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Introducing the Comer Process to the Faculty for the First Time

J. Patrick Howley and Michael Ben-Avie

Principals ask us how to present the Comer Process to their faculty. We tell them what J. Patrick Howley modeled for us. Pat, who is director of Adult Learning and Development at the School Development Program's national office at Yale, is a thoughtful, clear-spoken man who really listens. When he teaches communication skills to principals at a week-long training called Principals' Academy, he demonstrates a way of being peaceful and attentive at the same time. We've all been positively influenced by his style, which is an excellent style for principals to follow. Here is Pat, speaking as if he were a principal who is describing the Comer Process to the faculty in the first such meeting they've had. The questions the "teachers" ask in the dialogue that follows were offered by Michael Ben-Avie, Yale Child Study Center.

PRINCIPAL: I wanted to meet with you today as a faculty in a different way than we usually do because I just went to a training about what is called the Comer Process. It's named after James P. Comer, M.D., a child psychiatrist who is the associate dean of the School of Medicine at

Yale University. He has spent his whole adult life successfully reforming schools, and hundreds of schools all over the United States have transformed themselves using his process. Yale has a group called the School Development Program (SDP) and they conducted the training I went to.

The process is hard for me to define because it's still new to me, but I'm going to just talk about the whole process as I naively understand it in these early stages. And rather than just have me talk for an hour, I'd like to have a discussion. That's why I have us sitting in a circle for the first time. As large a group as we are, I still think that we can have a dialogue and toss around some of the ideas. So as I talk about this Comer Process, if you have some questions and concerns and objections to what I'm saying, I want you to raise those because they will get me thinking. And if we can't come up with an answer here, I can raise those same kinds of questions with the local SDP facilitator who has been assigned to help us implement the Comer Process, our university partners, or our mentors at the SDP's national office.

I want us to go into this together, rather than me seeing this as a good way to go and then forcing it down your throats with you saying, "Okay, he wants us to do this, so we'll do it." I'd rather have us really know what we're jumping into. You know, it's a little intimidating for me because what I've learned is that this process requires me to do less authoritative leading, less telling everybody, "This is what we're going to do." It's more give and take, with faculty members doing more of the leading and me doing some following. I'm not sure if I know how to do that all the time, so I'm going to be looking for a lot of your input. Right from the beginning, as I'm sharing this, if you have some questions and have your own comments, I'm going to welcome those. I'm going to try to be doing what I have now recognized as a different way of facilitating the development of a school.

TEACHER: I'm not quite sure what that means, facilitating—you know, all of these educational reforms have their own jargon. What do you mean?

PRINCIPAL: Well, to me facilitate means helping, so I want to help us work together in a new way rather than *direct* us to work together. In the past, what I might have done was to come in here and say, "Here is the School Development Program. Here's what we're going to do. This is when we're going to do it. This is how we're going to do it. This is why we're going to do it." And I wouldn't expect too much input from you. Instead, what I mean about facilitate is that we're going to help each other understand the task by asking some questions as you just did. If I don't know the answers, I'll tell you honestly that I don't know, and then I'll make the effort to find out what we need to know. So facilitating means that we're going to always try to help one another. We're going to help one another

become more effective in helping children and in working with parents and with each other. We're going to be coming out of our classrooms more often and meeting and learning from each other—not only learning about teaching processes, but learning to be better teachers and learning to be better leaders.

TEACHER: Can we back up a bit? You said "more meetings." I feel we already have so many different committees, we have so much work, that sometimes I don't even have time to grade the students' papers because I'm in all these meetings. You want *more* meetings!?!

PRINCIPAL: The Comer Process actually builds in ways of helping us to become more effective in our meetings so that we eventually take less time and accomplish more. The process has a set of "guiding princi-ples" to help us so that we don't blame each other, we hear one another out, so we make decisions by true con-sensus and we have some kind of general agreement about how to work in the most effec-tive and healthful manner, so we're committed to saying, "I need you." I personally real-ize, more than ever, that I need the teachers. You realize you need me, I think. So we need each other. We're interdependent.

> Teacher: You said "more meetings." You want more meetings!?!
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> Principal: The Comer Process actually builds in ways of helping us to become more effective in our meetings so that we eventually take less time and accomplish more.

