

fierce. any conversation **can.**



Fierce Conversations in Education Reform:

Uncovering the Ground Truth

a fierce white paper

Fierce Conversations in Education Reform: *Uncovering the Ground Truth*

After so much debate and so many policies, why is our education system still failing so many of our children? What are we either missing or pretending not to know?

Amid the spinning wheels of education reform, in the midst of new and old programs, an essential component is uniformly missing: conversations that interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough challenges and enrich relationships. Conversations that speak to the heart of the issue and galvanize the people involved and become catalysts for sustainable change.

No matter how brilliant a program, initiative or idea is, if we can't speak to the core of the issue and engage the hearts and minds of all stakeholders, we end up missing key perspectives, spinning our wheels.

Geoffrey Canada, noted education reformer, said in a recent presentation, "Education is the only business I know of where you can change anything you want, as long as you change nothing."¹

Reforms only work when people who implement them are on board, engaged and valued. The great differentiator going forward, the place where school reform will find a new sustainable edge, resides in the area of human connectivity. What gets talked about from the boardroom to the classroom, how it gets talked about, and who is invited to join the conversation determines what will happen or won't.

The conversations surrounding school reform must be co-constructed by those who will be responsible for carrying them out along with those who are invested and dependent on achieving success. Conversations that are led by tough leaders with admirable credentials, power and intellect aren't enough because they often take on the illusion of inclusion, regardless of the issue or position. If they don't invite cross-boundary collaboration and cooperation, they will likely exacerbate a culture of blame and deflection.

¹ November 10, 2010, at The Seattle Foundation's Annual Luncheon.

So Many Voices Talking, So Few Conversations Occurring

Each of the major proposals for education reform holds the promise and potential for meaningful change, and each is controversial and has detractors. Regardless of the pros or cons, they typically get hamstrung, become static, can't get traction and, ultimately, can't evolve because these mostly top-down directives and blueprints fail to mobilize the people behind them, producing a lack of engagement and buy-in.

Gen. Colin Powell has stated it like this: "Leadership is all about people. It is not about organizations. It is not about plans. It is not about strategies. It is all about people – motivating people to get the job done. You have to be people-centered."

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*– Gen. Colin Powell
Former U.S. secretary of state*

Critical and urgent discussions around education reform are not producing the thought and action necessary to forge change, regardless of the program, policy or theory under discussion. To the contrary, many of these conversations and debates create "us vs. them" cultures. Dialogue is focused on who's right and who's wrong, who wins and who loses. Many of the ongoing debates are propelled by "official truths," rather than ground truths – the reality of what's actually happening at the ground level, day-to-day. They don't encompass the multiple perspectives and realities that exist in our classrooms, our school districts, our communities. They fail to consider the realities of what students are learning (regardless of test results; for more information please see [Using Outcomes Data to Hold High Schools Accountable for Student Success](#)) that will actually help them navigate their lives in college, in their careers, as stewards of our planet.

Improving our schools, teachers, students and communities requires the courage and ability to collectively initiate and sustain the real conversations that give us the capacity to speak to the ground truths while connecting with one another at a deep level, building emotional capital one conversation at a time.

“The Fierce concept of accountability is ... ferocious integrity, personal authenticity, emotional honesty, the capacity to connect with others at a deep level, sheer courage, and a commitment to champion the common good over narrow self-interest.”

— Susan Scott

Author and founder, Fierce Inc.

“The single factor common to successful change [in schools] is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, schools get better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost.”

— Michael Fullan

Education reform authority

Human Connectivity: Engaging People To Create Lasting Results

Effective education reform demands an emphasis on developing our “human capital,” which a growing number of public policymakers and corporate funders of education programs see as the key strategy to improving schools. The people side of business is something corporations have been striving to perfect, knowing that engaged employees and loyal customers yield the best results. According to the Harvard Business Review, “Those organizations that invest more in talent management significantly outperform their competition across every measure of business.”

