Waiting for a Miracle
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Editor’s note: The following is an edited transcript of the keynote address given by James P. Comer, M.D., M.P.H. at the 4th Annual Patrick Francis Daly Memorial Awards for Excellence in Educational Leadership on July 11, 1996 at the Hartford Club in Hartford, Connecticut. The majority of those in attendance were principals participating in the 1996 School Development Program Principals’ Academy.

You are all critically important people in your schools, in your communities, in society. Education has become tremendously important in modern society. The opportunity to participate in the economy, to become constructive, productive citizens, and good community and family functioning depend on good education. And it all starts at a critical point of transference between the teacher and the child. The principal creates the permeable membrane that makes that transfer possible. The principal creates the condition in a school that make it possible for teachers every day to help young people grow up, develop, learn, and become productive citizens. No matter what we do in education, if a principal does not create the necessary context, the transfer of knowledge and motivation from teacher to child will not take place. You are all very important to many people and to the welfare of the country.

Now given that importance, you would think that society would pay great attention to principals and would provide the support, the attention, the care and feeding necessary; and yet as we all know, society does not do that. It does the opposite, and then, when there are problems, principals are blamed.

I’d like to tell you about the book I am writing entitled Waiting for a Miracle: Schools Are Not the Major Problem that grew out of a search that has been going on almost all of my life and includes my work with the School Development Program. Most of you know my background, but I think that I want to tell it again because it is part of the search. I grew up as a low-income kid, and my mother was a child of abuse. Together, my mother and father, with no education, made it possible for me and my four siblings to gain thirteen college degrees. My friends went on a downhill course in the same neighborhood. The question started right there, particularly when I went back home planning to become a general practitioner: What happened to me compared to my friends?

I began to realize that my friends did not receive the kind of support for development that I received at home, which included involvement in a church culture that was supportive, that gave my family purpose, meaning, and direction. My mother learned mainstream skills as a domestic with mainstream families, and that combination made it possible for us to make it in a mainstream, tough, demanding school. So I started questioning what happened to my friends and how we can stop that from happening to many, many low-income children. Today we are seeing it happening to more middle-income children and more children in general. Now the question for me is: What has
been going on in our society that is claiming so many victims and taking so many people on a downhill course?

Despite the fact that we have helped to change many school so that they work for children, you still have newspapers saying that no schools are working. You still have politicians saying that it is not possible to change those schools or to teach those children. Why is there so much resistance? Why is it that we say that it is important to educate our children, yet we don’t educate all our children? That is why I started writing the book.

I have organized the book into three sections. In the first section, I say that schools are not the major problem. As I see it, the major problem is that we are a culture of individualism run amok, and a culture of exclusion to the point that we did not invest in most of the people after World War II. When the economy changed, the people we didn’t invest in began to get into trouble. Instead of saying that we made policy errors, we began to blame it on people. The most vulnerable people in society, because of our peculiar history, were African Americans, and so we said as a society, it is not a societal problem, it is simply an African-American problem. We waited and the problems are out of hand. The teenage pregnancy rate, or out-of-wedlock pregnancy rate that Moynihan wrote about 25 years ago as a black family problem, is now the rate for the white population of the country. Many of the problems we once called black family or black community problems are now problems widespread in the country.

By scapegoating and blaming we did not focus on problem solving, and we still can’t focus on problem solving because we’re too busy trying to make certain that our divide-and-conquer tactics work and stay in place. As a result of that, we’re getting into more and more trouble as a society. We blame African-American and other minority communities. We blame schools. We blame poor people in general. We have demonized those groups in a way that keeps society from focusing on the kind of health care we need, the kind of schools we need, the kind of child care we need, the kind of support for families, and development of communities that we need. Whenever politicians get into trouble, they distract people by pointing to or scapegoating the demons of the society.

That’s the way I see where we are. The question is how do we turn it around and focus on the real problems. It is very difficult, because scapegoating is very deep in our culture; it is the way we do things. Scapegoating is based on two myths that allow us to look at very, very bad conditions and blame it on the victims. The first myth is the notion that what you achieve in life is determined by your intelligence and your intelligence alone. That myth is very troublesome. What I tried to do in the middle section of the book was to take that myth apart and to show that what you achieve in life depends on your development, on your opportunity structure, and the support you receive for development in your life.

The second myth is that everybody else made it but African Americans. I tried to show that there was a very different experience for African Americans. The loss of culture,
the imposition of a slave culture, the consequences of being closed out of the economic mainstream, in particular after slavery, all contributed to outcomes and conditions that are very different from every other group. The divide and conquer tactic allows us to continue to ignore that reality.

In the third section I tried to deal with what we can do about this problem. How do we make it possible for people who have been playing the divide and conquer game to stop playing it? How do we make it possible for people who have been identifying with the powerful—often at the expense of their own basic needs—to focus on their own basic needs rather than directing their rage at minorities, the poor, and anybody else that the society can scape goat. I focused on three areas that need work. First, the African-American community itself and the entire society must figure out how we bring about inclusion, not only of African Americans but every other group in the country, so that people feel they are a part of society and that they have a right to be here. Much of the work has to be done by the African-American community, because the African-American community in many ways plays the role that the designated sick child plays in a dysfunctional family: ‘There’s nothing wrong with our family. Just take care of that kid and we’d be all right.’ That is much of the way it is handled in our larger society. So the African-American community has to find a way to turn itself from a community of protest, which it has been and necessarily, to a community that promotes inclusion on an ongoing, systematic basis.

