

Appendix C

Stakeholder Feedback

(C1)	Social Studies Staff Survey	Pages 1—33
(C2)	Site-Based and Community Satisfaction Surveys	Pages 34—36
(C3)	Student Focus Groups	Pages 37—59

Social Studies Survey

As part of the Social Studies program evaluation, the Social Studies Office and the Office of Planning and Evaluation developed a teacher survey and a principal survey to collect information on topics such as time of instruction at the elementary level, co-teaching, use of resources, and satisfaction with district-level support. Each survey was administered during the winter of 2013-14.

Because the survey was part of a larger survey that addressed multiple programs in addition to Social Studies, it was sent to all teachers in APS. Teachers who identified themselves as social studies teachers were asked a series of questions about the social studies program. Teachers could identify themselves as teaching social studies in a variety of roles: classroom teacher, self-contained special education or ESOL/HILT teacher, or support teacher (i.e.; co-teacher or push-in teacher).

Survey response rates for classroom teachers can be found in **Table 1**. Response rates for teachers are calculated for classroom teachers and self-contained teachers only, as information about the total population of support teachers is not available. The population for classroom and self-contained teachers is based on social studies schedules that were collected for observations during the 2013-14 school year.

Table 1: Response Rates on the 2013-14 Social Studies Survey*

Response Group	Level	Population	Survey Responses	Percentage of Population	Margin of Error
Classroom teachers, ESOL/HILT self-contained teachers, Special Education self-contained teachers	Elementary	434	273	63%	3.6
	Middle School	71	49	69%	7.9
	High School	100	58	58%	8.4
Principals	Elementary	23	20	87%	8.1
	Secondary	15	9	60%	21.4

*Sample sizes will vary by question depending on the number of respondents answering a specific question and the number of responses they are able to select.

The margin of error for this survey is calculated at a 95% confidence interval, meaning that we can be 95% confident that the sample result reflects the actual population within the margin of error. In other words, in 19 out of 20 cases the data obtained would not differ by any more than the percentage points in the margin of error in either direction if the survey were repeated multiple times employing the same survey methodology and sampling method across the same population. When the margin of error is greater than 5, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of survey respondents among various roles that support social studies instruction.

Figure 1: Respondent Role for Social Studies Instruction

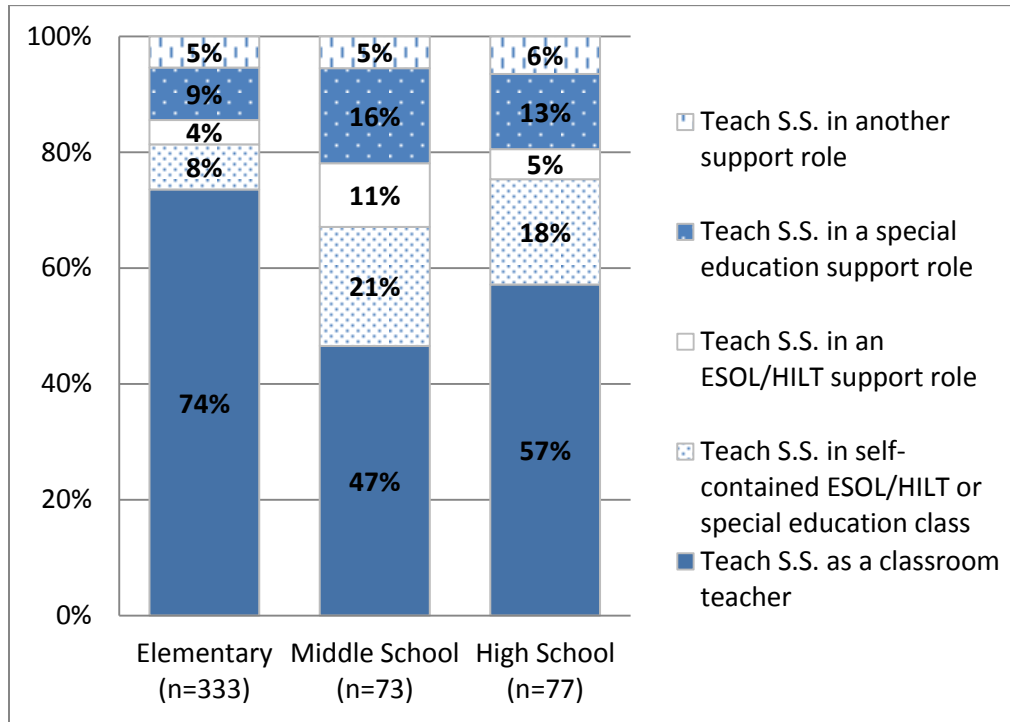


Figure 2 shows the average number of hours per week dedicated to social studies instruction at the elementary level by grade, as reported by elementary classroom teachers.

