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WAITING FOR A MIRACLE: WHY SCHOOLS CAN'T SOLVE OUR PROBLEMS AND HOW WE CAN

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After twenty-five to thirty years of work, I really became concerned and began to reflect on what was going on, and why it was so difficult to change schools. *Waiting for a Miracle*, my latest book, is just that-a first-step reflection on the resistance and difficulty in changing schools.

I remember that in my first year of work, I was invited to give a talk. The sponsor invited me to go to lunch with him. He listened to my spiel about the importance of education and the importance of educating all children, from all backgrounds, especially low-income minority children. He had been around supporting civil rights for a long time. He listened and finally said, "What makes you think that everybody wants to see low-income Black children succeed?" That was a surprising, new thought to me. It never occurred to me that anybody would not want to see all children succeed. Society was changing rapidly and needed everybody to succeed in school. I realize now that he was right. But it was more complicated than racial prejudice alone. The problems in the urban educational setting mirrored the problems in our larger society. And the problems in society and school stem primarily from a very deep-seated cultural belief. That belief is that success is determined by your genes, your inborn intelligence and your will.

This notion justifies the extreme individualism we have and leads to notions that we have about the economy and the status quo. The entire educational enterprise- institutions, people, even research, curriculum, instruction, assessment and technology-is affected by this underlying belief.

Children from families under economic and social stress are hurt the most by this belief. And until we change that cultural belief, thinking that the schools will solve our problems and prepare children to solve the problems of society is, I think, waiting for a miracle.

There's a special complication in our society. Because it is a competitive society, we need winners and we need losers. We have scapegoated every new group to arrive in America to produce these winners and losers. Yet, for historical reasons, Blacks in particular, but other minorities too, have become the designated scapegoats. And that makes it all the more difficult to face up to the complexities of today's education problems and today's society problems because you can always blame it on the group that is currently the losers.

What the work of our program at the Yale Child Study Center, and the work of others, has shown is that a large group of children, disproportionately urban, disproportionately minority, come to school unprepared to learn. This leads to a difficult interaction between home and school that is troublesome for the children in schools. Staff in many schools are products of a training model that ignores the importance of child development. Additionally, organization and management of these schools prevents the staff from successfully addressing the school challenge.

We have also shown that you can change the schools by giving parents and staff a developmental focus and emphasizing that helping children develop well can lead to better teaching and better learning. These are attitudinal and structural changes that are difficult to bring about. And they prevent the large-scale changes that we need to improve our educational system.

I hope I have been provocative enough. What I want to do now is to make a case to support what I have said. Let me do this by talking about my own background, because my own background is the source of much of my insight.

I am from a low-income family. My mother was born in rural Mississippi, the child of a sharecropper. Her father was a good man who cared about his family, but he was killed by lightning when she was about six years of age. And because there were no support programs around during that period, a cruel stepfather came into the lives of my mother's family. He was abusive in every way. He would not allow the children to go to school. My mother decided when she was about eight years of age that the way to a better life was through education. So when she was sixteen, she ran away to her sister in East Chicago, Indiana, and

tried to go to school. But when her sister did not support my mother's dream, she had to leave school and become a domestic worker with no education whatsoever. When she left school, she declared that if she ever had children, she was going to make certain that every one them got a good education. And then she set out to very, very, very, carefully find my father!

My father had been married once before, and she was not absolutely sure he was the right one, so she insisted that he bring a letter of recommendation from his ex-mother-in-law … but it worked out. My mother, with no education at all and working as a domestic, and my father, with a rural Alabama sixth grade education and working as a steel mill laborer, sent my four siblings and me to college for a total of thirteen college degrees among us.

While that was happening in my family, I had three friends who went off to elementary school with me. And while they were just as bright, just as able, as anybody in my family and anybody in our predominantly white, middle and upper income school, they all went on a downhill course. One died early from alcoholism; one spent a good part of his life in jail; and the other was in and out of mental institutions all his life until he died recently. Society cannot afford that kind of lost potential on an ongoing basis and expect to survive and thrive. And so the question became for me: what happened to them? That was the question that began to percolate in my mind. It eventually changed my plan to become a general practitioner in my home town and led to my career in child psychiatry and education.