Second, we have to develop schools that work for all of our children so we can create a good society. In 1983 Terrell Bell, then the U.S. Secretary of Education, described the crisis in education as a crisis across the board. I’m arguing that we don’t have one crisis, but at least three crises in education, or the other two are aspects of the major crisis. One crisis is that the children who are most privileged in this society have been so involved in being entertained that they are not working as hard as they need to work. There’s an awful lot of television and lots of other things that they are busy doing.

Another problem that has been neglected is that most Americans and most American young people are not being prepared to be citizens of a democratic society and have no idea what it means. Large numbers of children and young people don’t even know what the Fourth of July is all about. Many don’t vote and many see no reason to take civic responsibility. We are not doing something right when we have so many young people who are not participating in the civic mainstream.

The third and most serious crisis is the fact that many low-income children—children from families under economic and social stress—are not getting the education they need because their families are not able to give them the kind of support that they need, and they go into schools that too often are not geared to respond to their developmental needs. As we lose generation after generation of those children, and they pile up on the street corners and in the jails, we are creating a powder keg. The young people who stand on the street corner today have more fire power than all of the Roman armies put together and can do much more destruction in a very short
What is wrong with American education? There are lots of ideas, but I have six things that I think are the problems. First, we are a decentralized system of education without clear standards, without a clear mission, without the kind of coherence of legislative, academic, and social policy to support education at every level so that the classroom teacher is receiving a consistent message and consistent support to be able to respond to the child adequately. If we’re going to have a decentralized where decisions have to be made locally, then all of the people making those decisions have to be trained, selected, prepared, and supported in the same way that we train, select, and support the people who run the business institutions of this country. And we’re not doing it.

The second problem is that the funding for education based on a local tax base has created great disparities in the amount of money available from place to place. As a result of that, some districts look like very expensive college campuses and other districts look like Third World countries, and yet all of those children are expected to perform in the same world.

Third, we have a model of teaching and learning that is not based on what almost every psychologist, sociologist, and behavior scientist, or anyone who knows anything about children know. Children are not mechanical people. They are not instruments or computers, and yet the way teaching very often takes place across this country is by pouring information into the heads of children and expecting them to take it in and regurgitate it. It is a wrong and harmful model.

Also, because we don’t believe that education has anything to do with development, we are very ambivalent about development. We don’t believe in many cases that development is our job. When we first started our work years ago, there were many people who would say to us that our job is to teach children and parents should rear them. I would argue that all of us involved with children are child developers and that we have to develop them because it is good development that makes learning possible.

Finally, if education and learning is a mechanical process, then it doesn’t matter if the school is not an exciting place and the school isn’t part of the community. Children learn from books, they learn from computers and the like because any way you pour the knowledge into the child is okay. You can isolate the school in a way that is harmful.

And finally, if education is simply for employment and status rather than maturity and civic participation, then it is a boring process in which you gather bits and pieces of information necessary to pass certain exams so that you can get the jobs you want and think you deserve. In fact, you gain more information from television and computers and lots of other places than you gain in school, but you have to stay in
school in order to get those credentials and it’s a boring, unimportant place. Until we see the school as more than that, as a place where we help young people grow, develop, and organize the information they receive, learn how to use that information appropriately, learn how to get involved in civic and social responsibility, to be concerned about others, and to have meaningful experiences, then schools will continue to have trouble.

Those are the six issues that I see creating most of the problems that we have in education today. Many schools have been able to overcome many of these problems. You and I know that if you move one teacher, three teachers or two principals, you can make progress fall apart, because we don’t have a system across the board that prepares, trains, and supports educators on an ongoing basis and provides them with the kind of necessary development and investment.

We ask principals to serve as chief executive officers in these very, very complex systems with people of different races, people of different ethnic and religious groups. The school is the most complex institution in the world. Hospitals are not more complex. General Motors is nothing compared to public schools. You have a mission to help young people grow, and often it is not clear how you do that. It is one of the most demanding, difficult tasks of any institution, and yet we haven’t provided the kind of support for managing those institutions that leaders need.

Leaders are called up on to do far too much with far too little preparation. You are asked to have organizational theory and knowledge and to apply it to do all kinds of administrative and management tasks, and I dare say, most of you were not prepared in your training in school of education and even in your administrative preparation courses to do that. You’re also asked to be child developers, to be knowledgeable about human ecology, and how people behave and perform in institutions and to be able to intervene. You’re asked to be specialists in curriculum, instruction, assessment, technology utilization, how to bring all the materials and supplies and the like together. You’re also asked to be social workers, politicians, public relations workers, and you’re asked to do this in environments that are becoming increasingly difficult, environments sometimes full of crime, drugs, teenage pregnancy, a wide variety of problems. You are asked to overcome all of these things and make it possible for children to achieve at a high level and to succeed as citizens.

The country is fortunate that it has committed people who can work under very difficult circumstances and remain up and keep going in spite of the obstacles. I’m delighted that you’re able to do so, but we’ve got to change the attitudes and the belief systems in the society so that you will get more support and so that you and others will get the training which will make it possible for all of our children to achieve on an ongoing basis.

That is my hope and that is my prayer. You all are doing God’s work to help young people develop the kind of compassion, skills, and knowledge that will enable them to do good things in the world. We need all of that, because the year 2000, in my opinion,
is going to be a psychological watershed. The nations that go into the year 2000 having figured out how to make it possible for as many young people as possible to develop the skills they need to function well will go on an uphill course or continue to do well. The nations that go into the year 2000 not having figured it out and still talk about survival of the fittest and ‘tickle down’ are going to have difficulty, and it will be sow at first, but in one or two more generations, we will go on a quick downhill course. We have got to make a difference. We have got to create a movement. All of the people involved in education and human services and the like must get the country to understand that we must develop our children, because a country that does not develop its children is a country that does not have a future. You can make that difference, and I’m sure you will.