

THE COMER SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The School Development Program (SDP) is the organization charged with implementing the Comer Process in school communities. The Comer Process, a school and system-wide intervention formulated in 1968 by Dr. James P. Comer, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center, aims to bridge child psychiatry and education.

Of all the prominent educational reformers, only James Comer talks about healthy child development as the keynote to academic achievement and life success. Dr. Comer uses the metaphor of six developmental pathways to characterize the lines along which children mature – physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical. The SDP school community uses the six developmental pathways as a framework for making decisions that will benefit children.

Founding Assumptions

The Comer Process is based on certain key assumptions:

- Due to a lack of developmental support in their homes and communities, many of today's children come to school with developmental gaps that impair their ability to learn.
- While more children come to school with experience deficits, we expect all students to meet the high standards dictated by today's workplace and citizenship needs.
- The School Development Program recognizes and addresses the experience deficit that inhibits the development of many of today's children. On the other hand, the SDP does not accept the academic deficit theory that leads to tracking and lowered expectations of minority and ESL students.
- The Comer Process is based on the premise that all students can reach high levels of academic achievement. They are entitled to the opportunity to reach their highest potential.
- Academic learning rests on a foundation of solid development along six pathways critical to human development. These Six Developmental Pathways are the physical, psychological, language, social, ethical and cognitive pathways.
- For students with experience deficits to learn to their highest potential, schools must provide them with the developmental opportunities they lack.
- Schools cannot meet this challenge alone, but can mobilize other adult stakeholders, including parents, to help meet the developmental needs of the students.

How it Works

The Comer Process is a comprehensive educational reform strategy based on the principles of child, adolescent and adult development. It provides a structure as well as a process for mobilizing teachers, administrators, parents and other concerned adults to support students' personal social and academic growth. It also helps them make better

programmatic and curriculum decisions based on students' needs and on developmental principles.

It is a different way of conceptualizing and working in schools and replaces traditional school organization and management with an operating system that works for schools and the students they serve. The following three structures comprise the basic framework on which the Comer Process operating system 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 a counselor, social worker, psychologist, or nurse.
- [The Parent Team](#) involves parents in the school by developing activities through which the parents can support the school's social and academic programs. Composed of parents, 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**—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 & Modification** that provides new information and identifies new opportunities based on the data of the school's population

An Operating System

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 highly positive school climate, stability and an instructional focus that supports all of the school's curriculum and renewal efforts.

In its second generation, the Comer Process has evolved into a systemic reform program as well as a school reform program. While still bringing change to one school at a time, the program has been expanded to the district level. This new systemic focus is based on experience that shows the process works best when the "community" of support for each school includes the central office and school board.

Research and Evaluation

The School Development Program has a substantial history of evaluation and research, both by its own staff and by outside 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; and even meta-analyses have also been performed.

Studies of Comer Schools conducted by the SDP and by independent researchers indicate significant effects on school climate, student attendance, and student achievement. (The ***SDP was identified*** by Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown (2003) ***as one of three school reform models proven to increase student achievement***, based on an extensive meta-analysis of the research on 29 widely implemented comprehensive school reform programs.) 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 child as the center of the education process.

Research has also shown that in schools where the Comer Process was followed 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 were significantly more improved for Comer students than for non-Comer students. In addition, recent research shows that the systemic implementation of the SDP in districts has resulted in the dramatic reduction of the achievement gap between black and white students while increasing the academic achievement of both groups.

Recent books include *Leave No Child Behind* by James P. Comer and *Comer Schools in Action*, a three volume field guide edited by James P. Comer, Edward T. Joyner and Michael Ben-Avie. For additional information on the School Development Program, please visit our website at www.schooldevelopmentprogram.org.