



Rodney D. Joslin School

# How One Principal Rebuilt Trust and Broke Down Barriers by Improving Daily Conversations

## About Perspectives Charter Schools

Perspectives Charter Schools was founded in 1997 by two public school teachers who believed in quality education as the great equalizer. One of the State of Illinois' first five charter schools, today Perspectives manages five high-quality, open enrollment public schools serving grades six through twelve in the Chicago communities of Auburn Gresham, Grand Boulevard and the South Loop.

## Introduction

*Can a school rebuild relationships and improve performance in one year?*

When Dr. Angela Brooks-Rallins walked on to campus for her first day as the new principal at Rodney D. Joslin Perspectives Charter School in Chicago Illinois, she knew she had some work to do. It was the third quarter of the school year, and she was stepping into a new role with big goals and few relationships within the school. The staff felt unsettled, parents were skeptical, and students were frustrated.

Dr. Brooks-Rallins' experience is a common one; many schools deal with changes in leadership on a regular basis. The average length of a principal's tenure is three to four years<sup>1</sup>. And typically, tenure is shorter in more challenging, inner city schools. Even more profound? Most experts report it takes an average of five years to settle effectively into the role of principal.

Dr. Brooks-Rallins wasn't willing to become a statistic. This case study shares the steps she took to rebuild trust, strengthen communication and leadership skills for every person on campus, and transform the culture of the school,

## CHALLENGES

- Multiple leadership changes had dissolved trust
- Disparate groups were not collaborating with each other
- Conversations had become one-sided or were being avoided altogether

## SOLUTIONS

### PHASE ONE Principal modeled Fierce

- Invited honest feedback
- Collected data on what was working and what was not

### PHASE TWO Staff learned new skills; Modeled new behaviors for students

- Summer reading assignment prepared staff to learn
- 1-day "Taste of Fierce" kicked off new school year
- 2-day "Fierce Conversations" training introduced models for conversations

### PHASE THREE Students empowered with life-long communication and leadership skills

- Fierce Friday meetings reinforced learning

## WHAT CHANGED

- Improved relationships
- Increased innovation
- Improved attendance rate (95%)
- Significant growth in ACT scores
- More inclusive learning and work environments
- Greater accountability and "ownership"

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## Challenges

### CHALLENGE #1:

Multiple leadership changes had dissolved trust the Joslin campus had always felt like a family. Because of multiple leadership changes, the family had become insular and cautious. People were guarded with each other and wary of the leadership team.

### CHALLENGE #2:

Disparate groups were not collaborating with each other Dr. Brooks-Rallins knew one of the first steps was to break down barriers and build inclusiveness back into the school so that leadership, staff, students and parents were united and ready to collaborate and learn from each other.

### CHALLENGE #3:

Conversations had become one-sided or were being avoided altogether because many of the relationships were new—especially among the principal and staff—people didn't always feel safe seeking each other out and asking questions. When they did, many focused on getting their point across rather than listening to other viewpoints. In other words, they were talking *at* each other instead of *with* each other.

Even worse than one-sided conversations?  
Many conversations weren't taking place at all.

*In Latin-based languages, the root of the word—"con"—means **with**.*

*Yet frequently people don't have conversations **with** each other. They have "versations."*

*They focus exclusively on getting their point across rather than striving to understand the other person's point of view.*

# conversation

## Solutions



**PHASE ONE**—Principal modeled Fierce

**PHASE TWO**—Staff learned new skills; Modeled new behaviors for students

**PHASE THREE**—Students empowered with life-long communication and leadership skills

Dr. Brooks-Rallins had already embraced Fierce as an individual. Her one non-negotiable when she accepted her position as principal of the Joslin campus was that she be allowed to bring Fierce methodology with her to the school.

"I'd always dreamed of having a Fierce school," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "The philosophies and models are perfect for talking with kids, for opening up communication, and for building an inclusive, positive culture filled with leaders. Our school was ready for change. We were ready to be united and aligned and start achieving more—individually and collectively."

