

## **Building Relationships: Comer's Plan to Assure We Leave No Child Behind**

*Frances K. Kochan*

James Comer's book *Leave No Child Behind* begins with a captivating chapter entitled "Right Church, Wrong Pew," in which he establishes the foundational principle that education and schools are about relationships. Here he reminds us that the powerful belief that we must "leave no child behind" came from the Children's Defense Fund and must go beyond bureaucratic notions of federal policy focused on standardized testing, to center instead on building strong relationships within the schools and between the school and the community in order to meet children's needs and prepare them for the world of tomorrow.

The book details 35 years of implementation of Comer's School Development Program in elementary schools. He chose not to include his work in middle and high schools because there were some differences between that and his work at the elementary level, and he wanted to present a comprehensive view of the process.

The book is organized into twelve chapters. The first three deal with the realities of schools today and how the project was initiated. In these chapters he points to the misplaced blame by legislators and others who suggest that problems in schools are caused by students, parents, and/or school staffs, while problems continue and "the needs of children are not being met."

Comer's developmental process for initiating his program is unique because it began by having he and his staff "living in two schools" to really understand

them in a deep and meaningful way. This experience led them to the conclusion that school staffs, parents, and students all want to succeed. They used their year to “search for the underlying problems, which in turn led to the construction of a model that permitted school-based participants to engage in prevention, problem solving, and learning-promotion activities.”

These chapters contain voices from the schools that are both poignant and revealing. For example, we are confronted with the story of a child whose mother abuses him. When asked what he would want her to do, he responds, “I just want her to hug me.” When given this information, the mother refuses to respond to her son’s request. The power of these stories draws the reader into the book and into the realities that schools and children are facing.

Comer adds his own voice to the book through a touching chapter about his childhood and the strength of his African American family who “wanted and valued him.” He came from a poor background and his neighbors chided his parents for suggesting that he could become a doctor. He attributes his success to their willingness to set high expectations and help him believe in himself. Comer reminds us of the vital importance of good parenting skills and the value of high expectations for all children; he stresses that it is also important that the community have these values.

Chapter 4 presents an overview of the context of the society in which schools must function, which helps the reader to gain a deeper understanding of why some of the problems exist that have separated schools and communities. The fifth chapter describes the data collection and analysis processes used by the research team as they sought to live and learn in schools so that, ultimately, the students there would succeed.

Chapters 6-10 deal with the development and implementation of his school model which is built around a new paradigm. He stresses that the paradigm of thinking and action in schools is built around the concepts of intelligence and will. He proposes a new approach, built instead around the framework of support for development which includes a broad range of players working together to support each child’s development toward full potential.

The book is refreshing as the author shares the good and the bad, reminding us that change is a difficult process that requires time and commitment. His honesty helps the reader understand the realities of the experience and the passion and resolve that are required to create change and assure success. His openness will resonate with all who believe in schools functioning as communities to meet the needs of children and families in our society.

The last two chapters present thoughtful insights about our present situation in schools and society and caution us to fight against inertia, political rhetoric, and other barriers that can block progress toward creating schools

that are humane, caring, and successful. He reminds us that changing schools and assuring that we “leave no child behind” must begin with a passion for and belief in the underlying premises contained in this statement. Likewise, such change requires investing oneself in the process and context, along with a long-term commitment that encompasses good times and bad.

Comer’s writing is always inviting and his use of specific examples of real situations in school settings make his message a powerful reminder of the possibilities for success that lie within our reach if we will commit and work together to assure success for all. *Leave No Child Behind* is a stirring book that should be read by all who believe that our children are precious gems who must be prepared to make a better tomorrow for themselves and all who will come after them.

## References

Comer, J. P. (2004). *Leave No Child Behind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (ISBN 0-300-10391-3)

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