

School Ties

A Psychiatrist's Longtime Commitment to Education



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

Almost 60 years have passed since Dr. James Comer last saw three of his elementary school friends, yet he vividly remembers them. They were African American boys just like him. They, too, came from two-parent homes, and their fathers also worked in the local steel mill. But unlike Comer and his siblings, these three youngsters did not take an interest in academics. They grew up to lead hard lives: one died from alcoholism, a second was in and out of jail, and a third was in and out of mental institutions. As a young man, the question that always haunted Comer was why.

His mother had an idea. “Madison was known as a troublemaker in school, and yet he was a bright boy,” she once told her son about one of these friends. “His problems stemmed from his family life. I don’t think they sat and talked with the children or did anything together.”¹

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Comer’s own childhood differed considerably. His parents routinely sat and talked with him and his siblings; the family did everything together. Ultimately, the stark, sad contrast between his experiences at home and those of his friends led him to devote his life to studying the science behind his mother’s keen observation.

To understand how promising lives sometimes falter and fail, Comer decided to learn about people. And so he trained in psychiatry at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. His work in the early 1960s at the university’s Child Study Center taught him that many adult problems are actually rooted in childhood. With time, he began to understand the decline of his three friends.

In 1968, Comer and his colleagues at the center created the School Development Program.* The program focuses on improving relationships among the adults in schools—teachers, administrators, other staff members, and parents—so they can foster academic achievement and support student development. The model, mainly geared toward elementary schools, is based on Comer’s belief, grounded in research, that academic learning and

*To learn more about the School Development Program at Yale University, visit www.schooldevelopmentprogram.org.

child development are inextricably linked and proceed along six specific pathways: social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, cognitive, linguistic, and physical.

According to Comer, a medical professor and child psychiatrist at Yale, healthy development in school occurs when children form positive relationships with adults. First, though, adults must create school climates in which they relate well to each other. When they do, they become emotionally available to bond with students and to model positive behaviors. It is their relationships with adults, combined with a strong academic curriculum, that in turn motivate children to learn.

Often, children from low-income families do not receive the nurturing inherent in positive family relationships. Economic hardships and stress that cause parents to work multiple low-wage jobs may not allow them the time to engage their children the way middle-class parents typically do—and some may not even know how to engage them.[†] And so Comer regards schools as the only institutions strategically located to work with parents and communities to foster the healthy relationships poor children desperately need.

When he began his work, few shared this view. Long before *A Nation at Risk* warned in 1983 that “a rising tide of mediocrity” threatened our schools, urging that we make them a national priority, and long before society understood the achievement gap’s far-reaching consequences, Comer realized the tremendous power of schools to change the course of a child’s life. He has spent his career helping educators harness that power. He argued and still argues that schools can build character, encourage persistence, teach self-regulation, and shape students into citizens able to contribute to democracy. The best education prepares children academically *and* for life.

For more than 40 years, Comer and his team at Yale have worked with more than a thousand schools to implement a framework that enables schools to support all students, especially those from low-income families. Over the years, evaluations have found the model to be effective; in many schools, the program resulted in significant improvements in student behavior, parent participation, and academic achievement. But in recent years, its good work has largely been ignored.

As the emphasis in American education has increasingly focused on standardized test scores, this program focused on relationships has fallen out of favor. And though he wishes it weren’t so, Comer knows that fads—not sound research—often dictate education policy.

At 78, Comer still works full time and does not plan to retire. Though he no longer oversees day-to-day operations of the School Development Program or teaches, he continues to write commentaries and to speak at conferences and schools. He is the author of 10 books and hundreds of articles that explain how children develop. For 15 years, he shared his expertise with the public as a columnist for *Parents* magazine. In his writings, he often shares personal stories about his family and its pride in him

[†]For more on how poverty affects learning, see: “Why Does Family Wealth Affect Learning?,” by Daniel T. Willingham, in the Spring 2012 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2012/Willingham.pdf; the complete Spring 2011 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2011/index.cfm; and “Equalizing Opportunity,” by Richard Rothstein, in the Summer 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2009/equalizingopportunity.pdf.

for becoming a physician and the first African American to earn tenure at Yale.

