samutprakarn, near Bangkok. He began using Touchstones materials in his seventh-grade class last year, and at the same time he was writing his doctoral dissertation on discussion-based learning methods. He had learned about Touchstones from his mentor in his graduate education program and wanted to see what the method looked like and yielded in real practice. Fortunately, Touchstones was able to provide Michael with some initial training by including him in an Open-Enrollment Workshop last fall via the internet.

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I highly recommend the Touchstones Discussion Project as a means to support Social-Emotional Learning in schools. Touchstones is well thought out, easily implemented and effective.*

From Briget Koch
Effective Learning Habits for College & Career Teacher
Dumbarton Middle School

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The school’s goals—which include developing critical thinkers, effective communicators, collaborative workers, and responsible global citizens—and the Touchstones methods and materials fit seamlessly together to reinforce a student-centered environment focused on 21st Century Skills. As Michael’s students worked through their Touchstones program, he reported progress towards 100% participation within each discussion and a marked improvement in comprehension skills. As the school is trilingual (Chinese, Thai, and English), Touchstones programs additionally support those whose native language is not English to strengthen their speaking, listening, and comprehension skills in English.

After several months of using Touchstones with his seventh-grade students, Michael wrote that he saw all students participating actively during their discussions. He also observed during Touchstones that “students appeared to be on more equal footing in the conversation based on their assigned roles of Chairperson and Secretary… and they spoke voluntarily during the group discussions as opposed to being prompted by the facilitator.”

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Together
Stefanie Tahaka, MS.Ed.
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ith a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Touchstones Discussion Project launched a new program specifically for veterans in 2017. Completing the Odyssey: A Journey Home compared ancient perspectives on service, war, separation, and homecoming with modern perspectives from members of America’s modern armed forces. Touchstones is the recipient of a second grant from the NEH that allows us to expand programming and replicate the original program, in addition to converting our Touchstones Leader’s Guide and Participant Guide into a print-on-demand set. We look forward to making this program available to other organizations and groups that bring veterans together to share their experiences during service and in their transition back to civilian life. In addition, this funding provides for the development and implementation of a new program that explores how dialogues on the experiences of service and war can bring veterans and non-veteran civilians together through deeper and shared understanding. One of the most compelling outcomes from the NEH-funded Completing the Odyssey programs in 2017-2018 was a realization among most participants that their experiences must be understood within a greater context. Their lives and histories as members of the U.S. military do not define them in their entirety, nor do those experiences necessarily create insurmountable barriers and disconnects between themselves and those who have not served. “We are all human,” said one veteran participant about whether any civilian can ever understand a veteran’s experience. “No one can know what is inside my head, what my personal experience was,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean they can’t understand me as a person.”

His statement was a watershed moment for the group. For us, as program staff, it shed light on an essential element within the process of coming home: returning to community necessarily requires civilians at the table, too—listening, speaking, and learning from and with their fellow citizens how to build this new home where everyone has a place. This new program, which will be co-led by both a Touchstones-trained veteran and a civilian, explores a contemporary work, Tribe, Homecoming and Belonging, by journalist Sebastian Junger. It pairs each chapter from Tribe with selections from The Odyssey, weaving together themes of cooperation over individualism, bonds of family and group or tribe, empathy and resilience, the draw of home, and homecoming and concepts of home and trust. This program starts this fall. For more information, please email me at st@touchstones.org.

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TOUCHSTONES DISCUSSION PROJECT

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