Abell Salutes: Touchstones

Making an Art of the Science of Discussion

discussion: the consideration of a subject by a group; an earnest conversation; a formal discourse upon a topic; exposition.

American Heritage Dictionary

Discussion is thought by many to be the key to learning, but too often discussion as it is now conducted in the classroom fails to unlock closed-in minds.

Which is where Touchstones comes in.

The object of the Touchstones technique is to turn routine classroom interchanges among disinterested students into purposeful discussions among students newly inspired. The concept was developed at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland by Geoffrey Comber, Howard Zeiderman and Nicholas Maisterlis; Touchstones teachers are trained, and the program is monitored, by them and the college.

Touchstones seeks to transform the bored into the curious—and the curious into the productive.

It is doing this in Pittsburgh, Hartford, Philadelphia, numerous sites in Alabama—and now in Baltimore at Dunbar High School—creating in each case a special kind of classroom discussion with its own definition, which might, in a dictionary, read something like this:

discussion: interchange whereby students learn the skills of teaching themselves; try out new ideas to modify old roles; learn to appreciate differences; think coherently even while remaining uncertain about the right direction.

(continued on page 4)

The Maryland State Lottery: It's Big Business—But In the Public Interest, Is It Good Business?

Last Year, It Brought Into the State's General Fund Over $335 Million; Over 15 Years, $3 Billion. But At What Cost?

An Assessment As the Maryland Lottery Nears Its 20th Year

"The lottery eases the burden on the taxpayer. It is the only source of state revenue not derived from taxation.”

Director, Illinois State Lottery

"I'm against gambling because it feeds the get-rich-quick illusion that debilitates society; because gambling causes individual ruin, despair and suicide, and corrupts a state that seeks a piece of its action."

William Safire, New York Times

Last year by the thousands Marylanders bought more than $800,000,000 in lottery tickets ("Pick 3," "Pick 4," "Lotto," "Winner Take All," and "Instant Games") at 2,400 retail outlets in 23 counties and Baltimore City—many standing in line to do so. In that same year, the lottery paid winners about $390,000,000 (approximately half the amount bet); it paid $41,000,000 in commissions and fees to agents, $13,500,000 to itself for operating expenses—and $335,000,000 to the state general fund.

Big business. But not necessarily, in terms of the public interest, good business.

Lotteries have historically been the object of suspicion and denunciation. Prior to 1963, they were banned by every state. But today across America the numbers of dollars being bet and the numbers of people betting increase dramatically with each passing year. In Maryland, there is a greater and greater dependency on lottery revenue to fund services (including services to the poor). As the lottery experience in Maryland approaches its 20th anniversary year, there is a growing need to examine how, in terms of its mission, the Maryland lottery is serving the citizenry to whose best interests it is committed.

The mission of the lottery was clearly to raise money, and although lottery proponents claim that the lottery also serves the community by providing entertainment, that point was not made by proponents when the lottery bill was being debated in the legislature. Is the community satisfied with the performance of the lottery as a revenue raising agency, and, at the same time, that it accomplishes its goals in a way that meets the responsibilities implicit in the franchise?

The third largest contributor to the state's general fund

The answer to the first question is yes, clearly; there is no serious denigration of the lottery's record for raising money. Indeed, the lottery is now the third largest contributor to the state's general fund. The answer to the second, however, is
arguable. The community, looking back and assessing 18 years of lottery experience, needs to balance fiscal gain against societal cost, and evaluate the net gain or loss to itself.

From 1974 through 1990, the lottery has turned over to the state general fund to support critically needed services $3,242,966,688 (that is three billion...). These monies go into the general fund to support public education, health and mental hygiene agencies, human resources, public safety, housing and community development, and other agencies established to help the state meet its commitment to the public welfare.

It is well established, too, that for many the lottery provides a harmless form of entertainment. Hundreds of thousands of people “play to win” every day; their enjoyment of the experience makes itself known in the growing popularity of the games. Despite occasional dips in the sales curve, the lottery manages to stay popular. (Nationally, its popularity is continually underscored by the additional number of states legalizing, and promoting, lottery in their respective jurisdictions.)

