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# **James P. Comer**

Director of the Child Study Center's Comer School Development Project, Associate Dean and Professor of Psychiatry at Yale University Medical School

Nominated by:

**Alan R. Shoho**

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL  
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College of Education  
and Human Development  
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Dr. Alan Shoho,

The purpose of this letter is to endorse the nomination of James Comer, M.D. for the 2011 Brock International Prize in Education. I have followed Dr. Comer's work for over two decades and have interacted with him in person for over a decade, so I feel fully competent to assess his appropriateness for the Brock Prize.

Dr. Comer's work to develop and disseminate the School Development Program (SDP) at Yale University is a remarkable achievement for several reasons. First, the Comer Program has offered realistic hope to hundreds of schools and thousands of educational professionals. In a variety of contexts, the Comer process has produced significant gains in academic achievement and in other desirable outcomes (examples: the Tom Cook et al. studies in Chicago, including longitudinal follow up).

The Comer team has been particularly focused on improving schools in highly disadvantaged contexts. Their work in districts such as Benton Harbor, Michigan, on Chicago's West Side, and dozens of other locations have been somewhere between admirable and heroic.

As with such other laudable efforts as Success for All (Slavin & Madden, 2000), the Comer team's results have not always been successful, but they have continued learning and growing from both their successes and failures.

Perhaps the two most important aspects of Dr. Comer's work have been his focus on the whole community (and the whole child), and the fact of his perseverance. His whole community focus was an initial cornerstone of the SDP, and remains the same today. Schools can be part of the re-building of too-often-failed community processes. In SDP, the community of teachers and educational administrators interact with the larger community from which their students come, and the entire group seeks "no fault" solutions to abiding problems. All of America's children should be so fortunate to have this as a building block for their schools.

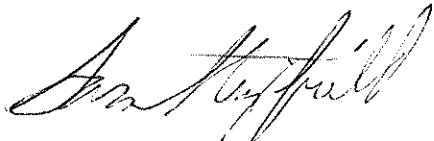
A special point needs to be made about the importance of Dr. Comer's and his team's sticking to addressing one problem for forty years. Far too many reforms have lasted as long as a specific grant (ex., several of the *New American Schools* designs), and then faded away. A great deal of practical learning has been lost through these on-again, off-again efforts. Dr. Comer has been at it for the long haul. An example of his learning through this process is that,

for the last decade and more, his team has been increasingly focused on working not just at the school level but at the district level. Increasingly, they have found that it “takes a whole city” to raise a child.

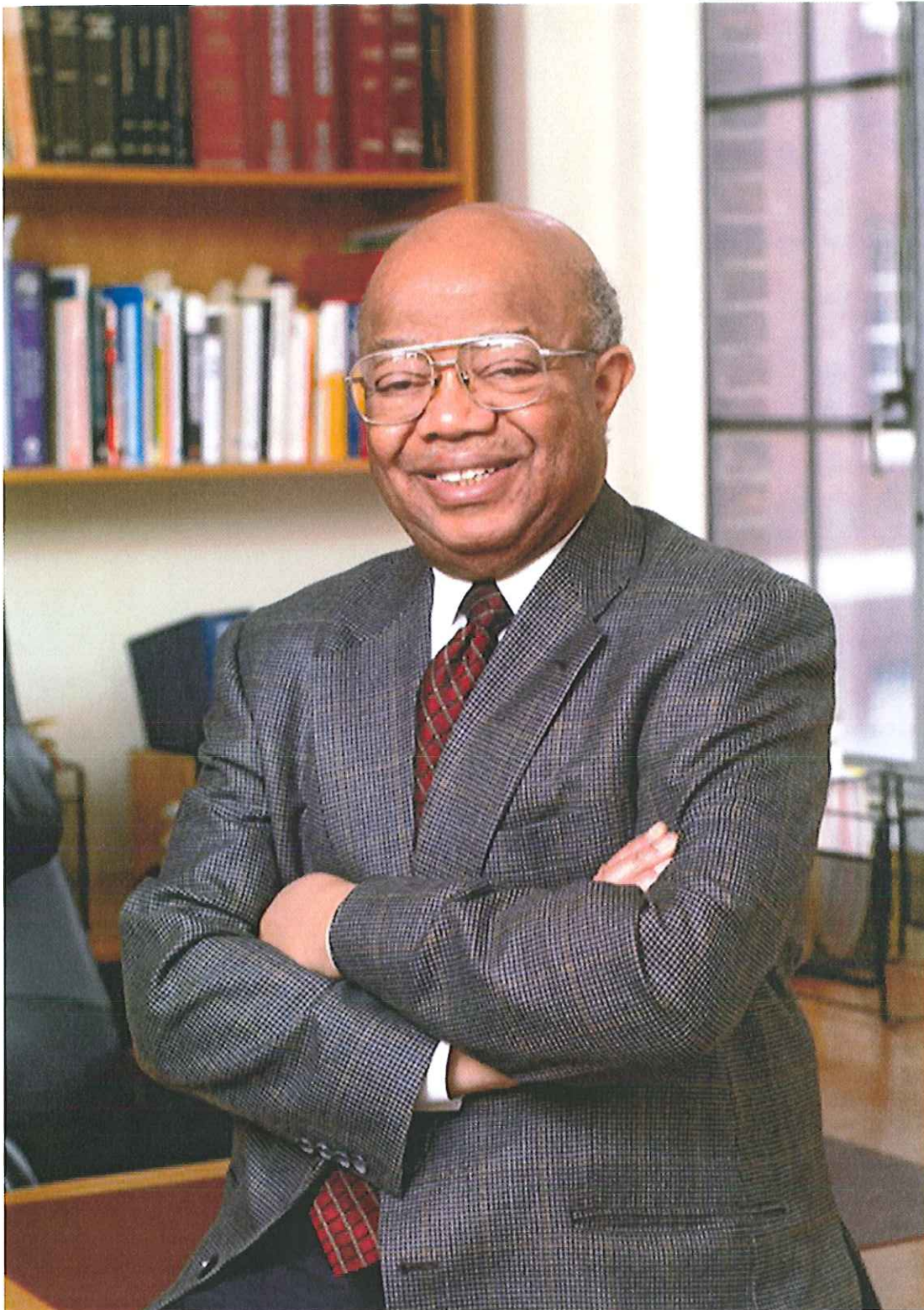
Finally, your committee will find that working with Dr. Comer is a delight. The gentleman is exactly as gracious when interacting with a secretary as with a university president. He is charming with all.

If you have any additional questions about Dr. Comer’s qualifications for the Brock Prize, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Sam Stringfield".

Sam Stringfield, Ph.D.  
Distinguished University Scholar  
(502) 852-0615  
Sam.stringfield@louisville.edu



**2010 Brock Prize Nominee  
Dr. James Comer, M.D.**

### Brief Biographical Sketch of Dr. James Comer

One of the country's leading child psychiatrists, Dr. James P. Comer is best known for his pioneering efforts to improve the [scholastic](#) performance of children from low-income and minority backgrounds. Unlike most education-reform programs, which focus on academic concerns, such as improving teachers' credentials and building students' basic skills, the "Comer Method" emphasizes the development of children's social skills and self-esteem. It was first introduced at two elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1968 as part of a "school-intervention" project organized by the Child Study Center at Yale University. "Our analysis of interactions among parents, staff and students revealed a basic problem underlying the schools' [dismal](#) academic and [disciplinary](#) record: the [sociocultural](#) misalignment between home and school," Comer explained in *Scientific American*. "We developed a way to understand how such misalignments [disrupt](#) beneficial relations and how to overcome them in order to promote educational development."

The second oldest of five children, James Pierpont Comer grew up in East Chicago, Indiana, where his father was a steel mill laborer and his mother worked as a domestic. Although neither parent had completed a formal education, the Comers--especially his mother, Maggie--took an active interest in their children's [schoolwork](#). In addition to phoning teachers to check on their progress and attending parent visitation days, they accompanied the children on trips to the library, to museums, and anywhere else that would [stimulate](#) their minds and build their confidence and self-esteem. Today, Comer identifies his parents' interest and involvement as the keys to his family's academic and professional success. Between them, he and his brothers and sisters have earned 13 academic degrees.

In order to reduce [antagonism](#) between parents, teachers, and administrators and provide new direction and a sense of [cohesiveness](#) to the schools' management and teaching, Comer and his colleagues created a 12-person governance and management team within each school, led by the principal and made up of elected teacher and parent representatives and a mental-health worker from the Yale Child Study Center. These teams were responsible for making decisions on a wide variety of issues, including the content and direction of the school's academic, social, and [extracurricular](#) programs.

Not surprisingly, it soon emerged that strong, positive relationships between students and teachers were linked to better social adjustment and academic performance. In an effort to encourage the growth of these relationships, one team introduced a program called "Two Years with the Same Teacher," which allowed students to spend an extra year developing their skills under the guidance of a teacher with whom they felt comfortable. Potluck suppers, book fairs, fashion shows, and other activities helped foster good relationships between parents and teachers and further reduce conflicts between home and school. This led to a decline in student behavior problems, which meant that teachers could spend less time disciplining and more time teaching.

A full professor of psychiatry at Yale since 1975, Comer was named Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry the next year; he also serves as director of the Child Study Center's Comer School Development Project and as associate dean of the Yale Medical School. The father of two grown children, Comer firmly believes that parents should take an active role in their children's social and educational development, organizing their work and social schedules around their children's school activities. This, he maintains, can help provide children from all socioeconomic backgrounds with the support and self-confidence they need to succeed.

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## **Mission & Vision for Comer School Development Program**

### **Mission**

The School Development Program is committed to the total development of children and adolescents by helping parents, educators, and policymakers create learning environments that support children's physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical development.

### **Vision**

Our vision is to help create a just and fair society in which all children have the support for development that will allow them to become positive and successful contributors in family, work, and civic life.

### **Description of School Development Program**

Developed by child psychiatrist Dr. James P. Comer and his colleagues at the Yale Child Study Center in collaboration with the New Haven Public Schools, the School Development Program (SDP) is a research-based, comprehensive K-12 education reform program grounded in the principles of child, adolescent, and adult development.

First introduced in two low-achieving schools in 1968, over the years the School Development Program has been implemented in hundreds of schools in more than 20 states, the District of Columbia, Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa, England, and Ireland.

The SDP provides the organizational, management, and communications framework for mobilizing teachers, administrators, parents, and other concerned adults to support students' personal, social, and academic development and achievement. The SDP also helps educators make better programmatic and curriculum decisions based on students' needs and on developmental principles.

While the School Development Program helps bring change to one school at a time, it has been used as a framework for system-wide reform, providing mechanisms by which school boards and district central administration can coordinate and support the reform work at each school.

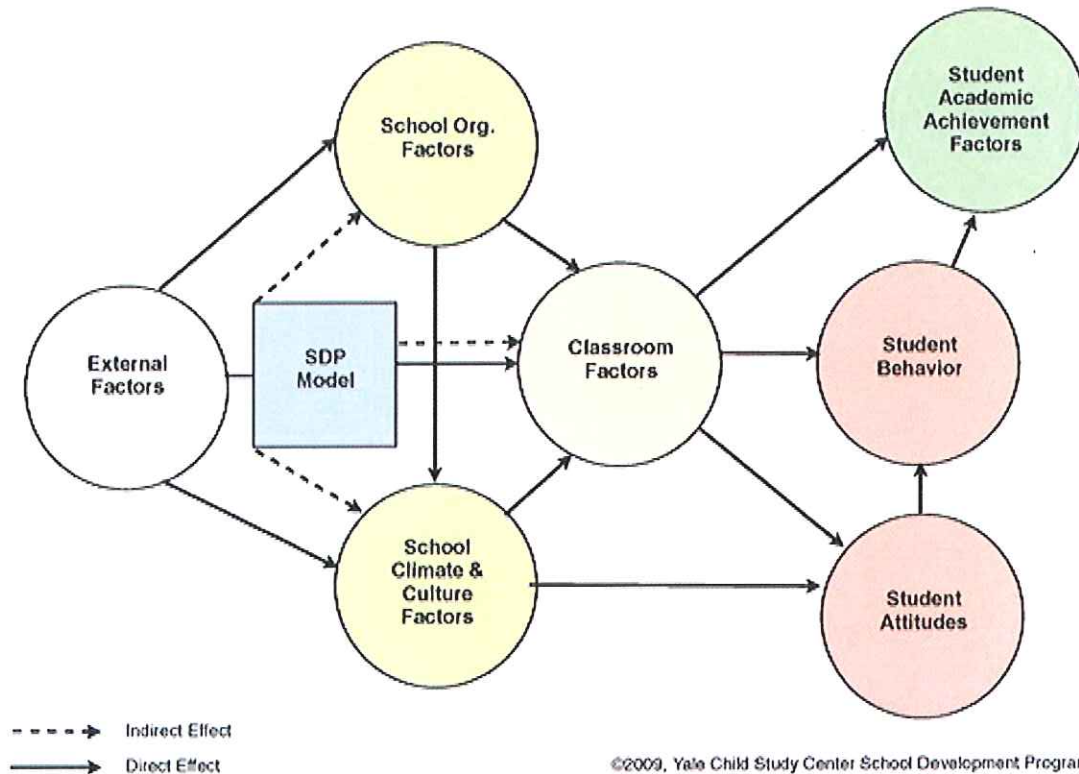
The Comer Process is not a project or add-on, but rather an operating system—a way of managing, organizing, coordinating, and integrating programs and activities. Three teams—the School Planning and Management Team (SPMT), the Student and Staff Support Team (SSST), and the Parent Team—work together to create a Comprehensive School Plan (CSP); to design and conduct staff development aligned with the goals of the Comprehensive School Plan; and to assess and modify the plan as necessary using a wide range of student and school-level data to ensure that the school is continuously improving. The teams are guided by three principles: decision making by consensus, no-fault problem solving, and collaboration.

The nine-element process fosters positive school and classroom climate and creates optimal conditions for teaching and learning, and emphasizes the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Over the past three decades, [research](#) conducted by the SDP and external researchers have consistently found that schools that implement the Comer Process at high levels tend to experience high levels of student achievement and development.

## SDP Theory of Change

The Yale School Development Program Theory of Change



The diagram depicts the theory of change that has guided our work. We hypothesize that the introduction of the SDP model:

- Directly influences the proximal outcomes of school organization and management;
- Influences school culture both directly and through its effect on organization and management; and
- Affects classroom practices both directly and through its effects on organization and school culture.

Classroom factors, in turn, affect the distal outcome of student achievement both directly and through their influence on other distal outcomes like student attitudes and behavior.

In short, in our theory, implementation of the School Development Program transforms the school into a learning environment that:

- Builds positive interpersonal relationships;
- Promotes teacher efficacy and competence;
- Fosters positive student attitudes;
- Increases students' pro-social behaviors; and
- Improves student academic achievement.



While the arrows in the figure show the principal direction of influence, we realize that in reality, relationships are reciprocal and that feedback loops exist between virtually every pair of points in the model.

### How It Works

Like the operating system of a computer that allows the software to do its specialized work, the Comer Process provides the organizational, management and communication framework for planning and managing all the activities of the school based on the developmental needs of its students. When fully implemented, the process brings a positive school and classroom climate, stability, and an instructional focus that supports all of the school's curriculum and renewal efforts.

Click [English](#) or [Spanish](#) for an illustration of the model.

Three structures comprise the basic framework on which the Comer Process is built:

- The **School Planning and Management Team** develops a Comprehensive School Plan, sets academic, social and community relations goals, and coordinates all school activities, including staff development programs. The team creates critical dialogue around teaching and learning and monitors progress to identify needed adjustments to the school plan as well as opportunities to support the plan. Members of the team include administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents.
- The **Student and Staff Support Team** promotes desirable social conditions and relationships. It connects all of the school's student services, facilitates the sharing of information and advice, addresses individual student needs, accesses resources outside the school, and develops prevention programs. Serving on this team are the principal and staff members with expertise in child development and mental health, such as counselors, social workers, psychologists, special education teachers, nurses, and others.
- The **Parent Team** involves parents and families in the school by developing activities through which they can support the school's social and academic programs. This team also selects representatives to serve on the School Planning and Management Team.