Even though Comer has received nearly 50 honorary degrees, many educators today may not have heard of him. Unlike some other school improvement advocates, he is more of a scholar than a salesman. An intellectual, he has long relied on reason to make his case in a field where passions and good intentions often reign supreme. “I received standing ovations in the beginning of my career,” Comer says, explaining that he once gave fiery orations about his work. “I toned down my presentations because I watched the same people stand up and cheer me and then do things that don’t serve children well. I try to get at the head, not the heart.”²

His ideas, though, strike at the heart of what a good education is all about, and how classroom teachers, especially those of low-

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income students, can provide it. For the question about his friends that first intrigued him long ago bears a strong resemblance to the one that educators often ask themselves about their students: How can I best help them reach their potential? It’s what all great teachers want to know. A look at Comer and his life’s work provides valuable insights into the ways that educators and schools can connect with children.

An Interest in Child Development

Comer’s parents, a steel mill worker and a cleaning lady, taught him, his two brothers, and his two sisters to value education and the opportunities it can create.

Originally from the South, Hugh and Maggie Comer started their family in East Chicago, Indiana. Even with limited funds, they exposed their children to educational enrichment. They visited museums, attended plays, and took sightseeing trips to nearby Chicago, Illinois. They ate dinner together as a family and encouraged debate on the events of the day.

Comer and his siblings learned much at home, and they thrived academically. They attended a racially integrated, predominantly white school that enrolled many middle-class and affluent students.[‡] Comer believes that the mostly positive interactions with classmates and teachers, and the strength of the academic program, combined with his parents’ support, are what led him and his siblings to earn a total of 13 degrees and to become

[‡]For more on the benefits of integrating schools by socioeconomic status, see “From All Walks of Life,” by Richard D. Kahlenberg, in the Winter 2012–2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1213/Kahlenberg.pdf.

professionals: an optometrist, a principal, a school district superintendent who became a community college dean, and a French teacher who headed the local Head Start.

Not long after Comer finished his medical training, he realized he wanted to work with low-income children to ensure their lives turned out better than those of his three elementary school friends. When the director of the Child Study Center at Yale asked him to head a school improvement program, he jumped at the chance.

It was September 1968, nearly five months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., amid a time of great upheaval, when Comer, along with a social worker, a psychologist, and a special education teacher from the center, walked into two struggling elementary schools to learn and to help. Nearly all of the students were African American and poor. Out of New Haven's 33 schools,



these two had the worst achievement scores and attendance rates. Discipline problems were rampant, and staff turnover was 25 percent each year.

Initially, teachers, administrators, and parents resisted; they did not trust the well-meaning team. Though the schools were just a 10-minute walk from the campus of the prestigious university, they represented a different world. Comer persuaded the adults in both schools to work with him, and the School Development Program slowly evolved.

The model they eventually created, with input from teachers, administrators, and parents, involves organizing the adults in the school, along with several parents, into three teams—the School Planning and Management Team, the Student and Staff Support Team, and the Parent Team—that work together to create a Comprehensive School Plan. The plan is based on decisions that the teams make on a range of issues, including curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The teams also set goals for the overall school climate and ensure that staff members communicate with the community.

These teams provide adults with a framework in which to promote children's social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, cognitive, linguistic, and physical development.³ According to Comer, children who are healthy are not only physically well. They can make friends and show empathy for others. They are self-aware and can express themselves. They can acquire academic knowledge and also apply what they learn.

In 1968, the prevailing notion was that schools could not help low-income students because their families and communities could not provide them with the social capital (mainstream knowledge and skills) needed to succeed in school. At the time, many argued that only school integration could overcome such a challenge. Largely because of his own supportive family and his understanding of child development, Comer declined an opportunity to focus on racial integration and instead focused on helping to create vital school cultures in low-income schools so that students could reach their potential. Because the School Development Program focuses on healthy child development, low-income students exposed to it gain the mainstream knowledge and skills that their middle-class peers often learn at home.

While this model recognizes that the principal is ultimately in charge of the school, the framework helps to prevent top-down decision making and encourage teamwork. To that end, three principles guide the teams: consensus decision making, in which teams reach a consensus rather than vote on issues (which can create “winners” and “losers”); no-fault problem solving, which allows teams to focus on finding solutions instead of blaming others; and collaboration, which encourages the principal to partner with the teams and respond to their concerns, while team members continue to respect the principal's authority.

“People who don't know each other, who don't trust each other, who don't like each other, can't work together,” Comer says.⁴ In such an environment, chaos ensues. Once the program brings key people together and they begin to experience a little success, then “those people who didn't know each other, who didn't like each other, who didn't trust each other, begin to know, trust, and like each other.”⁵

Adults then experience improved interactions with children who “are then interacting in a supportive environment that motivates them to learn,” he says.⁶ With sound relationships, staff members and parents can focus on preparing students academically and on helping them to develop socially. What Comer first learned in New Haven is that when compared with mental health professionals, educators typically don't understand what a child's classroom behavior, good or bad, really means.

