The Impact of Dr. Comer’s Work Has Been Extraordinary
Hugh B. Price

Editor’s Note: The following is an edited excerpt from the keynote speech given by Hugh B. Price on July 16, 1998 at the 6th Annual Patrick Francis Daly Memorial Awards for Excellence in Educational Leadership. At the time he was the President and CEO of the National Urban League.

I am deeply honored to be in the presence of the family of Patrick Francis Daly who was truly a remarkable educator. Your presence here is a powerful affirmation, not only of his life, but of the work that he was about, the work of the School Development Program.

Dr. Comer and I go way, way back. As a matter of fact, I think farther back than perhaps he even realizes. My mother-in-law, Dr. Ruth Lloyd, taught every physician who went through Howard University over the course of about forty years, and Dr. Comer was one of her students. My father taught there also, and Dr. Comer was one of his students. My wife Marilyn and I lived in New Haven from 1963 to 1978. In 1968 we moved to Ford Street and felt a little trepidation about sending our daughter Traer over to Martin Luther King School, because the first year Dr. Comer and his team went in there, things really didn’t go all that well. They hired a bunch of bright, young people with Masters of Arts in Teaching and did not rely on any veteran educators. I’m sure they’ve repressed the memory, but when the children had to go to the bathroom, they just got up and walked across the desks, and walked to the bathroom. It was sheer chaos. So Dr. Comer reconstituted the faculty, brought in a number of wonderful veteran teachers, including May Edmonds and others. Traer entered the school that second year, and it was a marvelous experience.

We were pioneers in Martin Luther King School. As the association continued, our families became fast friends. Jim became a real counselor and mentor to me in everything that I ever did. We reconnected most powerfully at the Rockefeller Foundation when I got there in 1988, to try to figure out how Rockefeller could provide support to the School Development Program. We struck up a powerful relationship when I served on a Carnegie Corporation task force that Jim co-chaired. The task force produced a landmark report called A Matter of Time that documented the critical importance of after-school programs in the lives of young people.

The impact of Dr. Comer’s work has been extraordinary. The impact of the work of every one of you in this room has been remarkable. You are reshaping the way we think about education in this country. I don’t know that you even begin to appreciate the impact that you are having by believing so powerfully in this approach and by showing what can be done. For one thing, you have helped the country come to understand that focusing on the overall development of young people is critically important. Many people now know that you cannot
concentrate solely on academic achievement without thinking about the readiness of a young person to receive instruction and to engage in the process of learning. Employers like General Motors understand this. To become autoworkers, General Motors requires people to pass reading, math, and spatial relation tests. Then you have to pass a drug test. If you pass all of those tests, you are then assigned to small groups of other folks who have passed those tests, and you are given three hours to work on improving the productivity of a part of a typical assembly line. Think about the skill set that is required to get a job as a modern-day autoworker. Not only must you have the academic skills to pass all of those tests, but you must also have the social skills to function as a team member. You have to have had a healthy developmental experience so that you steered clear of the allure of drugs. To get a job as a modern-day autoworker you must have all of the kinds of skills that the School Development Program is about.

You have taught us about the critical importance of linking parent engagement with professional education. That is something that is now spreading across the land, and much of that understanding came out of your work. You represent what social scientists refer to as "existence proofs." You prove that urban schools can indeed work extraordinarily well, and that the young people who society would tend to write off, who Charles Murray doesn't think are capable of learning, can, in fact, be fully competitive. Having those existence proofs is critically important because it enables advocates like me to pound away and say that the fundamental assumptions that schools can't work and young people can't learn are absolutely wrong. The responsibility is with the adults in our society, not with our children.

You have also contributed powerfully to a growing understanding of the importance of youth development in our society. It wasn't too many years ago that we tended to disparage after-school and summer programs that weren't purely educational in nature. But through the developmental work of Dr. Comer, through your work, you have demonstrated the value of those efforts. We are beginning to see a growing understanding of the importance of supplemental development experiences in our society. When we worked on the report A Matter of Time, there was almost no hard evidence about the importance of those kinds of experiences for young people, but the developmental theory which Dr. Comer kept pounding at, that your experiences affirmed, has finally begun to translate into hard evidence.

We now know that the after-school hours of 3:00 to 6:00 are prime time for teen sex and teen crime. It was very important to have that evidence because now we can say that if this society is concerned about out-of-wedlock births and youth violence, we have an answer. We now know that the involvement of young people in those kinds of programs can boost their academic achievement. In other words, with the evidence that has come from the philosophical base that you have established, those of us who advocate for the expansion of after-school programs are armed and dangerous on this
subject. Your work helped to inform an entire Public Service Announcement campaign that the National Urban League launched called "Time to Beat the Streets." Kids are shown hanging off a big clock at 3:00 with a voiceover about the importance of youth development. Those PSAs have appeared on television networks, in newspapers, and on the big screen in Times Square in New York City. All of your work has contributed to the growing understanding in our society that we must invest in prevention.

One of the many challenges we must face is what to do about schools that just don't work and about the adults in those schools who have lost hope. I've read a few assessments of the SDP schools and other schools where adults have given up. What are we as a society and you as professional educators doing about schools that are beyond repair, and about the adults in those buildings whose relationships with one another are beyond repair? How do we extricate the adults, or at least the children, from those situations?