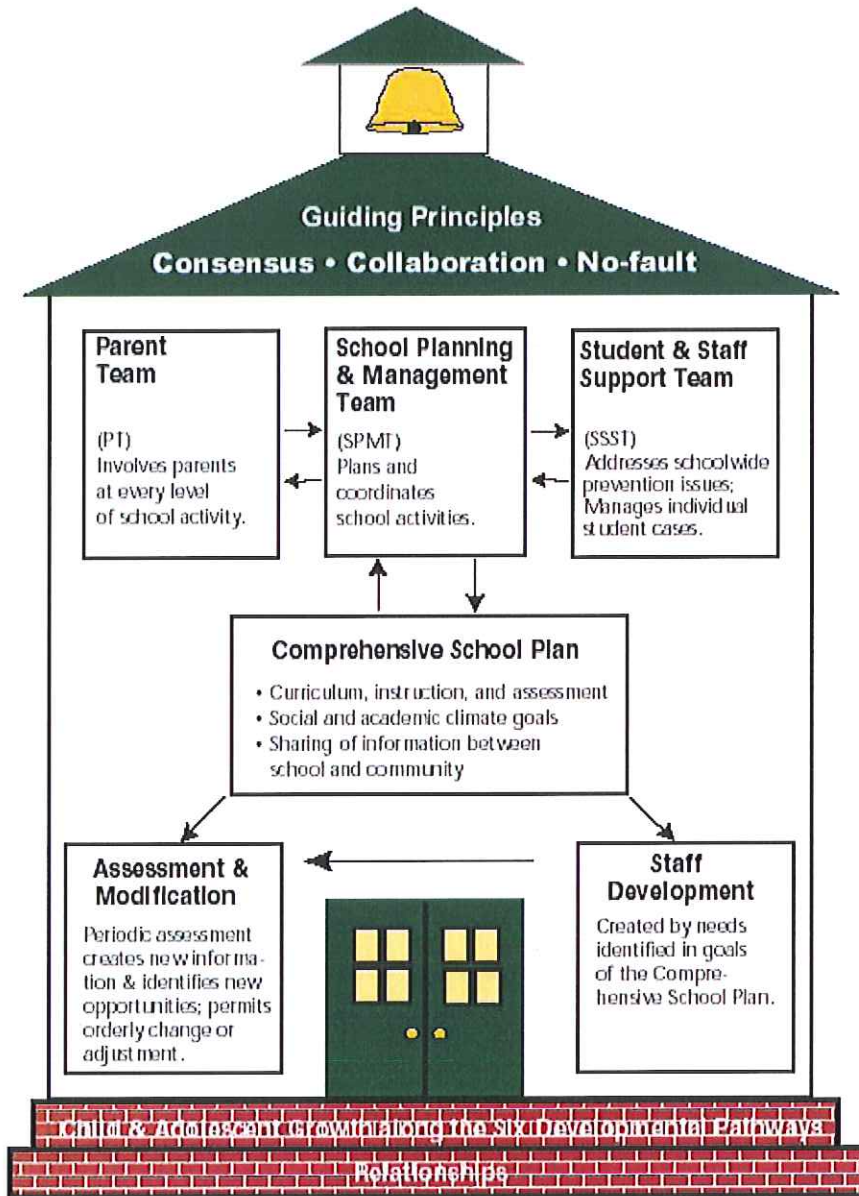
All three teams adhere to the following three guiding principles throughout their work:

- **No-Fault Problem Solving**—Maintains the focus on problem-solving rather than placing blame
- **Consensus Decision Making**—Through dialogue and understanding, builds consensus about what is good for children and adolescents
- **Collaboration**—Encourages the principal and teams to work together

This framework places the students' developmental needs at the center of the school's agenda and establishes shared responsibility. Concerned adults work together to provide students with the developmental activities that may be lacking outside the school. They also work together to make effective decisions about the program and curriculum of the school based on student needs. Central to their work are the following three school operations, which are supervised by the **School Planning and Management Team**:

- Development of the **Comprehensive School Plan** including curriculum, instruction and assessment, as well as social and academic climate goals based on a developmental understanding of students
- Provision of **Staff Development** in the service of achieving the goals of the **Comprehensive School Plan**
- **Assessment and Modification** that provides new information and identifies new opportunities based on the data of the school's population

## Model of the SDP Process



1998 © Copyright School Development Program (SDP), Yale Child Study Center

## Research & Evaluation

The School Development Program has a substantial history of evaluation and research, both by its own staff and by external evaluators. Comer schools have been assessed on a variety of factors at different levels, including school climate, level of program implementation, and students' self-concepts, behavior, social competence, and achievement.

These studies indicate significant effects on school climate, student attendance, and student achievement. Effects are generally first manifested in the improvement of school climate, indicated by improved relationships among the adults and students in the school; better collaboration among staff members; and greater focus on the student as the center of the education process.

Research has also shown that in schools that used the Comer Process consistently, there was a significantly greater reduction in absenteeism and suspension than in the district as a whole. Comparative studies of Comer and non-Comer schools also demonstrated that student self-competence, self-concept, and achievement was significantly more improved for Comer students than for non-Comer students. In addition, in cases where the program has been faithfully implemented, it contributed to the closing of the achievement gap.

In the report, [\*Comprehensive School Reform and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis\*](#), published in 2000 by the [Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk \(CRESPAR\)](#), the School Development Program was identified as one of three Comprehensive School Reform models "meeting the highest standard of evidence."

## Publications

### Books

- [\*What I Learned in School: Reflections on Race, Child Development and School Reform\*](#)  
**James P. Comer, MD**
- [\*Those Who Dared: Five Visionaries Who Changed American Education\*](#)  
**Edited by Carl Glickman**
- [\*Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World\*](#)  
**James P. Comer, MD**
- [\*The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action\*](#)  
**Edited by Edward T. Joyner, James P. Comer, and Michael Ben-Avie**
- [\*Child by Child: The Comer Process for Change in Education\*](#)  
**Edited by James P. Comer, Norris M. Haynes, Edward T. Joyner and Michael Ben-Avie**
- [\*Waiting for a Miracle: Why Schools Can't Solve our Problems—And How We Can\*](#)  
**James P. Comer, MD**
- [\*The Kids Got Smarter: Case studies of successful Comer Schools\*](#) (Understanding Education and Policy), **George W. Noblit, Carol E. Malloy, and William Malloy**
- [\*Rallying the Whole Village: The Comer Process for Reforming Education\*](#)  
**Edited by James P. Comer, Norris M. Haynes, Edward T. Joyner and Michael Ben-Avie**
- [\*School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project\*](#)  
**James P. Comer, MD**
- [\*Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family\*](#)  
**James P. Comer, MD**

### **Articles by Current and Former SDP Faculty**

The following are articles by researchers affiliated with the School Development Program.

- Comer, J.P. & Emmons, C. (2006). The research program of the Yale Child Study Center School Development Program. *Journal of Negro Education*, 75 (3), 353-372.
- Comer, J.P. and Haynes, N.M. (1996) School Consultation: A Psychosocial Perspective. In A.J. Solnit, D.J. Cohen, and J.E. Schowalter (Eds.). *Psychiatry*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.
- Comer, J.P. and Haynes, N.M. (1996) Improving Psychoeducational Outcomes for African-American Children. In Melvin Lewis (Ed.). *Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. Baltimore, Maryland: Williams & Wilkins.
- Comer, J. P. (1992-93). Educational accountability: A shared responsibility between parents and schools. *Stanford Law & Policy Review*, 113-122.
- Comer, J. P. (1993). All children can learn: A developmental approach. *Holistic Education Review*, 6 (1), 4-9.
- Comer, J. P. (1992). Opening the door to learning. Agenda: America's Schools for the 21st Century, *Scholastic, Inc.*, 26-28.
- Comer, J. P. (1992). Child development: An organizing theme for school improvement. *Social Policy*, 28-30.
- Comer, J. P. (1991). Parent participation: Fad or function?. *Educational Horizons*, 69 (4).
- Comer, J. P. & Haynes, N. M. (1991). Parent involvement in schools: An ecological approach. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91 (3), 271-277.
- Comer, J. P. (1990). Recreating our school communities for youth: the Comer School Development Program. Partnership: *A Journal for Leaders in Education*, 15(1).
- Emmons, Christine L., Haynes, Norris M., Owen, Steven V., Bility, Khalipha, and Comer, James P. (1995). Self-Concept as a Mediator of School Climate Effects. In *School Development Program Research Monograph*, edited by Norris M. Haynes.

### **YouTube Testimonies on Comer School Development Program**

#### **Betty Pope on the Comer School Development Program**

Betty Pope, a 42-year veteran teacher at Charles England Intermediate School, was named "Teacher of the Year" in the Lexington City Schools in North Carolina. This video is an excerpt from a 2008 interview about the Comer School Development Program with Cynthia Savo.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0hDdsTrySw&feature=related>

#### **Jackie Miller on the Comer Process**

Jackie Miller, principal of South Lexington School in Lexington, North Carolina, talks about the Comer Process and its impact on school climate, student achievement, staff collaboration, and more.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPRAJltFj8M&feature=related>

#### **James P. Comer, M.D. on Student-Centered High Schools**

Dr. Comer talks about his recent visit to a high school in Virginia.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiwBy0CPr5Q&feature=related>

#### **Dr. James P. Comer talks about his latest book, What I Learned in School**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hW3dPqYigzc>

*In Chicago, the Comer School Development Program has boosted reading and math test scores, using parent involvement as a core tenet.*

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan  
Mom Congress, Georgetown University  
May 3, 2010

**Joyce Herron-Taylor, Esq.**

In 2001 [Joyce Herron-Taylor](#) received the [Patrick Francis Daly Memorial Award](#) for her outstanding leadership of Anthony Wayne Elementary School in Detroit, Michigan. She currently serves as the Quality Schools Coordinator for the [Michigan Association of Public School Academies \(MAPSA\)](#). She directed Detroit Public Schools' Highly Qualified Teacher Assessment and Verification Center and was a Leadership Development Specialist for the district's Center for School Leaders. Joyce has also held Principal Leadership Coaching positions with the Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency.



**Reflections on the Comer Process**

When I became principal at Anthony Wayne Elementary School in Detroit, I suspected we were a staff of very nice people accustomed to a mentality of "teachers will be able to improve student achievement if teachers' needs are met." Something was missing in our lives, yet it was as if we were looking for an answer, but we did not know the question! With 850 students, no assistant principal, social worker, counselor, or critical support staff, I searched the educational literature to find models for change that would keep our building healthy, efficient, and successful. Once I admitted to the staff that I was absolutely overwhelmed and needed their support, we embraced several initiatives that ultimately clarified for us what we needed to do; we needed to be child-centered, instead of teacher-centered.

Through our research of continuous improvement models, we eventually encountered the Comer Process ([School Development Program](#)). Everything we were attempting to piece together was finally presented in one, logical, and magical package. The nine elements made so much sense to us that when the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) offered to provide funding for a few schools to adopt the Comer Process, we easily convinced the grant reviewers that we were ready for implementation.

This model changed my life as an administrator and it continues to influence my style as a change agent for children. If what we are doing isn't positively supporting and impacting the best interests of children and families, it does not deserve significant attention. I shared this advice often with legislators, educators, and organizations whose decisions touch children's lives.

**JAMES P. COMER, M.D.**

**DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH**

**September 25, 1934, East Chicago, Indiana**

**FAMILY**

Wife – Bettye Fletcher Comer - Married, July 11, 2004  
Shirley Arnold Comer (Deceased, April 9, 1994)  
Children – Brian Jay Comer – July 22, 1960  
Dawn Comer Jefferson – March 12, 1964

**CURRENT POSITIONS**

Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry, Yale Child Study Center  
Founder, School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center  
Chairman, School Development Program National Advisory Group,  
Yale Child Study Center  
Associate Dean, Yale School of Medicine

**EDUCATION**

<b>A.B.</b>	<b>Indiana University</b>	<b>1956</b>
<b>M.D.</b>	Howard University College of Medicine	1960
<b>M.P.H.</b>	University of Michigan School of Public Health	1964

**Psychiatry Training:**

<b>Yale School of Medicine</b>	<b>1964-67</b>
Yale Child Study Center	1966-67
Hillcrest Children's Center, Washington, D.C.	1967-68

**MAJOR WRITINGS**

**Articles**

Published in Scientific American, American Journal of Psychiatry, The Journal of Negro Education, Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, Ebony, New York Times, Boston Sunday Globe, American Prospect and more than 100 other journals.

**Columns**

Parents Magazine – over 150 articles published since 1978.

United Features Syndicate, Inc., 1978-84 – more than 300 articles published.

## LECTURES

**At colleges, universities, medical schools, scientific associations, public schools and numerous other organizations across the country.**

Lectured, observed and/or discussed child care, school and/or social welfare programs and conditions in London, England; Nairobi, Kenya; Jerusalem, Israel; Stockholm, Sweden; Paris, France; Dakar, Senegal; Tokyo, Japan; Peking, Tachai, Nanking, Shanghai, Hangchow, Kweilin and Canton in the People's Republic of China; Siena, Italy; Bellagio, Italy; Marbach Castle, Germany; Copenhagen, Denmark; Amsterdam, Holland; and Sydney, Australia.

## RECENT BOARDS

Teachers College, Columbia University, Board of Trustees	1994 --
Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Board of Directors	2002 --

Numerous others

## HONORS

**John and Mary Markle Foundation Scholar in Academic Medicine, 1969-1974**

Rockefeller Public Service Award, 1980

Newsweek Feature, "25 Americans on the Cutting Edge," October 2, 1989

Special Presidential Commendation, American Psychiatric Association, 1990

Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Prize in Education, 1990

James Bryant Conant Award, Education Commission of the States, 1991

Council of Chief State School Officers Distinguished Service Award, 1991

Charles A. Dana Award for Pioneering Achievement in Education, 1991

Member, Institute of Medicine, The National Academies, 1993

Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1994

Presidential Citation, American Educational Research Association, 1995

Healthtrac Foundation Prize, 1996

Heinz Family Award, FOR WHAT? 1996

Education Week Feature, "100 Faces of a Century," December 15, 1999

John P. McGovern Behavioral Science Award, Smithsonian Institute, 2004

University of Louisville, Grawemeyer Award in Education, 2007

Forty-seven Honorary Degrees; most recent,

Harvard University, LLD, 2008

Lesley University, LHD, 2008

Sacred Heart University, LHD, 2008

Numerous other awards

College of Education and Human Development  
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

June 12, 2010

Brock International Prize in Education  
University of Oklahoma  
1610 Asp Avenue  
Norman, OK 73072

Dear Fellow Brock International Prize Jury,

The purpose of this letter is nominate Dr. James Comer of Yale University for the 2011 Brock International Prize for Education. This nomination packet contains background information about Dr. Comer including a description of the School Development Program, examples of his publications, online and written testimonies, sample publications and six letters of support including one from the 2010 Brock Prize recipient, Geoffrey Canada.

To frame this nomination letter, I am using the threefold criterion listed for jurors to guide them in their deliberations. Before articulating how Dr. Comer exceeds each of these criteria, I'd like to start my nomination by sharing how I came to nominate Dr. Comer. When asked to serve as a juror, I immediately put together an informal committee of ten valued colleagues from across the country, gave them the threefold criterion listed and asked them to provide me with three possible names. Out of the ten colleagues, Dr. James Comer's name came up in nine of them. As I probed further into why they felt Dr. Comer deserved, here is what I learned. Dr. Comer is one of the country's leading child psychiatrists and is best known for his pioneering work to improve the academic performance of children from low-income and minority backgrounds. What separates Dr. Comer's work is his focus on the wholistic development of children. Unlike contemporary educational leaders who are fixated on raising student test scores, Dr. Comer understands that test scores are a by-product to developing healthy children. His work understands that there is more to children than a test score. In fact, the School Development Program developed by Dr. Comer is about creating processes that enhance the emotional, social, and intellectual development of children. To elaborate on why Dr. Comer deserves to be the 2011 Brock Prize recipient, I turn my focus to the threefold criterion below.

1. The essential criterion for awarding this prize is that the person will have made -- or is in the process of making -- a specific contribution that will have a significant impact on the practice or understanding of education.

As noted by all the letters of support, Dr. Comer's specific contribution is the creation of the School Development Program (SDP). Often referred to as Comer program, this reform movement involves a comprehensive array of processes involving parents and communities in supporting schools to harness resources to assist struggling students. As Dan Duke noted, "Comer understood that the etiology of low student achievement involved far more than inadequate instruction. He drew from his training in child development to create a program that addressed the developmental needs of young people." Similarly, Wade Boykin noted, "Dr. Comer was far ahead of the curve in implementing practices that promote genuine working partnerships between schools, families, and communities." The result of Comer's work was a comprehensive model of school improvement that has been empirically evaluated and stood the test of time. Implemented in thousands of schools across the U.S. and internationally, Dr. Comer has



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helped elevate the future aspirations for thousands of children who previously lacked advocacy and power.

2. That contribution should have the potential to provide long-term benefit to all humanity through change and improvement in education.

Given the changing demographics across America, it is imperative for the future success of our democracy that proven methods like the Comer program be widely touted and supported to improve the quality of life to all the underprivileged children who lack a voice in today's policy debates. The Comer Program as illustrated in one of Dr. Comer's book entitled, *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*, tells the story of his mother who grew up in rural Mississippi to ensure that all five of her children were given the opportunity to receive a college education. It is through this story that Dr. Comer's sense of social justice for the underprivileged led him to develop an innovative program that not only contributes to a reframing of educational resources and uses developmentally appropriate practices, but also uses the assets of the community to support the learning of children. What Dr. Comer recognized that many of his contemporaries failed to grasp is if you don't "feed" the child, they won't be able to reach their potential.

3. It is hoped that the idea or concept will have been proven successful by actual practice or at least accepted as valid within the education community.

As noted by Geoffrey Borman in his 2003 meta-analysis, "The Comer School Development Program was one of only three educational reform programs ever fielded that had established a highly convincing track record of success....This type of success at scale is extremely rare in the field of education and clearly sets the Comer Model apart from the many other efforts that have been advanced to reform schools."

In recent years, the fascination surrounding the term, "turnaround" schools has attracted a lot of attention, mainly from a business perspective. In reality, Comer schools pre-dated the turnaround phenomenon existing today. As Wade Boykin wrote, Comer "...convincingly demonstrated that the social backgrounds of children do not necessarily lead to an academic death sentence for them, if schooling cultures and practices are substantially altered." The Comer approach of nurturing the whole child by incorporating child and adolescent principles in teaching and learning activities is a pioneering method that is just starting to gain wide acceptance by the education profession.

In closing, while there are other worthy candidates for the 2011 Brock Prize, I believe Dr. Comer's School Development Program is a contribution without peer, because it addresses a persisting educational issue – how to improve the quality of life for children with the least amount of resources.

Respectfully submitted,

Alan R. Shoho  
Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

## COMMENTARY

### An Open Letter to the Next President

By James P. Comer

*One year from this coming week, the inauguration of the 44th president of the United States will take place in Washington. The following essay anticipates that event, and offers a perspective that may resonate in the unfolding presidential campaign.*

[← Back to Story](#)

Dear Madam or Mr. President:

Over the coming year, you will be laying out your positions on major issues relevant to the nation's needs and our collective future. I am writing to argue that none of these is more important than the education of our young. And no area is more in need of reconceptualization—a problem-solving reformulation—than education.

DON'T JUST MANAGE THE PERFORMANCE OF YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT - IMPROVE IT.

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—Patti Raine

It is the most important issue because family, workforce, and economic well-being, national defense, domestic tranquility, and the maintenance and improvement of our democracy are all interrelated and all tied to the quality of our system(s) of education. It must be reconceptualized because traditional education is based on a wrong notion: a belief that academic-learning capacities are almost exclusively an outcome of genetically determined intelligence. And despite significant evidence to the contrary, there is still a pervasive assumption that such intelligence is largely responsible for school subject-matter mastery and eventual life success. These conceptual foundation blocks have contributed heavily to a school focus on curriculum, teaching, and assessment, and to related educator preparation, practice, and policy approaches and processes that, though inadequate, are complex and deeply entrenched, hence difficult to change.

