Child and Adolescent Development: The Critical Missing Focus in School Reform

The key to improving student achievement, Dr. Comer asserts, is to pay attention to child and adolescent development. If this factor is overlooked, new approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment will have little chance of succeeding. But even troubled districts that have made development a priority have seen remarkable success.

BY DR. JAMES P. COMER

BEGAN my work in schools over 35 years ago, and it was clear to me then that the underlying problem in the low-income, African American schools we were serving was that the students were underdeveloped in the areas that could bring school success, and the staff members — through no fault of their own — were not prepared to help advance the students' development. Gradually, we created a framework that allowed the schools and the adults in them to generate a school culture that supported the development of the students. And because development and academic learning are inextricably linked, student achievement improved and behavior problems decreased greatly.[1]

From just two pilot schools, our Yale Child Study Center School Development Program moved through field-testing and dissemination to individual schools and clusters within districts to districtwide work in about 1,000 schools across the country. At

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Illustration by Bill Tsukuda
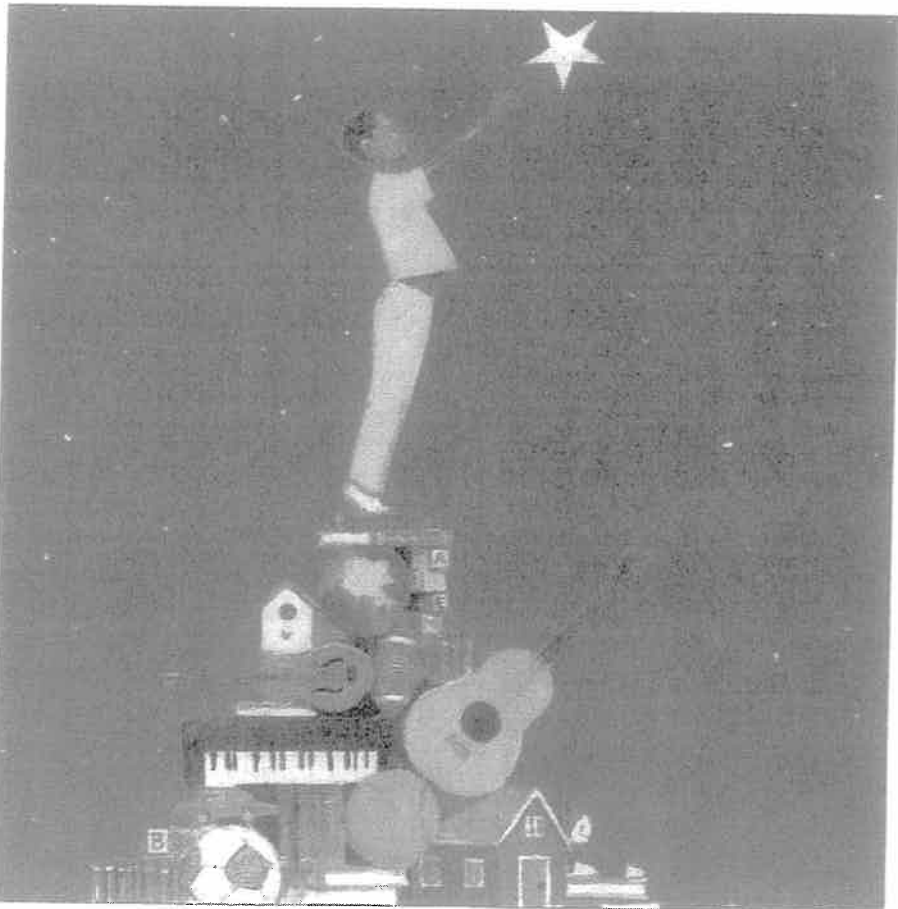
each step of the way, it became clearer that both academic and behavioral success were more likely in places where teachers and administrators bought into the value of basing their work on the principles of child and adolescent development.

An incident from the early days of our work first drew to my attention the fact that schools were not focusing on the development of the child. Over a weekend, a relative plucked an 8-year-old student out of his school and supportive home environment in a distant state and — without orientation or support — deposited him in a classroom in one of our pilot schools. Not surprisingly, the youngster panicked, kicked the teacher in the leg, and ran out of the room. Afterward, while our mental health team was working with the school staff to think about how to create a more child-friendly transfer procedure that took account of each child's developmental needs, I remarked, "That was an interesting reaction; not just fight or flight, but fight and flight!" The school staff looked puzzled.