Soon after his team began its work, an 8-year-old boy from a small community in North Carolina enrolled in one of the schools. He had recently moved to New Haven to live with his aunt, who dropped him off at school one morning. Comer writes that when the student walked into his new classroom, the teacher's “facial and body language expressed frustration and, to the student, rejection.”⁷ As a result, the child panicked, kicked the teacher in the leg, and ran from the room. Comer did not blame the teacher; she already had three transfer students in her class from the previous week. Rather than give the student a lecture, the teacher and principal worked with Comer and his team to understand the cause of the child's behavior: he was in a strange place with no support. After the incident, the principal and teacher welcomed him by telling him about the school. They also assigned a successful classmate to show him around the building. From then on, new students received similar orientations.

“The students themselves became the carriers of the new school culture,” Comer writes.⁸ For instance, a couple of years later, when a 9-year-old who had already attended three different schools that year put his fists up to fight after another student

inadvertently stepped on his foot, a classmate stopped him. “Hey man we don’t do that in this school,” he said. Comer writes that the new student dropped his fists. He too “became a carrier of this safe new culture.”⁹

Both incidents showed Comer that teachers often lacked the knowledge to understand students’ actions and so were placed in a tough position. “We do not prepare them to ‘read’ child behavior, but we expect them to respond to it in ways that can be helpful,” he writes. “We do not do that to other professionals.”¹⁰

Too many teachers, he realized, exit teacher preparation programs and enter the profession without even knowing they can support healthy development. What makes his program unique is that it shows them how.

Soon after the adults in these two schools implemented the model, student behavior and staff morale improved and parent

But he recognized that it is not okay. Comer explains that people are born with potential that is realized only when they interact with those who support their development and engage them so that their curiosity is turned into academic learning. “I’m a medical doctor,” he says. “I always say, of all the babies I delivered, there was not one born with an interest in academic learning.”¹³

As Comer is well aware, teachers understand that developing that interest is important, but too often policymakers view it as touchy-feely and soft. Yet he has spent his career promoting the idea that the “hard stuff is the soft stuff,” as he puts it.¹⁴ Developing strong relationships requires effort and hard work. But the payoff is profound. Ultimately, it is the relationships between adults and children—combined with a strong academic curriculum—that stoke a child’s interest in learning.

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involvement—volunteering to organize events, meeting with teachers to discuss their child’s progress—increased. After a few years, educators in the original two New Haven schools began to see significant academic improvements in reading and math.

The program’s success in those two schools was not an anomaly. A study published in 2002 of Comprehensive School Reform programs—school improvement models for which some schools received federal funding—found that of the 29 most widely implemented programs, only three were effective. The School Development Program was one of those three.* Comer emphasizes that the purpose of the model is not to raise test scores, although this occurs when implemented well. The point is to show that “when we create conditions that support the development of children,” he writes, “they will learn.”¹¹

Turning Curiosity into Academic Learning

Comer says that we as a nation still have not made creating those conditions a priority. Sitting in his office one October afternoon, he tells me that American education started with the wrong model and has yet to change. “The focus was on just pouring information in, and the belief was that those with the best brains would get it, and the others won’t, and that’s okay,” he says.¹²

Creating positive relationships, the basis of the School Development Program, takes time. Comer finds that it usually takes three to five years before schools using it see improvements in student achievement. The approach works best when a critical mass of parents attend meetings and activities in support of the school program so they can learn how to support their child’s development and improve their own parenting skills. Educators, too, must invest time in engaging with parents and colleagues. Both teachers and administrators find that a positive school climate enables them to spend less time addressing student behavior problems and more time focusing on instruction.

Comer says that despite the continued interest of parents and educators in those first two New Haven schools, his team pulled out because of a lack of funds. They left in 1980 after 12 years.

The schools, however, continued the program; both sustained their progress for some time. In an article for *Scientific American*, Comer wrote that by 1984, fourth-grade students in the two schools ranked third and fourth in the New Haven school district on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading and math. He also noted that one of the schools had among the best attendance rates in the school district, and that “there have been no serious behavior problems at either school in more than a decade.”¹⁵

In 1980, Comer set about documenting the results his program achieved in those schools with his third book, *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project*. He recalls that the publish-

*The study also found Success for All and Direct Instruction highly effective. To learn more about those programs, visit www.successforall.org and www.nifdi.org.

ing house bought the book because it was the first to demonstrate that schools can help poor children learn. “But it won’t sell,” Comer recalls the publisher telling him. “Nobody cares about education.”¹⁶ Comer shares this anecdote to give a sense of the climate regarding education at the time. He contends that unlike today, near panic had yet to set in.