With an overwhelming focus on data, programs and systems, it seems that reform efforts and programs often forget the human element, the relationships necessary to make change happen. They overlook the emotional capital that it takes to create real, ground-level change. That emotional capital is built or destroyed one conversation at a time. Before we can propose workplace competencies for school leaders and teachers we must develop a more complex understanding of their work, from where they stand.

“The debate about human capital and school reform is a solution in search of a problem,” according to Andrew Rotherham, co-founder of Education Sector, a national education policy think tank, and former special assistant to President Clinton for domestic policy. “Without a clear, jargon-free understanding of the issues, the political support for reform will fail to match today’s institutional and political obstacles.” ²

² Dan Goldhaber and Jane Hannaway, eds., 2009, Creating a New Teaching Profession, Urban Institute Press.

Like all organizations, schools are emotional as well as intellectual enterprises and need to engage people on a human level. To build emotional capital and relationships that go deep and endure requires fierce conversations, conversations that engage people on an intellectual and emotional level, creating buy-in that leads to action.

In 2002, Daniel Kahneman, a Princeton psychologist, was awarded the Nobel Prize for economics. His studies of over 30 years underscore that as human beings, we behave emotionally first, rationally second. It is the human condition.

“The single factor common to successful change [in schools] is that relationships improve,” writes Michael Fullan, renowned authority on education reform. “If relationships improve, schools get better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost.”

Roland S. Barth, founding director of the Principals’ Center at Harvard University, wrote, “The relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within that school’s culture. Teachers and administrators demonstrate all too well a capacity to either enrich or diminish one another’s lives and thereby enrich or diminish their schools.”³

³ Roland S. Barth, March 2006, Vol. 63, No. 6, Improving Professional Practice.



A New View of Accountability

“Next to human connectivity, accountability is the single most powerful, most desired, yet least understood characteristic of a successful environment,” says Susan Scott, founder of Fierce Inc. and author of *Fierce Conversations* and *Fierce Leadership*.

Leadership that demands accountability with top-down mandates and oversimplified metrics, rather than efforts to effect engagement and connectivity, leads to a culture of blame and excuses. This results in people focusing on “not losing” rather than on winning. It becomes “us” vs. “them.” Roles and outcomes lose clarity and confusion increases. Energy is funneled into tracking evidence to justify results rather than on overcoming obstacles and moving toward solutions. The workforce becomes passive-resistant, garnering negative results more quickly. Co-workers become bitter toward each other, adversarial and divisive. Leading becomes more difficult and credibility suffers, because honest feedback is not reaching leadership.

“This is just as true in education as in any other endeavor,” Scott says. “The long-term benefits of accountability have enormous implications for the quality of our lives – and of our education system – and there is a direct correlation between any company’s or education system’s health and the degree of accountability displayed by its employees, top to bottom.”

Regardless of your perspective on the reform debate, effective education transformation requires the kind of accountability that Scott describes as “ferocious integrity, personal authenticity, emotional honesty, the capacity to connect with others at a deep level, sheer courage, and a commitment to champion the common good over narrow self-interest.”⁴

“Imagine an organization, a school, a community, filled with individuals who, instead of laying blame, instead of making excuses or becoming a victim, willingly choose to be accountable for everything that’s got their name on it,” said Susan Scott, president of Fierce Inc. “Even when facing challenges and obstacles, they ask themselves, ‘What am I going to do? What else do I need to know? Given that this situation is tough, here’s what I can do.’ The answer is not, ‘Duck and cover.’ This is a fierce culture where people step up to the task and hold others as able to do the same.”

How is this “new view of accountability” different from holding people accountable? Accountability is an attitude – a personal, private and non-negotiable choice about how to live one’s life. It’s a desire to take responsibility for results, and for that reason, it cannot be mandated. It requires a personal bias toward solutions, toward action. Milbrey McLaughlin, co-director of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, has noted, “You can’t mandate what matters.”

A culture of fierce conversations inspires and instills intrinsic accountability – a desire to want to take responsibility and ownership.

⁴ Susan Scott, 2009, *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst “Best” Practices of Business Today*, Broadway Business.