Figure 2: Average Number of Hours for Social Studies Instruction per Week at the Elementary Level

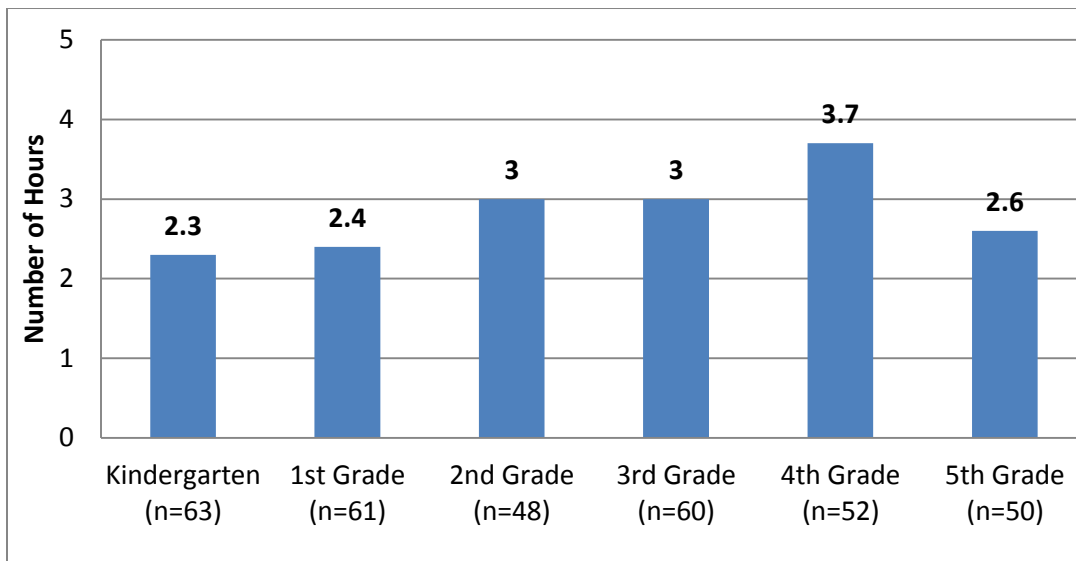


Figure 3 shows which delivery models are used to provide social studies instruction at the elementary level by grade, as reported by elementary classroom teachers. .

Figure 3: Social Studies Delivery Model by Elementary Grade Level

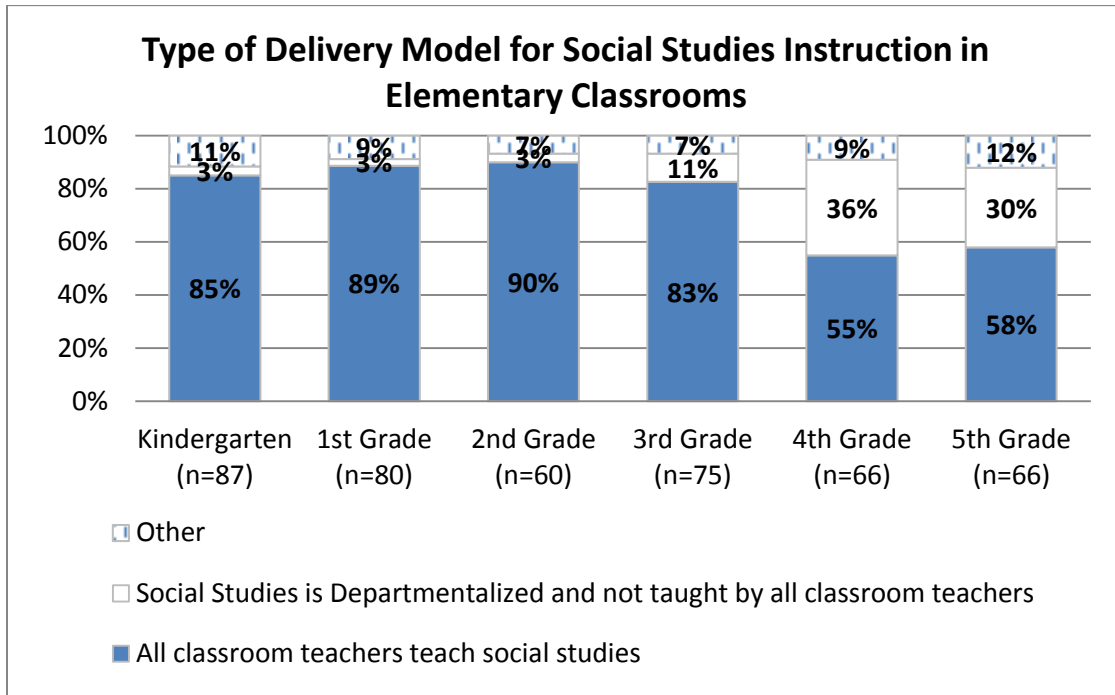


Figure 4 shows how social studies instruction is scheduled at the elementary level by grade, as reported by elementary classroom teachers.