TEACHER: Every year they ask us at our end-of-year faculty meetings, "What do you think we should do better? How should we improve?" And even though we speak up, nothing ever happens with our great ideas.

PRINCIPAL: Nothing ever happens, even though someone is supposed to take the next step? Is that what you're saying?

TEACHER: Yes.

PRINCIPAL: Who do you see . . .

TEACHER: You, the principal.

PRINCIPAL: Right, right. In this case, now, the change would be that, rather than *me* taking it to the next step, it's going to be *us* taking it to the next step. The reason that sometimes things don't get done is that I can't do it all. If we follow the Comer Process, I won't be expected to. Through our teams and our joint planning, we will share the decision making and the responsibility for action. One of the things that's changed in our society is that we've become more diverse, we communicate much more through voice mail, e-mail,

the Internet. Everyone has more information to receive and give, and it's not appropriate or useful for one person to make all the decisions anymore. Think of it: Our country is a democracy, which means it's participative, but we really haven't lived that out in businesses or in schools. So you've spent all that time giving me the information and then nothing happens because either I don't have the time or I don't agree with you. But now the significant change is going to be that *if we don't agree with each other we'll work out a consensus at this table.* And we're going to make that decision within some boundaries. My role would be less that of saying, "We can't do this, we can do that because I feel that way." Instead I would be guiding you and saying, "Well, our state mandates are saying this and our board of education has these goals, so we can't go outside those goals, but within those frameworks, we have more autonomy to make decisions. All of us here." I have less freedom to just make decisions based on my personal whim.

Now you may ask, "Why is he going to do that?" The reason is that I've come to appreciate that you're as knowledgeable as I am about this school, about the students, the parents, the teachers, and the support staff. You have different knowledge, but it's just as valuable and just as important. So I have to listen to you more. I really have learned that. I want to hear more about what you have to say because I've learned that everyone's opinion is very important if we want to get a better picture of what's happening.

Before, I only carried my own picture in my head. As I've listened more, and that started to happen only recently, I've heard more teachers and more parents tell me things that I didn't even know. And when I sat down with students—maybe you've noticed: I've walked into the cafeteria and had lunch with them—I just ask them simple questions sometimes, and I find out the most amazing things. Like the fact that some students don't feel safe in the buses. I knew that intellectually, but I'm now hearing directly from students about it. That's become very powerful for me, very urgent, and I hope we'll find some way to act on it right away.

So I realized that perhaps you knew that more than I did, and I don't know if I was listening to you. You can give me the feedback on that. I mean, you already said, "Well, I gave some input and nothing ever came of it." I think that's one of the reasons why I want to go in this direction. I do want to listen more and then act on the input. One of the reasons is that I realize I can't do it alone anymore. Life is too complex. School systems are too complex for that.

TEACHER: I'm feeling—and I'm sorry to be so honest—I'm feeling skeptical. You said that you have a lot to learn and that we're going to learn together. How are we going to learn how to do it?

PRINCIPAL: Before I went to this training, I just didn't know that there was a method that was already well established and working well in hundreds of schools. Now, I'm relieved because we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Dr. Comer has talked about child development, and I realize that this is adult development as well. We'll always be in a learning process.

TEACHER: My experience with all these educational reform initiatives is that there's always a select few people who go to all these workshops and receive training and they come back excited, and then, after a while, it all fades away.

PRINCIPAL: If we create what is called a School Planning and Management Team, you could put the issue of staff development on the agenda. The SPMT could come to a consensus that we need to have training in the Comer Process for all the faculty. You wouldn't come to me. You would go to the School Planning and Management Team, and the team leader would help a discussion to take place in which we said, "This is what we need to do. People don't fully understand the Comer Process." You might say, as a next step, "Enough of our parents don't really understand this. We want to have parents serve on this team, and they don't even really know what this process is. Sometimes they work against us, and we need to help them understand what we're trying to do here." So if training or orienting parents became an agenda item and we decided that's what we needed to do, the team would decide to do it.

> The work of the teams is the business of the school.
> —Lester Young, Jr., former superintendent, Community School District 13, Brooklyn, NY

TEACHER: You used the word "feelings" before. I've heard that the Comer Process is this kind of touchy-feely thing, just self-esteem for the children. Nothing really serious.

