



Honest conversations are the cornerstone to building a culture of excellence

I believe that the culture of a school and of each classroom within is shaped by our daily practices and that the most powerful practice of all is conversations. Schools and the students they serve succeed or fail one conversation at a time. But it's the quality of the conversations that matters. Conversations provide clarity or confusion, invite collaboration and cooperation or add concertina wire to the walls between well-defended fiefdoms. Conversations inspire us to tackle our toughest challenges or stop us dead in our tracks wondering why we bothered to get out of bed this morning.

A leader's job is to engineer conversations that produce epiphanies. Conversations that reveal we are capable of original thought. Intelligent, spirited conversations that are both intelligent and impassioned, providing clarity and impetus for action, for change when needed. And how wonderful it is to hear the hum of classroom conversations that nourish relationships and generate learning.

— Susan Scott

By Michelle Curry

When I first became superintendent, I felt prepared to raise student achievement in Orting (Wash.) School District, a rural district of 2,300 students in four schools. My goal was to create a culture of excellence — a healthy, professionally sustaining environment in which teachers are encouraged to do their best and students are highly engaged.

In any school system, culture can take on different definitions and norms, but it is the driving force behind whether all students succeed. Culture is how teachers interact with students or parents, how meetings are run at the school or boardroom, and how parents and the community are

embraced as partners in education. It is also how school facilities look and are maintained, the language we use with one another, and how we engage with students in and out of the classroom.

According to research cited in *Transforming School Culture* (Stolp & Smith, 1995), school culture was the most significant factor in determining the success of school restructuring. The authors concluded that strategies for improving school culture are crucial for any successful school reform and restructuring effort.

At the core of transforming school culture is the ability to have honest and meaningful conversations. We must have conversations and provide feedback in a way that's helpful and produces an outcome that moves the system forward.

Professional learning has given district office staff, principals, and teachers the tools for these conversations, but it starts with me. Not only must I initiate conversations that make a difference in the lives of students and staff, but I must also be able to hear and embrace feedback from stakeholders.

Susan Scott (2009) writes, "What is needed now is for leaders to become more open, more flexible, less egoistic, and less hypocritical. We must loosen our death grip on whatever we believe to be the truth simply because it is how we want the truth to look. We must be honest with ourselves and invite honesty from others."



Michelle Curry

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. Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2013.

As I continue to lead change in the district, I strive to make those words a reality through continual feedback, honest dialogue, and an openness to seek a diversity of opinion and possibilities.

A superintendent must be proactive in encouraging a climate of openness and candor, especially at the cabinet level. If cabinet members and principals are not pushing back on ideas, sharing different perspectives, and asking the tough questions, I'm not getting the critical feedback that will bring about improvements in our work to raise student achievement. Here are ways our district is seeking honest feedback.

1. BUILD A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT AND HONEST EVALUATION.

The teacher-principal evaluation committee is helping the district transition from our current evaluation system to new evaluations mandated by the Washington legislature. This collaborative committee focused on teacher evaluation.

The Orting Education Association selected four members for the committee, and the superintendent selected four district officials. The committee met monthly over nine months to explore state requirements, Orting's framework for teacher evaluation, and implications for the district.

This school year, the district moved to the new evaluation system. Feedback, honest dialogue, and being open to a diversity of opinion and possibilities will continue to be an important part of this transition year.

2. MEET WITH STAFF AND FACULTY PERIODICALLY.

Two significant changes have affected district culture. The first was to establish the instructional council, a districtwide advisory group supporting student achievement. The council includes teachers, administrators,

and community members who serve one-year terms. The council reviews programs, courses, and initiatives throughout the district and makes recommendations to the superintendent about instructional areas, curriculum, resources, and materials.

In order to have high-quality and effective conversations about instruction, I purposely sought out individuals with diverse opinions and backgrounds. Committee selection is based on qualifications as well as an effort to include representatives from various grade levels, geographic areas, curriculum expertise, and ethnic backgrounds.

The other significant change was implementation of Friday collaboration days. These days allow time for professional learning and collaboration among teachers and staff during the school day through professional learning communities. Teachers need opportunities to learn together to deepen their content knowledge, learn research-based instructional strategies, coordinate curriculum, and address the increasing demands to implement standards in all schools.

As a result of this strategy, the district modified the elementary math program to meet new state standards, and the middle and high schools hired additional math teachers and instituted new programs. In addition, the district moved to a K-5 standards-based report card, and elementary teachers participated in professional learning to understand what students should be learning each trimester. The district created brochures for parents and family members to explain student learning goals.

3. OBTAIN FEEDBACK BY CONDUCTING A LEADERSHIP REVIEW.

Communication among all Orting School District stakeholders is a priority for me. I worked with the regional educational office to conduct an

independent communications audit of the district as well as my personal efforts to connect with all constituents.

A communications audit is a comprehensive evaluation of an organization's ability to send, receive, and share information with various audiences within the organization as well as key constituencies outside, such as parents and community members. The audit's purpose is to uncover the strengths and weaknesses.

Overall, the district received high marks. One area of improvement highlighted in the audit was the staff's desire to know more about work occurring in other schools. The audit also showed a desire for me to share more frequent updates on district initiatives.

While staff and stakeholders could respond anonymously to both face-to-face interview questions and a staff survey, most identified themselves. I attribute this comfort level and ability to provide critical feedback to the work the district has done to build a culture of excellence, where we can have the right conversations about the right issues that will raise student achievement and lead to professional growth.

This culture of excellence has created a strong foundation for the district to address academic and social issues that directly impact students and benefit staff in preparing all students for work and life.

REFERENCES

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