Linger ing concerns

If the lottery from a perspective of its 18 years in operation does in fact meet its mission to raise money as described, why does concern about it linger? Why do letters to the editor continue to question the lottery as an institution in Maryland life? Why do the Sun and the Evening Sun (and news and opinion journals across America) continue to editorialize sharply against it? Why do psychiatrists and social workers involved in treating gambling addiction consistently condemn it? Why do even some of our elected officials, while recognizing the need for the revenues the lottery produces, harbor concerns about what they perceive as its deleterious effects on society?

The resistance—fear of it, concern about it—is an intense albeit amorphous mix: that the state’s promotion of such get-rich-quick schemes promotes the wrong message in a country that preaches rewards for hard work, education and thrift; that the state, while in the business of selling lottery tickets should not be, too, in the business of promoting the sale of lottery tickets, making, in effect, gambling a goal of public policy; that the lottery business breeds corruption and attracts the criminal element to it; that the lottery is gambling pure and simple and that too many bettors become addicted to it, with serious repercussions on family and workplace; that it is a tax upon the poor, who are enticed to spend a disproportionate percent of their income for lottery tickets; that the lottery advertising fails to make known the weight of the odds against winning; that it is an inefficient way of raising money; that it does not, as so many of its proponents argue, discourage illegal gambling; and finally, that the state itself, with its growing dependency on the lottery, is becoming addicted.

How valid, after 18 years, are the arguments, for and against the Maryland lottery?

The “get-rich-quick” enticement

There is a considerable body of opinion marshalled against the lottery’s siren, “get rich quick” enticement, and among the most vocal of these critics is syndicated New York Times’ columnist William Safire. In a recent commentary (New York Times, April 22, 1991) on the spread, state by state, of the lottery, he writes, “Private gambling, like prostitution, should not be illegal, but it should not be treated as a value. The state should not make the hustling of gambling the basis for state education.” According to Charles T. Clotfelter and Philip J. Cook in their book, “Selling Hope,” (State Lotteries in America: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989), the Chicago Tribune continues to editorialize against lotteries, criticizing the low proportion of revenues returned as prizes and charging that “state sponsorship of a lottery teaches an ethic of easy money over the value of hard work.” And Pulitzer Prize winner Taylor Branch writes in New England Magazine (June, 1990), “Like drug pushers, the promoters of the lottery seek to reverse the work ethic—and to entice experimenters into habitual consumption.” But the lottery as the state views it, according to Donna Williams, Lottery Specialist, State of Maryland, is a benefit to players and non-players alike, rich and poor. Players get the fun of betting; some, of winning. Non-players get the benefits of the revenues that go to support state services. Most of our winners think of their lottery winnings as a supplement to their regular income. They use the money constructively, for education, for example. Winners do not seem to change their lifestyles.”

Has the Maryland lottery attracted any criminal element to it? Is there corruption in the operation of the lottery? In Maryland, there is not a single instance of wrongdoing in connection with the administration of the lottery.

What about the lottery as gambling, and gambling as addiction, and the concern that in promoting the lottery the state is in effect helping to promote addiction to gambling? The Baltimore chapter of Gamblers Anonymous keeps no statistics on how many of its members have fallen victim to lottery gambling—as opposed to betting on horses, sports and poker hands. But Arnold Wexler, an official with its national office, has warned that “owing to state lotteries we are breeding a society of gamblers.”

State lotteries and the gambling problem

How much does the introduction and promotion of state lotteries contribute to the problem? Although isolated cases exist, and each by itself is a personal tragedy that bears no relationship to statistics, the effect of state lotteries on the numbers of compulsive gamblers overall, according to Clotfelter and Cook, is quite small. “First, the total wages for lotteries, $13 billion in 1987, is small compared to the overall addition to consumer indebtedness during the year of about $80 billion. Second, lottery play lacks some of the attributes that are thought to be conducive to excessive gambling: continuous action, short payout interval. Nevertheless, far more people participate in the lottery than in any other form of commercial gambling,
and some of them obviously bet beyond their means." They cite the experience of the “800-Gambler” hotline in New Jersey, a state where nearly every form of commercial gambling is available. During one period, 17 percent of those who called this hotline indicated that excessive lottery expenditures were their problem, or part of their problem.

Director of the Maryland lottery, William C. Rochford, in an interview with Sun writer Patrick McGuire (Sunday Sun, June 16, 1991) responded to the “lottery as addiction” question this way: “I’m sure there are compulsive lottery players but not in great numbers. I think everything has a side effect. Look at the stock market. That has a side effect. And horse racing. They all have side effects. I can’t think of one thing that doesn’t have a side effect.”