The fight-or-flight reaction is triggered by the brain's response to threat. When an individual faces prolonged and intense threat, thinking can be severely impaired.[2] These connections are basic knowledge among bio-behavioral scientists. And yet teachers and administrators, who routinely face these and many other brain-regulated behaviors that influence student development and learning, receive little in the way of preparation that would enable them to acquire and use such knowledge. The focus on child development that is largely missing from the preparation of educators probably contributes more to creating dysfunctional and underperforming schools than anything else.

Many improved practices in education that have been developed over the past two decades have been less successful than they might have been because they have focused primarily on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and modes of service delivery. Insufficient attention has been paid to child and adolescent development. When these matters are addressed at all, the focus is often on the student — on a problem behavior — and not on how to create a school culture that promotes good growth along the six critical developmental pathways: physical (including brain development), social/interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive/intellectual.[3]

Children grow along these developmental pathways, and they learn, in large part, through interacting with caretakers in reasonably good environments. In the process, they form emotional attachments, and they identify with, imitate, and internalize the attitudes, values, and ways of the adults and institutions around them. Through these relationships, students' own unfocused and potentially harmful energies and biological potentials are channeled into the development of constructive attitudes and capacities that can prepare them for academic learning. We often forget that, for many children, academic learning is not a primary, natural, or valued task. It is the positive relationships and sense of belonging that a good school culture provides that give these children the comfort, confidence, competence, and motivation to learn.[4]

Many school leaders do not appreciate the fact that producing a good school culture, fostering healthy child and adolescent development, and promoting sound academic learning are interactive and mutually facilitating processes. Indeed, a good school culture is not a given; it must be created. And it's a job for everyone who cares about schools and children. A student in a graduate program at the University of Wisconsin asked permission
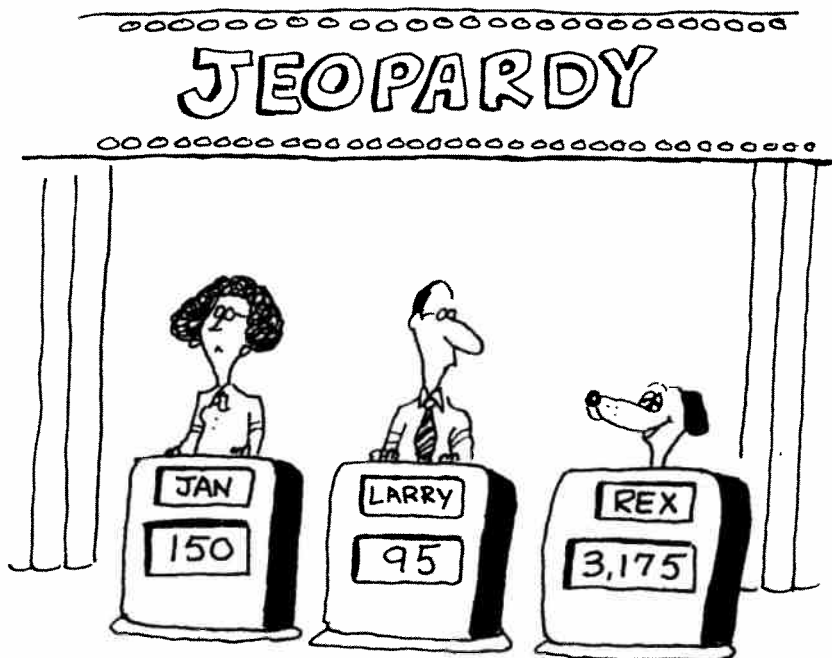
"Well, Alex, you don't eat homework for five years without learning something."

to be excused from his required child development course because he was a principal and would not need it. But the central responsibility of a principal is to help create a school culture that facilitates good development and academic learning.