Evidence from modern social, psychological, educational, and biological science indicates that the expression of individual intelligence is a product of the quality of interactions, from birth to maturity, between an individual and his or her environment. Early attachment and bonding, together with these multiple environmental interactions, enable caretakers to promote, or to limit, brain development and functioning, as well as to shape social-interactive, psycho-emotional, moral-ethical, linguistic, and cognitive-intellectual competencies. Because these developmental competencies are inextricably linked to academic achievement, young people who receive reasonably supportive interactions in reasonably good environments have the best chance of being successful in school and in life.

But many children do not have these favorable developmental circumstances. As a result, many are

underprepared for school. Until 30 years ago, this was not a significant problem because most could work in the agricultural and industrial economies of the day with little education and meet all of their adult tasks and responsibilities. Today, however, the underdeveloped child must remain in school and attempt to acquire a college education or the equivalent.

School people, thinking and acting from traditional beliefs and structures, are rarely prepared to create a school culture and a system of relationship experiences that can overcome the ill effects of underdevelopment and give such students a good chance for school and life success. Students from the families, family networks, and schools that are most marginalized from the economic and social mainstream are denied, in disproportionate numbers, the opportunity to be successful.

The limited early success of such students and their teachers, and reactions to it, are the root causes of low-performing schools and the attendant demoralization, community dissatisfaction, and teacher turnover. This situation also fuels the emergence and disappearance of one quick fix after another. Without successful developmental experiences, students who could have been successful eventually contribute heavily to our school dropout rates and a list of health, behavior, safety, and other social and economic problems.

There is abundant direct and indirect evidence that students from all backgrounds can thrive in environments designed to promote their development. Given the compelling case for the developmental impact of constructive interactions between young people and the adults around them, and the fact that many school people are not adequately prepared to provide these interactions, the obvious place to begin a program aimed at effecting school improvement is in the preparation and support of future and practicing educators.

Forty years ago, the **Yale Child Study Center** began to apply the principles of child and adolescent development to all aspects of students' lives in two inner-city elementary schools in New Haven, Conn. These were schools known to have the lowest levels of achievement and the most difficult behavior challenges in the city. We helped their staff members identify nine program elements that generated most of the problems, and then developed nine activities and guidelines designed to help them create a positive school culture. That positive culture, in turn, made possible interactions among students, staff members, and parents that promoted greater levels of development, new modes of behavior, and increased learning.

Eventually, impressive academic and behavior gains were made, and we at the center began disseminating the model, which we called the **School Development Program**, to a growing list of schools that now totals more than 1,000. The patterns of success and failure in these schools, and the challenges of sustainability and scale, point to structural problems of schooling more than people problems. Yet we tend to blame the people.

In general, we found that schools and systems achieved success in line with their buy-in to the program and their application of child and adolescent development principles to all aspects of schooling. It is our impression that many practitioners cannot "buy in" because they are being asked to do in practice something no one prepared them to do in preservice or in-service activities. The most common complaint we hear from teachers and administrators in our training academies is that they should have been

**Students who are most marginalized from the economic and social mainstream are denied, in disproportionate numbers, the opportunity to be successful.**

**The obvious place to begin a program aimed at effecting school improvement is in the preparation and support of**

provided in their preparation programs the knowledge and skills needed to create school cultures that promote student development. This would have made promoting development a part of their professional identity, a part of what it means to be an educator.

Preparatory programs must empower preservice and practicing educators to see themselves in this role and to perform this important function for their students. No other intervention in education can be as effective for this workforce, and no area requires more attention to appropriate preparation. Yet many knowledgeable people are convinced that preparatory institutions cannot and will not change to accommodate this new emphasis. They can, and they must.

This is where your leadership over the next four to eight years, Madam or Mr. President, could help our education system become the best in the world. Recognizing that education is primarily a state responsibility, you should work first with the governors, their chief state school officers, departments of education, and other policy and practice leaders to do the following:

1. Reconceptualize the task of the school in our society and the methods that we should use in fulfilling it, based on the best current knowledge about how young people develop and learn.
2. Develop funding arrangements that reward preparatory institutions that enable their graduates to apply principles of child and adolescent development to teaching and learning in the classroom.
3. Create teams of proven experts who can provide support for the changes needed to preparatory programs and school systems.
4. Enable higher education institutions and school districts to work together more successfully, rather than maintaining their own "silos" of experience and influence.
5. Begin this effort with a program that is open to all, but weighted toward communities that demonstrate a commitment to helping students develop in a way that promotes not only their academic achievement, but also their preparation for meeting adult tasks and responsibilities. Do *not* create a massive federal and/or state(s) program. And don't promise a quick fix.

There is precedent for using a systemic-change approach based on good theory and scientific evidence. At the turn of the 20th century, Congress created the agricultural Cooperative Extension System to put science-based help on the ground for farmers, and to overcome the resistance to new methods fueled by tradition and policy. America eventually became the breadbasket of the world.

American education, too, can be an example for the world—a model for preparing all young people to participate in the economic life of the country, become successful family and community members, and help protect and promote peace and democracy.

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*James P. Comer is the Maurice Falk professor of child psychiatry at Yale University, in New Haven, Conn., and the founder of the Yale Child Study Center School Development Program.*

Vol. 27, Issue 19, Pages 25,32

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**teachme** wrote:

Amen! Teachers across America can only hope our future President will listen to this advice.

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# Child and Adolescent Development: The Critical Missing Focus in School Reform

The key to improving student achievement, Dr. Comer asserts, is to pay attention to child and adolescent development. If this factor is overlooked, new approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment will have little chance of succeeding. But even troubled districts that have made development a priority have seen remarkable success.

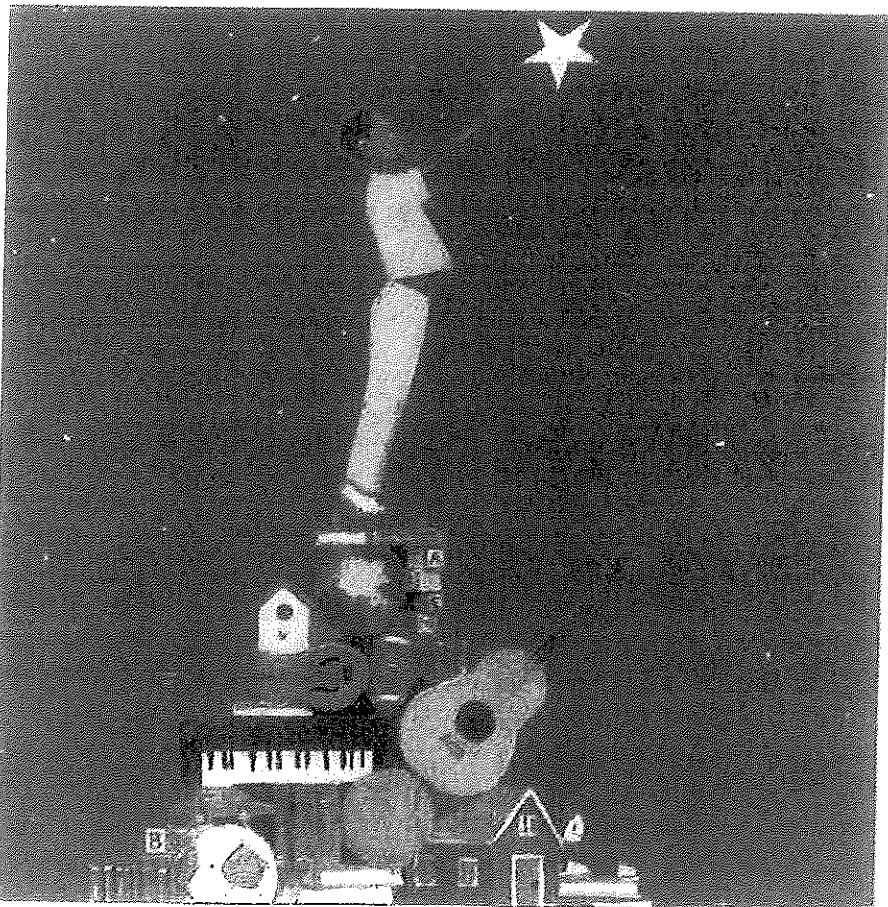
BY DR. JAMES P. COMER

field-testing and dissemination to individual schools and clusters within districts to districtwide work in about 1,000 schools across the country. At

**I**BEGAN my work in schools over 35 years ago, and it was clear to me then that the underlying problem in the low-income, African American schools we were serving was that the students were underdeveloped in the areas that could bring school success, and the staff members — through no fault of their own — were not prepared to help advance the students' development. Gradually, we created a framework that allowed the schools and the adults in them to generate a school culture that supported the development of the students. And because development and academic learning are inextricably linked, student achievement improved and behavior problems decreased greatly.<sup>1</sup>

From just two pilot schools, our Yale Child Study Center School Development Program moved through

<sup>1</sup>ES P. COMER, M.D., is Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry, Yale Child Study Center, and associate dean of the School of Medicine, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.



h step of the way, it became clearer that both academic and behavioral success were more likely in places where teachers and administrators bought into the value of basing their work on the principles of child and adolescent development.

An incident from the early days of our work first drew to my attention the fact that schools were not focusing on the development of the child. Over a weekend, a relative plucked an 8-year-old student out of his school and supportive home environment in a distant state and — without orientation or support — deposited him in a classroom in one of our pilot schools. Not surprisingly, the youngster panicked, kicked the teacher in the leg, and ran out of the room. Afterward, while our mental health team was working with the school staff to think about how to create a more child-friendly transfer procedure that took account of each child's developmental needs, I remarked, "That was an interesting

reaction; not just fight or flight, but fight and flight!" The school staff looked puzzled.

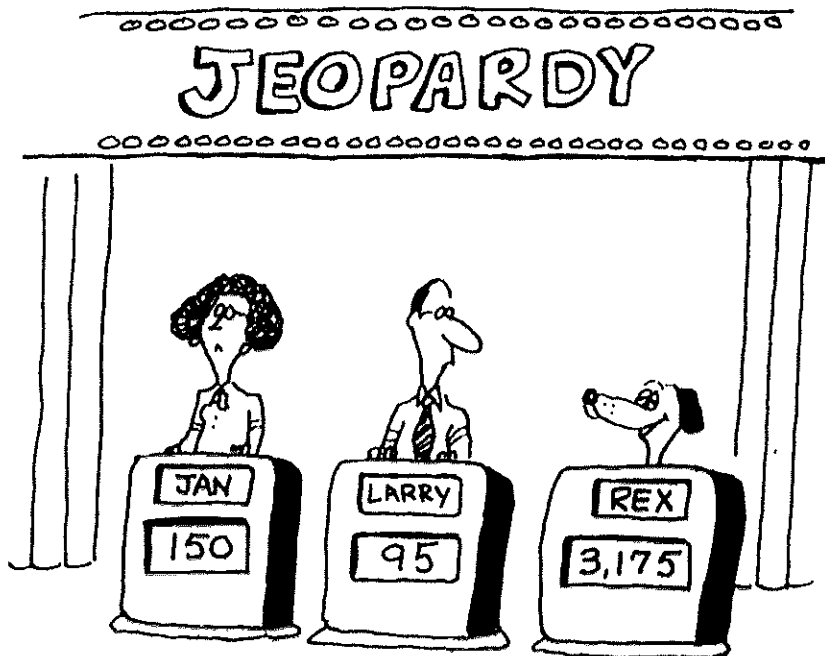
The fight-or-flight reaction is triggered by the brain's response to threat. When an individual faces prolonged and intense threat, thinking can be severely impaired.<sup>2</sup> These connections are basic knowledge among bio-behavioral scientists. And yet teachers and administrators, who routinely face these and many other brain-regulated behaviors that influence student development and learning, receive little in the way of preparation that would enable them to acquire and use such knowledge. The focus on child development that is largely missing from the preparation of educators probably contributes more to creating dysfunctional and underperforming schools than anything else.

Many improved practices in education that have been developed over the past two decades have been less successful than they might have been

because they have focused primarily on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and modes of service delivery. Insufficient attention has been paid to child and adolescent development. When these matters are addressed at all, the focus is often on the student — on a problem behavior — and not on how to create a school culture that promotes good growth along the six critical developmental pathways: physical (including brain development), social/interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive/intellectual.<sup>3</sup>

Children grow along these developmental pathways, and they learn, in large part, through interacting with caretakers in reasonably good environments. In the process, they form emotional attachments, and they identify with, imitate, and internalize the attitudes, values, and ways of the adults and institutions around them. Through these relationships, students' own unfocused and potentially harmful energies and biological potentials are channeled into the development of constructive attitudes and capacities that can prepare them for academic learning. We often forget that, for many children, academic learning is not a primary, natural, or valued task. It is the positive relationships and sense of belonging that a good school culture provides that give these children the comfort, confidence, competence, and motivation to learn.<sup>4</sup>

Many school leaders do not appreciate the fact that producing a good school culture, fostering healthy child and adolescent development, and promoting sound academic learning are interactive and mutually facilitating processes. Indeed, a good school culture is not a given; it must be created. And it's a job for everyone who cares about schools and children. A student in a graduate program at the University of Wisconsin asked permission



Dale Carpenter...

"Well, Alex, you don't eat homework for five years without learning something."

to be excused from his required child development course because he was a principal and would not need it. But the central responsibility of a principal is to help create a school culture that facilitates good development and academic learning.

In 1968 the two schools in our Yale Child Study Center pilot project were so dysfunctional that it was impossible to carry out an effective instructional program. School operations were being carried out in piecemeal, fragmented ways that ignored child development and contributed heavily to the anger, conflict, apathy, and hopelessness that characterized these sites. While we faced the usual resistance to change, most of the

staff members in these schools wanted to succeed. But because learning about student development had not been a part of their professional preparation, they did not have the skills they needed to create a healthy school culture. And because they didn't understand the factors that contributed to the dysfunction, most of the actions they took only made matters worse.

Our five-person team from the School Development Program (SDP), working collaboratively with staff members and parents, gradually identified three conditions that were at the root of the problems: 1) an authoritarian, top-down approach to organization and management; 2) the underdevelopment of students, staff members, and parents; and 3) a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment that did not take developmental issues into account. To create well-function-

ing schools, comprehensive planning that focused squarely on child development and good program coordination were needed.

To begin the improvement process, we formed a governance and management team that was representative of all the adult stakeholders. This team focused the schools on creating a culture that supported development and learning among students. Pursuing this goal gradually led our team to devise a nine-element framework for change. The nine elements were three mechanisms (changed governance and management, a parent team, and a professional support team); three operations (a comprehensive school plan that included social and academic components, staff development, and assessment and modification); and three guidelines (no-fault problem solving, consensus decision making, and collaboration).<sup>5</sup>

development in all aspects of practice, and eventually led to schoolwide success.<sup>6</sup>

Once the SDP framework had been learned and internalized by the school stakeholders, it served as a platform for a continuous process of school improvement. As a result, the two pilot schools gradually moved from the two lowest positions in achievement in New Haven to a position near the top, with the best attendance and no serious behavior problems.<sup>7</sup> The stakeholders were energized and motivated because they could influence change. A major reason that young teachers leave the profession — and a major source of discontent among all teachers — is the sense that they can't influence change.<sup>8</sup>

To our surprise, despite the improved achievement and behavior in the pilot schools, there was very little interest in replicating the model in other parts of or outside the city.

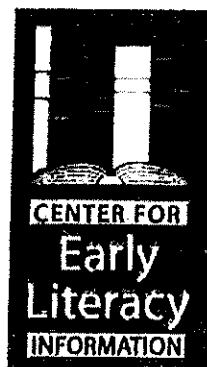
In our pilot schools, organization and management, curriculum, instruction and assessment, and parent and staff development were all based on what helped the students develop and learn. The insistent focus on understanding and supporting good student growth reduced blaming and fault-finding and led to improved interactions among the adults. An improving school climate enabled staff members to better focus their attention on assessing social and academic data and to make program changes that led to improved student development and learning. Small successes from working in this way gradually overcame resistance, promoted broader use of the principles of child and adolescent devel-

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ually we were able to field-test the model in 12 schools in different regions of the country and found the same pattern of resistance — until successful use of the SDP process gradually reduced it. In a midwestern district, one school using the model went from 23rd to first in achievement and was accused of cheating, amid much media attention. On a repeat of the test, this time administered by the central office, the students achieved slightly higher scores.<sup>9</sup> This fact was barely noted by the media. Subsequently, the superintendent removed the principal and made staff changes without training the new people to use the model. The school plummeted back to its low-performing position.

Over the years state education people have rarely inquired about how significant academic and social gains were being made in places that had not had such outcomes before they had used SDP. And we gradually came to realize that there is strong resistance to accepting child and adolescent development as a central focus in school reform. Moreover, this resistance is strong throughout every level of the education enterprise — in schools, districts, schools of education, and state departments. Even documented evidence usually does not spark significant interest in the full application of principles of child and adolescent development in school programs.<sup>10</sup> Our response has been to continue to “grow the evidence” until the outcomes cannot be ignored.

External evaluation studies and our own evaluations have demonstrated that better implementation of the SDP model is associated with better outcomes.<sup>11</sup> We also found that schools that “bought in” to the SDP theory of change most thoroughly tended to implement it best. Thus we began to work for broad and deep buy-in. We focused on working with clusters

of schools with some district-level support. Finally, we sought entire district-wide buy-in, which means that district-level leaders, school board members, and other policy makers approve and support the SDP approach. A management team is created at the district level that facilitates the work of the building-level management teams. In this way, accountability, change, and continuous improvement become both bottom-up and top-down, internal and external to individual schools.

### DISTRICTWIDE IMPLEMENTATIONS

Over the past five years we have conducted districtwide work in four communities: Community School District 17 in New York City; Westbury, New York; Hertford County, North Carolina; and Asheville, North Carolina. The districtwide work began with discussions about child and adolescent development and learning with school board members, superintendents, and other district-level and community leaders. With better understanding and deep and broad buy-in — from the policy makers to classroom teachers — all of the districts made outstanding academic and social gains.