Fierce Conversations for Education Reform

While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a school, a relationship or a life – any single conversation can. It's not a matter of which program is under discussion, which mandates are established, or which carrots are dangled and which sticks are bandied. The focus on conversation is essential because the conversation is the relationship. Nowhere is that more important than education.

Fierce and the Iowa Department of Education

In Iowa, state education administrators credit **Fierce Conversations** with helping to create a more cohesive leadership system and develop more rigorous classroom environments.

"The work that has to be done in schools cannot be done without leadership," said Dr. Troyce Fisher, director of the Wallace Leadership Grant for Iowa School Administrators. "And it's tough work. It's very difficult work. And whatever tools we can provide leaders to help them with that will increase the possibilities that kids benefit." ⁵

One tool that has been extremely successful for Fisher and the Iowa schools is Fierce Conversations training.

The training has had a direct impact from the top of the Iowa school system down to the local classrooms. Fisher first reached out to Fierce after reading about the training and sensing that its theory of action and accountability among leaders was similar to the philosophy embraced by the Wallace Foundation. On its website, the Wallace Foundation says that, "In simplest terms, our approach is to develop and test useful ideas 'on the ground,' gather credible, objective evidence on what is most effective and why, and then share that knowledge with the individuals and institutions having the courage and authority to bring those effective ideas to life in ways that bring benefits to people."

The work started with **Fierce Conversations training** for 15 people on the state-level team charged with helping schools improve performance.

⁵ Fierce, Inc., webinar presentation, 2010, http://dl.luxmedia.com/fierce/20100510_FC_FITS_webinar.wmv.

“How one conducts these intense, dedicated, powerful conversations will play a significant role in whether leaders, teachers and principals will work together effectively in the course of improving the system – their system.”

– Dr. Troyce Fisher
Director, Wallace
Leadership Grant for Iowa
School Administrators

“Fierce conversations have become a way of life. It is clearly our attitude. And it is definitely our way of leading.”

– Elaine Cash
Superintendent, Riverdale,
Calif., Joint Unified School
District

What Fisher referred to as the “state support team.” It was then extended to central office personnel in the state’s eight largest urban school districts and four smaller, rural districts that had “intense needs.” Next, Fierce Conversations was offered as a module for leadership evaluator training, approved by the state superintendent, for administrators to receive credit toward their certifications as evaluators. These supervisors have conversations to identify the level of rigor in school classrooms.

“They use that as a launching point,” Fisher said. “How one conducts these intense, dedicated, powerful conversations will play a significant role in whether leaders, teachers and principals will work together effectively in the course of improving the system – their system.”

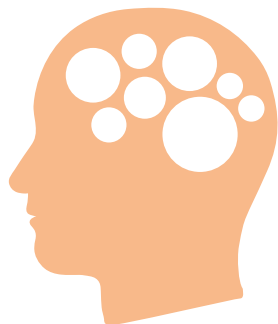
With funding from the Wallace Leadership Grant, about 200 Iowa educators, administrators, coaches and trainers participated in the [two-day Fierce Conversations training](#). Title I funding was used to bring a certified [Fierce Conversations](#) trainer to each Area Education Agency in the state.

“We believe Fierce Conversations will play a significant role in whether leaders will be able to work effectively with teachers, whether supervisors can work effectively with principals, and principals with teachers, and so on,” Fisher said.

In addition, the original 15 trainers have been further trained in Fierce Accountability, and Iowa has approved a syllabus to teach [Fierce Conversations](#) to educators over time, with coaching between training to ensure sustainability, and offers two graduate credits to its 2,000 administrators.

“If we think about developing a vision, creating a culture and having ethical ways of leading, Fierce Conversations is a natural way to approach each of those leadership tasks. Making the conversations a way of being in our system,” Fisher said. “We have to build a culture where the conversations are held within the buildings and the districts and not in the parking lot. We need to make it our way of being. This is what leaders do.”

Rand Corporation recently found that Iowa is one of three states making the most progress toward a cohesive leadership system.