In 1968 the two schools in our Yale Child Study Center pilot project were so dysfunctional that it was impossible to carry out an effective instructional program. School operations were being carried out in piecemeal, fragmented ways that ignored child development and contributed heavily to the anger, conflict, apathy, and hopelessness that characterized these sites. While we faced the usual resistance to change, most of the staff members in these schools wanted to succeed. But because learning about student development had not been a part of their professional preparation, they did not have the skills they needed to create a healthy school culture. And because they didn't understand the factors that contributed to the dysfunction, most of the actions they took only made matters worse.

Our five-person team from the School Development Program (SDP), working collaboratively with staff members and parents, gradually identified three conditions that were at the root of the problems: 1) an authoritarian, top-down approach to organization and management; 2) the underdevelopment of students, staff members, and parents; and 3) a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment that did not take developmental issues into account. To create well-function-

ing schools, comprehensive planning that focused squarely on child development and good program coordination were needed.

To begin the improvement process, we formed a governance and management team that was representative of all the adult stakeholders. This team focused the schools on creating a culture that supported development and learning among students. Pursuing this goal gradually led our team to devise a nine-element framework for change. The nine elements were three mechanisms (changed governance and management, a parent team, and a professional support team); three operations (a comprehensive school plan that included social and academic components, staff development, and assessment and modification); and three guidelines (no-fault problem solving, consensus decision making, and collaboration).[5]

In our pilot schools, organization and management, curriculum, instruction and assessment, and parent and staff development were all based on what helped the students develop and learn. The insistent focus on understanding and supporting good student growth reduced blaming and fault-finding and led to improved interactions among the adults. An improving school climate enabled staff members to better focus their attention on assessing social and academic data and to make program changes that led to improved student development and learning. Small successes from working in this way gradually overcame resistance, promoted broader use of the principles of child and adolescent development in all aspects of practice, and eventually led to schoolwide success.[6]
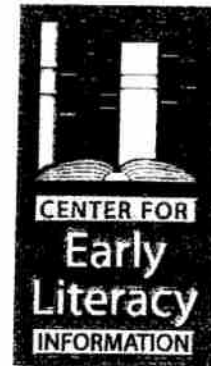
Once the SDP framework had been learned and internalized by the school stakeholders, it served as a platform for a continuous process of school improvement. As a result, the two pilot schools gradually moved from the two lowest positions in achievement in New Haven to a position near the top, with the best attendance and no serious behavior problems.[7] The stakeholders were energized and motivated because they could influence change. A major reason that young teachers leave the profession — and a major source of discontent among all teachers — is the sense that they can't influence change.[8]

To our surprise, despite the improved achievement and behavior in the pilot schools, there was very little interest in replicating the model in other parts of or outside the city.

Eventually we were able to field-test the model in 12 schools in different regions of the country and found the same pattern of resistance — until successful use of the SDP process gradually reduced it. In a midwestern district, one school using the model went from 23rd to first in achievement and was accused of cheating, amid much media attention. On a repeat of the test, this time administered by the central office, the students achieved slightly higher scores.[9] This fact was barely noted by the media. Subsequently, the superintendent removed the principal and made staff changes without training the new people to use the model. The school plummeted back to its low-performing position.

Over the years state education people have rarely inquired about how significant academic and social gains were being made in places that had not had such outcomes before they started using SDP. And we gradually came to realize that there is strong resistance to accepting child and adolescent development as a central focus in school reform. Moreover, this resistance is strong throughout every level of the education enterprise — in schools, districts, schools of education, and state departments. Even documented evidence usually does not spark significant interest in the full application of principles of child and adolescent development in school programs.[10] Our response has been to continue to "grow the evidence" until the outcomes cannot be ignored.

External evaluation studies and our own evaluations have demonstrated that better implementation of the SDP model is associated with better outcomes.[11] We also found that schools that "bought in" to the SDP theory of change most thoroughly tended to implement it best. Thus we began to work for broad and deep buy-in. We focused on working with clusters of schools with some district-level support. Finally, we sought entire districtwide buy-in, which means that district-level leaders, school board members, and other policy makers approve and support the SDP approach. A management team is created at the district level that facilitates the work of the building-level management teams. In this way, accountability, change, and continuous improvement become both bottom-up and top-down, internal and external to individual schools.

