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Gerald D. Bailey
Kansas State University

Randal E. Bagby

Rick Doll

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Book Study Teams: Empowering Others to Become Leaders in the 21st Century

Gerald D. Bailey
Randal E. Bagby
Rick Doll

Over the last five years, the department of Educational Administration and Leadership at Kansas State University has been engaging in a series of university-school district partnerships to improve the training of school leaders. Specifically, faculty at Kansas State University have reached out to school districts who have a special interest in preparing their faculty for leadership positions – both administrators and leaders of leaders within their faculty. One of the most recent partnerships involves Kansas State University with two school districts: Marysville U.S.D. 364 and Rock Creek U.S.D. 323 which are located near Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. The partnership focuses on delivering a comprehensive program resulting in a leadership degree and/or building level administrative certificate.

From the outset, this partnership has focused on preparing administrators and school leaders in a different fashion. Courses are: (1) co-planned by university and school district faculty, (2) co-taught by faculty and school superintendents, (3) delivered onsite to students in alternating locations, and (4) focused on teams who learn together for a sustained period of time.

While much of the program content focuses on the ISLC Standards, the course content comes from a wide range of books. While traditional administrative textbooks are used, there is a greater emphasis on other types of books including fields such as business, psychology, science, medicine, and futurism. Each semester, team members and faculty propose a series of books that relate to course outcomes. Students can select which book study team or teams by interest or need. Book study teams are formed which can range from four to eight students.

Team Agreement

As a team, they must agree to do the following:

1. Select a team facilitator(s) for the selected book, or book series.
2. Dialogue and commit to the purpose of the book as it relates to course competencies or outcomes.

Gerald D. Bailey is Professor, Educational Administration and Leadership, Kansas State University. Randal E. Bagby is Superintendent, Marysville USD #364, Marysville, KS. Rick Doll is Superintendent, Rock Creek USD #323, Westmoreland, KS.

3. Establish a schedule of times and places to meet which is agreeable to everyone.
4. Create an action plan that is a product or outcome of the book study process.
5. Participate in ongoing electronic dialogue about the issues raised in the book study (see Extending the Dialogue below).

Extending the Dialogue

Technologies have provided opportunities for extending the potential of book study teams to higher levels of dialogue. These electronic systems for supporting teams allow continuous mission-focused dialogue that carries the book study teaming to new levels of communication. Extending the dialogue can be as simple as using email, or using something more elaborate such as Blackboard that Kansas State University provides for the leadership academy.

When electronic dialogue occurs between book study team meetings, it provides a mechanism for capturing and storing a record of communication. Equally important, it provides a repository of shared information for future action planning. Having well-structured information facilitates the distribution of information and knowledge among team members, and the information becomes available as needed. The challenge of book study team learning is in interpreting information and making it easily accessible to all team members.

Book Study Guidelines

Prior to the book study activities, the following guidelines are discussed with the whole team.

1. The book study team leader does not need to have complete mastery of the book. However, they must have a basic understanding of the content.
2. The book study team leader needs to be a facilitator of the teaming and not a disseminator of knowledge. The book study facilitator needs to support teaming concepts such as empowerment and dialogue as well as welcoming challenge and conflict.
3. The book study team members must be willing to share their opinions and experiences in the spirit of team dialogue.
4. The book study team processes are "shared endeavors" and not lectures. The diversity of opinions and experiences makes a book study team more effective.
5. The book study team must address the questions found in the Book Study Team Guide Sheet (See Figure 1).

Action Planning As a Process to Take Action

Action plans resulting from a book study team need to specify the actions that address each of the issues raised in the book. However, the purpose of an action plan is to help leaders put new knowledge to work. The guiding question addressed is "how can the book's major concepts or strategies impact our practices or culture in our school/district?" Action planning needs to be an ongoing process throughout the book study process. (See Figure 2).

Conclusion and Implications

The book study strategy has become a major underpinning of our field-based partnership for developing leaders. While the book study teams are still a "work in progress," the faculty are excited about the initial results.

Figure 1
Book Study Team Sheet

Directions: The following study sheet is designed as a guide to help the team record their progress on the book being discussed. The team needs to record their findings by answering the following questions:

A. We agree on the following concepts/ideas/practices from the book:

1. _____
2. _____

B. We disagree on the following concepts/ideas/practices from the book:

1. _____
2. _____

C. We believe that the following ideas or practices will work in our building/district:

1. _____
2. _____

D. The general concepts that could be developed into an action plan are:

1. _____
2. _____

E. Things we want to continue to discuss on Blackboard and/or e-mail before our next meeting:

1. _____
2. _____

Figure 2
Book Study Action Plan

Concept	Strategies	Personnel	Outcome	Date	Evaluation

The broad implications for book study teams in school districts go well beyond what the Kansas State-Marysville-Rock Creek partnership has generated to date. Both superintendents who co-teach the courses have already planned to continue books study programs well beyond the life of the academy. Book study teams can:

1. Become an effective process for school improvement.
2. Become a way to study new professional materials, and build a shared vision in the school building/district.
3. Become a major strategy for creating teams that engage in meaningful dialogue.
4. Become a method to help faculty and staff clarify their priorities in learning and teaching, and;
5. Encourage broad-based dialogue throughout the school district on issues that impact teaching and learning or any issue being considered.

Book study teams can become one of the major strategies for changing the face of education in the next few decades. Developing formal and informal leadership in schools through dedicated study of critical of books is an idea of great merit. As the old leadership adage goes, "how you lead depends on what you read."

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