I will discuss the Asheville case here because we were able to document the deepening of the buy-in process most fully in this district, and the district also had data on the racial achievement gap.<sup>12</sup> We decided to begin with a pilot school that served students of the lowest socioeconomic level, Hall Fletcher Elementary School. We started working with this school in 1999-2000. We included all the schools in the district beginning in 2000-2001. An assistant superintendent was selected as the local facilitator, and our Yale-based SDP coordinator served as a consultant to her. A candidate who embraced the focus on develop-

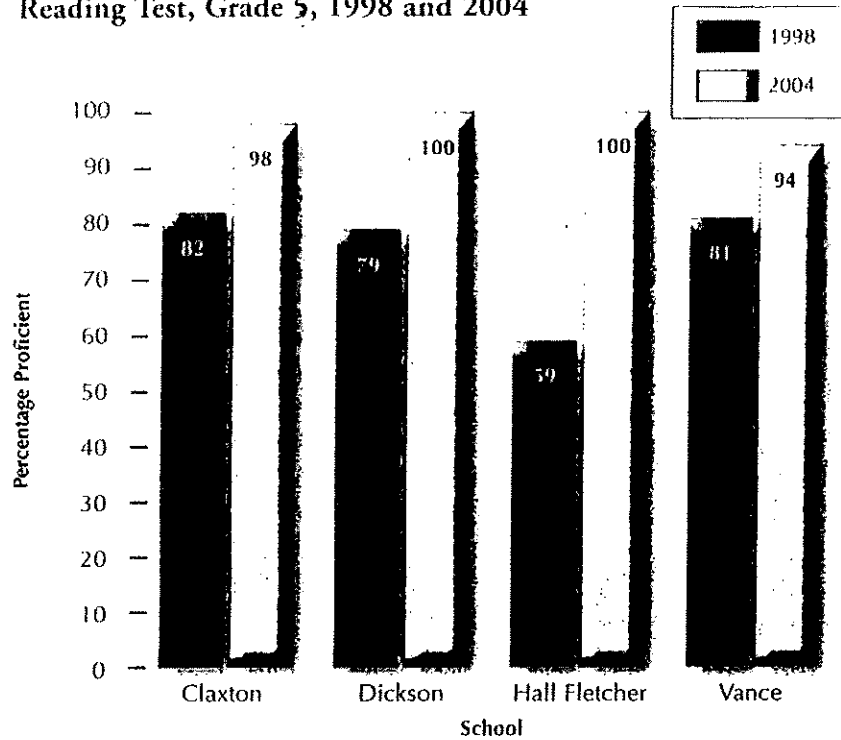
ment was selected to be principal at Hall Fletcher. Before and after the first year of implementation, a team that was representative of adult school and community stakeholders attended one-week academies. These training exercises were designed to provide knowledge and skills about the SDP concept.

In 1999, as we started our work, 42% of Hall Fletcher students were at or above grade level in both reading and math on the North Carolina State Test. Outcomes improved significantly in each subsequent year. At the end of the fourth year, with the schoolwide figure at 78.6% proficiency, the principal was moved to another school. She reassured her staff that improvement would continue because they had internalized the process. At the end of the fifth year, the Hall Fletcher students were 98% proficient. There was no major change in staff, parents, students, or curriculum. At that time, the school served nine federal housing projects, and the student population was 85% low-income and 70% African American.

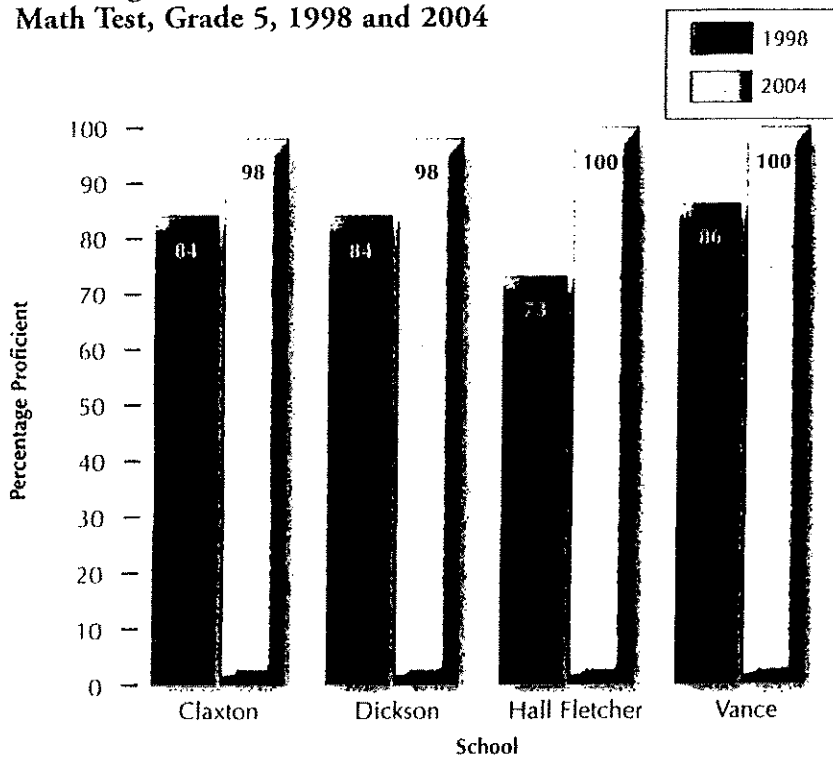
The other elementary schools we worked with in Asheville also showed significant improvement by the end of the 2003-04 school year. Figure 1 compares each school's 1998 and 2004 fifth-grade proficiency levels in reading, and Figure 2 presents the same comparisons for math.

The implementation of our program also had a significant impact on the district's achievement gap. Figures 3 and 4 (page 762) chart the fifth-grade proficiency levels in reading and math for blacks and whites from 1999 to 2004. Note the rapid closing of the achievement gap between blacks and whites from 2001 to 2004. Although the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch increased over the years, academic achievement continued to rise.

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Reading Test, Grade 5, 1998 and 2004**



**FIGURE 2.**  
**Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Math Test, Grade 5, 1998 and 2004**

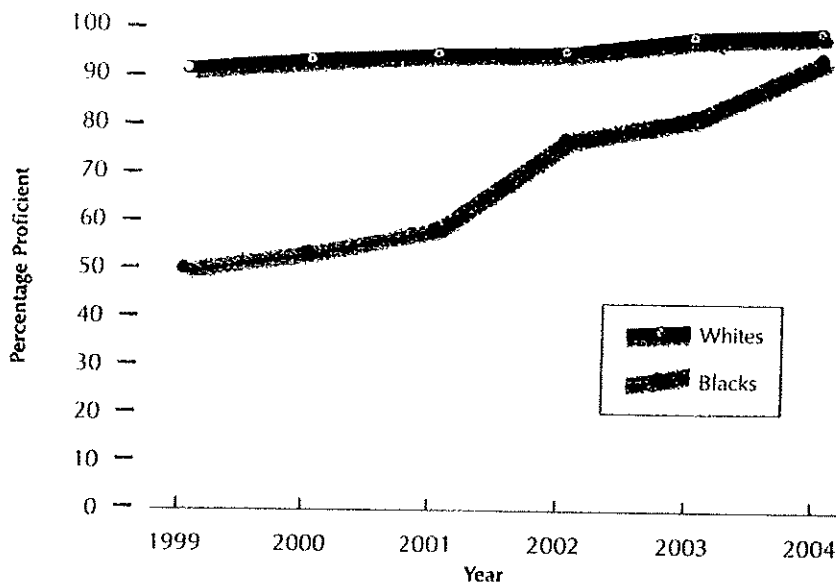


In the third year for Hall Fletcher and in the second year for the other Asheville schools, the Comer in the Classroom approach was introduced.<sup>11</sup> In this model, the nine elements of the SDP framework, slightly modified, are used in a very intentional way in individual classrooms to help the students grow along the six developmental pathways mentioned earlier: physical, social/interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive/intellectual. The classroom model helps the staff pull together and coordinate the setting of developmental and academic objectives, the implementation of strategies to achieve them, and the administration of assessments to track progress. Teachers and parents use their creativity to turn curriculum content and activities into meaningful and memorable experiences for the students.

The activities in these classrooms are typical of those seen in many exciting classrooms: mock television talk shows and court trials, collaborative collage-making, and so on. The difference is that the content that fosters growth along the developmental pathways is intentionally selected and embedded in the academic content and activities. Students and staff members reflect on various social, emotional, and ethical issues and behaviors as they are expressed in the academic content. In addition, in this culture of thoughtful reflection, when problem behaviors flare up, teachers can ask students to reflect on the developmental pathways and come up with more appropriate and effective ways that they might manage a situation. Reflection promotes better thinking, better management of feelings, and more desirable social behavior.

Some students keep journals on their achievements and what they believe they need to work on. This practice breaks the cycle of teacher con-

**FIGURE 3.**  
**Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Reading Test, Grade 5, 1999-2004, by Race**



and punishment. Thus student resentment and reactive behavior that interferes with academic learning can be minimized. In short, the staff helps the students learn self-regulation and take responsibility for their own growth. As a result of a focus on overall development, the basis of recognition for school performance is growth along *all the pathways* — not just academic achievement as measured by test scores. Because they are included in the process, the children can use what they are most interested in — their own growth — to foster academic learning.

Some have suggested that if *Corner in the Classroom* had been used from the beginning, the gains could have been achieved more quickly. Based on our experience, we believe that the framework that improves the school culture must be in place first, or the relationships needed to engage students in a powerful way won't be created. After the first year, some argued

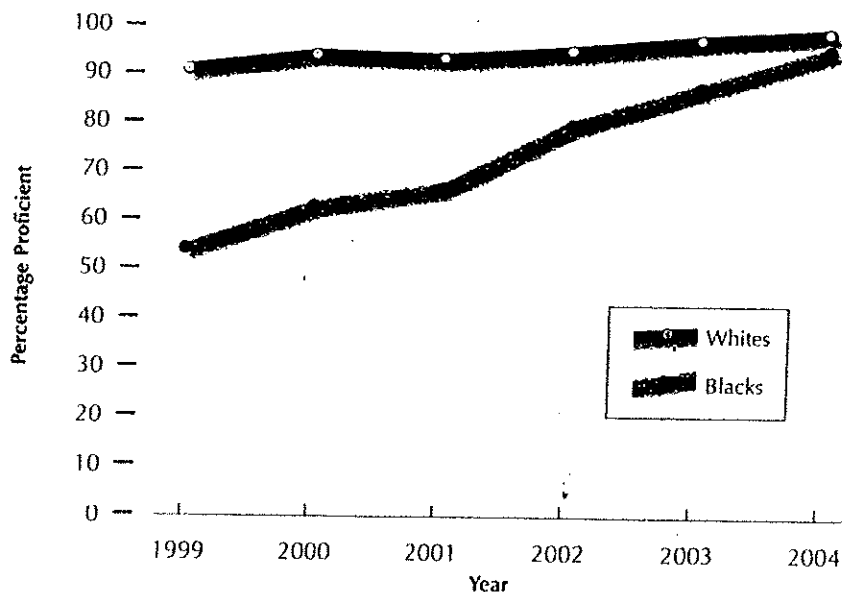
that the gains had to be due to more than the adoption of the SDP ap-

proach. They are partially correct. Again, the process is a tool. One principal explained, "The process was the overarching framework through which we planned all those strategies and nurtured all those relationships — not just adult-to-adult, but adult-to-children and children-to-children — that turned the school around."

The outcomes of the districtwide implementation in particular suggest that broad and deep buy-in of an approach that gives centrality to the principles of child and adolescent development can improve academic learning for all students and, at the same time, encourage behavior that gives students a better chance for success in school and life.

Nonetheless, without a change in the way teachers and administrators are prepared, a successful program based on child development cannot be sustained for longer than the tenure of the initial participants who can and want to work in this way; nor

**FIGURE 4.**  
**Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Math Test, Grade 5, 1999-2004, by Race**



can it be carried out on a nationwide scale. Again, curricular, instructional, and assessment activities are best facilitated by good relational and developmental conditions, and these conditions can be achieved by joining developmental principles and practices with pedagogy. All educators need to use the principles of child and adolescent development to create positive interactions between students and school staff members. And the preparation of educators must be carried out in a way that makes understanding and using the principles of child and adolescent development central to the professional identity of all teachers and administrators.

But generations of teachers, administrators, and policy makers have been prepared in ways that do not enable them to create a school culture that can support student development and learning, to say nothing of their own learning and that of a school's other stakeholders. The portion of the educator work force that is already inclined and able to join development and pedagogy is small. Trying to modify the understanding and practice of others is difficult and exhausting and is probably the reason that most interventions have limited success. Continued school dysfunction contributes greatly to staff "burnout" and turnover, which in turn makes organizational stability and growth difficult to achieve.

A major underlying reason that child and adolescent development is a missing focus in education is the widely held notion that performance in school and in life is determined by one's genetically fixed intelligence. Institutional inertia — and related economic, political, and social forces — hold this traditional perspective in place in spite of an array of recent findings suggesting that the expression of intelligence is an interactive and devel-

opmental outcome.

Several measures can help bring about the necessary change. First, we must continue to "grow the evidence," backed now by brain research, that the capacity to learn is developmental. Second, we must work to inform policy makers and influence them to offer schools of education financial and other incentives to stress child development. Third, the accreditation of preparation programs must be based on the demonstrated ability of their students to use knowledge of child development in practice, and the certification of teachers and administrators must be based on their ability to do so. And fourth, university-based leadership is needed to help practicing educators make use of the principles of child and adolescent development.

There are well over three million teachers and administrators in the U.S. Enabling this work force to help all students develop well would go a long way toward addressing many of our most vexing and costly academic, economic, and behavioral problems. If we are to reach this goal, we will need to add the missing focus on child and adolescent development to the education of all educators.

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3. See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1985); Anna Freud, *Normality and Pathology in Childhood: Assessments of Development* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965); Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1930); Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips, eds., *Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000); and Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

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7. James P. Comer, "Educating Poor Minority Children," *Scientific American*, vol. 259, no. 5, 1988, pp. 42-48.

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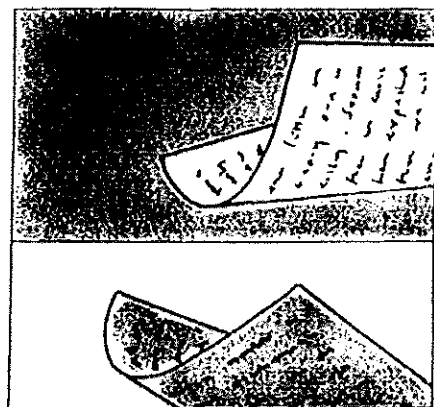
9. Comer, *Leave No Child Behind*.

10. Geoffrey D. Borman et al., *Comprehensive School Reform and Student Achievement: A Meta-analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk [CRESPAR], November 2002), p. 59; and Thomas D. Cook and Robert F. Murphy, "Comer's School Development Program in Chicago: A Theory-Based Evaluation," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 37, 2000, pp. 535-97.

11. *Evaluation of Detroit's Comer Schools and Families Initiative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Associates, 2000); Christine Emmons, New York City District 13 analysis, unpublished raw data, 2004; and George W. Noblit, William W. Malloy, and Carol E. Malloy, *The Kids Got Smarter: Case Studies of Successful Comer Schools* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2001).

12. More information on the impact of the SDP process and achievement data for all of the pilot schools are available at [www.schooldevelopmentprogram.org](http://www.schooldevelopmentprogram.org).

13. Comer, Joyner, and Ben-Avic, op. cit. **K**



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# Educating Poor Minority Children

by James P. Comer

**SCIENTIFIC  
AMERICAN**

NOVEMBER 1988  
VOL. 259, NO. 5 PP 42-48



PUBLISHED BY W. H. FREEMAN AND COMPANY 41 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10010

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# Educating Poor Minority Children

*Schools must win the support of parents and learn to respond flexibly and creatively to students' needs. A successful program developed in New Haven points the way*

by James P. Comer

Thomas Jefferson and other advocates of free public schools believed fervently that an educated populace is the lifeblood of democracy. In their view the school clearly had a political purpose: to socialize children to become good citizens. Jefferson wrote, "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion."

It is a long fall from this lofty ideal to the grim reality facing youths at the margins of today's society. Poor minority children are undereducated in disproportionate numbers across the

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country. Academically such children may lag behind the national average by up to two years. In large cities as many as 50 percent of minority children drop out of school. The failure to educate these children makes ever harder the task of rectifying economic and social inequities. Job opportunities increasingly reside in service and technology industries, but poor minority youths are the least likely to have the social and academic skills these jobs demand. Unless schools can find a way to educate them and bring them into the mainstream, all the problems associated with unemployment and alienation will escalate.

The task seems overwhelming. And yet it can be done. In 1968 my colleagues and I at Yale University's Child Study Center started an intervention project at two inner-city schools in New Haven. Unlike many of the reforms that are now being tried or proposed, which focus on academic concerns such as teacher credentials and basic skills, our program promotes development and learning by building supportive bonds that draw together children, parents and school. By 1980 academic performance at the two New Haven schools had surpassed the national average, and truancy and disciplinary problems had declined markedly. We have now begun to duplicate that success at more than 50 schools around the country.

The perceptions underlying our approach are partly rooted in my own childhood. In 1939 I entered an elementary school in East Chicago, Ind., with three other black youngsters from a low-income community. The school was considered one of the best in the district; it was racially integrated and served the highest socioeconomic group in town. All four of us were from two-parent families, and our fathers made a living wage in the local steel mill. We were not burdened by any of the disadvantages—school segregation, inadequate schools, single-parent families, unemployment—commonly cited as causes of educational underachievement in poor black children. Yet in spite of the fact that we had similar intellectual potential, my three friends have had difficult lives: one died prematurely from alcoholism, a second spent a large part of his life in jail and a third has been in and out of mental institutions.

Why did my life turn out better? I think it was largely because my parents, unlike those of my friends, gave me the social skills and confidence that enabled me to take advantage of educational opportunities. For example, I became friendly with my third-grade teacher, with whom I would walk hand in hand to school every day. My parents took me to the library so that I could read many books. My three friends, however, never read books—which frustrated and angered their

teachers. What the teachers did not realize was that their parents were afraid to go to the library; indeed, they were uncomfortable around white people in general and avoided them.