DISTRICTWIDE IMPLEMENTATIONS

Over the past five years we have conducted districtwide work in four communities: Community School District 17 in New York City; Westbury, New York; Hertford County, North Carolina; and Asheville, North Carolina. The districtwide work began with discussions about child and adolescent development and learning with school board members, superintendents, and other district-level and community leaders. With better understanding and deep and broad buy-in — from the policy makers to classroom teachers — all of the districts made outstanding academic and social gains.

I will discuss the Asheville case here because we were able to document the deepening of the buy-in process most fully in this district, and the district also had data on the racial achievement gap.[12] We decided to begin with a pilot school that served students of the lowest socioeconomic level, Hall Fletcher Elementary School. We started working with this school in 1999-2000. We included all the schools in the district beginning in 2000-2001. An assistant superintendent was selected as the local facilitator, and our Yale-based SDP coordinator served as a consultant to her. A candidate who embraced the focus on develop-ment was selected to be principal at Hall Fletcher. Before and after the first year of implementation, a team that was representative of adult school and community stakeholders attended one-week academies. These training exercises were designed to provide knowledge and skills about the SDP concept.

In 1999, as we started our work, 42% of Hall Fletcher students were at or above grade level in both reading and math on the North Carolina State Test. Outcomes improved significantly in each subsequent year. At the end of the fourth year, with the schoolwide figure at 78.6% proficiency, the principal was moved to another school. She reassured her staff that improvement would continue because they had internalized the process. At the end of the fifth year, the Hall Fletcher students were 98% proficient. There was no major change in staff, parents, students, or curriculum. At that time, the school served nine federal housing projects, and the student population was 85% low-income and 70% African American.

The other elementary schools we worked with in Asheville also showed significant improvement by the end of the 2003-04 school year. Figure 1 compares each school's 1998 and 2004 fifth-grade proficiency levels in reading, and Figure 2 presents the same comparisons for math.

The implementation of our program also had a significant impact on the district's achievement gap. Figures 3 and 4 (page 762) chart the fifth-grade proficiency levels in reading and math for blacks and whites from 1999 to 2004. Note the rapid closing of the achievement gap between blacks and whites from 2001 to 2004. Although the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch increased over the years, academic achievement continued to rise.

FIGURE 1.

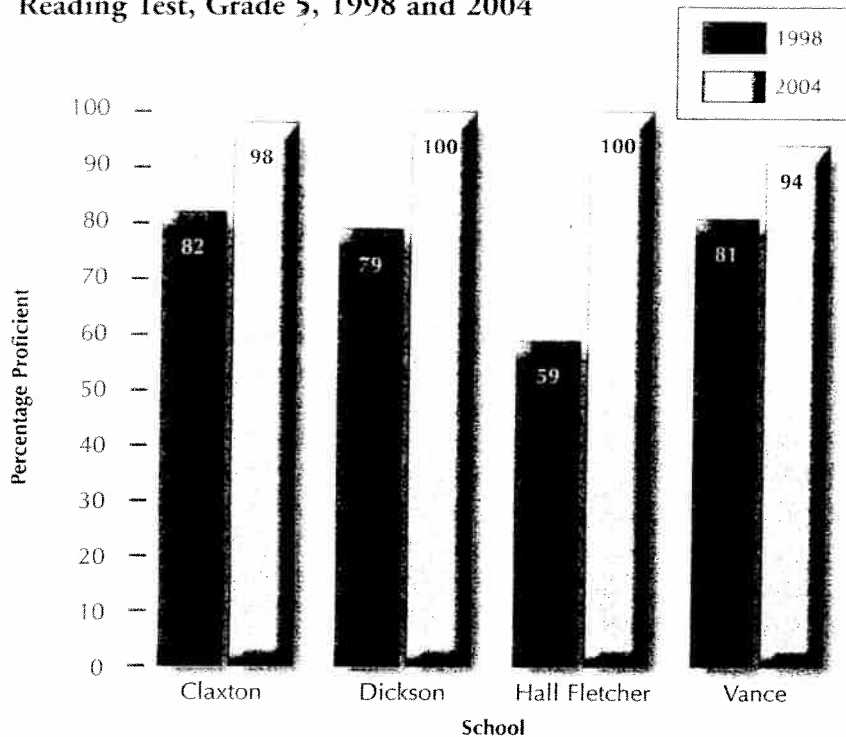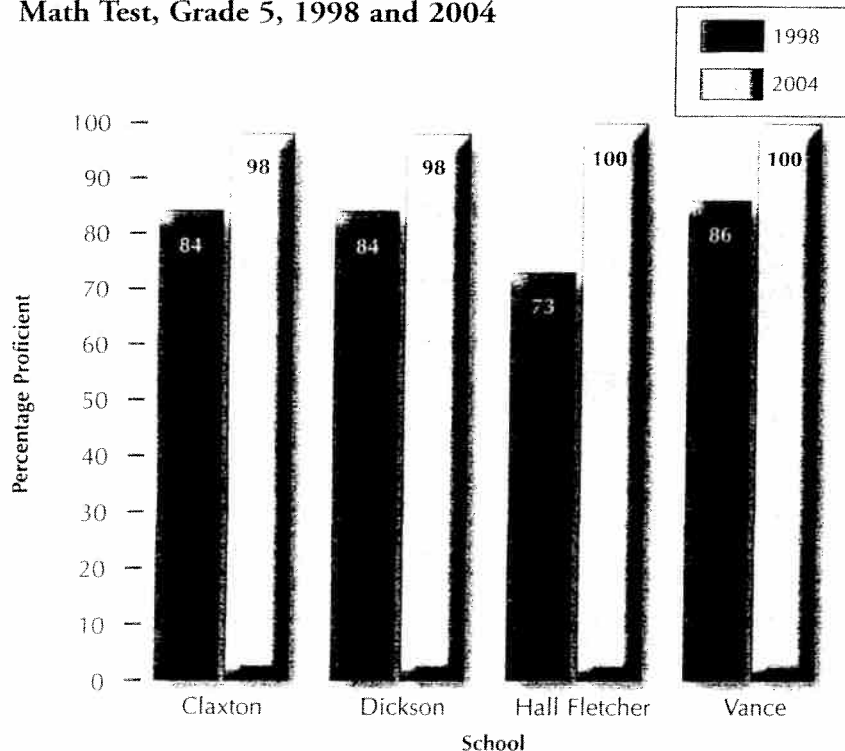**Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Reading Test, Grade 5, 1998 and 2004**