My friends and I went to the same schools, our parents worked the same jobs-steel mill laborers and domestics-and yet I experienced such a different outcome. I realized eventually that the difference was in the quality of the developmental experience in my home compared to the homes of my friends. I want to talk a little about that developmental experience because I think that it is critically important and it is also what has guided my work all these years.

First of all, my siblings and I were very much wanted. My parents had goals for us and they did everything they possibly could to promote our growth and educational interests. Every Sunday, the four younger children would gather around my mother and she would read us the funny paper. Now the funny paper is not great literature, but the important thing was the nurturing, the closeness. We would have her read our favorite column over and over again, giving us more time together.

Also, there was the malted milk, the popcorn, the play at the lake front park on many evenings. There was time spent on the porch together with our parents. I remember many occasions on that porch, when one of my three friends who went on a downhill course would come by and ask, "Mrs. Comer, can I come up and play?" He was known to be a bad boy in school. My mother would spell out the rules of the porch and the rules of play, and if he could live by that, he could come up. So he came up and I never remember a fight the entire time. He was not a bad boy; he was simply an underdeveloped boy who was mismanaged in a variety of settings.

Also, dinnertime was important. Every evening we had dinner at the same time. There was always discussion at the table. We were expected to talk about what went on during the day. And as we talked, we learned all of the rules of conversation: not to talk too much, not to talk too little, not to interfere with others' points, and always listen carefully to others. Those discussions would spill over into debates after dinner. And we would debate everything and anything. There was a rule that no matter how badly you were losing your debate, you could not fight. Therefore, you had to learn to make your points very well. I would come home from school already thinking about how I was going to make my points. All of that thinking and reflection was preparing me for good performance in school.

Then, there was exposure to experiences outside of the home. For example, when President Roosevelt's caravan came through town one winter, my mother bundled us all up and took us out to see the president. On another occasion, when my mother was working at the polls, she invited me into the polling place (which was probably against the rules), and actually let me pull the lever (which was definitely against the rules). The important thing was the emotionally powerful introduction I got to mainstream, adult activities.

Equally important was the protection of my aspirations and ideas. I remember, well at least I was told, that when I was about four years old, I said that I wanted to be a doctor, and my parents encouraged that dream. They bought me a toy doctor's kit. One day, a visitor said to my parents, "Why are you encouraging him to be a doctor? We are poor people. You know that he will never be a doctor." My mother said, "If you say that one more time, you will have to leave this house!"

On another occasion, when I was in about fifth grade, a student transferred into our school. She said that she knew my mother. I was curious so when I got home, I asked my mother how the girl knew her. My mother said: "I worked for her mother many years ago." She could immediately see that this was a problem for me. She said, "You know, you are just as clean as she is, you are just as smart as she is and you can do just as well." And then she looked at me only as my mother could do, and said, "And you had better!"

We were also part of a church community, which was warm and supportive
like my home. There, my father, the Sunday School Superintendent, expected every one to arrive on time. People would run to make sure they got there on time. My father refused to give us special treatment. On one occasion, he was the Baptist Young Peoples' Bible Drill moderator. The idea behind the drill was to find the verse first. My sister had found the verse, was about to give it and somebody whispered the answer. My father disallowed her answer. My sister thought that she should get a break because he was her father. Not my father, what is fair is fair, is fair always. My point is that we caught the values that were modeled in that environment. It was not taught, it was caught. This is critically important for children.

Yet I was like most eleven year olds. In spite of all that support, I could get in trouble. Once, I was curiously exploring my environment and was about to get into trouble. Before I got home my father knew what I was up to. I was fortunate that I had one of those progressive fathers, who did not spank me, but said to me, "You know if you want to be respected by the people in your church and the people in your neighborhood, there are certain things you can do and there are certain things you just cannot do." So because I wanted to be respected, I did not do those things-well, at least not where anybody could see me! The point I am making is that the entire community was locked into a conspiracy to make certain that I grew up to become a responsible, contributing citizen.

