Student Book Clubs: Improving Literature Instruction in Middle and High School

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As teachers seek ways to engage secondary students with texts, student book clubs provide an alternative approach to helping adolescent readers link those texts with their own lives.

In Student Book Clubs: Improving Literature Instruction in Middle and High School, authors Mark Faust, Jennifer Cockrill, Cheryl Hancock, and Holly Isserstedt provide detailed information on implementing book clubs at middle schools and high schools, as well as at the university level. The book stems from a class created by Faust at the University of Georgia in Athens. Through the class, practicing teachers experienced book clubs and learned ways to implement them. Cockrill, Hancock, and Isserstedt—participants in Faust’s class—have now gone back to their classrooms and created their own versions of the book clubs.

Faust’s book clubs are designed to encourage collaborative reading, allowing students—at whatever age—to share their ideas and expand those views by listening to the perspectives of others. The approach involves making book clubs part of actual class activities rather than an after-school program.

Each author has written a section of the book. Faust gives details on the university-sponsored book club, while Hancock focuses on the middle school classroom. Cockrill and Isserstedt, meanwhile, emphasize their experiences at the high school level. While it may be tempting to focus on a specific chapter that relates to the age group a teacher instructs, educators will pick up useful information in all chapters, regardless of the level they teach. In addition, the authors offer an authentic look at implementing such programs, including how to introduce book clubs to parents, make students feel more comfortable as they adjust to a nontradi-
ditional approach to reading literature, and handle issues the teachers experienced along the way.

Practical handouts and forms are provided at the end of each section. These appendixes help simplify the process of any educator who is considering starting such a book club. Among those are a personality test, a reader’s autobiography, a letter to parents detailing book clubs and how they can become involved, rubrics for assessing student participation, and a complete syllabus for a college-level class.

As educators tackle interesting ways to foster student engagement with texts, this book provides detailed information that removes some of the hassles that often make classroom teachers hesitant to implement new programs. We’ve all had ideas to help make the language arts content more meaningful, but often we’re reluctant to start something from scratch. That’s where Student Book Clubs steps in. Those who have contemplated starting book clubs in their classrooms now have a practical starting point and will benefit from the authors’ experiences. The extensive collection of rubrics and other assessment tools help legitimize this approach to literature, which might otherwise be seen by some as lacking concrete educational objectives and documentation of learning.

On the other hand, teachers wanting to establish a student book club as an after-school program will need to somewhat modify the authors’ approaches, because these focus on classroom programs. A voluntary after-school club probably would eliminate much of the “school” approach with essays, portfolios, and other assignments. Many of the details on establishing a club and the student questionnaires, however, would still be valuable.

Simply put, Student Book Clubs gives teachers another classroom option for helping students find meaning in the literature awaiting them in the curriculum. And, in this age of education and accountability, anything that can assist in doing that is worthy of consideration.
