

How One State Improved Evaluations, Developed Teacher Leaders, and Changed Lives

This study shares a systemic approach to improving communication statewide. Fierce Conversations training was embedded into the mandatory evaluator recertification process and provided shared protocols for teacher leaders and other adults working with adults.



Challenges

When the state of Iowa began requiring evaluators to get recertified every five years, leaders decided to go beyond the checkbox mentality of compliance training to ensure development changed behaviors.

"We weren't interested in evaluators just observing and telling people what to do differently," said Troyce Fisher, Executive Director, School Administrators of Iowa. "We wanted to give evaluators tools for deeper conversations—ones that invite experimentation, ownership, and personal growth."

At the same time, leaders in Dubuque were looking for ways to strengthen communication skills and provide shared protocols for development, coaching, and collaboration among administrators, principals, and instructional coaches.

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— TROYCE FISHER
Executive Director, School Administrators of Iowa

CHALLENGES

- Improve evaluations
- Encourage experimentation in development process
- Strengthen communication skills

SOLUTIONS

- Analyzed **how** and **why** organizations change
- Selected Fierce for evaluator certification and communication training
- Certified trainers from every AEA
- Spread out training to include practice time

Key Players

The Iowa Department of Education
School Administrators of Iowa (SAI)
The Wallace Foundation

Solutions

1 Analyzed *how* and *why* organizations change

The first step for evaluator recertification planning was to assemble a committee with representatives from all districts. “It was critical for us to have buy-in,” said Lou Howell, veteran Fierce Conversations Trainer and Educational Consultant. “We were looking for a robust but friendly process that supported our members and improved skills.”

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The committee analyzed how and why organizations change and what drives educational reform. They agreed evaluations alone do not change behaviors; meaningful relationships change behaviors. “We know if there’s trust, if there’s honest dialogue, and if professional learning is supported, change occurs,” said Fisher. “Fierce was a natural solution as a vehicle to get there.”

2 Selected Fierce for evaluator recertification ...

After evaluating multiple training options, the committee—made up of educational stakeholders, principals and superintendents—picked Fierce. The Wallace Foundation approved it, and underwrote it. And Fierce became a statewide, 2-credit option for evaluator recertification.

... and for communication training



a fierce case study

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— DELI MOUSSAVI-BOCK
Director of Training, Fierce in the Schools

While the state of Iowa was targeting evaluators, the city of Dubuque was looking at broader applications for Fierce—specifically, how communication skills and shared protocols would benefit teacher leaders and collaborators.

"For us it was a little serendipitous," said Nancy Bradley, Director of Elementary Education and Professional Development in Dubuque. "We identified the need without any knowledge of the evaluator licensure. It was an extra bonus to realize those who were evaluators could also use it for recertification."

3 Certified trainers from every AEA

Next, Fierce certified 2-person training teams from every **Area Education Agency (AEA)** to provide training and support change within every region.

"We made sure there was a cohort of strong trainers for a community of practice," said Howell. "We gathered the trainers every month for the first year and then every couple months the second year. They shared what was working and what wasn't and uncovered new opportunities to take training deeper."

4 Spread out training to include practice time and assignments

Rather than offering Fierce Conversations as a 2-day course, the Iowa Department of Education decided to offer it as eight 1/2-day sessions, spread out over 30 days. The four conversation models (team, coaching, delegation, and confrontation) are covered one at a time—with a day of practice and feedback in between each new concept.

"Participants complete assignments and use an online forum to support each other and ask questions," said Deli Moussavi-Bock, Director of Training, Fierce in the Schools. "When they walk out, they've already established new habits."

Results

"Fierce Conversations changed the fabric of our organization. Our leaders now have a common toolkit of conversational strategies that bring results," said Bradley. "It's been life changing for people—personally and professionally."

Evaluations have improved, and unexpected benefits continue to surface. In Dubuque, administrators use the team model to facilitate community conversations—especially emotionally charged conversations like possible school closures—to ensure everyone is heard.

In other areas, principals use it to conduct teacher meetings. "The process prevents domination by individuals," said Dale Lass, Principal of Roosevelt Middle School. "Everyone has time to reflect on their thoughts and suggest solutions." And principals report feeling less isolated because of the shared tools and strong learning cohorts.

In Iowa, Fierce Conversations is more than just a workshop—it's part of a systemic approach to communication. "When the models are practiced, coached, and reinforced, they become second nature," said Fisher. "That's when lives change, and we see what a powerful difference Fierce makes."

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