The school was a natural part of the community because school people could be seen in the grocery store, post office and other local public places. Because of my pre-school experiences at home and in the community, I was prepared to go to school ready for learning and able to elicit positive responses from school staff. I got some support for this notion when I went home a few years ago to visit my mother in the hospital. There, I encountered my first grade teacher, then a spry 80 plus year old volunteer at the hospital. She threw her arms around me and she said, "Oh, my, little James!" I was 55, but of course you are always "little James" to your first grade teacher. Then she stepped back and said, "Oh, we just loved the Comer children. They came to school bright-eyed and eager to learn."

Now this type of response is exactly what my friends did not receive. They had not been given the support at home that enabled them to elicit such responses, and as a result, they had difficult interactions in school. I remember one occasion when the school had a contest intended to teach us how to use the library. It was a reading contest, in which we had to read as many books as we could. I won the contest by reading the most books. But my three friends, the only other Black youngsters in the class, did not read any books. My teacher was so frustrated and disappointed that she said, "If you three little colored boys do not want to be like the rest of us, you should not come to our schools." My friends felt rejection as a result of that, I am sure.

My teacher was not a diehard racist. She used to walk to school with me hand-in-hand every day. But she was simply not prepared to respond to that situation. If she had known that these were the grandchildren of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who were intimidated by mainstream institutions, systems, and ways, she would have taken them by the hand to the library and helped them succeed.

I was vulnerable when I went off to college and experienced significant racial prejudice. For example, in English Composition the professor would grade the exams anonymously and then read the best paper at the beginning of class. Once, he was reading my composition as the best. Midway through, he questioned, "Whose paper is this?" I was the only Black kid in the class. I raised my hand, and from that point on he ripped it apart, line for line. As a result of this and other incidents, I made almost all C's the first year, which was not good enough to remain a pre-med student.

My response demonstrates the importance of family, community and the strength that they provide. I was devastated because my family expected me to succeed, but I did not fall apart. That summer I went back home and visited every "sister" from our church who had helped to rear me. I was tapping the good feelings and good experiences of my community. When I went back to college I stayed on the Honor Roll from that point on.

Also at college, I noted that there were a number of successful Black students, despite the fact that other Black students of the same ability level avoided the classroom setting, played cards, flunked out and went home. Many of those in my Black fraternity were among this successful group. I also noticed that many of the men in my fraternity were from the same kind of background as myself-from strong families and a warm supportive church culture that was important to them. Young people need a supportive culture around them in order to succeed in school. The kind of community that I grew up in has all but disappeared. And it has disappeared because of changes that have taken place in our society very rapidly and very recently.

Let us focus on change. Human beings have been on earth more than five million years and there has been very little change from generation to generation until the last one hundred and fifty years. Within the last century, we have gone from horse and buggy to automobile, jet plane, and interplanetary rocket levels of technology. Yet, the needs of children have not changed at all. They still need to be protected, supported, and guided in order to succeed.

In recent times, more than ever before, we need our children to achieve high levels of education. In the past, only a few needed to succeed at a high level because most people could be swept into an economy that did not require an education: the farm, the factory, the waterfront, and a variety of other jobs that no longer exist. Today 90 to 95 percent of young people must be able to get a good education in order to earn a living, take care of themselves, their families and meet all of their adult responsibilities. In order to do that through education, children need a higher level of development.

The experiences young people have today are very different from the ones that I had. For example, when my daughter was about four years of age, my wife and I were both working and we had a housekeeper who liked to watch the soaps with my daughter. I was packing one day to leave for a trip and my little four-year-old very solemnly shook her finger at me and said, "Now don't you have an affair!" She was four; I was sixteen before I knew what an affair was! (It is ironic that she is now an actress, and her first small part in Hollywood was on "Days of Our Lives"). The point I am making is that today's children see more, hear more, and know more than ever before. And yet they are no more mature than the children before them. This is the first time in history that information goes directly to children, rather than through the important authority figures who can censor the information, and censure them for acting inappropriately on that information.