PRINCIPAL: The Comer Process is serious because it touches people's emotions. When SDP's executive director hears the accusation that the Comer Process is touchy-feely, he responds: "Guilty as charged." And the Comer Process is serious. A recent meta-analysis of all the comprehensive school reform initiatives found that the Comer Process was one of only three initiatives that had the strongest evidence of effectiveness (Borman et al., 2003, p. 161). Furthermore, why talk about touchy-feely as if that were a bad thing? Feelings are an important part of growing up. How do you feel when certain things happen in this building? Well, you have some feelings, and you may talk to your spouse about those. That's being touchy-feely. I think there's a place for touchy-feely, but SDP demonstrates that that doesn't mean excluding academic development.

Also, in educational leadership, you see all kinds of different programs. Let me just talk about some of the significant differences between the Comer Process as I've learned it and other educational change initiatives. I have material right here that I'll distribute at the end of the meeting, and then we can have another meeting where we talk about some of the ideas in here.

From my three days of training, this is what I've learned: The Comer Process focuses on *child development.* Most other programs do not focus on children the way this program does. It focuses on adults working together in a way that many programs don't even mention. Sometimes people have seen this program as being only for children or only about psychological development; only for poor children or only for minority children; or they've seen it as a mental health program or an African American program. But I really saw during the training why it's called "school development." It's truly about developing the school. One part of it involves drawing up a *comprehensive school plan*. You could really call this the Comprehensive School Development Program. It's not just touchy-feely; it takes in every aspect of school life.

The Comer Process touches every aspect of school life because it provides us with a common language to talk about children and their behavior. Dr. Comer's metaphor of the six developmental pathways is a powerful way of organizing our observations about the students, regardless of setting. When talking with parents, it is especially helpful to use the metaphor of the developmental pathways because the language is descriptive and nonjudgmental. The pathways are also an effective framework for evaluating the purpose of each and every initiative that we have in our school.

One developmental pathway that Comer talks about is *cognitive development.* There are five others: *physical, social, language, emotional, and ethical.* And a major point that he made, being a psychiatrist, is that each of these pathways of development is interdependent. They need one another. Just imagine: If some event happened in your own life that was traumatic to you, it would be hard for you to come to work. I've had calls from teachers saying, "My child isn't feeling well. I have to bring her to the hospital." Even if the child doesn't have to stay in the hospital, even if they have someone to stay with their child, they're not emotionally prepared to come in and teach that day. Their problem is interfering with their ability to do cognitive work.

The cognitive and emotional are two different pathways, yet they interact powerfully. And how do both of them influence the way children develop language? That's what the SDP trainers are going to be teaching us, among other things. You know, the students are learning all kinds of things in different ways. As they go through the school, for example, how they're being treated by the custodian or the cafeteria workers makes them feel good or makes them feel bad. We have an obligation to pay attention to their ethical development

as well: teaching them right from wrong in how they're treating and speaking to one another. When a fight breaks out in the classroom and students aren't treating each other right, that's interfering with their learning in the classroom. SDP is saying that we have to pay attention to more than just academics, more than just their cognitive development. However, you'll see when we talk about the comprehensive school plan that we're still going to pay close attention to their cognitive development.

TEACHER: I feel like you're taking us off the road to smell the daisies. You know that it doesn't make a difference how you feel about a test, the fact is that you perform well on the test regardless of what you're feeling like at that moment. Because if I had called you this morning and said, "I don't feel like working today," what would your response have been?

PRINCIPAL: You know what it would've been!

TEACHER: I know exactly what it would've been. Why should we let the children have this idea that emotions are important and that they could potentially interfere with their school work?

PRINCIPAL: I don't want to overemphasize this focus on emotions. And you know, if you said, "I don't feel like coming in," you know what my response would be. I would expect you to come to work. I think that should be the same response with children. If a child says, "I don't feel like taking this test," or "I don't feel like going to gym," I don't think this program is going to advocate giving in. So, I think either something I've said or something that you've heard about this program is suggesting that we'll be softer on the students than we are now.

TEACHER: Well, if a student really deserves a C, I don't want to give that student an A or a B because I'm afraid of hurting that student's self-esteem.

