

How One School District Transformed by Speaking the Truth

Background

When Michelle Curry, the superintendent of Orting School District, moved from a school district with 43,000 students to a rural community with 2,300 students in four schools, she brought Fierce Conversations training with her. "Fierce is a game changer," said Curry. "I saw it work in an urban setting, and I knew it would work here."

As the new superintendent, she had a few non-negotiables: "I was committed to being a learner, an advocate, and a collaborator, and I was going to speak my truth and help others speak theirs."

Since that time, things have changed drastically. "We flipped the district, and we attribute it to Fierce," said Curry. "We made 83% gains in math in our high school, and our high school has received an award of distinction for three years in a row."



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— MICHELLE CURRY
Superintendent, Orting School District



CHALLENGES

- Transparency
- Feedback
- Timely decision making

SOLUTIONS

- Fierce Conversations and Fierce Accountability for leadership, central office and support teams
- Expectations modeled by leadership
- Fierce training for at-risk students

RESULTS

- Transformed culture
- Improved academic results
- More successful negotiations

Challenges

CHALLENGE #1:

One of the first things Curry noticed as superintendent was that the district wasn't comfortable having conversations around student growth and achievement. "We were really good at never showing our data, and never talking to people about practices they needed to change," said Curry.

CHALLENGE #2:

Feedback was also an area of concern. As in many districts, an "us vs. them" mentality had surfaced between and among different groups.

"Listening to feedback and taking it well is a learned skill," said Kacie Nesby, a grant-funded service provider in the district. "We needed a way to help people break outside of their comfort zone and look at things from a different perspective."

CHALLENGE #3:

"In education, it's too easy to say 'let's address this after spring break or in the summer,'" said Superintendent Curry. "We only get these kids 181 days a year, and we're dealing with student learning, outcomes and achievement. If we don't take the time now, it passes, and we all miss out."

A photograph showing three students in a classroom setting, focused on a hands-on activity. They are gathered around a table, working with various materials, including what appears to be a small aquarium or terrarium. The student on the right is wearing a white t-shirt with a logo that says "FIERCE The Heat" and "LITE SCHOOL OF DANCE". The student in the middle is wearing a grey t-shirt and glasses. The student on the left is wearing a dark t-shirt. They are all looking down at their work with concentration.

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QUICK FACTS ABOUT ORTING

- Rural community in Washington State
- 40% poverty
- 2,300 students in 4 schools
- 250 employees



Solutions

FIERCE CONVERSATIONS & FIERCE ACCOUNTABILITY TRAINING

The first step was to build a common language and shared communication plan. Deli Moussavi-Bock, a Fierce trainer with a background in education, came to Orting to conduct Fierce Conversations training and help lay the groundwork. Everyone was invited: board members, the union president, teachers, principals, and others from the leadership, central office and support teams.

Once people had a chance to let the learning sink in and practice new skills, Deli came back and took the same group through Fierce Accountability training. "Deli is amazing!" said Curry. "She knows our district and understands what we need to work on."

EXPECTATIONS MODELED BY LEADERSHIP

Most importantly, learning didn't stop when people left the classroom; that's when the hard work began. Curry was clear with attendees that Fierce was the new expectation. "We expect direct, collaborative conversations," said Curry. "When someone gets mad and tries to avoid a conversation, we tell them to tee up their Fierce. Make time, write down your thoughts, practice it, and have the conversation."

By modeling Fierce, Superintendent Curry encourages others to do the same. "She sets the stage to interrogate the reality of others and focus on the facts," said Nancy Harris, President of the Teachers' Union and Head of Special Education at Orting High School (OHS). "People are more prepared to have solution-seeking conversations that are respectful and empowering for everyone involved."

FIERCE TRAINING FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

As the district began to see success, they decided Fierce would be the perfect tool for high school students who struggled to advocate for themselves. Orting applied for and received a work-readiness training grant they now use to offer Fierce Conversations to at-risk students in their alternative high school.

Results

TRANSFORMED CULTURE

"Fierce brought authenticity and courage to our district," said Curry. "People are listening to each other. They're having conversations that are well thought out and accepting feedback. As a result, relationships are blossoming—in the classrooms and hallways, on the school board and within the community."

IMPROVED ACADEMIC RESULTS

Key players now discuss reality without laying blame. Tough conversations—even about low test scores or low data points—take place regularly so solutions can be found quickly. Ultimately, the winners are the students. They're being put first. And the results speak for themselves: Orting school district has received multiple awards for their progress and made powerful academic leaps—including 83% gains in math at the high school.

MORE SUCCESSFUL NEGOTIATIONS

For the first year, negotiations in Orting switched from adversarial (across-the-table) bargaining to interspace bargaining, and everyone—including the superintendent and the teachers' union president—believes the improvement was powerful.