In the 1960's I began to speculate that the contrast between a child's experiences at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development, and that this in turn shapes academic achievement. The contrast would be particularly sharp for poor minority children from families outside the mainstream. If my hunches were correct, then the failure to bridge the social and cultural gap between home and school may lie at the root of the poor academic performance of many of these children.

Yet current educational reforms de-

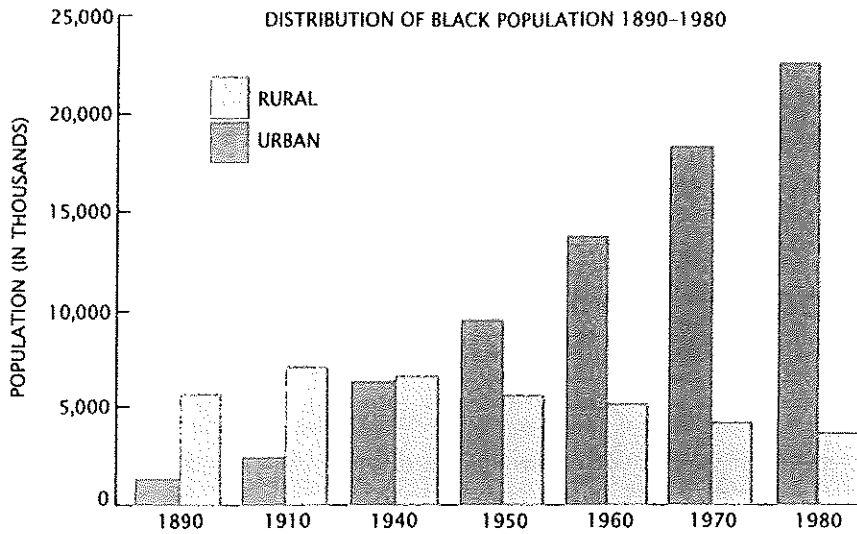
emphasize interpersonal factors and focus instead on instruction and curriculum. Such approaches reveal a blind spot: they assume that all children come from mainstream backgrounds and arrive at school equally well prepared to perform as the school expects them to. Reading, writing, arithmetic and science are delivered to students in much the same way as tires, windows and doors are attached to the frame of an automobile on an assembly line. Yet students do not come in standardized frames that passively receive what is delivered. Most educators do not challenge this assumption, however, and the approach has never been systematically evaluated or modified through direct experiments in schools.

In contrast, Albert J. Solnit and his colleagues at Yale's Child Study Center believed educational reformers should develop their theories by directly observing and intervening in schools over long periods of time. Solnit's ideas inspired the school-intervention research project that was begun by the center and the New Haven school system in 1968 and continued until 1980. I was asked to direct the project and to work with a social worker, a psychologist and a special-education teacher from the center. We decided to immerse ourselves in the schools to learn how they function and then, on the basis of our findings, to develop and implement a model for improving the schools. We were guided by our knowledge of public health,

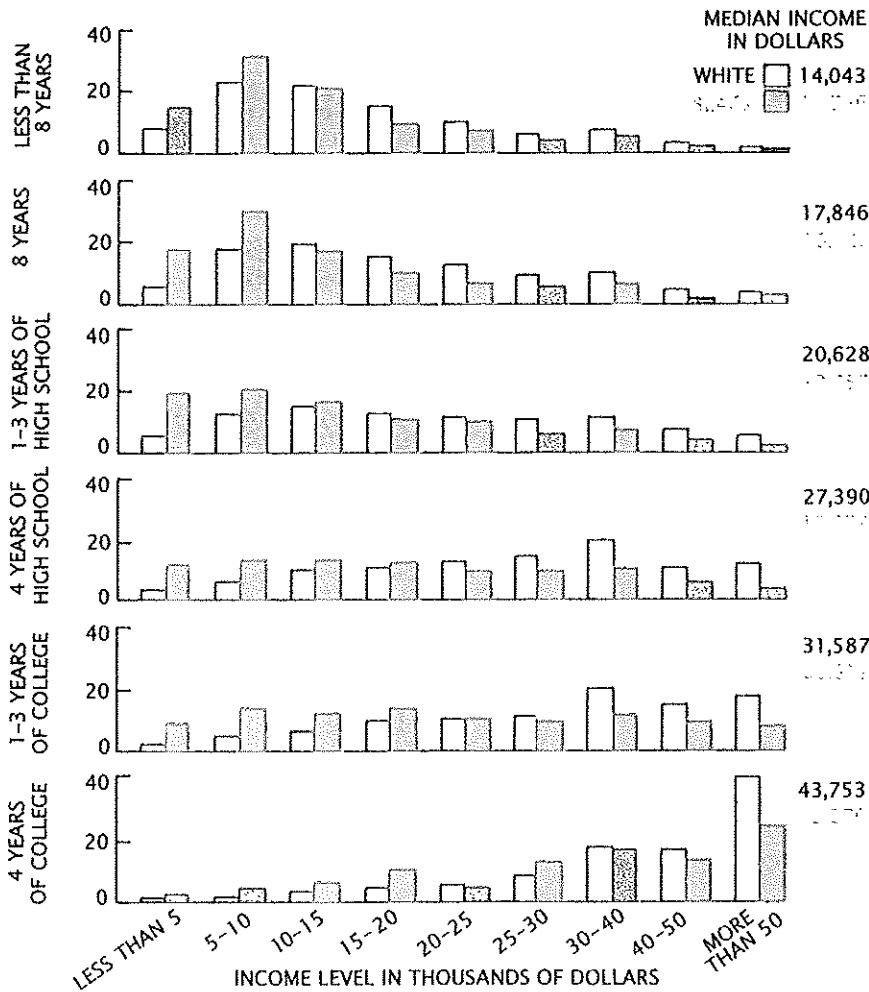


**SMILE REWARDS A JOB WELL DONE** in teacher Nancy McManus' first-grade class at the Katharine Brennan School in New Haven, Conn. The school, one of two elementary schools in which the author and his colleagues intervened, serves a nearby low-income housing project that suffers from rampant

joblessness and crime. The staff is alert to the special needs of developing children, particularly those from marginal homes, and works hard to get parents involved; 92 percent of the parents visited the school 10 times or more in the past year. The school is now academically one of the best in the city.



**BLACK MIGRATION** into urban communities (towns of more than 2,500 people) accelerated after World War II. The rural black population once greatly outnumbered the urban population, but the postwar economic boom led large numbers of blacks to move to the cities in search of jobs. Discrimination and lack of adequate education, however, denied many blacks access to the primary urban job markets.



**EDUCATION LEVEL** correlated to family income for whites and blacks shows that black incomes are at least a third less than the incomes of whites with equivalent schooling. For a given level of schooling completed by the family head, the graph indicates the percentage of families within each income bracket. Lack of education reduces the income of blacks more than that of whites, and black income rises more slowly with education than white income does. The data, for 1984, are from *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1987*, issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

human ecology, history and child development—and by common sense.

Our model evolved in two schools: the Martin Luther King, Jr., School, which had about 300 pupils from kindergarten through fourth grade, and the Katharine Brennan School, which had more than 350 pupils from kindergarten through fifth grade. The pupils were 99 percent black and almost all poor; more than 70 percent were from families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. At the beginning of the project the pupils were ranked near the bottom in achievement and attendance among the 33 schools in the city. There were serious problems with attendance and discipline. The staffs were discouraged; their turnover rate was 25 percent. Parents were dejected, distrustful, angry and alienated.

Both staff and parents approached the first year of the project with high expectations. But because teachers and administrators could not agree on clear goals and strategies, we had a difficult school opening. Some new teachers tried to have open classrooms, but the children soon became uncontrollable. Teachers blamed the administration for not providing adequate resources, and parents became angry—angry enough to march on one of the schools. Needless to say, the students did not learn much.

We, on the other hand, learned a great deal. The spectacular deterioration of the schools illuminated their social dynamics, something that would otherwise have taken us many years to perceive. We learned, first of all, that both the schools and our project needed more structure; we established regular meetings so that the staff could coordinate plans and set goals. More important, our analysis of interactions among parents, staff and students revealed a basic problem underlying the schools' dismal academic and disciplinary record: the sociocultural misalignment between home and school. We developed a way to understand how such misalignments disrupt beneficial relations and how to overcome them in order to promote educational development.

Our understanding is based on the fact that a child develops a strong emotional bond to competent caretakers (usually parents) that enables them to help the child develop. Many kinds of development, in social, psychological, emotional, moral, linguistic and cognitive areas, are critical to future academic learning. The attitudes, values and behavior



of the family and its social network strongly affect such development.

A child whose development meshes with the mainstream values encountered at school will be prepared to achieve at the level of his or her ability. In addition the meshing of home and school fosters further development: when a child's social skills are considered appropriate by the teacher, they elicit positive reactions. A bond develops between the child and the teacher, who can now join in supporting the overall development of the child.

A child from a poor, marginal family, in contrast, is likely to enter school without adequate preparation. The child may arrive without ever having learned such social skills as negotiation and compromise. A child who is expected to read at school may come from a home where no one reads and may never have heard a parent read bedtime stories. The child's language skills may be underdeveloped or non-

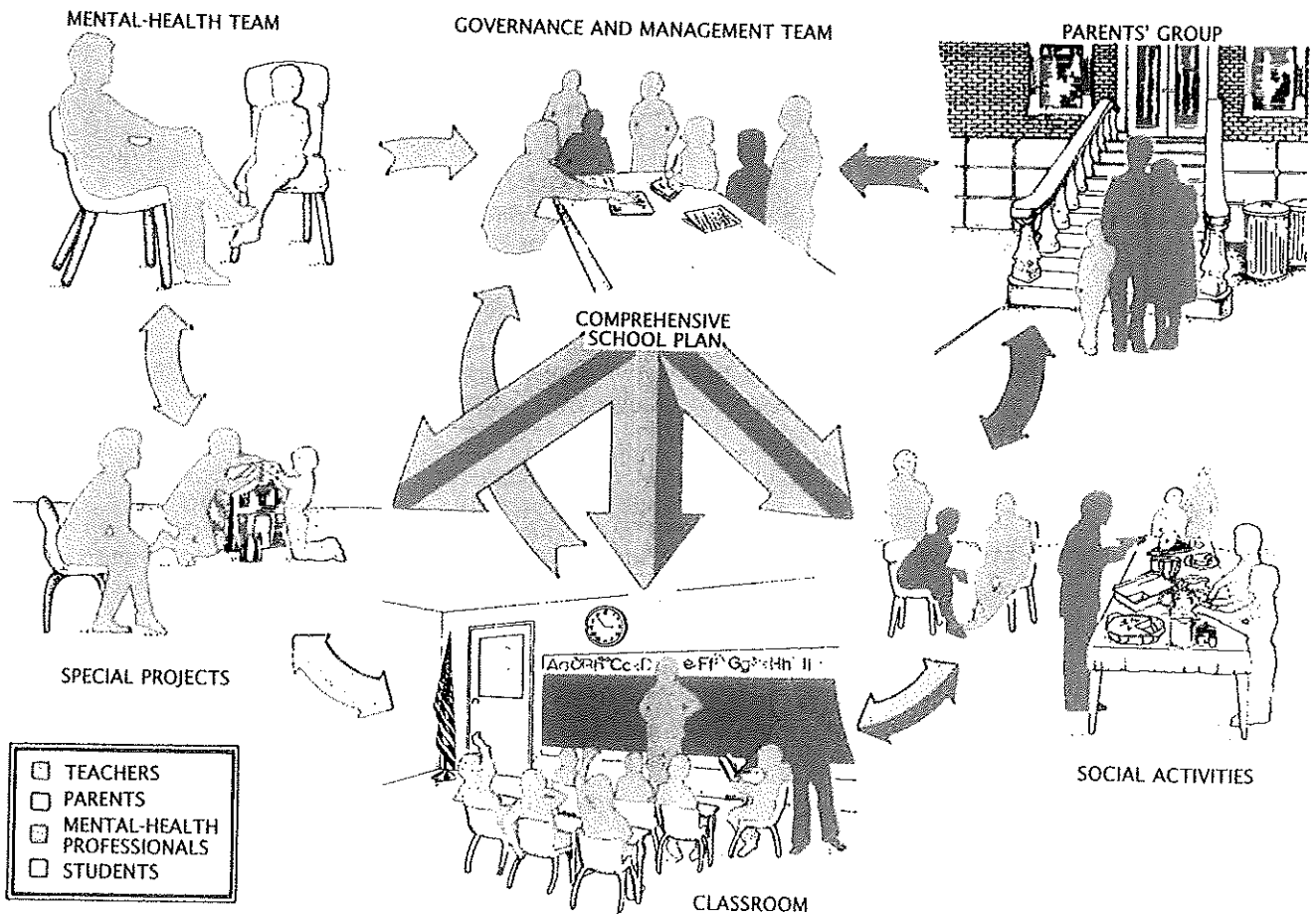
standard. Expectations at home and at school may be radically at odds. For example, in some families a child who does not fight back will be punished. And yet the same behavior will get the child into trouble at school.

Such lack of development or development that is at odds with the mainstream occurs disproportionately often among children from the minority groups that have had the most traumatic experiences in this society: Native Americans, Hispanics and blacks. The religious, political, economic and social institutions that had organized and stabilized their communities have suffered severe discontinuity and destruction. Furthermore, these groups have been excluded from educational, economic and political opportunity. These themes are particularly vivid in the black experience.

Blacks arrived in this country forcibly uprooted from their own culture, and they had another culture—that of

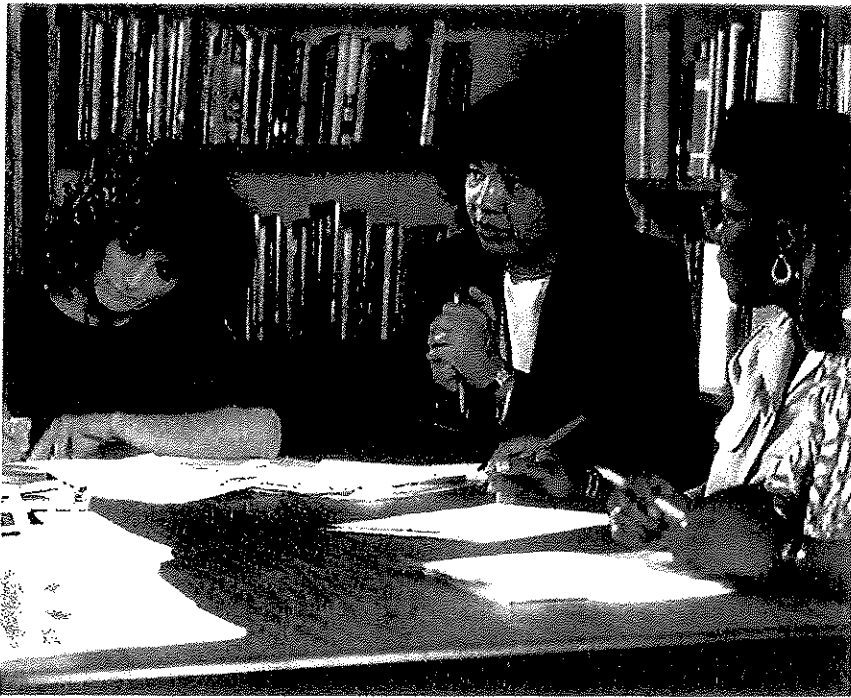
slavery—imposed on them. Slavery was a state of enforced dependency and inferiority, which offered no future. The dominant Anglo culture, in contrast, placed a high value on independence and personal advancement. The dominant culture devalued the imposed black culture, and many blacks in turn developed a negative self-image. After the abolition of slavery, widespread discrimination denied blacks access to education and to the political and economic mainstream. Yet in spite of these psychological and social handicaps many poor black families, particularly in rural areas, were able to develop strong religious and cultural support systems and to function reasonably well.

After World War II opportunities for rural work diminished and many black families migrated to cities, but as a result of discrimination they were largely shut out of the primary job markets. Moreover, urban jobs de-



**SCHEMATIC** of the school-intervention program shows its key components and the relations among them. A governance and management team, consisting of the principal, parents, teachers and a mental-health worker, develops a comprehensive school plan covering academics, social activities and special programs, such as a Discovery Room for children who have lost interest in learning. Social activities, such as potluck

suppers, teach children social skills and enable parents to meet teachers. Some parents become teachers' aides. The mental-health team assigns a member to work with a child who is having difficulty. It also tries to prevent behavior problems by recommending changes in school procedures. By reducing behavior problems and improving relations with parents, the program creates a school climate conducive to learning.



**MENTAL-HEALTH TEAM** of the Katharine Brennan School meets weekly under the direction of principal Dietria Wells (*center*). Members track the progress of students who are having problems and discuss intervention strategies, which often involve the children's families. Participants include staff member Bridget Hardy (*left*), speech pathologist Judith Campbell (*right*) and psychologist Karen McCleu (*far right*).

manded a higher level of education than rural ones, and blacks, undereducated in prewar years, were at a disadvantage. At the same time, they experienced severe stress resulting from the loss of supportive communities. For all these reasons, many black families began to function less well and could not provide their children with preschool experiences that would enable them to succeed in school.

Furthermore, blacks were able to achieve mainstream success only in limited professional areas. Thus they could not gain a significant share of political, economic and social power in the larger society and thereby help to advance socially marginal blacks. With time, marginal blacks came to resent mainstream blacks and whites for being unable—and apparently unwilling—to help them, and they defensively rejected the mainstream.

**I**n spite of their alienation from the mainstream, many poor black parents still look to the school as their hope—indeed, their only hope—for the future, even though at the same time they expect the school to fail them and their children as other mainstream institutions have. And in fact the schools often do fail them. Typical schools, with their hierarchical and authoritarian structure, cannot give

underdeveloped or differently developed students the skills and experiences that will enable them to fulfill expectations at the school. Instead such students are labeled "bad," unmotivated or stupid. Staff people punish the children and hold low expectations for them, often blaming the students, their parents and their communities for the problems. Parents, for their part, take the problems as a personal failure or as evidence of animosity and rejection by the mainstream. They lose hope and confidence and become less supportive of the school. Some parents, ashamed of their speech, dress or failure to hold jobs, become defensive and hostile, avoiding contact with the school staff.