A study by the National Council on Compulsive Gambling (New York State Office of Mental Health, September 1988) makes the point that as much as 73 percent of social gamblers bet on the state lottery. In contrast, only about 27 percent of social gamblers bet on other forms of gambling—casino, sports, cards, horses. Thus, social gamblers are more than 2-1/2 times as likely to bet on lotteries as the next most popular form of gambling (casino). Why is this? Perhaps, lottery adversaries argue, because of the lottery’s advertising and ease of access. In effect, state promotion of lotteries may significantly increase the proportion of the population that gambles. With regard to compulsive gambling, 63 percent say they gamble on the lottery, which turns out to be the most common form of gambling. Thus, lottery betting is strongly associated with compulsive gambling. While these findings do not disprove that lotteries cause compulsive gambling, there can be little doubt that the promotion of gambling in the general media under the sponsorship of the state lends a certain legitimacy to gambling, and, at least for many, is an unfortunate encouragement to it.

“State is not encouraging people to spend money they are not already spending.”

Donna Williams, State Lottery Specialist, makes the point that, in the view of the lottery administration, “People who bet on the lottery are using discretionary dollars—they will spend it for one thing or another, including, even, illegal gambling. The state isn’t encouraging people to spend money they are not already spending.”

Possibly the most consistent argument made against the lottery over the years is that it amounts to a tax on the poor. Time magazine, commenting on riverboat gambling now legal in Iowa, remarks, “Given the myriad opportunities to blow the rent check on games of chance, do states want to offer taxpayers further encouragement to speculate idly rather than invest soundly?” But the Maryland lottery has made available studies that tend to suggest that the people playing the lottery are for the most part not poor. About 40 percent of the players of all games are in the $20,000 to $39,999 income range—hardly poor. Yet the same study shows that though blacks make up 23 percent of the state’s population, they make up 34 percent of the purchasers of lottery tickets. (These bettors are more likely to spend a larger percentage of their lower incomes on the lottery than higher income bettors.) Also in the same study: citizens with the most education are the least likely to play the state lottery. “It is wrong,” Safire says, “for the state to exploit the weakness of its citizens. It is the most unfair and painful form of ‘painless’ taxation. The money isn’t coming from a few big bookies and croupiers, but from the pockets of millions.” Taylor Branch argues, “In one study, a third of the members of poor families who gambled spent more than 20 percent of their income on lottery tickets.”

Perhaps the most visible reminder of the presence of the Maryland lottery in the lives of Marylanders is the lottery’s television advertising. The budget for television advertising by itself, not taking into account the monies spent for radio, outdoor billboards and newspaper advertising, is $4,000,000. (Advertising is included in the state’s operational expenses budget, 3.5 percent of gross sales.) Setting aside the question of whether the state, which has the legal right to “promote” the lottery, should be in the business of aggressively encouraging the sale of lottery tickets, the question asked of the advertising program is whether it is “truthful”: does it make clear to the consumer what the odds against winning truly are?

Odds: 811,500 to 1

The lottery administration points to the brochures available on the counters of the retail outlets where lottery tickets are sold; it is here, not in the television (or even radio) advertising that true odds are published (in what printers call 12-point type—not as large or bold as some would hope for, but larger than newspaper text). An example is the brochure, “Winners Take All” Cash Game (“Win cash on the double. Two Chances to Win over $100,000 For Only a Dollar”). If the customer betting chooses to bet on guessing correctly six consecutive numbers, the odds against winning are listed as “1:811,580.”

Which the customer must interpret to mean that the odds against his winning are more than 811,500 to 1. The criticism is that these odds are not visible in the lottery’s most visible advertising—television. But Williams says that bettors are not interested in the odds. “They play for the fun of it. They all have a dream.”

An inefficient way to raise money

Some critics of the lottery argue that the enterprise shouldn’t exist for the very reason proponents say it should: the quick-and-easy way it raises money. They say the lottery fails at money-raising because it is inefficient at it. “However,” Williams points out that “according to the magazine, Gambling and Wagering Business, the Maryland State Lottery is the most efficient lottery in the United States—as far as generating money for the state.”