A few years after Comer and his colleagues left the original two schools, they field-tested the model in schools in eight different states. The program’s strong results in those schools earned them the foundation grants they needed to disseminate the model further. Throughout the 1990s, Comer continued writing about the program. School superintendents and other educators who read his work wanted to learn more about how child development and academic learning were linked, and they wanted their schools to improve. Several districts adopted the model, and Comer received grants from foundations and the US Department of Education to enable his staff to provide support. Newspaper articles at the time highlighted a strong and growing interest in the program. In the 45 years since its inception, the model has operated in more than a thousand schools in the United States and around the world.

When No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law in 2002, the program’s growth ground to a halt. Comer says that the law, focused on test scores, did not include a developmental perspective. As a result, even schools that had successfully implemented the model eventually dropped it and then saw their improvements in student learning and school climate fade. Many stopped the trainings on collaboration to concentrate on test prep instead. According to Comer, the trainings, which took place at Yale, saw a dramatic decline in attendance as the law was being considered and soon after it passed. While 1,988 teachers and administrators attended trainings in 2001 and 1,476 teachers and administrators attended trainings in 2002, only 467 did so in 2003. The decline continued to the point that Comer and his staff discontinued the trainings at Yale and held them within school districts and for fewer participants. Without a continued focus on development, “teachers and administrators will fall back into old ways of doing things,” he explains. “The difference is so subtle that it’s hard to see.”¹⁷

The high-stakes climate that NCLB created around preparing students to pass standardized tests, along with the touchy-feely label that has unfairly been attached to the School Development Program, has meant that in recent years Comer has struggled to find funding. Today, to implement the model in a single school costs about \$30,000 each year. Without grant support, it’s a sum that many schools simply can’t afford.

In the wake of NCLB, Comer has mainly focused on building partnerships between school districts and colleges of education to help them support student development and academic learning. He also works a great deal on education policy, regularly participating on panels of national education experts.

“Ahead of the Game”

Like his program, Comer, at first glance, seems subtle. He speaks deliberately and earnestly. His voice is not booming, nor is he physically imposing. Yet behind the intellectual reserve lie passions for playing basketball and unwinding on the dance floor that

help explain his youthful appearance. To reach his third-floor office, he takes the stairs, never the elevator. The professor prides himself on physical fitness.

For his efforts to improve schools, Comer has garnered considerable acclaim. He has lectured across the country and abroad and is the recipient of many prestigious awards. On a wall in his office, he proudly displays pictures of Bill Cosby and Hillary Clinton speaking at the 25th and 30th anniversary celebrations, respectively, of the School Development Program. In 2007, he received an honor highlighting both his contribution to public education and the fact that some believe he deserves even more recognition. The Grawemeyer Awards, from the University of Louisville in Kentucky, are given in five categories each year, including education. They are named for H. Charles Grawemeyer,

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an industrialist and entrepreneur, and an alumnus of the institution, who established the prizes. According to the awards’ website, Grawemeyer, though he studied chemical engineering, so highly valued the liberal arts that he “distinguished the awards by honoring ideas rather than life-long or publicized personal achievement.”

In his introductory remarks during the award ceremony, David Reynolds, an education professor in the United Kingdom, noted that Comer was ahead of his time. He compared him to Martin Peters, a member of the UK’s winning World Cup team in 1966, who was so talented a soccer player that he was considered to be “twenty years before his time.” Reynolds said that Peters saw the field in such a way that he knew where to pass the ball, but his teammates couldn’t anticipate the plays. “He was just ahead of the game.”¹⁸

Reynolds made the point that the same holds true for Comer. In the decades since he and his colleagues first began their work, American public schools generally have adopted more of the professor’s “plays,” his line of thinking if not his exact program. “It is as though today’s theoretical mountain has moved closer to Comer, making his program less intellectually unique than it was 30 years ago,” wrote Thomas Cook in a 1999 evaluation of the School Development Program in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Cook cited other programs that also focus on “decentralized governance, parent involvement, better quality staff relationships, more emphasis on child development, setting higher standards, and seeing schools as communities rather than production fac-

tories.”¹⁹ Comer himself acknowledges that since he first introduced the program, the ideas behind it have become more mainstream. School Development Program “practices considered highly controversial in 1969—whole-school change, school-based management, strong parental involvement in decision making, and teacher study groups—are now common in schools throughout the country,” he writes.²⁰