The result is a high degree of mutual distrust between home and school. A black first-grade teacher in an inner-city school with a nearly all-black student body recalled explaining classroom rules on the first day. When she finished, a six-year-old raised his hand and said, "Teacher, my mama said I don't have to do anything you say." Fortunately this teacher understood the underlying problem, but most teachers would have reacted angrily, whereupon any chance of gaining parental cooperation would have quickly evaporated. This degree of alienation between home and school makes it

difficult to nurture a bond between child and teacher that can support development and learning.

The consequences of alienation become most apparent when these children reach the age of about eight. Around this age they are expected to progress academically at a rate that begins to exceed their level of development. In addition the children begin to understand how they and their families differ in income, education and sometimes race and style from other people in the school. At this age, moreover, children seek to decrease their dependence on adults and on the approval of adults.

Unable to achieve in school, these children begin to see academic success as unattainable, and so they protect themselves by deciding school is unimportant. Many seek a sense of adequacy, belonging and self-affirmation in nonmainstream groups that do not value academic achievement. Such children are at risk for dropping out, teen-age pregnancy, drug abuse and crime. On the other hand, the decision to pursue academic achievement and to join the mainstream also exacts a heavy price: such a choice means rejecting the culture of one's parents and social group.

**O**ur analysis of the two New Haven schools suggested that the key to academic achievement is to promote psychological development in students, which encourages bonding to the school. Doing so requires fostering positive interaction between parents and school staff, a task for which most staff people are not trained. Such changes cannot be mandated or sustained from outside the school. Our task, then, was to create a strategy that would overcome the staff's resistance to change, instill in them a working understanding of child development and enable them to improve relations with parents.

From our experience during the first difficult year it was obvious that we would make no progress until we had reduced the destructive interactions among parents, teachers and administrators and given cohesiveness and direction to the schools' management and teaching. To this end we created in each school a governance and management team of about a dozen people led by the principal and made up of elected parents and teachers, a mental-health specialist and a member of the nonprofessional support staff—all the adults who had a stake in the outcome. The teams decided issues ranging from the schools' aca-

democratic and social program to changes in school procedures that seemed to engender behavior problems.

Several rules guided these teams. First, team members had to recognize the authority of the principal but, equally important, the principal could not push through decisions without weighing the concerns of the team members. Second, we agreed to focus efforts on problem solving and not waste time and energy in placing blame. Third, we made decisions by consensus rather than by vote; this promoted cooperation by reducing the harmful tendency of groups to polarize into "winners" and "losers."

The teams were not fully accepted at first, nor were they immediately effective, because we at the center were viewed as outsiders (from Yale, to boot, which working-class people in New Haven have always regarded with suspicion). But as we helped the principals to see that power sharing increased their own ability to manage the school, and as teachers and administrators benefited, the staff became more willing to apply our expertise in social and behavioral sciences to every aspect of the school.

We invited parents from among the group that had protested against us in the first year to join the team. With their input we developed a program that involved parents at three levels: shaping policy through their representatives on the governance and management team, participating in activities supporting the school program, and attending school events.

At one point about a dozen parents worked as classroom assistants and formed the core of the parents' group. (They were paid the minimum wage.) Parents and staff sponsored activities such as potluck suppers, book fairs and graduation ceremonies. These social gatherings fostered good relations between parents and staff, so that when a child was having problems, the staff could discuss the matter with the parents without eliciting defensive reactions. As a result the school climate and student behavior improved, and more parents began to attend school activities.

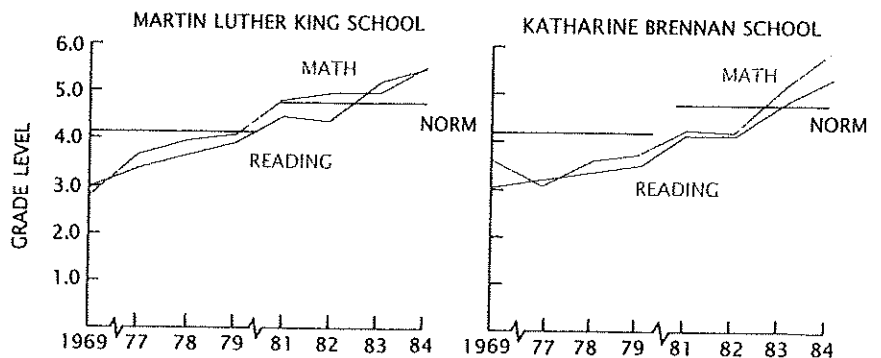
In a typical school, students who have emotional, learning or behavioral difficulties are seen by the school's psychologist, social worker or special-education teacher, who all work independently of one another. In our project, however, they worked as a team. We found this to be more efficient; the team would discuss each case and assign one member to it. The

team approach also made it easier to detect patterns of troublesome behavior and to determine whether some aspect of the school was making them worse. Through its delegate on the governance and management team, the mental-health group recommended changes in school policies and practices so that students' developmental needs would be served better and behavior problems prevented.

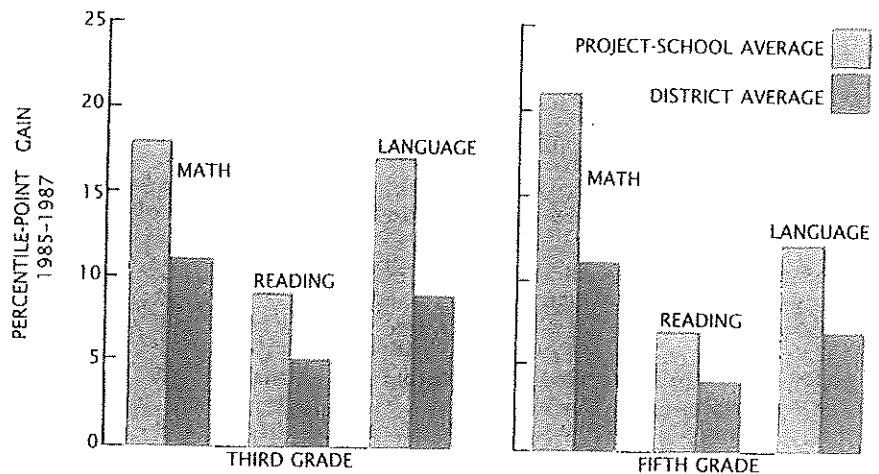
These actions reduced the sense of failure, the feelings of anger and the loss of confidence that can lead to problem behavior among students. For example, an eight-year-old who was transferred into King from another school was taken directly to the classroom. He panicked, kicked the teacher in the leg and ran out. Usually such a child is punished. If nothing is

done to reduce the child's anxiety, the cycle is often repeated until the child is labeled disturbed and referred for treatment. Our mental-health team helped the school staff to understand that the child's anxiety was a natural reaction to being thrust among strangers, and, together with the staff, we developed an orientation program to introduce transfer students and their parents to the school.

In the course of the 12 years we spent in the New Haven schools, other programs emerged in response to students' needs. In one school, children were kept with the same teacher for two years. A Discovery Room enabled "turned off" children to form a trusting relationship with an adult and, through play, rediscover an interest in learning. A Crisis Room provided a



FOURTH GRADERS at the two New Haven schools taking part in Yale University's Child Study Center's intervention program registered steady gains in achievement-test scores from 1969 through 1984. The graphs show mean scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading (red) and mathematics (blue); scores in 1969 are for the Metropolitan Achievement Test. From 1969 through 1979 the tests were given in the fall (when the norm is a score of 4.2); from 1981 through 1984 the tests were given in the spring (norm score 4.8). Scores have stayed near the 1984 levels since then.



AVERAGE PERCENTILE GAINS on California Achievement Test scores from 1985 through 1987 were larger for 10 mainly black schools in Prince Georges County, Md., that use the Comer program than they were for the school district as a whole. Test scores of black students still lag behind those of white students, but the gap is narrowing. The school district, the 15th-largest in the U.S., has 105,000 students, 62 percent of whom are black. The schools using the program are more than 90 percent black; they receive extra staff and funds because they have been hard to integrate.

refuge for children who were "out of control." We discovered that this behavior could often be traced to a traumatic home experience, and so staff members helped the children to handle their feelings and regain a sense of control. With each intervention the staff became increasingly sensitive to the concerns of developing children and to the fact that behavior problems result mainly from unmet needs rather than from willful badness—and that actions can be taken to meet these needs.

By 1975 the program was clearly having an effect. Behavioral problems had declined, relations between parents and staff had improved and the intelligence of the children had become manifest. In that year we drew up a formal School Development Program based on the key ingredients of our success: the governance team, the parents' program and the mental-health team.

Having established a way to achieve and maintain a smoothly functioning school, we decided to see whether the school might also play a role in redressing the problem of social misalignment. We argued that it should be possible to teach our nonmainstream students the social skills that are expected of them in school, and that the acquisition of these skills would help them to succeed academically.

Staff and parents devised a curriculum of social skills, with instruction in the subjects children would need to know: politics and government, business and economics, health and nutrition, and spiritual and leisure activity. The staff chose specialists to help develop the program. Children learned how to write invitations and thank-you notes, how to serve as hosts, how the body functions, how to write checks, how to plan concerts, and so on. Each activity combined basic academic skills with social skills and an appreciation of the arts. These activities were an immediate and dramatic success. Students, parents and staff alike all felt a surge of excitement and a growing sense of participating in the mainstream.

The intervention program in New Haven produced significant academic gains. The students had once ranked lowest in achievement among the 33 elementary schools in the city, but by 1979, without any change in the socioeconomic makeup of the schools, students in the fourth grade had caught up to their grade level. By 1984 pupils in the fourth grade in the two schools ranked third-

and fourth-highest on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. By the early 1980's attendance rates at King were either first or second in the city. There have been no serious behavior problems at either school in more than a decade.

In 1980 our group left the schools. The program was fully integrated into the normal practices of the staff, who continued to carry it out. In the same year we began to develop a way to apply our program in other schools. We left intact the key elements of our success in New Haven—the governance and management team, the parents' program and the mental-health team, along with our operating rules—while allowing specific social and academic activities to vary with the needs of a particular school. In a sense the program enables school personnel to engage in a "clinical practice": armed with theories of child development and education, together with observations of children and school systems, they can diagnose problems in the school and develop solutions.

The Prince Georges County, Md., and Benton Harbor, Mich., school districts, which serve mainly low-income black children, have been using the program for several years; they have achieved successes on a par with those of the two New Haven schools. The program is being introduced to all New Haven schools, as well as to three other districts: Norfolk, Va., Lee County, Ark. (both also serving mainly poor black children), and Leavenworth, Kans. The program is now being implemented in more than 50 schools around the country, including two middle schools and one high school.

All the money and effort expended for educational reform will have only limited benefits—particularly for poor minority children—as long as the underlying developmental and social issues remain unaddressed. Yet most teachers and administrators are not trained to organize and manage schools in ways that support the overall development of students. Nor does their training enable them to analyze, much less solve, the social-misalignment problems of children from outside the mainstream.

The first step toward improving the education of these children, then, is to induce teachers' colleges and schools of education to focus on student development. Teachers who invest time in training will have an incentive to use what they have learned. The efforts of individuals will not be enough; the entire staff of a school must embrace new ways of thinking.

School districts, state and local governments and school boards must actively support these changes. They must recognize that students' social development is as important to society as their academic ability. They must select, certify and reward teachers and administrators who are skilled in nurturing the development of students. They must evaluate schools by their ability not only to produce high test scores but also to prepare students to assume adult responsibilities. And they must provide necessary funds.

The Federal Government must play a leading role in bringing about national educational reforms that can prepare young people to be effective and responsible citizens. Besides appropriating funds and establishing programs, the Government must facilitate the interaction of state and local government, educational authorities and private interests—foundations, businesses, colleges and universities.

To pull all of this together, I believe a National Academy of Education is needed. Its purpose would be to set national priorities, assess current research in education, learn how to implement approaches that work, identify areas for further study and allocate resources effectively. Such an academy must be free from the pressures of political expediency, and the interests of researchers must be balanced against those of educators. It could be created largely from existing Federal programs and governed by those who have a stake in education: educators, parents, government and business. A National Academy of Education could spearhead a process of change that is geared above all to the needs of children and to the national interest. It could set a timetable and move forward at a rational pace that recognizes the urgent need for reform and at the same time is guided by knowledge and common sense.

#### FURTHER READING

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# Schools That Develop Children

BY JAMES P. COMER

American schools are said to be failing. Like nineteenth-century medicine men, everybody is promoting everything, whether there is any evidence that it works or not. Over here we have vouchers, charters, privatization, longer school days, summer school, and merit pay. Over there we have the frequent testing of students, the testing of teachers, smaller class size, report cards on schools, and high-stakes accountability. And over here, a very special offer: student uniforms, flag-raising ceremonies every morning, the posting of the Ten Commandments on schoolhouse walls, and sophisticated diagnostic instruments to identify children at risk for acting violently—when many administrators and teachers can't even identify children who need glasses.

Most of these “cures”—traditional and reform—can't work or, at best, will have limited effectiveness. They all are based on flawed models. We will be able to create a successful system of education nationwide only when we base everything we do on what is known about how children and youths develop and learn. And this knowledge must be applied throughout the enterprise of education—in child rearing before school age, in schools and school districts, in schools of education, in state education departments, in legislatures, and everywhere else that personnel preparation takes place and school policy is made.

Given the purpose of education—to prepare students to become successful workers, family members, and citizens in a democratic society—even many “good” traditional schools, as measured by high test scores, are not doing their job adequately. But test scores alone are too narrow a measure. A good education should help students to solve problems encountered at work and in personal relationships, to take on the responsibility of caring for themselves and their families, to get along well in a variety of life settings, and to be motivated, contributing members of a democratic society. Such learning requires conditions that promote positive child-and-youth development.

Children begin to develop and learn through their first interactions with their consistent caretakers. And the eventual learning of basic academic skills—reading, writing, mathematics—and development

are inextricably linked. Indeed, learning is an aspect of development and simultaneously facilitates it. Basic academic skills grow out of the fertile soil of overall development; they provide the platform for higher-order learning.

Through the early interactions, a bond is established that enables the child to imitate, identify with, and internalize the attitudes, values, and ways of their caretakers, and then those of other people around them. These people become important because they mediate (help make sense of and manage) a child's experiences and protect the child and help him or her to grow along the important developmental pathways—physical, social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, intellectual-cognitive, and eventually academic. The more mature thus help the less mature to channel potentially harmful aggressive energy into the energy of constructive learning, work, and play. But good early development is not a kind of inoculation that will protect a child for life. Future good development builds on the past and is mediated continuously by more mature people, step by step.

Understanding this process is no longer a matter of conjecture or the whining of “fuzzy-headed” social scientists or, as in my case, psychiatrists. Hard science—brain research—has confirmed the nature and critical importance of this interactive process. Without it children can lose the “sense”—the intelligence potential—they were born with. Children who have had positive developmental experiences before starting school acquire a set of beliefs, attitudes, and values—as well as social, verbal, and problem-solving skills, connections, and power—that they can use to succeed in school. They are the ones best able to elicit a positive response from people at school and to bond with them.

People at school can then influence children's development in ways similar to competent parents. To be successful, schools must create the conditions that make good development and learning possible: positive and powerful social and academic interactions between students and staff. When this happens, students gain social and academic competence, confidence, and comfort. Also, when parents and their social networks value school success and school experiences are positive and powerful, students are likely to acquire an internal desire to be successful in school and in life, and to gain and express the skills and behavior necessary to do so.

In order to realize the full potential of schools and students, we must create—and adequately support—a wide and deep pool of teachers and administrators who, in addition to having

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thorough knowledge of their disciplines, know how children develop generally and academically and how to support that development. They must be able to engage the families of students and the institutions and people in communities in a way that benefits student growth in school and society.

Vouchers and similar reforms currently being touted do

school, they could leave, earn a living, still take care of themselves and their families, and become positive, contributing members of their communities. Despite massive and rapid scientific, technological, and social change, children have the same needs they always did: They must be protected and their development must be guided and supported by the people around them. They cannot rear themselves.

High mobility and modern communication created by technological change have undermined supports for child-and-youth development. Children experience many stimulating models of potentially troublesome behaviors—often in the absence of emotionally meaningful, influential adults. As a result, too many young people receive too little help in learning to manage feelings and act appropriately on the increased and more stimulating information they receive. This makes adequate social, psychological, and ethical development difficult.

