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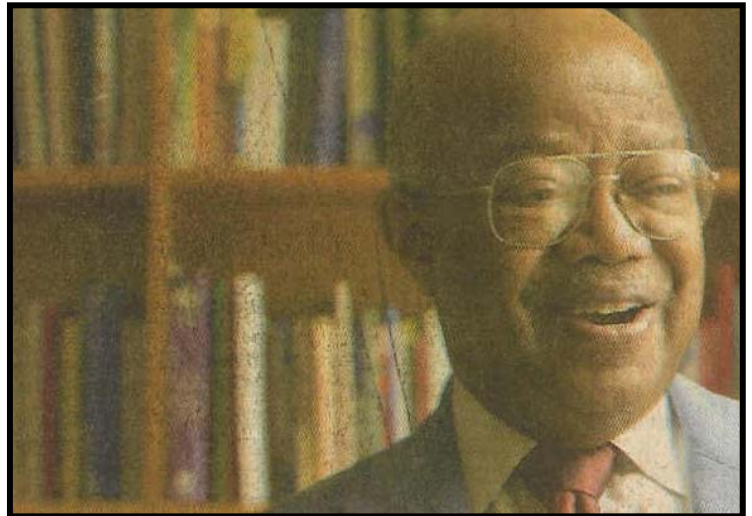
**Old ideas look new again as test-score gap widens**

**Maria Garriga, Register Staff**

**NEW HAVEN — For 35 years, a quiet voice has risen above the shrill debate in schools on how to bridge the achievement gap in education.**

Dr. James Comer, a professor of child psychiatry and associate dean at the Yale School of Medicine, believes focusing on child development enables all children, regardless of race, to succeed in school.

The focus on child development calls for intensive nurturing in schools for children who lack that nurturing at home.



*Dr. James Comer of the Yale Child Study Center believes a nurtured child is a better learner.*

The Comer method, in use around the nation for more than 30 years, faded out in communities like New Haven. But the widening achievement gap, debate over the effectiveness of the federal No Child Left Behind Act and recent success in North Carolina has refocused attention on Comer's ideas: Perhaps the answer has been right in front of educators' eyes all these years.

"The education enterprise has ignored everything except the academics; that's what they pay attention to exclusively. That's a problem. What most children need is the opportunity to learn in an atmosphere that encourages them to learn," Comer said.

The numbers tell the story of how stark the achievement gap is in Connecticut. According to state Department of Education statistics, 22.2 percent of eighth-grade math students in New Haven performed at or above the state goal in the 2004 Connecticut Mastery Test.

In Old Saybrook, 72.1 percent met or exceeded the goal.

Statewide, 67.2 percent of white eighth-graders met or exceeded the goal in math, compared to 28.2 percent of blacks. In reading, the gap was 63.8 percent to 24.9 percent. In writing, it was 72.4 percent to 39.3 percent.

Comer found that successful students succeeded not because of their race, in-come level,

genetics or determination, but because they had a nurturing environment and healthy relationships.

Those relationships, Comer found, can draw students from marginal families into the mainstream by giving the confidence and skills to succeed.

Students in Comer schools bridge the achievement gap without focusing on it.

"Income and race have very little to do with outcomes," Comer said.

Comer arrived at his conclusion based on his own life experiences.

Slight, with big glasses and a warm smile, Comer sat down recently to discuss his method under framed photos of himself with Hillary Rodham Clinton and Bill Cosby in his spacious, light-filled office at the Yale Child Study Center.

He grew up in a low-income but stable family. The son of a housekeeper and mill worker in East Chicago, Ind., Comer announced he wanted to become a doctor at the age of 4.

His parents responded by giving him a doctor's kit for playtime.

Raised in that nurturing environment, Comer grew up to be not just a physician, but an accomplished author, a professor and founder of Yale's school development program.

His three childhood friends, raised in similar socioeconomic situations but without the intensive nurturing, failed to succeed in school. One ended up in prison, another in a mental institution and a third became an alcoholic.

Comer shares the lessons of his childhood in his most recent book, "Leave No Child Behind," published in 2004.

He built the Comer method with the insights from his own life.

A 2002 study of 23 educational methods by Geoffrey Borman, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, showed that only three methods consistently raised test results. The Comer method was one.

The Comer method offers a way out of the seething debate that pits advocates of the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandates schools bring all children to test goals by 2013, against the status-quo education establishment.

The No Child Left Behind supporters believe annual student testing will force schools to help all their students equally, instead of favoring some groups and ignoring others.

But educators argue that "teaching to the test" and testing all students at grade level, regardless of their skill level, demoralizes teachers and students.

The state of Connecticut embraced Comer's philosophy by offering grants to schools that

tried the Comer method, said Fran Rabinowitz, associate commissioner of the state Department of Education.

"The research right now continues to support and reinforce Dr. Comer's philosophy and standards. He focuses on the whole child," Rabinowitz said.

More than 600 schools nationally have tried the Comer method, some with more success than others.

Success depends on how well the school implements the method, Comer said.

While Comer does not use standardized tests as a yardstick for success, he does use his method's ability to raise test scores as a way to win credibility among skeptical educators.

In the Comer method, three committees steer the school.

One committee develops a school plan for improvement, another committee works to solve problems students face, and a third committee gets parents involved in the school. The committees form the back-bone of Comer's framework.

The committees can develop creative solutions that individual teachers or administrators could not carry out alone.

In one New York school employing the Comer method, a student who bullies another student can choose a grueling in-school suspension or agree to perform "acts of kindness" to the victim until the victim says he or she feels better.

The bully must clean up after the victim at lunch, carry the victim's books to class, and hold doors open for the victim.

In another school, administrators realized that tardy students were getting themselves up for school without any parental help.

The administrators solicited donations from businesses and used the money to buy 100 alarm clocks, and teachers taught the students how to use the clocks to make a morning schedule to get to school on time.

Comer's principles can be more difficult to implement than the committees.

Comer's first principle is to avoid assigning blame and focus instead on solving problems.

The second principle requires making decisions by consensus. The third requires educators, parents and students to collaborate on solutions.

Schools that successfully implement the program, including two in North Carolina that he used as a role model, have been able to eliminate the achievement gap by using the

Comer method.

New Haven schools, which provided Comer with a living laboratory as far back as 1968, have attempted to embrace the program but foundered in trying to accept some of its principles.

Comer tested his model first in New Haven at the Baldwin and the King schools, which were marked by chaotic environments.

At the end of a five-year period, Baldwin School had improved so much that the administrators wanted to revert back to their authoritarian model and keep it that way.

Comer's team switched to Katherine Brennan School, at the time ranked 33rd out of New Haven's 33 elementary schools in fourth-grade achievement on nationally standardized tests.

King School ranked 32nd. By 1976, the two schools tied for third place. According to Comer, the schools had the best attendance in the city and no serious behavior problems.

New Haven public schools retain vestiges of the Comer method in the form of the Comer committees.

But the Comer principles have not survived the years as well, partly because of administrators' philosophies and partly because of changes in federal law.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 made it even more difficult to implement the Comer principles.

The law's accountability measures made it difficult to focus on problem-solving instead of blame, while the focus on testing diverted the focus on child development, according to Dee Speese-Linehan, assistant principal for social development in New Haven public schools.

"No Child Left Behind made it easier to blame. It really set up a whole new blaming structure," Speese-Linehan said. "After No Child Left Behind people turned away from Comer, when he is the answer.

"The bad effects of NCLB would have been avoided if his process had not been bastardized," she added.

*Maria Garriga can be reached at [mgarriga@nhregister.com](mailto:mgarriga@nhregister.com), or 789-5726.*