Because of family breakdown, poverty, and the fact that many people are busy, many children are not receiving the kind of support that they need during this time when high-level development is essential. Many children come to school unprepared for the challenge, and too many people in school are not prepared to support their development. In fact, the whole school structure is not set up to support development.

Let us now focus on our work in the School Development Program, started thirty years ago as a response to the underdevelopment of our children. As part of an intervention project, we went into schools that were not functioning well and we realized that the major reason was a difficult interaction between home and school, due to underdeveloped children and unprepared staff. Everybody was defeated-parents, teachers, children-and everybody was defensive. At the same time though, everybody wanted to succeed.

We had explosions. We were almost blown out of the school. In order to survive, we created a governance and management team that was representative of all the players-parents, teachers, administrators, and students.

The nine elements of the School Development Program grew out of the needs that we observed. The School Planning and Management Team (SPMT) was charged with the responsibility of developing a Comprehensive School Plan that covered both social and academic areas, as well as coordinating staff development to achieve school goals. Assessment and Modification took place on an ongoing basis. The Parent Team was a mechanism through which parents could support the school plan. And the Mental Health Team, now called the Student and Staff Support Team, in addition to helping individual children, was given the role of reminding everybody to "think development," and focus all on important questions, such as: What do children need to succeed in school, and what do their behaviors mean?

Beyond delegation of responsibility to teams, we had to change the culture of the school-the way people behaved and the way that they thought. In schools that are not going well, there is a lot of fighting and conflict; everybody blames everybody else. So we came up with the idea of the "no-fault" environment. You do not blame anybody, rather you find solutions to the problems. We also implemented consensus decision-making rather than voting. When you have a vote, you have a winner and a loser and the loser says, "You won, you do it." This causes lack of support and leads finally to paralysis, preventing collaboration.

What we did, in short, was to recreate community in school-one like the community which existed in a natural way outside of school thirty years before. And it was this restored community that supported the development of children, permitting teaching and learning at a much higher level.

Over time, the School Development Program has had very good outcomes. When we first entered two New Haven, Connecticut schools, they were 32nd and 33rd in academic achievement out of 33 schools, and had the worst attendance and behavior in the city. After our intervention, the schools rose to be tied for 3rd and 4th in academic achievement. They were first in the city in attendance and had no serious behavior problems.

In recent years, we have had similar successes in other cities. For example, one school in Virginia went from 24th to 1st in academic achievement in their district. Unfortunately though, these successes are not always sustained if problematic action is taken by the district. In the case of Virginia, the central office did not believe the test scores. "Those students" were not supposed to do better than doctors' children and other professionals' children in the city. So they tested them again. The children did better the second time than they did the first. Then the tragedy occurred; they took twelve senior people from that school, moved them all over the place, and sent in a principal who was not trained to implement the model. Of course the scores went

down.

An example of a better transition is in a school that rose from 34th to 1st in academic achievement. In the case of this school, the district leadership moved the principal who had helped make success happen to work with many other schools. But they also properly trained a new principal and did not turn over the staff. That school was number one again this past year. So it can be done.

But the point I am making is that our institutions have not adjusted in the way that they can and must in order to make it possible for all children to learn. This is due, in my opinion, to the fact that schools reflect the attitudes of the larger society, especially the popular attitude that success is a matter of intelligence, not a matter of development. Our culture still believes that if you pour information down the heads of children, those with the best brains will get it. We also believe that anybody who is bright enough can teach, that teaching is no more than passing on information. And as a result of that, we do not adequately invest in our schools. We do not train, select, or support teachers well, and we do not give them the time to work together collaboratively.

As a young psychiatrist, I was in the playroom with a youngster that we called the "wild child," because she was absolutely impossible. One day, she threatened to throw paint on my suit. It was the only suit I had, so I rushed to my supervisor to try to figure out what to do. He said, "She likes you." I could not imagine how she could show that she liked me by throwing paint on me. But I had to save my suit, so I did what he said. He had suggested that "...the next time she threatens, you might say, "You know, if you throw that paint, I will be so angry that I won't want to play with you.'" I could not see how that would stop the wild child, but I said it, and sure enough, her arm came down very gradually and she never tried it again.