Another challenge is how to embed in future generations of teachers an understanding of how to teach the young people that you serve so very well. We must make sure that teachers understand content. There's no way that you can teach a child algebra if you don't know it yourself. We know from all the research that as many as half of the teachers in many urban schools don't have mastery of content. In Massachusetts, they recently tested all the new teachers who were applying for licenses, and 60% of them failed the test. The state did what schools often do when they discover this kind of problem: they lowered their standards. But the word got out and now it's a big scandal.

Also, how do you embed in teachers an understanding of how to teach bright, young people who are jittery? Think about the youngsters who are not going to sit still for another talk. How do you engage those youngsters in the process of learning? You have a lot to contribute to that issue. One of our challenges is to figure out how you can give back to schools of education so that future generations of teachers know what you're doing. This same challenge applies to professional development. There is no way that schools can function effectively if teachers have to grind it out eight hours a day in the classroom. We've got to create space in their lives so that they can retool, learn, test and practice. How does the body of knowledge that you have get incorporated into the professional development experiences of educators who will never call themselves Comer educators, but who can be powerfully influenced by what you know?

That leads to a question that I know is before all of us: How do we exploit technology to share knowledge? I urge all of you to think about how to use technology most powerfully. At the Urban League we have, in effect, created our own video network on the Internet. We have already broadcast live two major meetings that drew five to six thousand people. Imagine pulling up a website where you can see what is actually transpiring. We have gotten a grant to broadcast our entire annual conference live on the Internet. There are ways in
which a lot of what you have to share can be sent out across systems for powerful learning. Technology is moving very, very fast, it's potent, and it may be part of the answer to the challenges you face.

Ed Joyner and I were talking about the fact that some school districts are under such acute pressure to raise test scores that they have lost patience with more process-oriented reforms. You are not going to be able to do a lot about that. We have to figure out how to make sure that your program is as much about driving the things that the political process is paying attention to as it is about the full development of young people. We're all up against the fact that there is tremendous pressure simply to dismantle the public schools as we know them.

We are headed into a period where the real contest is not going to be between those who advocate for vouchers and those who believe in public education. In the near term, the war that will matter will be between the forces of renewal and the forces of inertia in public education. Whoever wins that war will determine the fate of American public education. If the forces of inertia win, you can forget about public education, because low-income parents, minority parents, will become increasingly impatient, and will start to opt for alternatives.

Lastly, we've got to figure out how to deal with the increasing inclination of Americans to just not care. We not only have gated communities, we have gated mindsets. I saw a wonderful cartoon in the New Yorker in which people were walking up to a zoo and the sign said, “This is a gated community for animals. That's where we are. At the Urban League, we are attempting to respond to these challenges by mounting a campaign for African-American achievement. To summon all of the villagers back to active duty, we have formed a coalition with the African-American churches, the fraternities and sororities, and the tenant associations, to mount this campaign.

We are trying to spread the gospel that achievement matters, so that parents and young people really embrace that message. We are doing that by designating the month of September as Achievement Month, and we are staging huge rallies to celebrate young people who are doing the right thing. We are asking ministers to preach about the importance of achievement from the pulpit every Sunday.

In late April we created a National Honor Society for our youngsters called the Thurgood Marshall Achievers’ Society. On the 25th of April we inducted 2,500 young people in twenty-five cities across the country at cotillion-like events in churches. Organizations nominated young people who had B averages or better for induction into this society. We have created a national achievement gang for our children. We expect this to grow and grow. In Gary, Indiana, they inducted 1,369 youngsters. There were 4,000 people at the induction ceremony. Imagine the power of having thousands of young people in a given community who are part of this Achievers’ Society with their own jackets, their
own colors, their own stripes, and the like. We are also going to be leaning on the schools by creating a market demand for improved schools. We want all the parents whose children are inducted into the Achievers' Society to get really angry if there aren't qualified teachers in the schools, and if their children aren't taking the challenging courses that we all know they are capable of handling. We are endeavoring to reactivate all the elements of the village in order to make sure that our children achieve.

We have got to find the right answers to this challenge because it is too tempting for others to write off the children that we all care about. Last August I read in the *New York Times* magazine section one of the most disturbing articles I have ever read. It was written by Irving Kristol, a neo-conservative, who said that America has an acute shortage of highly productive workers who can pay the Social Security bills of the Baby Boomers who will be retiring. He said there are two policy solutions to this problem. One is for productive people—that's a code word—to have more kids, and the other is to import more highly skilled immigrants. The solution of investing in the education and development of children of color in America's cities and rural communities was not on his radar screen at all. We have to do something about that. There are lots of jobs available in this society. Fortunately the demographic trends in our society are moving in the right direction, because employers will be increasingly dependent upon young people of color who are well prepared. We are also headed, however, into a world that is more unforgiving than we have seen probably since before the Depression. This is the most callous era in this country in the 20th century because we just don't care anymore.

You have the answers and you are the "existence proofs." I am delighted to have been able to share this evening with you, delighted to pay tribute to Jim Comer and the staff of the School Development Program who are seminal figures, and delighted to see so many Patrick Francis Daly honorees because you are the authentic heroes in this country today. Thank you very much.