Taylor Branch is among the most vocal to make the point of the lottery’s inefficiency. In his article, “What’s Wrong With the Lottery,” he writes, “Every dollar spent on a lottery ticket is a bastard mix of wages and tax, a kind of ‘wajax.’ Viewed as a wager, the lottery ticket makes for a losing, noncompetitive proposition because the states skim off forty to fifty percent in taxes and expenses before returning prize money to winners. Viewed as a tax, a wajax contains even more of a loser’s tilt. Its gross inefficiency mocks any public purpose to which the net revenue might be applied. With every dollar sent in with the purchase of a lottery ticket, forty to fifty cents is left after the redistribution of prize money, and another dime is
siphoned off to advertising gurus, computer companies, television stations and convenience store agents. To collect a dollar of revenue through this sieve, a state spends twenty-five times what it would by general taxation."

What of lottery proponents' argument that legalized lottery takes illegal gambling off the streets? Does legal lottery gambling seriously impact illegal street-lottery gambling?

"Still a tremendous amount of money being bet on the street."

According to Sgt. George Klein, an 11-year veteran of the city's vice squad in an interview with Patrick McGuire of the Sun, illegal gambling has not been hurt at all. "There is a tremendous amount of money being bet on the street. It would be safe to say in the Baltimore metro area hundreds of thousands are wagered on a daily basis. And that is a conservative figure."

McGuire points out that even conservatively, at $200,000 a day that comes to $73,000,000 a year wagered illegally just in Baltimore. (Klein told McGuire that what the state lottery did was to make illegal lottery more credible. "Instead of relying on the complicated formula taken from the daily handles of racetracks, illegal numbers runners now use the same numbers the lottery uses, verifying their results each night as they are drawn on television. No more confusion among bettors as to which racetrack was being used in that day's bets.")"

And finally, is the state itself becoming addicted to gambling on gambling? There is an argument to be made that it is.

With state revenues down as a consequence of the recession and the state already facing a deficit with the lottery funds included, far from cutting back on dependence on the lottery, the state is looking more and more to the lottery for more and more money. (Monies to help pay for the new stadium, for example, will be raised in part with funds from lottery sales.)

Lottery's case for bringing in money is a strong one

While the case for the lottery's bringing in much needed dollars is a strong one, the costs to society in human terms must be evaluated, too. To what extent is the lottery addictive, and what is the price to society of that addiction? Is it appropriate for the state not only to make lottery tickets available but to actively and aggressively promote the sale of them? And is it appropriate for the state to sponsor the message, in particular to young people, that to get rich one should take a chance and bet, rather than focusing on the need to get an education, prepare for a career, and find gainful employment within it?

In the end, the Maryland lottery provides recreation for some Marylanders and revenues to fund state agencies for all. Against these pluses are the minuses—the complex impact of gambling on an already troubled society.

Complacency—failure to assess—would be the state's biggest gamble

The electorate brought the lottery into being in Maryland in 1972 with a referendum—voting for it five to one. It may be time, with the benefit in two years of 20 years' experience, for the community to reassess the lottery's value—not, realistically, to consider its discontinuance, but with a view of determining whether its role as a state revenue source should be allowed to diminish, and whether the state, deep in the business of selling lottery tickets, should also be in the business of promoting lottery tickets through advertising—and to study the lottery's social impact.

Complacency—to do nothing about assessing so overwhelmingly large an issue in Maryland life—would be too big a gamble for the voters of Maryland to take.

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Abell Salutes: Touchstones (continued from page 1)

Touchstones at Dunbar

Every one of Dunbar's 750 students is in one of the schools 24 Touchstones classes.

There is a Touchstones class every Wednesday, taught by a teacher trained in the Touchstones method. Brenda Johnson, vice principal, has watched the Touchstones program take hold among the students. "The Touchstones discussion idea seems to bring out the best and the most from the students. Many who barely expressed themselves before now, after involvement in the program, are quick to volunteer, to give their ideas and invite fellow students to give theirs. And the fact that the Touchstones experience is a nongraded one seems to encourage the students to take risks in what they say—and that helps stimulate others to do the same. The result often is discussion that has come alive. The discussions prove not only engaging and liberating, but instructive."

Johnson points to an evaluation test that supports her impressions. "At the beginning of the school year we gave each of the students a particular set of test questions. We gave them the same set of questions at the end. In the second set of test questions, given after a year of Touchstones training, the students answered more fully, more precisely, and had obviously developed better thinking skills."

Touchstones has demonstrated its ability to make students think more effectively—changing the education of students by changing the definition of discussion.