Fierce and the Riverdale Joint Unified School District

Elaine Cash became superintendent of the Riverdale, Joint Unified School District in California in July 2001. As she says in an article in the Journal of Staff Development, “With the accountability of No Child Left Behind, schools needed to shift more emphasis and energy to curriculum and instruction ... and it was my plan to keep working hard at minor changes and show necessary growth every year.”⁶

The reality was that only 20 percent of the district’s students were proficient in the core curriculum. However, because of the district’s demographics – 80 percent of the students lived below the poverty level and spoke English as their second language – even though the district was “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,’” Cash says.

If anyone mentioned that the district was still far below national goals, she offered what she called her “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,” Cash says.

Her unrecognized reliance on excuses and on deflecting accountability changed after Cash listened to an audiobook of Scott’s [Fierce Conversations](#). “The principles of this book have not only transformed my leadership, they have transformed our district’s culture,” Cash says.

The transformation started with a leadership retreat during which the participants learned the [ideas and principles](#) of [Fierce Conversations](#). After that retreat, district leaders took what they learned and changed the theme for the district from “Rolling Up Our Sleeves To Improve Student Learning” to “Believe It and You’ll See It.”

As a certified fierce trainer, Cash along with her leadership team, embedded fierce conversation strategies and skills, fostering a new mindset. This created a culture shift where fierce conversations became a way of life.

“Everyone in the district became committed to powerful learning,” Cash says. “From the custodians to the school board, people were not afraid of building relationships with each other as well as with our students, an element so necessary to bring students to learning.”

⁶ National Staff Development Council, Journal of Staff Development, June 2010

Specifically, results of the transformation in the Riverdale district included:

- The district elementary school in 2009 was named a California Distinguished School.
- The district high school in 2009 was one of three in the nation to receive the College Board's Inspirational Award for inspiring students to go on to college.
- The achievement gap has narrowed considerably, and fewer than 1 percent of students drop out.
- More than 90 percent of graduating high school students are enrolling in post-secondary education.
- Thirty-five percent of graduating high school students enroll in a four-year college.

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Conclusion

Changing the way students learn over the long haul demands leadership that knows that programs are bound to fail if they are not led by conversations that are fierce, courageous, authentic and transparent.

As seen in Iowa and California, effective change demands leadership led by fierce conversations that dive deep to uncover every truth about any situation creating a culture in which people feel able – and desire – to be accountable for their decisions, for their actions, and for making a difference. Ken Jones, professor of education at the University of Southern Maine and a 2010 Fulbright Scholar, has spent years researching school accountability and professional development. Jones states, “Accountability must focus on individual responsiveness and interpersonal dynamics within specific contexts. It must be local in implementation and of high resolution in the light it sheds on teachers’ practice and students’ learning.”

It’s not simply a matter of programs, mandates, vouchers and data.

“None of that truly matters if leaders don’t model fierce conversations and accountability for the results,” says Susan Scott, president of Fierce.

Authentic education reform is a matter of creating cultures in each school district, each school, each classroom that ultimately set new standards for the way children interact with the world around them.

We argue that the answer is not to duck and cover. We argue that stories from 10 years of [Fierce Conversations training](#) in business, and its more recent adoption in schools, say that the answer is a fierce culture in which everyone steps up to the task and holds themselves accountable, and others able to do the same, while forging stronger, deeper, and more collaborative relationships.

At the end of the day, we can have amazing ideas and strategies, but it comes down to people implementing them. How are we going to engage the people whose hearts and minds we must capture to initiate and create lasting change for the better and pass these same skills on to future generations? One fierce conversation at a time.

About Fierce

Fierce, Inc., is leadership and development training that drives results for business and education by developing conversation as a skill. Traditional programs are impersonal, complicated and disconnected from concrete results. Fierce creates authentic, energizing and rewarding connections with colleagues and customers through skillful conversations that lead to successful outcomes and measurable ROI. Tailored to any organization, Fierce principles and methods translate across the globe, ensure individual and collective success, and develop skills that are practical, easy-to-learn and can be applied immediately. Fierce, Inc., is based in Seattle and online at www.fierceinc.com.