It is important to note here that I had a supervisor. I had a senior mentor out there supporting me; someone who could help me understand what was going on and how to handle the situation in a way so that I survived and was able to help the child. Teachers are out on the front line every day with all kinds of problems and there is nobody to help them. That is why so many leave the profession. It is a very serious situation that we must change.

There are people who are doing a great job in schools. At the same time there are people doing a terrible job-some because they have not been trained, and some because they have the wrong attitude and simply should not be in education in the first place. We must address both situations.

Better support for education would help. But there is another great problem-the one I keep talking about-that is the absence of child development knowledge in the hearts and minds of so many teachers simply because it was not a part of their training. and it was not a part of the way they grew up. They reflect that lack of knowledge when they are there on the front line. In many schools of education, even today, you can graduate with just one course in child development. Often that course is taken on campus in the school of education, not involving any applied work in schools. Some teachers receive no child development training at all.

Recently I spoke at a school of education and a child development professor told me that a principal came to her and said, "Why do I have to take this course? I'm going to be a principal?" The professor said "If it were up to me, this would be the only course that you would take." The lack of understanding of how important child development really is, and how much we need to know, and how we need to be able to apply it to everything that goes on in schools is a huge problem. The adjustment and the changes needed are very difficult, not only because of the economic, political, and organizational interests, but primarily because of our cultural beliefs. The competitive and defensive blaming postures that we get into in our culture complicate this situation even further.

I discovered when I was writing my book, *Maggie's American Dream*, that the schools in Denmark were based on knowledge of development. I went to Denmark to observe. When I came back I realized that I had not asked one important question: What do you do with bad teachers and how do you get rid of them? I asked the people I had observed to write to me with an answer. After a long period, they finally called and explained that the process was too difficult to explain in writing. We arranged a telephone call.

In short, what the people in Denmark said was that a cultural difference makes it difficult to explain. The caller said, "We do not have many bad teachers." I asked, "How is that?" She replied, "Because the union selects the teachers and they would not want to do anything harmful to the children. That would give them a bad reputation. They make the recommendation to the city council and the city council appoints the teachers." I said, "But somebody's mother or sister or somebody needs a job, doesn't that happen?" The caller replied, "The city council would not hire a weak teacher. They would not want to harm the children." I said, "But what happens when somebody manages to get through and is not effective?" She said, "All the other teachers who work in the group will work together to help that teacher. They want every teacher to be successful because they do not want to hurt the

children."

Over and over, the focus was on the children - no nepotism, no blame, no power struggles. And over and over in the United States, the focus is on what the parents want, what the teachers want, what the union wants, and on and on.

Let me close by outlining three thrusts that we must make. First of all, we must address the problems of marginalized children, families, and communities in our society. Secondly, we must change the structures and processes in school that create the negative conditions that I am talking about. And finally, we must change our cultural beliefs.

How do we help the children who have been marginalized? Many middle income children gain what they need to succeed in school simply by living with and growing up with their parents. Many low-income children in particular are marginal to the mainstream. We can change that by giving children mainstream experiences in school. To do so, we must develop what I call the new school where we focus on physical health, mental health, and child development in the service of academic learning. We must protect programs that we now call recreation (such as the arts and athletics), but that really provide constructive self-expression opportunities. We must bring all of these programs and services together in the school in order to connect children to the mainstream. We can then teach the social skills necessary to prepare them for mainstream participation. We, of course, must not just accept the mainstream as it is, but change it if necessary so that it works for everybody.

How do we enable our institutions to promote child development? I suggest that we need an Education Extension Service very much like the Agricultural Extension Service of a hundred years ago. Education is today to the economy what agriculture was to the economy a hundred years ago. And if we really want to move ahead, we have got to help people change who are out there working in ways that are destructive and harmful.

We must also change our leadership training. In Denmark, you cannot elect to get a degree that makes you eligible to become a principal. You are selected because you have shown leadership talent as a teacher. Then you go to be trained. We have too many going into educational leadership because they are not successful teachers. We have got to change leadership and leadership academies so that they are focused on helping educators learn to help children develop.