[Bar chart: Percentage Proficient by School (Claxton, Dickson, Hall Fletcher, Vance) for 1998 and 2004. Legend: 1998 (black), 2004 (white). Values — Claxton: 82, 98; Dickson: 79, 100; Hall Fletcher: 59, 100; Vance: 81, 94.]

FIGURE 2.

Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Math Test, Grade 5, 1998 and 2004

[Bar chart: Percentage Proficient by School (Claxton, Dickson, Hall Fletcher, Vance) for 1998 and 2004. Legend: 1998 (black), 2004 (white). Values — Claxton: 84, 98; Dickson: 84, 98; Hall Fletcher: 73, 100; Vance: 86, 100.]
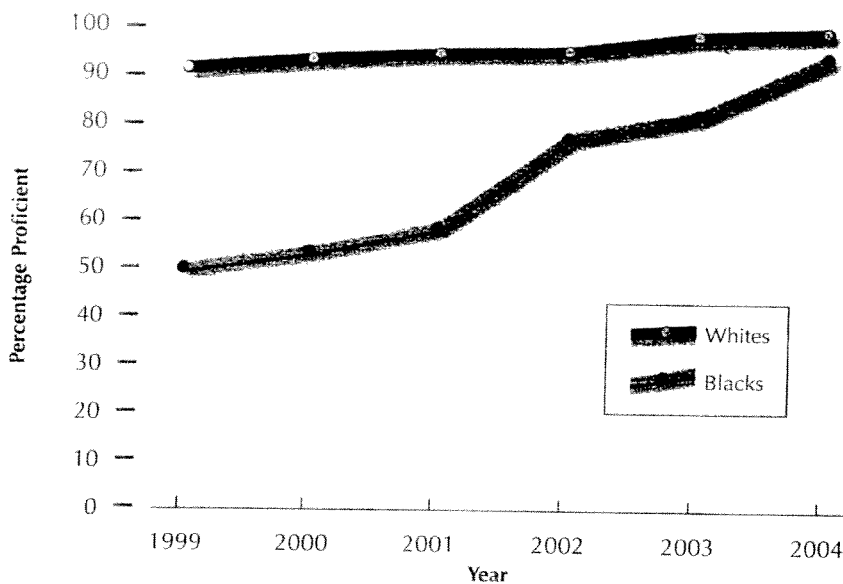
In the third year for Hall Fletcher and in the second year for the other Asheville schools, the Comer in the Classroom approach was introduced.[13] In this model, the nine elements of the SDP framework, slightly modified, are used in a very intentional way in individual classrooms to help the students grow along the six developmental pathways mentioned earlier: physical, social/interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive/intellectual. The classroom model helps the staff pull together and coordinate the setting of developmental and academic objectives, the implementation of strategies to achieve them, and the administration of assessments to track progress. Teachers and parents use their creativity to turn curriculum content and activities into meaningful and memorable experiences for the students.