PRINCIPAL: I think you're absolutely right. In fact, do you know what has occurred to me as I'm listening to you? In some ways, this program may be harder on children, or at least it will create higher expectations than we've had in the past, because we'll not just be expecting the children to perform well academically. We'll be expecting them to perform better in their relationships with us and with other students and with their parents. So if I see behavior that's inappropriate, I would see it as our obligation to respond to that in some way, but in ways that are good and healthy for development. Now sometimes that will mean a consequence, but one of the things that you learn in child development is that sometimes it may not be the best course of action to be punitive. Sometimes the child needs to learn a lesson through learning about relationships.

I think this is going to lead to all of us expecting more of children. We're going to be expecting them to speak better because we'll be focusing on more ways to stimulate and reward language develop- ment. We're going to expect them to eat better and to take care of themselves physically because we'll be focusing on more ways to stimulate and reward positive decisions they make regarding their health and well-being. We're going to expect them to perform in the classroom, and we'll be helping to create new ways of teaching them. We're going to expect them to talk to one another about their relationships in ways that are healthy because we're going to be teaching them new ways to solve problems.

We don't do enough of that in our society, and that leads to violence. You see violence all over; every day you read about it in the paper. Right now, we expect children to work out their differences, but we haven't taught them specifically how to do that. With the Comer Process, we will be practicing specific skills with the children so that they'll come out of school knowing how. And in developing socially and psychologically, they will be supported cognitively. You know, this has been very helpful to me to have you even raise the question because now I understand that we will be expecting more of our children, not less.

It really means more work from all of us, not only from you. Hey, do you think I want to go to another meeting? But in the long run, if it's going to help me feel like I'm doing a better job, that's great. In the long run, it's better for the children and better for our society, and that's why we're here in the first place. Why just do my job and go home and feel like I'm not really making any major contribution? Even this first meet- ing has contributed to my learning by hearing some of your concerns.

TEACHER (head of the mathematics department): What does this mean for me? I feel very threatened here. I feel like you're introducing new structures, new teams, new committees, a new focus on emotions—and I understand that that's coming. What's going to be my role?

PRINCIPAL: You're going to decide that. As chairperson of your department, you've held many meetings to deal with the nitty-gritty, everyday decisions of the depart- ment, and those meetings are going to continue. As you point out, though, there will also be School Planning and Management Team meet- ings. Some department chairpersons will serve on the SPMT, but so will parents and support staff and teachers who are not department chairs. It will be a *more diverse, comprehensive group of our total school community*, including both school people and outside community members.

> Head of the mathematics department: I feel very threatened here. I feel like you're introducing new structures, new teams, new committees—and I understand that that's coming. What's going to be my role?

The decisions that group makes will be educational decisions. What you're not going to be deciding about are things like snow days. The

superintendent is not going to call every teacher and say, "We're collaborating. What do you think? Should we have a snow day?" If an accident occurs on a bus, I may just make a unilateral decision that we're leaving school early today and that I'm not going to collaborate with anybody. I'm going to make that decision. So I'm not abdicating my responsibility for decision making when I need it, and you're not going to abdicate your responsibility or lose your privilege about decision making, either. Our typical department meetings will continue the same way they have.

One of the things that we will be doing is communicating more through the School Planning and Management Team. The SPMT, as I said, becomes more of a collaborative group, a consensus-reaching group, in which they're looking primarily at whole-school issues related to teaching and learning. I'm expanding what I mean by teaching and learning to mean not just cognitive development but all pathways of development. So, they'll be concerned about how your department supports that process. We'll also have a Student and Staff Support Team, which will be focused on global issues of development for children.

TEACHER: What does that mean?

PRINCIPAL: We would have meetings of the special education Planning and Placement Team where we refer students who are having difficulties, and those students then meet with our school psychologist to be tested and counseled. We have that kind of process built in. In a Comer Process Student and Staff Support Team, that leads to discussions about *prevention*. How do we prevent problems from occurring? For instance, suppose this school has some safety issues and we have children being physically hurt a number of times or being hurt in other ways, and we begin to see this as a pattern. We would look at the pattern and look at the global issue and say, "What decision can we make that will prevent this from occurring in the future?" And then the Student and Staff Support Team would take this to the SPMT, which would collaborate on an action plan, and the whole school would be involved in taking those preventive action steps.