### what is a "fierce school"?

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



### Being the change

"I knew if I was going to inspire others to commit to a new way of communicating, I needed to be relentless in my own commitment. I needed to model the behaviors in every encounter," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "I needed to talk the talk and walk the walk, and to fully commit to a new communication lifestyle."

## Getting real

The first goal was to understand what was really going on at the school. That meant getting beyond what people thought they were supposed to say and encouraging them to share what they were actually experiencing. Dr. Brooks-Rallins spent the last part of her first school year asking tough questions and helping stakeholders get comfortable giving honest feedback.

"If you want people to be honest with you, you have to be ready to hear what they have to say," said the principal. "Real feedback can be tough to give and even tougher to receive. You have to prepare your heart for it. But the truth is essential. It's the starting point for unification and change."

Dr. Brooks-Rallins visited classrooms, sat in on teacher meetings, spent time in the family room, and listened in the hallways. And she met with parents, students and staff in every position at the school. She collected data to uncover trends about what was working well and what was causing dissatisfaction and frustration.



**PHASE ONE**—Principal modeled new approach to communication

**PHASE TWO**—Staff learned new skills; Modeled new behaviors for students

**PHASE THREE**—Students empowered with life-long communication and leadership skills

For the next phase, Dr. Brooks-Rallins set the tone for the new school year by empowering her staff with the same tools that had been so transformative for her and had helped her gain a better understanding of the school.

To prepare everyone to learn together, Dr. Brooks-Rallins gave her staff a summer reading assignment—"Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time." Next, they kicked off the new year with a 1-day professional development session called "A Taste of Fierce."

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## Setting clear expectations

"I wanted to introduce a common language to help get us all on the same page," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "Then we sat down together and wrote the 'Joslin Family Norms.' We set clear expectations of how we were going to communicate going forward—with each other and with parents and students."

After allowing the initial learning to resonate, Dr. Brooks-Rallins partnered with a Fierce facilitator to deliver the 2-day "Fierce Conversations" workshop to all staff in every position within the school. This session introduced the conversation models for **Team**, **Coaching**, **Delegation** and **Confrontation** conversations.

## Conversation Models Provide the "How"

The Perspectives Charter Schools are founded on the belief that social emotional development and academic achievement are interdependent. The foundation of the culture is based on "A Disciplined Life®," a set of 26 principles that guide students inside and outside the classroom. What was missing was the "how." Fierce provided the specific tools for *how* to achieve the goals—especially those involving communication, leadership and relationships.

"Saying we're going to 'communicate effectively' or 'respect each other's differences' or 'solve conflicts peacefully' is the start," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "The Fierce conversation models provided clear tools for *how* to achieve those goals—*how* to communicate effectively, *how* to show respect for others, and *how* to solve conflicts peacefully."

## Talking to people or with them?

Communication in schools is not a one-way street. "We don't believe we talk to students," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "We talk *with* students and they talk *with* us. We talk *with* families and *with* each other."

C=R

Relationships  
are not just  
based on  
conversations.

Conversations  
are the  
relationship.



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Just as Dr. Brooks-Rallins modeled behaviors for staff, the staff needed to embrace the new tools in order for them to be received well by students and families. "If we weren't living it, we would definitely get called out on it by the students," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "'You're telling me to be Fierce, but what about you?'"

The Joslin campus decided on a staggered approach to learning implementation so staff could get comfortable with the techniques before introducing them to the students.



**PHASE ONE**—Principal modeled new approach to communication

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Because of the performance improvements that took place in the first year using Fierce techniques, the next step was to pass new communication and leadership skills on to the students. Fierce was introduced to the student body as part of the A Disciplined Life® curriculum.

Every Thursday, students work on study lessons provided in the Fierce Conversations Classroom Field Guide. The lessons are specifically designed for teachers to share with students and offer practical tips for students to practice new approaches to communication and leadership. The approaches not only help students navigate their current school careers, they help them prepare for their future academic, personal and professional lives.

