



A change in beliefs leads to a change in behavior — and improved student achievement

Elaine Cash, superintendent of Riverdale School District in California, has participated in a dramatic turnaround in her district's performance. She describes how conversations transformed district culture and led to significant improvements in student proficiency in the core curriculum and a decrease in the achievement gap. With effective change, mind-set comes first: What you believe determines how you behave. And your behavior produces your results — the ones you like and the ones you're not so crazy about. Here is Cash's story about how a change in thinking led to an outcome worth celebrating in her school district. — Susan Scott

By Elaine Cash

I became superintendent in July 2001, succeeding a superintendent who had the confidence and respect of the district. He was wonderfully supportive of me, and we shared a common

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (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), 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.

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devotion to our schools and students. A difference in our personalities was that he had a strong top-down leadership style.

With the accountability of No Child Left Behind, schools needed to shift more emphasis and energy to curriculum and instruction. The theme of my first year's state of the district speech was "Rolling Up Our Sleeves to Improve Student Learning," and it was my plan to keep working hard at minor changes and show necessary growth every year.

The reality was that only 20% of our students were proficient in the core curriculum. However, given our district's demographics — 80% of the students live below the poverty level and speak English as their second language — though we were not even close to achieving at the levels of neighboring suburban middle-class communities, we were making enough growth to be seen as "beating the odds." If anyone mentioned that we still were far below the national goals, I would offer my "yeah, but's": "Yeah, but we have children who are poor

and do not come to school with academic experience," and "Yeah, but many of our students do not speak English." And on and on and on. Sadly, for the next three years, the theme was "Continuing to Roll Up Our Sleeves." We were not meeting the needs of the majority of our students, and I told myself that it was the best we could do.

We all were working hard. I was running out of ideas within our traditional culture and could feel everyone waiting for me to tell them what to do next.

Fortunately, I had two amazing encounters that almost simultaneously changed my work, my district, and my life. First, I heard Kati Haycock, president of The Education Trust, provide disturbing statistics concerning low national expectations for minority students simply because they are children of color, an excuse without merit. She pointed out how educators often don't demonstrate confidence that these students can achieve. My spirit shaken, I contracted with Pivot Learning Partners, whose model for closing the achievement gap included coaching for school and district leadership. My coach brought to me a thoughtful package that was to be the second encounter of profound influence for me. She gave me the audiobook version of *Fierce*



Elaine Cash

Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time.

The principles of this book have not only transformed my leadership, they have transformed our district's culture. In essence, the concepts guided me to "master the courage to interrogate reality" and "come out from behind myself" and into my authentic self to do the work that our students so deserved.

As a district, we used the conversational model called "mineral rights" to ask those deep questions that expose the truth about any situation. Partners in a mineral rights conversation dig deep through a series of questions to



Seven principles of *Fierce Conversations*

1. Master the courage to interrogate reality.
2. Come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real.
3. Be here, prepared to be nowhere else.
4. Tackle your toughest challenge today.
5. Obey your instincts.
6. Take responsibility for your emotional wake.
7. Let silence do the heavy lifting.

Source: Scott, 2002.

find clarity. Here is what I came to know.

1. I was quietly attracting a staff of bright people with excellent emotional intelligence because they recognized the "heart" in me and wanted to work next to me. And they were desperately waiting for me to "come out from behind myself" and lead with my truths and my heart;
2. As long as I was making excuses, I was sending the message to that wonderful majority of students that I didn't believe that they were able to achieve at the highest level; and
3. I recognized that it was people, not programs or special curriculums, who were the core of our work; thus, developing real, honest, and authentic relationships with each other must be a defining element of our culture.

A transforming concept is that the conversation IS the relationship. And so our district's culture began to transform, one conversation at a time. We began this culture transformation with a book study of *Fierce Conversations*, followed by a leadership retreat.

This retreat was different. Rather than coming guarded and trying to pretend that I was clearly the boss, with a definitive agenda and all the answers, I chose to invite the collective construction of a course of action. We spent time getting to know each other, sharing ideas, and building trust. We came away with improvement plans at every level.

We planned a new theme for the state of the district: "Believe It and You'll See It!" Essentially, we established a sense of urgency that our first order of business was to challenge all to believe that all students will achieve proficiency. We also called for a commitment to build relationships with our students as individuals known by their names and not just a statistical subgroup. This expectation included teachers, administrators, and office and support staff, including food services and maintenance.

That was just the beginning. From there, and with a lot of honest and wonderful, sometimes tough, and many failed conversations, there has been transformation. A few examples:

- We are a district committed to powerful learning, which includes rigorous and relevant course work for every student. This requires honest dialogue and support, both for students to achieve and for staff to maintain a high level of rigor. We believe that all students can learn at this level, and our actions demonstrate that belief.
- We are focused on hiring astute people with hearts open to our vision, people who are not afraid of building relationships with each other as well as with our students, an element so necessary to bring students to learning. We encourage them to take risks, to ask for resources, training, and equipment, and we hold them accountable, both students and staff.
- Last year, our elementary school was named a California Distinguished School, and our high school was one of three in the nation to receive the College Board's Inspirational Award for inspiring students to go on to college. Now 50% of our students are proficient in core subjects, our achievement gap has narrowed considerably, and less than 1% of our students drop out of school. More than 90% of our graduating high school students are enrolling in post-secondary education, with 35% enrolled in a four-year college.

We are not yet at the level where we want to be, but we are universally committed to getting there. And most importantly, we work, and our students learn, in an environment where people are valued and known.

Fierce conversations have become a way of life. It is clearly our attitude.

And it is definitely our way of leading. ■