"We were so proficient," said Curry. "We only talked about agreed upon action items. And it was done with a tenor and tone of respect. If superintendents across the nation added the extra ingredient of Fierce to their negotiations, they would see amazing differences."

Negotiations shifted away from positions, and on to the actual issues. "In our meetings, we use various Fierce tactics to help us all focus on our personal realities and seek out solutions," said Harris. "Everyone has a voice at the table."

Superintendent
Curry's favorite
Susan Scott quote

“the most valuable thing any of us can do is to find a way to say the things that can't be said.

— SUSAN SCOTT
Founder & Author, *Fierce Conversations*

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MEET JOANN TRACY

Teacher at Orting HIGH SCHOOL LEARNING LAB
(alternate high school)

Tell us a little about your role.

"My role is more as a coach than a traditional, classroom teacher. We help students set and accomplish goals so they're able to earn their diplomas. We typically have 25-30 kids graduating every year."



How has Fierce helped?

"Most of our kids don't know how to have tough conversations without getting angry or walking away. Fierce teaches them it's possible to get your point across without getting overly emotional or getting mad at the other person. They learn to really listen to another perspective and to state their own perspective clearly."

What was the biggest a-ha moment for your students?

"Uncovering the actual issues. That's been a real eye-opener for a lot of our kids. Because they're angry, they think the issue is one thing, but when they practice and ask questions, they realize the issue is actually something else. Knowing what the real issue is not only helps them advocate for themselves, it helps us counsel and coach them."

What was your biggest takeaway as a teacher?

"Getting the diploma is such a little piece of what we're trying to do. Learning to work in a group and to be a team player, learning responsibility and accountability and learning to communicate well—that's what prepares kids for life inside and outside of school. That's what will change lives and help students rise to a new level."



a fierce case study

The Importance of Now

Curry plans to continue preparing employees to have the conversations they need to have every day. "If we stop postponing conversations and take action every single day, imagine how our schools will look next year," said Curry. "Fierce helps us to use our voice and make things happen now.

One example took place this year when kindergarten was changed from half-day to full-day in the middle of the year rather than waiting until the next school year. "Once we understood it was what was best for the kids, we made it happen," said Terry VanZanten, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent. "If we waited until next year, our current kindergarteners would have missed out."

Teachers, principals, parents and the technology team all came together to pull off the changes and create a communication plan. "It was a huge success," said VanZanten. "The ultimate in teamwork, and it was practically seamless."

A photograph showing a teacher with long dark hair leaning over a wooden table, interacting with a group of young children. The children are gathered around a large orange pumpkin. The background shows a classroom setting with various educational materials and posters on the wall.

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— MICHELLE CURRY
Superintendent, Orting School District



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MEET ROBIN TOTTEN

Principal at Orting Primary School

Tell us a little about your experience.

"We had a huge challenge in our school. The problem was with adults intimidating each other—and it had gone on for over a decade and through multiple principals. The way it manifested was some people were afraid to speak out, and others ran roughshod over their colleagues. We tried multiple tactics. Nothing worked until Fierce."

How did Fierce help?

"Fierce helped us realize, as a team, that our culture was worth fighting for, and we had to be willing to talk about what was going on in order to change. They gave us the protocols to turn things around."

What was the biggest learning for your school staff?

"There was a powerful turning point when we invited our entire staff—certificated and classified—to go through the Confrontation module together. They started asking themselves: 'Is my fear to confront worse than the reality I experience when I don't confront?'"

What was your biggest takeaway as a principal?

"Learning not to step in to solve people's problems for them. In the past, I would do the confronting for people. It's so much more powerful when people speak up for themselves. As a supervisor, I don't want to rob people of the learning opportunity to try out strategies and deal with situations on their own."





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NANCY HARRIS —
President of Teachers' Union & Head of Special Education
at Orting High School
Orting School District

Next Steps

Orting is continuing to build and practice new skills. Curry is interested in partnering with other school districts using Fierce to share stories and learn about the successes of others. She also hopes to put more of her district through training this summer.

“It’s like turning around the USS Nimitz in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. It’s not going to happen in an hour,” said Curry. “It does happen though. It happens when we’re focused and confident and skilled. For us that means being authentic and transparent. It means having the conversations we need to have and speaking our truths every day.”

what is a “fierce school”?

A fierce school is collaborative—with high levels of personal authenticity, ferocious integrity, and genuine respect.



WHILE
NO SINGLE
CONVERSATION
IS GUARANTEED
TO CHANGE THE
TRAJECTORY
OF A SCHOOL,
AN ORGANIZATION,
A RELATIONSHIP
OR A LIFE—
ANY SINGLE
CONVERSATION
CAN.