TEACHER: Right now we have faculty meetings and we have PTA meetings, and these meetings are held at different times. When you were talking about the School Planning and Management Team, you were talking about parent representatives on this team. Will we still have separate faculty meetings and separate PTA meetings?

PRINCIPAL: Absolutely. We will still have our regular faculty meetings. I might change them to make them more like what we're doing now, a session where I give you information and then we discuss the issues, but we're going to continue with faculty meetings. The PTA will continue to meet. The role of the Parent Team will be to get more

parents involved at many different levels. It is almost more a parent process than it is a parent team. *As more and more parents become involved, they increasingly feel that they're in a partnership with us.* Remember the incidents that we had a couple of years ago when parents attacked individual teachers verbally? The parents complained that the teachers didn't care. And what we talked about in the faculty room then was whether the parents cared. It occurred to me when I was in the Comer Process training that the parents don't see us as partners and we don't see them as partners, either.

If we can get more parents truly involved, when we have a concern, they'll call you. But they won't say, "Mr. Smith, how come you didn't do such and such?" They're starting to talk *with* you, and they're saying, "You know, I've had some trouble with my son at home and I wanted to just kind of check this out with you," and then, "Could we meet and talk some time?" And now you don't feel like you have to be defensive about what you're doing because they're really saying, "Let's just talk about our child"—*our* child.

> Principal: The PTA will continue to meet.

That's what I see the Comer Process being about and the parent process being about. That's where the guiding principle of *no-fault* is really felt. The parents feel that we're not blaming them, and we really feel the parents aren't blaming us. We're all willing to sit down and say, "Let's talk about this, share our ideas, and solve it." So I think we have some things to learn, and I think parents have some things to learn.

TEACHER: You used the word consensus several times. What do you mean by consensus?

PRINCIPAL: I don't know if I can describe consensus in just a few words, but when I looked it up I saw "general agreement." That doesn't necessarily mean that everyone agrees. But what it does mean is that even those people who have disagreed have really been heard. If I said to a person, "Have you felt like we have heard you on this team?" he or she would say, "I feel that people have heard my opposing point of view." Often, some parts of an individual idea can be merged into the group's idea so that several goals can be included in the final decision. The proposals can be blended, in other words. But if there is still opposition, the team leader could probably say to that person, "Okay, would you be willing to go along with this decision even though you disagree with it? Would you be willing to support it and let us try it out and see if it works? We may find out that you're indeed right, but I hope that you won't block it or just walk away because this decision is different from your opinion." And the person would say, "All right." That's what I mean by consensus: that we've all sat down together, and we've talked out all of the

different viewpoints, and then we say, "Okay. We could talk about this forever, but if we talk about it forever, we'll be paralyzed."

So at some point, and I think this is the difficulty in this process, all of us are going to have to let go. I feel very strongly that I, in particular, am going to have a hard time with this, and this is where I say I have a lot to learn that you can teach me. I may want to say to you, "Hey, I'm the principal. Let me make the final decision here because I'm personally uncomfortable with your decision." And I'm beginning to learn that I don't have that right to do that anymore. I have the right and obligation as a professional to give my point of view, and you have the professional obligation to hear it, but the reverse is also true. I'm not solely in charge anymore. If we realize later on that there's a better way or a different way from the particular decision we reached by consensus, we'll review it and develop consensus on a new way to proceed. But the way I understand it, we'll be more open to trying things out.

Also, consensus does not mean that we're saying, "Eloise's idea is better," because then we're focusing on Eloise. Instead, we're focusing on ideas, and we're saying, "We see that more people are leaning in the direction of this idea rather than that idea. We've listened to two or three people who have objected, and we've given them every opportunity to explain their objections, yet almost all of us still prefer the first idea." I would say at this point in my knowledge, that the majority view would still constitute consensus. I would suggest at that point that we try out the idea preferred by the majority but assess it as we try it because *part of the Comer Process is action research. Let's continually assess it, and let's modify it if it's not working.* Let's not just say, "Okay, we agreed to it and come what may, we're going to go and do it." Later on, when you're giving input again and saying, "Look, I told you this wasn't going to work and I see it's not working here and here and here," the people who favored the consensus are not going to let their pride blind them to the results. This process opens it up to reassessment.