### **Learning Transfer—What's the point of going through training if it's not used?**

Joslin campus has also implemented Fierce Friday meetings so the staff has a comfortable environment to share successes, uncover concerns and, most importantly, reinforce habits. As a result, new learning is transferring and making a difference in the workplace, the classroom, and the personal lives of all involved.

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## What's Changed

Staff and leadership now have relationships built on trust. "I love being part of this school," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "People come to me now when they have concerns. And I go to them. We're honest with each other, and we have each other's backs."

One of the biggest reasons for this change is everyone now understands it is safe to speak up. "We've worked very hard on letting staff and students know we're interested in reality. We don't want things sugar coated," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "There's always a way to come up with a solution when we interrogate reality together."

### Interrogating reality leads to innovation

For example, one staff member noticed independent study time wasn't working for some struggling students. Time wasn't all the students needed; they needed someone to mentor them and help them uncover the steps to achieving goals.

Instead of keeping silent, the staff member decided to do something about it, and created a new mentoring program. Now, more experienced students are paired with younger students. The results? Ninth and 10<sup>th</sup> graders are achieving goals and 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders are strengthening communication and leadership skills by practicing new behaviors and modeling new norms. Both groups are building new relationships.

### The power of inclusion

People not only feel safer voicing their own opinions, they have a new appreciation for the perspectives of others. "Inclusion is not something we *should* do," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "It's something that makes us stronger." Students and staff are enlisting the perspectives of others and collaborating on solutions," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins.

**inclusion**—a heightened awareness that there is more than one right way to live a life, and when we encounter someone with beliefs different from our own, rather than become angry or judgmental, we have the opportunity to become curious and learn



## Improved attendance rate; Better test scores

The new, more inclusive environment means students are more involved in shaping their educational experience. The attendance rate for the school year has increased to 95% and significant growth in ACT scores shows students are not only showing up, they're engaged and learning.

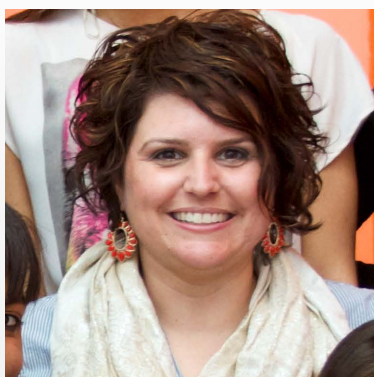
## Taking things personally

Work and school lives are extremely personal. Most people spend an enormous chunk of their lives dedicated to their education and their work. It pays to be truly present. Success starts with accountability.

"Instead of looking for excuses, people are now saying things like, 'I'm not performing the way I need to be. I need some help,'" said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "The conversation models help us ask the right questions so everyone becomes a better advocate for themselves—whether it's a student reflecting on what they need in order to learn well, a teacher reflecting on what they need in order to teach well or a staff member reflecting on what they need to be successful in their particular role."

## "Ownership" leads to action

Most importantly, new levels of trust have brought about a stronger sense of "ownership." "Now when students or staff see an opportunity—a club they'd like to start, a leadership position they're interested in, a student or staff member that should be recognized, they do something about it," said Dr. Brooks-Rallins. "Joslin is a family again. This is *our* school. We *all* have the power to change things for the better and make great things happen."



## Still to Come: Surpassing Statistics

Next year will be Dr. Brooks-Rallins third year at Joslin campus. She looks forward to continuing to strengthen the relationships at her school—every day through every conversation. Her goal is to ensure every student, every staff member and every family member feels heard, and communication remains open, honest and Fierce.

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<sup>1</sup>Wahlstrom, Kyla L., Karen Seashore. Louis, Kenneth A. Leithwood, and Stephen E. Anderson. *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*. Alexandria, VA: Educational Research Service. Print.



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