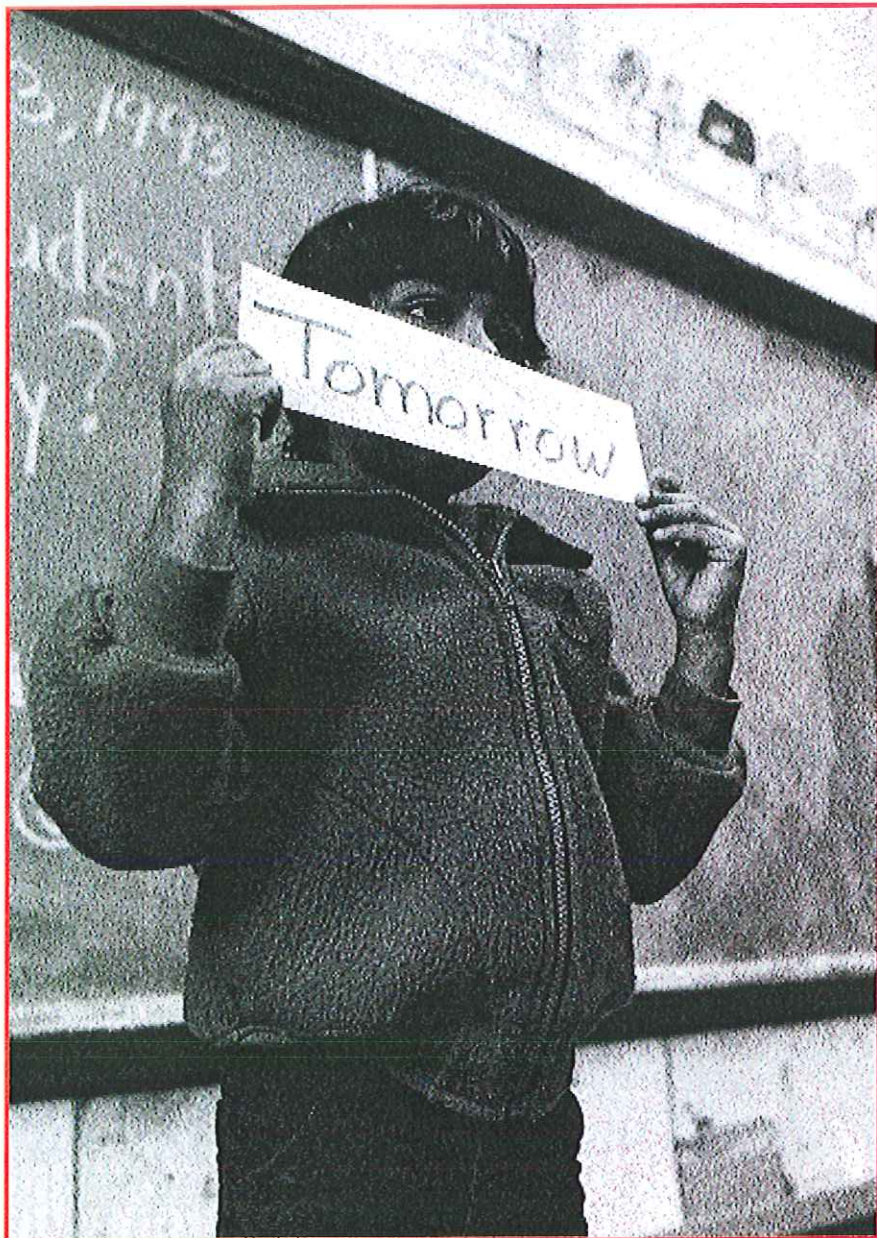
Meanwhile, the new economy has made a high level of development and education a necessity for 90 percent of the population instead of the 20 percent we got by with half a century ago. Yet the rise of technology has led to an overvaluation of measured intelligence rather than an appreciation of overall development and the kind of intellectual growth that promotes strong problem-solving capacities.

Many successful people are inclined to attribute their situations to their own ability and effort—making them, in their minds, more deserving than less successful people. They ignore the support they received from families, networks of friends and kin, schools, and powerful others. They see no need for improved support of youth development. These misperceptions influence many education policies and practices.

Adequate support for development must be restored. And school is the first place this can happen. It is the common pathway for all children—the

only place where a significant number of adults are working with young people in a way that enables them to call on family and community resources to support growth systematically and continually. And school is one of the few places where students, staff, and community can create environments in which to help young people achieve the necessary levels of maturity.

In the early 1980s, James Coleman, the late and respected University of Chicago sociologist, called what children gain from their parents and their networks “social capital.” I do not like this term in discussing humans, but it is much used. Many poor children grow up in primary social



IBID PHOTO

not address these standards. They are simply changes in infrastructure, curriculum, and service delivery. They do not offer the potential for a nationwide transformation that a developmental focus does. And vouchers can reduce funds needed to improve the schools that must educate the majority of American children.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

The function of promoting good child-and-youth development and achievement was once served in our society through families and their social networks and through community life in small towns and rural areas. If students did not do well in

networks that are marginal to mainstream institutions and transmit social capital that is different from that needed for school success. School requires mainstream social capital. In a January 2000 *New York Times Magazine* article, James Traub said that “Coleman consistently pointed out that we now expect the school to provide all the child’s human and social capital—an impossibility.”

I agree that the school can’t do it alone. But schools can do much more than what they now do. Most students, even those from very difficult social conditions, enter school with the potential needed to gain mainstream social capital. But traditional schools—and most reforms—fail such students.

Not long ago I asked approximately 300 experienced teachers and administrators from across the country if they’d taken a child development course; about half had. But when I asked how many had taken a school-based, supervised course in applied child development, only seven hands remained up. This lack of training is why many educators can’t discuss the underlying factors involved in a playground fight or how to create social and academic experiences that motivate learning by tapping into the developmental needs and information level of today’s students. Even fewer could construct environments conducive to overcoming racial, ethnic, income, and gender barriers.

But schools can succeed if they are prepared to embrace poor or marginalized families and to provide their children with conditions that promote mainstream skills. And when these conditions are continued throughout the school years, children from low-income backgrounds can do well in school; they will have better life chances. I was first convinced that this was the case for very personal reasons.

My mother was born into the family of a sharecropper in rural Mississippi in 1904. Her father was a good man, but he was killed by lightning when she was six years old. There were no family assistance programs, and a cruel, abusive stepfather came into their lives. He would not allow the children to go to school, and they lived under conditions of extreme poverty. At about eight years of age, as a barefoot child in the cotton fields, my mother realized that education was the way to a better life. When she was 16, she ran away to live with a sister in East Chicago, Indiana, with the hope of getting an education. But that was not possible.

When she had to leave school, my mother declared that if she ever had children, she would make certain they all got a good education. And then she set out—very, very, very carefully—to find my father, a person of like mind and purpose. Her caution paid off. My father, with six or seven years of education, worked as a steel mill laborer; and my mother, with no education, worked as a domestic. The two of them

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delivery.**

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eventually sent the five of us to college, where we earned a total of 13 degrees.

Our family was enmeshed in an African-American church culture that provided the necessary social, ethical, and emotional context. My parents took us to everything educational they could afford; they talked and interacted with us in a way that encouraged learning and promoted overall development. Working for and respected by some of the most powerful people in our community, my mother observed and acquired mainstream success skills and made useful social contacts. Most of the summer jobs that helped us pay our way through college came from those contacts. And I enjoyed caviar brought home after parties before my working-class friends knew that it existed. Indeed, many European, black, and brown immigrants “made it” through similar experiences.

My three best friends were as intelligent as anybody in our family and in the predominantly white working- and middle-class school we attended. On the playground and the street corner, they could think as fast and as well as students who were more successful in school. But all three went on a downhill course: one died early from alcoholism, one spent time in jail, and one was in and out of mental institutions until he died recently. My parents had the same kind of jobs as their parents did, and we all attended the same school. Why the difference? It was the more useful developmental experience we were provided.

This notion was confirmed a few years ago when I visited my mother in the hospital. My spry, 80-plus-year-old first-grade teacher, Ms. Walsh, was a hospital volunteer. When she saw me, she threw her arms around me and said, “Oh, my little James.” I was 55 years old going on six. She stepped back and said, “We just loved the Comer children. You came to school with those bright, eager eyes, and you got along so well with the other children, and you all were so smart,” and more. She was describing the outcome of a home and community experience that provided a adequate development and school readiness—social capital, if I must use the term.

I acknowledge that my parents, perhaps even my community and school, were not and are not typical. And again, the community conditions that supported family functioning, child rearing, and development to a much greater degree in the past are weaker today. The positive connections that the poor previously had with the more privileged in American society have decreased.

A few scattered programs make good education and life opportunities possible for poor and working-class children. Prep for Prep lays the groundwork for students to attend elite private schools; A Better Chance places students in good suburban schools; the Summer Study Skills Program prepares students for challenging academic courses. These “pull-out” programs provide the social capital, knowledge, and skills needed for mainstream participation. But they do not serve that large body of able young people, like my childhood friends, who are lost in elementary schools. Prepared and supported differently, such children could succeed.

## MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT

The Yale Child Study Center’s School Development Program has been working with schools for the past 32 years. The outcomes suggest that by basing what we do in schools (and in the education enterprise beyond schools) on what we know about

how children develop and learn, we can provide most children with what they need to succeed in school and in life.

I recently visited the Samuel Gompers Elementary School in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Detroit, a school with 97 percent student poverty. The Yale program has been used in this school for the past six years. The neighborhood was a disaster; the school was a pearl. The students were lively, spontaneous, and engaged in their work at appropriate times, yet quiet and attentive when they were supposed to be. They got along well with one another and were eager to demonstrate their skills to their parents and teachers. Eighty percent of the students passed the 1999 fourth-grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test in reading and science, and 100 percent passed in mathematics. In 2000 they achieved the highest MEAP test scores among elementary schools in their size category in the state. Why here? It is not a mystery.

**T**he Gompers School's success is related as much to the conditions that promote development and learning as it is to curriculum and instruction. How did it create these conditions and achieve good academic outcomes? The Yale program provided the conceptual and operational framework, child development-centered training for staff and parents, and very limited field support. The Skillman Foundation in Detroit, the Detroit Public Schools, Eastern Michigan University College of Education staff members, and parents (key members of the education enterprise) all came together to help the Gompers School and others provide the social capital the students need. The philosophy of the principal, Marilee Bylsma, is an important underpinning: "The school should be a safe haven for children, someplace that inspires learning." The staff, parents, and students did the work.

Committees, operations, and guidelines help schools create a culture of mutual respect and collaboration as well as social and academic programs that enable them to support students' development and learning. The transformation is gradual but frequent in schools that work to form good adult relationships. Good student relationships can follow.

At Gompers there is a 15-minute assembly every morning in which the students say the Pledge of Allegiance and make a school pledge. They sing a patriotic song and the school song. The custodian recognizes the "birthday boys and girls." (Message: It's everybody's school; we all play important roles.) The class with the best previous-day behavior gets "Gator points." Other recognitions take place. During the announcements, the students often discuss what's going on in their lives—the unexpected death of a teacher, problems in the neighborhood, and so on—and the adults help them learn to manage related feelings.

When the school basketball team lost a tournament they had expected to win, the principal gave much thought to how to help the players manage their disappointment and grow from the experience. The next morning, she talked about how important it is to try to be number one in all you do. But the team members should celebrate their effort, she explained—they came in third in a large field—and look forward to the next opportunity. The students can tell you that they participate in extracurricular activities to create a good community, a condition that they value.

Activities and interactions like those at Gompers can't be carried out very long, if at all, in a school where the staff members don't like, trust, or respect one another or the parents. And you can't just mandate these conditions. Child development-oriented structures and processes must operate in a way that brings about these conditions.

**I**nitially, the Yale program's work was just in elementary schools, but it is now being carried out in many middle schools and high schools. Admittedly, middle school is difficult, and high school is even more so. That's when teens are "placing" themselves in the world and establishing their identity. Young people who place themselves and their futures in family and social networks that are dysfunctional are likely to perform in school in ways that lead to similar poor or marginal outcomes for themselves. Additionally, they are physically able to engage in adult behaviors. Only a half-century ago, many teens were married, working, and raising families; but in these more complex times, they often lack the experiences and resultant judgment, personal control, discipline, and problem solving skills needed to manage adult living.

In traditional high schools, teachers are often much more anchored in subject matter than in student development. Peer groups provide belonging and therefore become very powerful. They are sometimes positive, but too often are troublesome—it's the inexperienced and immature leading the inexperienced and immature. Aside from athletic coaches and teachers in the arts and other special areas, too few mature adults can interact with students in sustained and meaningful ways. These are powder keg conditions. And in communities where there are too few constructive supports for good development both inside and outside school, bad things happen—among staff, students, and parents.

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**In traditional high schools, teachers are often much more anchored in subject matter than in student development.**

In all schools—but particularly in low-income and nonmainstream communities—it is important for the staff to expose students to mainstream work as well as civic activities so that the connection between learning and later expectations is clear. School should help young people to learn what is needed for life success. Social and academic skills, attitudes, management of feelings, and other attributes needed to participate successfully in the mainstream can then be developed.

West Mecklenberg High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, received an additional 222 students in 1992 from a competing high school; its enrollment went from 1,144 to 1,366, precipitating a crisis. The school was almost evenly divided between whites and African Americans. Most of the students were children of blue-collar workers. Fourteen guns and many knives were confiscated during the first year, and parents, teachers, and students were concerned about their safety. Dennis Williams was assigned to the school as principal; Haywood Homsley,



then the guidance counselor and coach, became the Yale-program facilitator. Williams and Homsley began to focus on reducing intergroup tensions and creating a climate that enabled staff members to consider and respond to the developmental needs of the students.

The transformation was dramatic. On April 28, 1995, *The Leader*, Charlotte's major newspaper, highlighted the gains seen at West Mecklenberg since the Yale program was introduced: Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores rose by an average of 16 points; the number of students who made the honor roll jumped 75 percent; the number of students enrolled in advanced courses increased 25 percent; and the average daily attendance rate for the year went from 89 percent to almost 94 percent. The process of change at West Mecklenberg was essentially the same as in elementary schools like Gompers except that the students themselves were more involved in the thinking and planning of the programs.

In the 1994–1995 academic year, West Mecklenberg was designated a “school of excellence” by the state of North Carolina for the high level at which it reached its benchmark goals, and it was the only high school of 11 in its district to attain this status. Despite the fact that there have been three principals since 1992, the school has held the “excellence” rating for three of the past five years.

#### IS THE DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL ENOUGH?

Are the academic gains large enough? Can they be sustained? What about the schools that do not improve? And what about middle- and upper-income young people, who face a more complex world? Even with developmentally based programs and other reform models, it's true that academic gains in schools serving students who are most in need do not quickly and routinely match those of more privileged students. Sometimes they can't be sustained; and sometimes there is no improvement at all. But when the process is well implemented, large gains have been achieved and sustained.

For example, the Norman Weir K–8 school in Paterson, New Jersey, went from 34th to first in academic achievement among eighth-graders in 1995. They equaled or surpassed suburban schools for four consecutive years. A school in Virginia went from 24th to first but fell apart the next year because the principal and several key senior staff members were removed or left and were replaced by untrained staff. Weir escaped the same fate because a group of staff members went to the superintendent and asked for and were assigned a good principal whose educational philosophy was grounded in child development.

Before a school can experience large, widespread, sustained achievement-test gains and adequately prepare students for adult life, it must be able to promote student development and manage its way to success, as Gompers, West Mecklenberg, and others have done. For this to be possible, we must produce large numbers of adequately prepared and supported staff. The policies and practices of the major players in the education enterprise nationwide—schools of education, legislators at all levels, state and federal departments of education, school

districts, businesses—must be coherent by virtue of being based in child-and-youth development.

There are many obstacles to significant school improvement. Five in particular are very troublesome yet more accessible than the seemingly intransigent issues of race, class, and financial equity. These five are the ones that prevent the education enterprise as a whole from empowering school staffs, as in the case of the Gompers School. If these were addressed all at once, the United States could begin to foster widespread, sustained, high-level school improvement—and perhaps, eventually, could even address the most resistant issues.

First, frequent changes in personnel—particularly in districts and schools faced with great challenges—is a major problem. Child development-based strategies require continuity, training, and support of school staff. Frequent changes in administrators or governance at the district or building level, or in teachers—without careful selection and training of new people—can undo in several months or less a school culture that took three to five years to create. Understanding student and organization needs, developing resources and staff, and building community support isn't possible in the two-year tenure of most school superintendents.

Second, education policy is often fragmented rather than prioritized. This is because it is made everywhere—legislatures, state departments, districts, unions, city councils, businesses, and more. Many policy makers have no expertise in child development, teaching, and learning. And when crafting policy, most do not talk to one another, to students, or to school staff. Rarely are these policies guided by what we know about child growth and development and its relationship to learning.

And legislators, businesspeople, state departments, and others are—like school administrators—under great pressure to “Do something!” Because they widely believe that test scores alone can measure school effectiveness, that is what they

focus on most. And without well-considered, evidence-based, coherent education policies, equitable funding will be impossible. In one city, eight of the 10 schools listed as “failing” had made the greatest gains in the system over the previous two years. The listing was demoralizing and led to harmful staff turnover and achievement setbacks, but it was the only way to get funds to help those schools.

Third, most schools of education do not provide future teachers or administrators with adequate knowledge or skills to promote a culture supportive of overall student development. Most focus—and in the college classroom, particularly—on curriculum, instruction, assessment, administration, and, sometimes, use of technology.

Sound knowledge of academic disciplines is important but not sufficient. Many schools of education provide courses in abnormal child development but no study of normal development. And the preparation to teach reading is often limited. Yet a child who has difficulty learning to read—the academic task that serves as a foundation for all future learning—is likely to experience feelings that limit emotional,

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psychological, ethical, and social developmental growth, or that promote troublesome growth.

Fourth, schools of education are seldom involved with other departments of the university in mutually enriching ways. Meaningful interaction between colleges of education and other university departments would be beneficial also to the institutions and the communities around them.

And fifth, there is no vehicle in universities or among research-and-development groups that will enable working educators to update their skills regularly and learn best practices. Also, there is no existing way to address these five most troublesome obstacles simultaneously so that synergy results.

#### HOW WE CAN IMPROVE SCHOOLS

Agricultural extension provides a useful model for educators. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created the Agricultural Extension Service to transmit knowledge to a large number of farmers through federal, state, and county partnerships. Farm agents, in addition to changing farmer practice, changed policy makers' and the public's understanding of best practice, as well as the policies needed to promote it. Improved agriculture enriched the economy and made America the breadbasket of the world.

Education is to the information-age economy of today what agriculture was to the economy at the turn of the twentieth century. Schools of education could create centers designed to overcome major obstacles in the education enterprise. Such centers would provide education agents. Schools of education will need to incorporate and institutionalize child development

knowledge and expertise. But once this is done, education scholars and agents will be well positioned to share with and learn from colleagues at universities, to help future and current teachers and administrators become more effective practitioners, and to help policy makers and the public better understand and support good schooling.

Few schools of education or university programs are presently prepared to work in this way. We should not rush into such programs without sound pilot and infrastructure work. But knowledge, organization, and support can be acquired. The states—who are legally responsible for educating America's children—should support such efforts. Most, largely through their departments of education, have been involved in standard-setting as well as in regulatory and oversight activities. They are involved in takeovers of failing districts. Yet they have little experience in—and no mechanisms for—correcting the complex problems involved in school improvement.