So I think that makes it harder for all of us in some ways, if you don't count how much better the outcomes are going to be. It's always been easier just to say, "We decided it. Let's do it. Let's not visit it and revisit it because that takes time and energy." Earlier, someone objected to more meetings. The reason for more meetings is to reassess and refine whenever we discover problems in a process or project we had decided on.

Now let me go back to the idea of more meetings because it seems like putting in more energy. Right? But what happened last year when we made a decision and then it didn't work and we didn't have a way to review it? I'll tell you what happened, because people

told me. They had arguments in the hallways. You saw that. They had meetings after school, on their own, outside the building. And there were—these aren't my words—there were "complaining sessions." Right? People complained about it. Well, why were there complaining sessions? Because there was no vehicle, no process for them to bring it legitimately back in to say, "Here is what we're seeing. Here is a concern we have."

And they didn't come to me. Maybe that's because of my style. Maybe it's because I'm the principal. Maybe it's because in the past they perceived me as someone who was not going to do anything anyway or as someone who doesn't like decisions to be challenged. I think one of my problems is that I'm comfortable making decisions. That's why I became a principal. I want to make the decision and then get on with it, and I don't want to go back and hash it out again. But now I'm realizing that sometimes issues really need to be hashed out again. And what tells us that they need to be reexamined? If some parents are saying, "This is an issue" and some classroom teachers are saying, "This is an issue" and some support staff are saying, "Yes, this is an issue" then, by golly, it's an issue whether I want to admit it or not.

I am learning that I'd better listen to my—Wait. I don't want to say *my.* I want to listen to *our* group here. What I'm realizing is this isn't *my* school. This is really *our* school. It has to be *our* school. Because if I had to leave tomorrow and somebody else came in, you'd know more about this school than the new principal. And you know as much about the school as I do. It's ours, you know, and we've got to help each other. That's what this is all about.

I feel like I've done a lot of talking today. I'd like to give you the opportunity to think about what I've said. As soon as the meeting ends, I'm going to hand out several graphics: The "schoolhouse" graphic depicts the Comer Process (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3 in the next chapter for English and Spanish versions of this graphic) and the second graphic depicts the six developmental pathways (see Figure 2.1 in the same chapter). I will also make available to all the adults in the school community copies of the book *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action.*

I'd like you to think about what strengths you could bring to a team. At this point, you're supposed to bring this information to your departments and grade-level meetings. Have meetings, discuss it, and be really honest with me. We can have other meetings like this, and you tell me whether it's worth it to do this, or each grade level can write down their concerns and we can meet. I'll take the time after school or whenever to meet with each grade level or each department, and we can have small group discussions as a follow-up

to help clarify what this process is about. As I said, if there are some things I can't answer, I'll try to get the answers for you.

Our SDP facilitator explained to me that during the first phase of implementing the Comer Process, we have to study ourselves. The point of the self-assessment is not to assign blame. In fact, the facilitators who will help guide those meetings *won't let us* assign blame!

I am thinking that in five years, we will hold a celebration, like so many other successful schools that use the Comer Process. We will celebrate the successful creation of a school where children learn well because they are developing well. At the celebration, we will laugh as we recall our struggles during the first few years. More important, we will have formed group experiences. We will be a team.

In the meantime, we have a great deal of work ahead of us. After we complete the self-assessment, at our school we will first see if 75 percent of the staff agree to implement the Comer Process. If so, then we will be on our way. Initially, when children are learning new knowledge, they're not sure of themselves. They need a lot of protection, pats on the back, reassurances. Adults, too, need protection while we're learning a new way of working and interacting with one another because we're not quite ready to fly. The Comer Process provides us with a road map: The SDP Implementation Life Cycle. Having a road map for whole-school change gives us the protection that we will need as we embark on change. During the first phases of change, which could take two to three years, we will say to outsiders, "Let us first put our house in order before you come to visit." We don't have to do everything perfectly the first year. However, we know the final destination because we have a road map. Many of the other schools that have gone before us have moved up from being the lowest performing to the highest performing schools in their districts.

REFERENCE

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