Central to Comer’s model is the notion that child development and academic learning are inextricably linked, which a body of research now supports. For instance, the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago has examined the supports students need to develop socially and academically. A report that the group published last year found that when teachers help students develop positive attitudes and behaviors that char-



acterize effective learners, they can increase students’ chances of success in school and in life.²¹

The consortium also assessed the impact of social support (for example, homework help from teachers and parents, cooperation and respect among peers) and academic pressure (such as teachers setting high standards for students) on achievement. It found that when children experience high levels of both support and pressure, they make significant gains in math and reading.²² As Charles Payne writes about the consortium’s work, “the main message from the study is that social support and academic pressure each independently make a meaningful difference, but when both are present at high levels, the results can be striking.”²³

Based on the consortium’s findings, Payne, a professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, writes that an “authoritative-supportive” teaching model that includes a “high level of intellectual/academic demand,” a “high level of social demand,” a “holistic concern for children,” and a “strong sense of teacher efficacy and legitimacy” could best prepare students academically and develop them socially.²⁴

Payne’s analysis echoes ideas that James Heckman says have received scant attention. “Important character traits that promote personal achievement are largely ignored or maligned as ‘soft’ and nonmeasurable skills,” writes the economist and Nobel laureate. “Evidence suggests that efforts that focus mainly on closing disparities in cognitive achievement are not as successful as they could be because they neglect the need to close gaps in character development.”²⁵

Angela Duckworth specifically studies such development. The University of Pennsylvania professor has found the importance of self-control, perseverance, and conscientiousness in predicting student achievement. She explains that “a major reason for adolescents falling short of their intellectual potential is a lack of self-discipline.” As a result, “effective interventions geared at helping students exercise self-discipline are of pivotal importance.”²⁶ Ultimately, the work of these scholars reinforces the ideas on which Comer’s program is founded.

Instead of focusing on the research supporting development, Comer says that we have given in to “distractions” such as charter schools and vouchers. He labels them as such because it’s the core interactions within schools—not their management or organizational structures—that make a difference in student learning.

However, he does admire Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone. Comer says that the School Development Program has informed a lot of Canada’s own work and focus on wraparound services. But Comer says that he has had frank discussions with Canada about society’s lack of concern for poor children. And while the press has lauded Canada’s program, that praise ultimately rings hollow, he says, because society refuses to address child poverty and institutionalize the supports Canada advocates. “I’ve already told him, ‘Look out for being held up as novel,’” he says. “In a few years, they’ll be looking for something new, and they’ll want to go around what it is he does.”²⁷

All these years later, Comer still marvels at how much his home life positively influenced his academic success. He explains how the support of family and friends sustained him during one of his toughest years: his freshman year at Indiana University. He says that the racism he experienced at the institution, which then enrolled few African Americans, made him question his ability to succeed. When an English professor first praised a paper Comer had written but then began criticizing it to the class after learning that Comer was black, the experience nearly crushed him.

After talking with people back home who believed in him, he persisted. “In my family, you just kept going,” he says.²⁸ Comer recalls that his mother, who had an abusive stepfather and also experienced racial discrimination, modeled how to face adversity.

Comer contends that if children don’t learn that lesson at home, they can learn it at school—that is, if the school provides the right environment, including the right stories. For example, “the Jackie Robinson story is the story,” he says, but too often, schools miss the point. “They teach that Jackie Robinson was the first African American in baseball. That’s not the story. The story was his persistence, self-regulation, determination, cool under fire, demonstration of excellence.”²⁹ All of those character traits, along with academics, he says, are what the school ought to teach.

To that end, Comer says that schools of education, which prepare the majority of the nation’s educators, must teach what he has long taught: the centrality of child development to academic achievement. Just as medical schools more than 100 years ago decided to focus on anatomy and physiology—the basic sciences of medicine—and to stop “being overrun by all kinds of people selling everything and claiming everything, and little science,” he

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says, so too should teacher preparation programs focus on subject-matter expertise plus child development, a basic science of teaching. Though he has yet to convince these institutions that teachers are child developers, he remains undeterred. “That’s work to be done,” he says, adding in his unassuming way, “I’m around until that happens.”³⁰ □

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