The decisions we make in the next few years will involve significant amounts of money and will lock us into helpful or harmful directions. A miracle quick fix is not possible. But if we today begin to mount programs that connect to practice and to policy what we know about how children develop and learn, we could soon be well on our way to having better-functioning systems of education in five years and good ones in a decade. If we continue to be guided by tradition, ideology, and power, however, we will reach a point of no return—one where too many young people are undereducated, acting out, and gradually undermining our economy and our democracy. ♦



June 10, 2010

Brock International Prize in Education  
University of Oklahoma  
1610 Asp Avenue  
Norman, OK 73072

To Whom It May Concern:

It gives me great pleasure to write this letter of support for Dr. James Comer's selection for the 2011 Brock International Prize in Education. I believe that Dr. Comer is uniquely qualified for this distinction because of the significant contributions he has made as both a psychiatrist and developer of exemplary education programs. One of the country's leading child psychiatrists, Dr. Comer is best known for his pioneering work to improve the academic performance of children from low-income and minority backgrounds. Unlike most education-reform programs, which focus only on academic concerns, such as improving teachers' development and building students' basic skills, the "Comer Method" emphasizes the development of the whole child, psychologically, socially, and academically. It was first introduced at two elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1968 as part of a school-intervention project organized by the Child Study Center at Yale University. "Our analysis of interactions among parents, staff and students revealed a basic problem underlying the schools' dismal academic and disciplinary record: the sociocultural misalignment between home and school," Comer explained in *Scientific American*. "We developed a way to understand how such misalignments disrupt beneficial relations and how to overcome them in order to promote educational development."

Dr. Comer has noted that his work began, in part, as a reaction to James Coleman's highly influential research for the *Equality of Educational Opportunity Study*, which was published in 1966. This report, known as the "Coleman report," suggested that schools contributed very little to academic opportunity and achievement and that, instead, families and communities played the most significant roles in shaping students' academic trajectories. Some scholars at the time turned to other research and data analyses to counter Coleman's conclusions. Researchers such as Ronald Edmonds, then Director of the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University, refused to believe the results and set out to find schools where children from low-income families were highly successful, and thereby prove that schools can and do make a difference. Known as the "effective schools research" paradigm, this line of work identified pockets of excellence

where schools serving large numbers of poor and minority children did make a difference.

Dr. Comer's work, which began at the same time, took things a quantum leap forward. He created a framework and a process that enabled all the adult stakeholders in two of the lowest performing schools in New Haven, CT to apply developmental principles to all aspects of schooling in a way that created a school culture of inclusion with specific and intentional support for development. This made it possible for students to take responsibility for their own development, and to achieve at academic and social levels equal to those of the highest income students in the city. In this way, Dr. Comer not only showed that urban schools could make a difference, he developed the tools to enable all schools to make dramatic and comprehensive improvements in the lives of children across a range of psychological, sociological, and academic dimensions.

By 1980, the New Haven school board voted to introduce the Comer Method at all 42 of the city's elementary, middle, and high schools. School districts in other areas of the country, ranging from Prince George's County, Maryland, to Norfolk, Virginia, Chicago, Illinois, Detroit, Michigan, and Benton Harbor, Michigan have also adopted Dr. Comer's reforms and experienced similar improvements in students' attitudes and academic performance. His work received further recognition in 1990 when the Rockefeller Foundation announced its intention to introduce the Comer Method at ten elementary schools in Washington, D.C., followed by the rest of the district's schools. The foundation's proposal also called for the creation of special, university-based centers throughout the country designed to familiarize teachers, principals, and other administrators with Comer's methodology, as well as for field-testing of a teacher-training program based on his ideas.

Dr. Comer's methods have helped turn around over 1,000 schools in 82 school districts in 26 states across the nation. The results have been documented by his own research, and by the rigorous evaluations of many other esteemed researchers. For instance, Dr. Tom Cook, an internationally known evaluation expert at Northwestern University conducted rigorous randomized trials of the Comer model confirming its efficacy. My own 2003 meta-analysis of 29 of the most widely used comprehensive school reform programs revealed that only a few program developers in the field had established high-quality research evidence that their educational reforms had positive impacts on the children they served. The Comer School Development Program was one of only three educational reform programs ever fielded that had established a highly convincing track record of success. Based on the combined quantity, quality, and statistical significance of evidence, the School Development Program clearly established across varying contexts and varying study designs that its effects are robust and that the model, in general, can be expected to improve the academic performance of students. This type of success at scale is extremely rare in the field of education and clearly sets the Comer Model apart from the many other efforts that have been advanced to reform schools.

In addition to his extraordinary work developing this highly innovative and successful educational reform program, Dr. Comer has been a full professor of psychiatry at Yale since 1975. He was named Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry the next year and also serves as director of the Child Study Center's Comer School Development Project and as associate dean of the Yale Medical School. Dr. Comer has written on a variety of topics related to race, education, and parenting. In *Beyond Black and White*, published in 1972, he describes many of his own encounters with racism and attempts to understand the origins of racist attitudes. His second book, *Black Child Care: How to Bring Up a Healthy Black Child in America*, written in collaboration with Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, professor of psychiatry and dean of student affairs at Harvard University Medical School, focuses on the distinctive race and income-related issues faced by African American parents. *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project* describes Dr. Comer's groundbreaking work with the Baldwin and King elementary schools.

In his most personal work, *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family* (1988), Comer recounts the story of his mother, Maggie, who rose from poverty in rural Mississippi to ensure that all five of her children were given the chance to obtain a college education. A dual autobiography, the book begins with Maggie's childhood recollections and continues with the story of Comer's youth, his education, and the evolution of his educational and social philosophy. "By sharing his mother's vision, Comer manages to inspire while keeping the moralizing—and psychoanalyzing—to a minimum, allowing a warm and seldom-told tale to unfold," wrote V. R. Peterson in *People*. Comer has also contributed articles to numerous professional and popular journals, and since 1978 has written a monthly column for *Parents* magazine focusing on the emotional and psychological problems confronting adolescents and their parents.

His outstanding body of work has earned Dr. Comer numerous awards across his career. However, the Brock International Prize in Education is especially emblematic of his life's work. Dr. Comer's work on the School Development Program has been used to turn around thousands of under-performing schools and has impacted hundreds of thousands of students. This innovation has not only contributed to the dramatic reform of the "art" of education, resulting in important and innovative impacts on educational practice, but it has also been refined and supported by a consistent application of rigorous scientific research methods. For these significant contributions to educational practice, policy, and theory, I enthusiastically nominate Dr. James Comer for the Brock Prize.

Sincerely,



Geoffrey D. Borman  
Professor of Education and Sociology



## CRESPAR/CAPSTONE INSTITUTE

AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY

2900 VAN NESS STREET, NW; HOLY CROSS HALL, SUITE 427-29; WASHINGTON, DC 20008



Capstone  
at Howard University

June 11, 2010

Brock International Prize in Education  
University of Oklahoma  
1610 Asp Avenue  
Norman, OK 73072

To Whom It May Concern:

It is an honor and a pleasure to offer a letter of support on behalf of Dr. James P. Comer's nomination for the 2011 Brock International Prize in Education. I have been working closely with Dr. Comer over the last year and half on a professional collaboration project. In this course of time, I have gotten to know him well as a colleague and a friend. He is no doubt a consummate scholar, brilliant thinker, and a passionate advocate for enhancing the life conditions of children and youth from marginalized backgrounds. He sets the standard for how to integrate successfully theory, research, and educational practice. He obviously stands out as a prolific knowledge producer. But what also sets him apart is that he is a willing knowledge consumer as well. As deep and wide is his current understanding of the challenges and opportunities pertinent to educationally under-served children and youth, he remains open to new ideas and concepts; to different ways of conceptualizing relevant issues; to possibilities for incorporating new insights into his existing intellectual frame of reference. I have benefited greatly from our collaboration.

Although my professional relationship with Dr. Comer only goes back approximately 18 months, indeed I have known of Dr. Comer and his work for over 40 years. Long before it was fashionable to be involved in school reform that sought to close achievement gaps between majority and minority group students, Dr. Comer had already established an evidence-based comprehensive model of school reform. Decades before the notion of working to "turn around" schools came into vogue, Dr. Comer was demonstrating through his interventions that schools at the bottom of district rankings could move to the top of the list in terms of achievement outcomes. In doing so, he convincingly demonstrated that the social backgrounds of children and youth do not necessarily lead to an academic death sentence for them, if schooling cultures and practices are substantially altered.

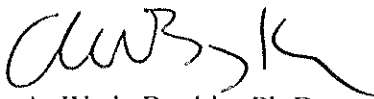
Dr. Comer is *the* educational pioneer when it comes to focusing schooling practices on the “whole child.” In some respects the field is just now catching up with Dr. Comer’s work on incorporating child and adolescent principles into teaching and learning activities. Dr. Comer was far ahead of the curve in implementing practices that promote genuine working partnerships between schools, families and communities. Today no one

serious about doing school reform can proceed without taking into account the work and ideas of Dr. James Comer.

I know him to be a humble man, so he is likely embarrassed that today terms like “Comer schools,” “the Comer method,” and “Comer in the classroom,” are acceptable parts of the jargon of educational practitioners across America. That this is the case is testament to Dr. Comer’s impact on the field of education. Indeed in the course of time, over 1000 schools in this country have been serviced by Dr. Comer’s School Development Program. And whenever there has been sufficient implementation quality, the schools have benefited greatly from such involvement.

In all, I think that he is most deserving of this prestigious award.

Respectfully Submitted,



A. Wade Boykin, Ph.D.  
Professor and Director of the  
Graduate Program  
Department of Psychology and  
Executive Director  
Capstone Institute for School Reform  
Howard University  
Washington, DC



Harlem Children's  
**ZONE**

June 11, 2010

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Mr. Alan R. Shoho  
Brock International Prize in Education  
University of Oklahoma  
1610 Asp Avenue  
Norman, OK 73072

Dear Alan,

I am writing to give my highest recommendation to James P. Comer for the 2011 Brock International Prize in Education.

Dr. Comer deserves this honor for the groundbreaking work he has done in education over a long and distinguished career. I believe Dr. Comer may have been the first person to document why so many U.S. schools serving low-income students were under-performing and why urban students were underachieving. Without rancor or fingerpointing, he and his team created a framework that helped practitioners create a school environment that helped parents, teachers and administrators work collaboratively to support the development and education of students in under-performing schools.

Dr. Comer and his team then field-tested the model and disseminated it widely. In addition to forging this pioneering work, he is the author of an insightful book about his own family, upbringing and education, *Maggie's American Dream*. Over the years, he has helped improve educational practices in the United States and abroad through his lectures, as well as his many articles and books.

I know I speak for many in the field of education, when I say many of the recent successes in urban education were built on the foundation of Dr. Comer's work. He is truly a giant in the field of education and his work will continue to be an inspiration for generations of researchers and educators. Dr. Comer is singularly deserving of the recognition that comes with receiving the Brock Prize.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey Canada  
President and CEO



#### Letter of Recommendation for James Comer

Long before policy makers spoke of school turnarounds and transformations, James Comer developed and implemented a model for raising the performance of schools serving large numbers of students from disadvantaged homes. A true pioneer, Comer's approach to school improvement was multifaceted. He recognized that there was no single "key" to higher achievement. He recognized that it "takes a village to raise a child" before that phrase became popular.

What has become known as "the Comer program" involved an array of processes for involving parents and communities in supporting their schools and for marshalling the resources of a variety of professionals in assisting struggling students. Comer understood that the etiology of low student achievement involved far more than inadequate instruction. He drew from his training in child development to create a program that addressed the developmental needs of young people.

The result of Comer's work was a comprehensive model of school improvement that has stood the test of time. Implemented in hundreds, if not thousands, of schools across the United States, the Comer program has been proven to be an effective approach to school improvement. As a result of Comer's efforts, thousands of young people have gotten the opportunity to succeed in school and gone on to lead productive lives. His work has offered hope to those who otherwise might be inclined to give up on schools serving large numbers of students from poor families.

Comer's work also has influenced other advocates for school improvement. Because of his path breaking efforts, others recognize that raising student achievement has a psychodynamic component and a community component. Educators, in other words, cannot improve schools by themselves. They need the support of concerned and committed parents and community members.

I can think of no individual more deserving of the Brock Proze than James Comer. Not only has he offered the world a viable model for school improvement, but he himself is a model of what an academic can accomplish when he combines a solid understanding of child development with a deep-rooted commitment to helping leave the world better than he found it.

Respectfully submitted,  
Daniel L. Duke  
Professor of Educational Leadership  
University of Virginia





# HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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June 10, 2010

Dr. Alan Shoho  
Brock International Prize in Education  
University of Oklahoma  
1610 Asp Avenue  
Norman, OK 73072  
[shoho@flash.net](mailto:shoho@flash.net)

Via Email and First Class Postal Mail

Letter of Recommendation for Dr. James P. Comer

I am pleased to support the nomination of Dr. James P. Comer for the 2011 Brock International Prize in Education. Few, if any, Americans have done as much for the lives of disadvantaged children as Dr. James P. Comer. A physician by training, with special expertise in the science of human development, Comer realized in the 1960s that a large proportion of our minority children came to school with little preparation for an academic setting and that they often fell further behind as a consequence of this lack of preparation. Building on a research basis in developmental psychology, clinical psychology, social services, and medicine, Comer determined to devote his life to the perfection of methods which would help these children to succeed in school, to prepare for the workplace, and therefore to have a reasonable chance to become productive members of American society.

Now nearly, thirty years later, thousands of children all over the land have been helped as a result of implementation of the School Development Program, widely known as the Comer Program, the Comer Approach, or as Comer Schools. Comer and his associates have worked tirelessly to develop methods for educating youngsters. They have devised ingenious methods for involving the various stakeholders in the community in the

education of children and of maintaining this involvement over the long run. They have created multi-media materials that are being used all over the country in efforts to bring the Comer approach to an ever wider, and alas, ever more needy population. Thus, after over a quarter of a century of gestation and development, the Comer approach has been scaled up successfully.

James Comer merits a Brock Award on the basis of his remarkable achievements with young children, the very youngsters who have few other advocates. But he merits the award equally because of the kind of person he is. With humility and dignity, and without an ounce of self-importance or vanity, Comer represents for many of us the embodiment of the kinds of virtues that he hopes to develop in children—and in all who work with children. In writing these lines, I speak not only about Comer as a public figure but also as a collaborator, whom I find to be an inspiring figure in our daily interactions. In what he says, and especially in how he acts, James Comer combines a gentleness of manner and a seriousness of purpose that catalyzes those of us in his presence to do our best. Comer has written movingly of his own background in Maggie's American Dream, a self-portrait of the Comer family which is rapidly achieving the status of an autobiographical classic in our nation. By virtue of his social contribution, his writings, and above all his personal example, James Comer would be an ideal recipient of the Brock Award.

Thank you for considering this nomination of Dr. James P. Comer for the 2011 Brock International Prize in Education. Please let me know if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,



Howard Gardner  
Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

May 31, 2010

Brock International Prize in Education  
The University of Oklahoma  
1610 Asp Avenue  
Norman, OK 73072-6405

Re: Nomination of Dr. James Comer for the 2010 Brock Prize

To Whom It May Concern:

Dr. James Comer has unquestionably been the most influential child psychiatrist, and one of the most influential education reformers, over the past forty years. As a psychiatry professor at a highly prestigious university, he has not only published innovative research, but also used that research to develop a groundbreaking, highly successful, comprehensive, K-12 school program, originally developed to serve African American children in low performing schools, but now serving all races and ethnicities of children worldwide. Not surprisingly, then, he has established himself as a "public intellectual" who writes both for highly regarded research venues but also for the public press. In other words, he had a powerful vision for serving children in need and was able to turn that vision in to a practical program that has been directly making a difference in the lives of thousands of children for several decades.

James Comer, M.D., has been a faculty member of the Yale University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, since 1968. Currently, he is the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale's Child Study Center. Throughout his illustrious career, he has focused on the importance of supporting the development of whole child for the purpose of improving school success.

What Dr. Comer is best known and most widely respected for is the founding of the Comer School Development Program in 1968. Rather than focus solely on the academic development of children, this research-based, comprehensive, K-12 program brings parents, educators, and the community together to support simultaneously the social, emotional, and academic growth of children, particularly those children whom the school system has historically failed to serve successfully. According to the philosophy of this program, support for the development of the "whole child" makes for a better and more just foundation for school success.

While Dr. Comer started this program principally to serve African American children in low performing schools, over a hundred schools in this country and other countries have used this program to support the healthy development of children as the basis for school success. In addition, this program has been evaluated more than any other comprehensive school improvement model over the past thirty years.

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What this research has consistently shown is that schools that do a quality implementation of the Comer model average high levels of improvement in both student development and achievement (including closing of achievement gaps). Moreover, researchers have found positive effects on school climate, student attendance, reductions in discipline cases, relationships between educators and students, and collaboration among educators and parents. In other words, this program is one that has a strong research base and that has repeatedly been evaluated by numerous external evaluators who have consistently found that fidelity in implementation of the program yielded major positive gains.

In addition to his leadership in the development of this exemplary program, Dr. Comer has been a consultant to the Children's Television Workshop, which produces the prize-winning program, Sesame Street. He served as a member of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the Institute of Medicine, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's Commission on the Whole Child, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He has also served as a trustee for Wesleyan University, Teachers College of Columbia University, the Carnegie Corporation, and the National Academy Foundation, among other institutions and organizations. Furthermore, he has received 47 honorary degrees, including from Harvard, Boston College, Columbia, Brown, University of Pennsylvania, Howard, Northwestern, Amherst, and Indiana. Finally, he has published over 150 articles, 40 chapters, and 9 books in the popular and research presses.

Very few scholars have achieved such exemplary outcomes. He has devised theory and converted that into an impressive educational program. He has been the lead child psychologist for the nation, always counseling that we need to focus on the whole child. He has been an educational reformer who has insisted that academics are not enough, but we must also focus on the social and emotional well being of the child. He has envisioned; he has created; he has led; and he has spoken out publicly—all in the service of the well being of all children. Thus, he exemplifies the requirements of the Brock Prize at the highest possible level, creating a legacy few other educators will ever attain.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Scheurich". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jim Scheurich, Professor  
Texas AUM University



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RECEIVED

JUN 14 2010

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Thank you for considering this nomination of Dr. James P. Comer for the 2011 Brock International Prize in Education. Please let me know if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Howard Gardner". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Howard Gardner  
Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education  
Harvard Graduate School of Education