The activities in these classrooms are typical of those seen in many exciting classrooms: mock television talk shows and court trials, collaborative collage-making, and so on. The difference is that the content that fosters growth along the developmental pathways is intentionally selected and embedded in the academic content and activities. Students and staff members reflect on various social, emotional, and ethical issues and behaviors as they are expressed in the academic content. In addition, in this culture of thoughtful reflection, when problem behaviors flare up, teachers can ask students to reflect on the developmental pathways and come up with more appropriate and effective ways that they might manage a situation. Reflection promotes better thinking, better management of feelings, and more desirable social behavior.

Some students keep journals on their achievements and what they believe they need to work on. This practice breaks the cycle of teacher con-

FIGURE 3.
Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Reading Test, Grade 5, 1999-2004, by Race

proach. They are partially correct. Again, the process is a tool. One principal explained, "The process was the overarching framework through which we planned all those strategies and nurtured all those relationships — not just adult-to-adult, but adult-to-children and children-to-children — that turned the school around."

The outcomes of the districtwide implementation in particular suggest that broad and deep buy-in of an approach that gives centrality to the principles of child and adolescent development can improve academic learning for all students and, at the same time, encourage behavior that gives students a better chance for success in school and life.

Nonetheless, without a change in the way teachers and administrators are prepared, a successful program based on child development cannot be sustained for longer than the tenure of the initial participants who can and want to work in this way; nor

trol and punishment. Thus student resentment and reactive behavior that interferes with academic learning can be minimized. In short, the staff helps the students learn self-regulation and take responsibility for their own growth. As a result of a focus on overall development, the basis of recognition for school performance is growth along *all the pathways* — not just academic achievement as measured by test scores. Because they are included in the process, the children can use what they are most interested in — their own growth — to foster academic learning.

Some have suggested that if Comer in the Classroom had been used from the beginning, the gains could have been achieved more quickly. Based on our experience, we believe that the framework that improves the school culture must be in place first, or the relationships needed to engage students in a powerful way won't be created. After the first year, some argued
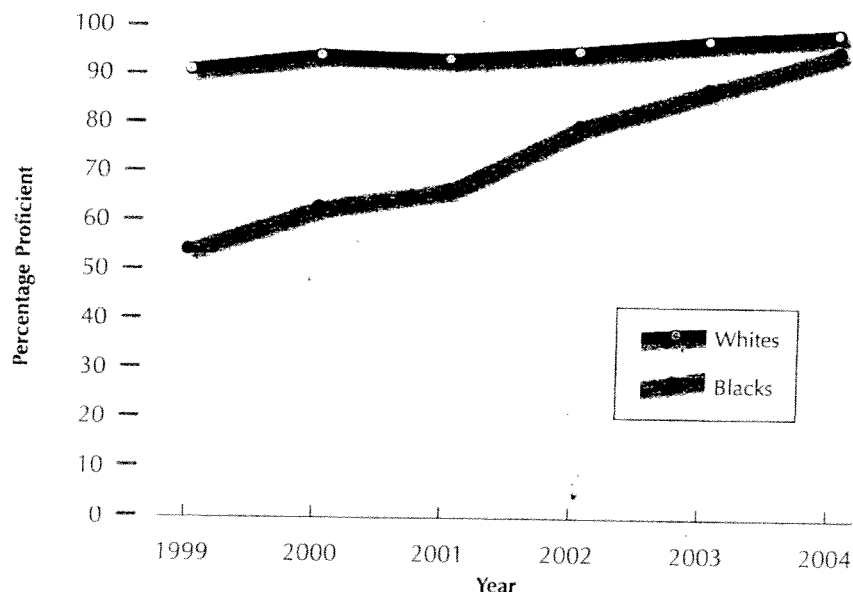
that the gains had to be due to more than the adoption of the SDP ap-

