



## A strong, trusting community is an important element of a school safety plan

*Tressie Armstrong is a shining star, a model for how to build a strong, trusting school community that can and will do the right thing should the worst thing imaginable occur. When bad things happen, it is too late to talk. Armstrong started early.*

— Susan Scott

### By Tressie Armstrong

On Oct. 8, 2010, Kelly Elementary School in Carlsbad, Calif., where I am principal, was put to the test. A lone gunman jumped the playground fence and began firing a handgun into a crowd of 250 1st, 2nd, and 3rd graders at lunch recess. Two students were injured.

This experience challenged relationships within the school community. From the first phone calls home to injured students' parents, to asking parents to wait calmly in the nearby park, to weathering the media onslaught, to holding a special celebration the following Monday to reclaim the campus, the school community relied on these relationships to ensure that our response and recovery could move us forward.

As Susan Scott says in *Fierce Conversations* (2002), "Our lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time. While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a

business, a marriage, or a life, any single conversation can." In Scott's work, I found what would prove pivotal for my whole outlook on life, my work with children, and my focus on building strong, honest, lasting relationships that are trusting and can withstand adversity.

The close-knit Kelly community is known for respectful interactions and dialogue, for being an open and welcoming school that values and encourages parental involvement and volunteerism in the classroom, and for expecting positive relationships. Our work is important: We are building future leaders and strong community members, and each day we are loving little children. This reputation stems largely from the belief we share with Scott that "the conversation *is* the relationship." This influences how we interact with each other and how we expect the children to interact with each other.

During this very intense time, we had to rely on relationships built ahead of time, not only with each other, but also with first responders and district

leaders. We were in this together, standing side by side with each other to move through the turmoil. While we were in lockdown, one father, waiting in the neighboring park to receive updates as the situation unfolded, texted me to ask, "I know you have my son safe. How can I help YOU?" I asked him to begin organizing people in the park and help calm the parents waiting there.

As parents waited in the park and we began to bring the children out of the school, one of the local police officers said, "Watch, this is where chaos will begin." The children were guided out, and one student began to break from the line to go to her mother. The mom put her hands out towards her daughter and said to her, "No, do the right thing and stay with your class." The parents remained calm and trusting, they gathered over the weekend in their neighborhoods to support each other, and they were all on board when, after



Tressie Armstrong

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott ([susan@fierceinc.com](mailto:susan@fierceinc.com)) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. ([www.fierceinc.com](http://www.fierceinc.com)), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. *Fierce in the Schools* carries this work into schools and higher education. Columns are available at [www.learningforward.org](http://www.learningforward.org). © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2014.

much thought about next steps, we decided to hold a community gathering at the school on the following Monday, called “Celebration of a Miracle,” to reclaim our school.

That Monday, after handling some morning business with staff, we celebrated. The community brought balloons, tied ribbons all over the school fences, prepared gift baskets for those who played a large part in protecting the community during the situation, invited the mayor and other local officials, and brought the children back to Kelly Elementary School.

Since then, we’ve been through a lot — the trial and sentencing of the gunman, as well as the recovery of the emotional, physical, and mental sense of well-being for the entire community — and we are stronger than ever. We

are a close-knit community that stood together through a very traumatic experience, and our relationships are lifelong and stronger than ever.

Our reality shifted in a very large way in October 2010, but we were able to not only maintain our culture and community, but also thrive for the well-being of the children. One student, after leaving Kelly and moving on to middle school, was asked by a new peer, “Didn’t you attend the school where you had the shooting?” The student responded, “No, I attended the school where we had the miracle.”

Our leadership imperative in education is to continue to find ways to shift from crisis to opportunities to build community and improve student learning. While every effective comprehensive school safety plan

includes prevention, preparation, response, and recovery, there needs to be a fifth component: relationships. We must build trusting and strong relationships before any traumatic experience, large or small, occurs. It is only through healthy interactions with one other that we will come out stronger on the other side, as we have done at Kelly Elementary School.

#### REFERENCE

Scott, S. (2002). *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time*. New York, NY: Penguin.

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## lessons from research JOELLEN KILLION

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- content foci on writing instruction and with a larger number of active learning strategies, were more likely to provide help to colleagues with teaching writing. They developed more expertise and confidence in practice and became go-to experts for peers and used the active learning strategies to help peers.
- Peers’ interactions with colleagues who experienced intensive professional development in Year 2 had a significantly positive effect on their own instructional practices in writing in Year 3 in both treatment and control schools. Through collegial interactions, expertise spread among teachers.
- The effect of exposure to colleagues’ breadth of writing instruction content on writing instructional practices nearly equals the effect of direct exposure to the breadth of content in writing instruction on writing instructional practices, signaling a noteworthy finding for the design and spillover effect

of professional development. Improvements in instructional practices of teachers who did not participate in professional development increased almost as much as those of teachers who participated directly in professional development.

#### Limitations

Researchers note a number of limitations. A single data set — the teacher survey — was used for the study. The unit of randomization in the longitudinal study whose data were used for this study is the school, yet the unit of analysis in this study is the individual teacher.

Only three features of professional development were analyzed: duration, content area focus, and active learning. Other features not analyzed might affect the positive spillover effects.

The study focused on teachers across multiple disciplines rather than subgroups of teachers. It is possible English language arts teachers may be impacted differently than teachers

of other disciplines. Researchers acknowledge potential measurement errors.

Finally, this study does not examine the impact of changes in instructional practices on student achievement. The authors advocate that future research addresses these limitations.

#### Implications

Researchers cite a number of policy implications that emerge from this study, including the design of professional development. Schoolwide instructional improvement results from professional development with extended duration, content focus, and active learning strategies and intentionally distributing teachers with expertise in content, pedagogy, and collaboration within the school.

Incorporating into professional development strategies to increase teacher collaboration to extend the diffusion of expertise may build the capacity of teachers to serve as internal experts who are available to provide assistance to their colleagues. ■