Authorities charged with the responsibility for improving schools need more clout. School functioning should become the responsibility of the courts. We should have a system where the courts can insist that schools will change and begin to use the methods and practices that have been demonstrated to bring about that change. There are many things going on in schools that work. We must use these best practices.

Today, there are many teachers in schools, especially those teaching math and science, and those in poor communities, who are not qualified to teach, or who are teaching outside their discipline. Nobody should be teaching in an area in which they were not trained to teach. Until we vigorously expose and address this and other problems, we are going to continue to have underachieving schools. This denies children their civil rights. That is why we need to have the courts involved.

Finally, we cannot bring about these changes unless we counter the culture that makes it all right to have poor Black kids, poor Hispanic kids, and isolated White kids underachieve, and create a culture where they are expected to do well. Until we change the belief that "these kids can't"-which many people still hold-we are not going to get the kind of changes in schools needed for all children. We need what I call a "Human Capital Development Movement" to really bring about change. Change is difficult, but it has been brought about before in our society in very resistant areas: racial segregation, smoking, and other areas. We must help all children to gain a good education.

It takes time. But we must hurry because time is running out, believe it or not. We cannot continue to have the "haves" and "have-nots" move farther and farther apart. In these days of media communications, where the "have-nots" can see what the "haves" possess, they are not going to tolerate it. The more dependent we are on technology, the more vulnerable we are to expressions of discontent. If we do not change now, in thirty years we are going to be in a condition that none of us would like to see. The only solution to the "have v. have-not" problem is education.

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James P. Comer, M.D., M.P.H., the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center, has been a Yale medical faculty member since 1968. During these years, he has concentrated his career on promoting a focus on child development as a way of improving schools. His efforts in support of healthy development of young people are known internationally.

Dr. Comer, perhaps, is best known for the founding of the Comer School Development Program in 1968, which promotes the collaboration of parents, educators, and community to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for children that, in turn, helps them achieve greater school success. His concept of teamwork is improving the educational environment in more than 500 schools throughout America.

A prolific writer, Dr. Comer has authored seven books, including *Beyond Black and White*, 1972; *Black Child Care* (with Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint) 1975; paperback revision of *Raising Black Children*, 1992; *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project*, 1980; the autobiographical *Maggie's American Dream: the Life and Times of a Black Family*, 1988; *Rallying the Whole Village*, (edited with Dr. Michael Ben-Avie, Dr. Norris M. Haynes, and Dr. Edward T. Joyner), 1996; and the newly published, *Waiting for a Miracle: Why Schools Can't Solve Our Problems, And How We Can*, 1997; and *Child by Child* (edited with Dr. Michael Ben-Avie, Dr. Norris M. Haynes, and Dr. Edward T. Joyner) 1999. Between 1978 and 1994, Dr. Comer wrote more than 150 articles for Parents magazine and more than 300 syndicated articles on children's health and development and race relations.

Since 1971, Dr. Comer has served as Director or Trustee of the following Boards: Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT (1978-1984); Albertus Magnus College, New Haven, CT (1989-2000); Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY (1999-present); the Hazen Foundation, New Haven, CT (1974-1978); the Field Foundation, New York, NY (1981-1988); the Carnegie Corporation of New York, New York, NY (1990-1994); Connecticut Savings Bank (1971-1991); the Connecticut Energy Corporation, Bridgeport, CT (1976-2000); and the National Academy Foundation, New York, NY (1993-1998).

For his work and his scholarship, Dr. Comer has been awarded 40 honorary degrees and has been recognized by many organizations. In 1996, he won both the prestigious Heinz Award in the Human Condition for his profound influence on disadvantaged children, and the Healthtrac Foundation Prize. Other honors include the Charles A. Dana Award for Pioneering Achievement in Education, 1991; the James Bryant Conant Award, presented by the Education Commission of the States, 1991; the Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Prize in Education given by McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1990; a Special Presidential Commendation from the American Psychiatric Association, 1990; the Rockefeller Public Service Award, 1980; and the John and Mary Markel Foundation Scholar Award in Academic Medicine, 1969-1974.