FIGURE 4.
Percentage of Asheville Students Proficient on N.C. State Math Test, Grade 5, 1999-2004, by Race

can it be carried out on a nationwide scale. Again, curricular, instructional, and assessment activities are best facilitated by good relational and developmental conditions, and these conditions can be achieved by joining developmental principles and practices with pedagogy. All educators need to use the principles of child and adolescent development to create positive interactions between students and school staff members. And the preparation of educators must be carried out in a way that makes understanding and using the principles of child and adolescent development central to the professional identity of all teachers and administrators.

But generations of teachers, administrators, and policy makers have been prepared in ways that do not enable them to create a school culture that can support student development and learning, to say nothing of their own learning and that of a school's other stakeholders. The portion of the educator work force that is already inclined and able to join development and pedagogy is small. Trying to modify the understanding and practice of others is difficult and exhausting and is probably the reason that most interventions have limited success. Continued school dysfunction contributes greatly to staff "burnout" and turnover, which in turn makes organizational stability and growth difficult to achieve.

A major underlying reason that child and adolescent development is a missing focus in education is the widely held notion that performance in school and in life is determined by one's genetically fixed intelligence. Institutional inertia — and related economic, political, and social forces — hold this traditional perspective in place in spite of an array of recent findings suggesting that the expression of intelligence is an interactive and developmental outcome.

Several measures can help bring about the necessary change. First, we must continue to "grow the evidence," backed now by brain research, that the capacity to learn is developmental. Second, we must work to inform policy makers and influence them to offer schools of education financial and other incentives to stress child development. Third, the accreditation of preparation programs must be based on the demonstrated ability of their students to use knowledge of child development in practice, and the certification of teachers and administrators must be based on their ability to do so. And fourth, university-based leadership is needed to help practicing educators make use of the principles of child and adolescent development.

There are well over three million teachers and administrators in the U.S. Enabling this work force to help all students develop well would go a long way toward addressing many of our most vexing and costly academic, economic, and behavioral problems. If we are to reach this goal, we will need to add the missing focus on child and adolescent development to the education of all educators.

1. James P. Comer, *Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).

2. Mariale M. Hardiman, *Connecting Brain Research with Effective Teaching: The Brain-Targeted Teaching Model* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

3. See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1985); Anna Freud, *Normality and Pathology in Childhood: Assessments of Development* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965); Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1930); Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips, eds., *Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000); and Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

4. John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cockings, eds., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2002); Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools That Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); and Chip Wood, *Yardsticks* (Greenfield, Mass.: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1997).

5. For details about the framework and process for change, see James P. Comer, Edward T. Joyner, and Michael Ben-Avie, eds., *The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action: When Children Develop Well, They Learn Well* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2004). See also Milton J. E. Senn and Albert J. Solnit, *Problems in Child Behavior and Development* (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1968).

6. James P. Comer, *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

7. James P. Comer, "Educating Poor Minority Children," *Scientific American*, vol. 259, no. 5, 1988, pp. 42-48.

8. *No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America's Children* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003).

9. Comer, *Leave No Child Behind*.

10. Geoffrey D. Borman et al., *Comprehensive School Reform and Student Achievement: A Meta-analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk [CRESPAR], November 2002), p. 59; and Thomas D. Cook and Robert F. Murphy, "Comer's School Development Program in Chicago: A Theory-Based Evaluation," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 37, 2000, pp. 535-97.

11. *Evaluation of Detroit's Comer Schools and Families Initiative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Associates, 2000); Christine Emmons, New York City District 13 analysis, unpublished raw data, 2004; and George W. Noblit, William W. Malloy, and Carol E. Malloy, *The Kids Got Smarter: Case Studies of Successful Comer Schools* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2001).

12. More information on the impact of the SDP process and achievement data for all of the pilot schools are available at www.schooldevelopmentprogram.org.

13. Comer, Joyner, and Ben-Avie, op. cit. ▮