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Yale prof honored for work in education

Grawemeyer goes to James Comer

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In the era of the federal No Child Left Behind law -- and its mandate to boost student achievement -- raising test scores has become the focus in public schools.

But that is a mistake, according to leading child psychiatrist James P. Comer, who says schools need to take a more "whole child" approach, focusing on helping children develop socially, emotionally and intellectually.

That includes teaching them to get along with others, work collaboratively, be responsible for their actions and work out problems, he said.

"We don't prepare children to be successful adults, and we don't help them have the experiences that will help them become successful family members and successful citizens in their community and in our society," said Comer, the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine.

Comer also wrote "Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World" in 2004.

The book -- and Comer's 30-plus year career in child development and education -- led to his being selected today as winner of the 2007 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Education. The award carries a \$200,000 prize.

Comer, 72, said in a phone interview this week that he is thrilled with the award.

"It's a prestigious award without the financial part of it," said Comer, who said he hopes the Grawemeyer will help grab the attention of the education community, which he said has "been marching in the opposite direction of what our work suggests."

"The award is recognition that it's more than improving test scores," Comer said. "I sometimes think facetiously, but not so facetiously, that if we keep concentrating on test scores, a few years from now we're going to have prisoners with higher test scores."

Sam Stringfield, acting chairman of U of L's Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology and an education professor, said more than 30 people were nominated for the award.

He described Comer's book as "very timely and topical."

"I think the committee felt that with No Child Left Behind legislation being more and more a part of the daily lives of teachers in America, that this book was a nice balance to it," Stringfield said. "You can't get increased academics by just going into it focusing on increased academics. It helps if you also strengthen the community."

The award also recognizes Comer's career, including his development of the Comer School Development Program, which encourages formation of teams of teachers, parents, principals, students and other community members to improve their schools.

The program has been used in more than 1,000 U.S. schools, and research has shown it increases achievement and shrinks the performance gap between poor and affluent students and minorities and whites.

"I think there is a sense that he has demonstrated the viability of this program not by writing one really smart article or one really clever book, but by just staying the course over quite a period of time," Stringfield said.

Comer, an East Chicago, Ind., native, holds a doctorate in medicine from Howard University, a master's degree in public health from the University of Michigan and a bachelor's degree from Indiana University.

He joined Yale's faculty in 1968 and has received many awards, including the Smithsonian Institution's John P. McGovern Behavioral Science Award, the Heinz Award in the Human Condition and the Charles A. Dana Award for Pioneering Achievement in Education.

He also received a special presidential commendation from the American Psychiatric Association and has written and edited a number of books.

Comer said families have a role in helping develop students, but so do schools.

The problem, he said, is that most school staff are "not trained to understand it that way or to compensate."

He argues that teachers need to be trained to incorporate more of a whole-student approach instead of a traditional curriculum, instruction and assessment model.

"They're not talking about child development and application of child development in a way that helps the children grow and be available for academic learning," he said. "It's not simply racial difference. It's not simply class difference. It is understanding that you're a developer and that you've got to work with parents and you've got to create an environment in school that supports development."

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