Figure 4: Scheduling of Elementary Social Studies Instruction

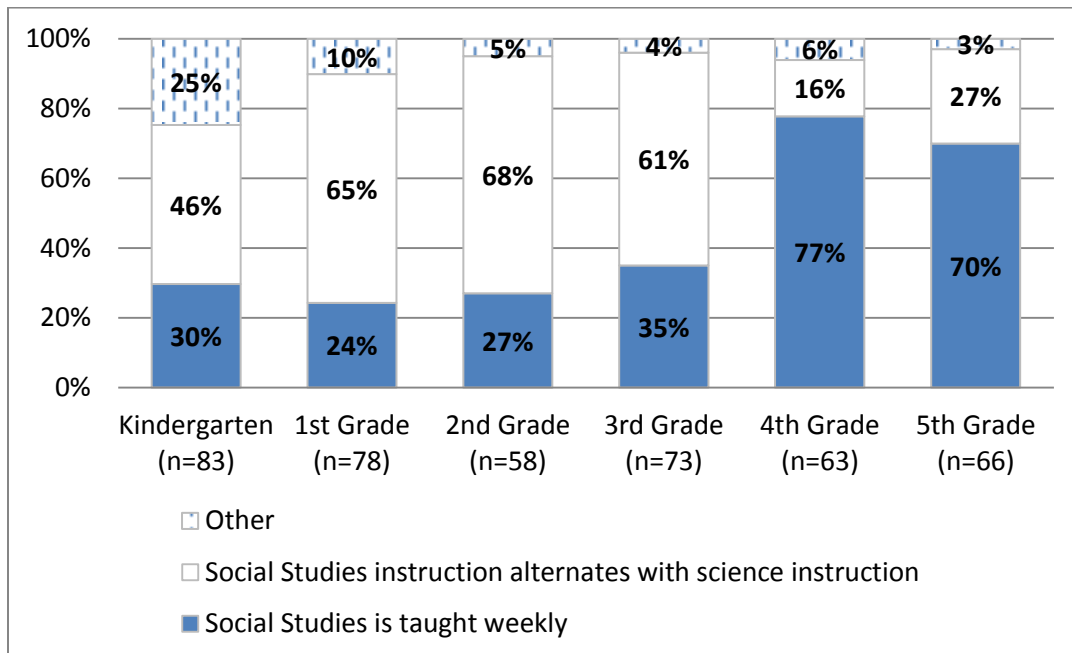


Figure 5 shows how frequently elementary classroom teachers report that elementary students miss social studies instruction because they are pulled out of class for reasons unrelated to social studies.

Figure 5: Frequency with which Elementary Students are Pulled out of Social Studies Instruction

(n=319)

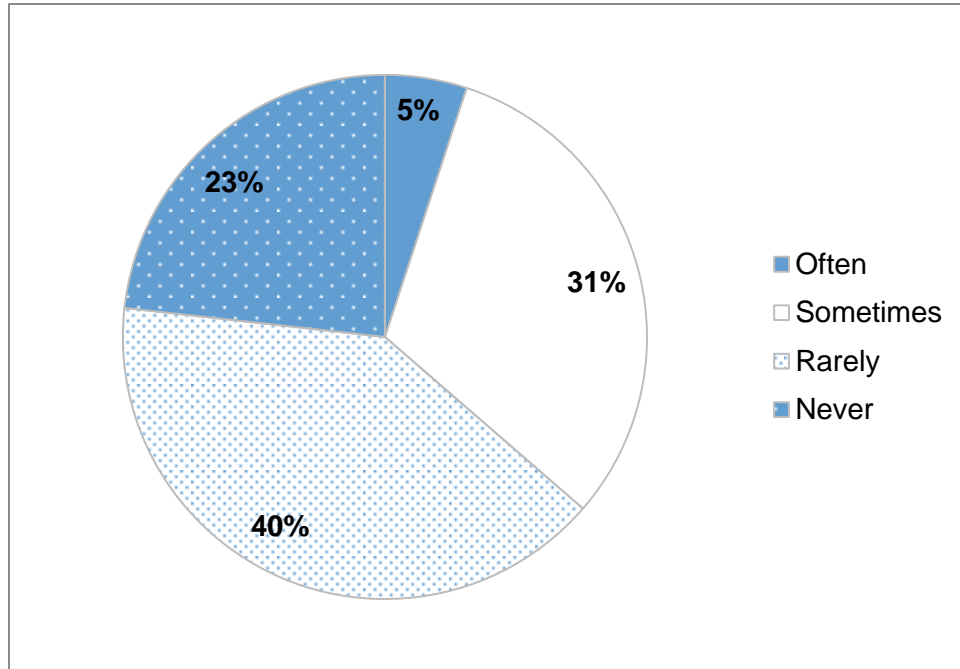


Figure 6 shows elementary teachers' responses concerning the degree of impact various factors have on social studies instructional time.

Figure 6: Factors that Impact Social Studies Instructional Time according to Elementary Teachers

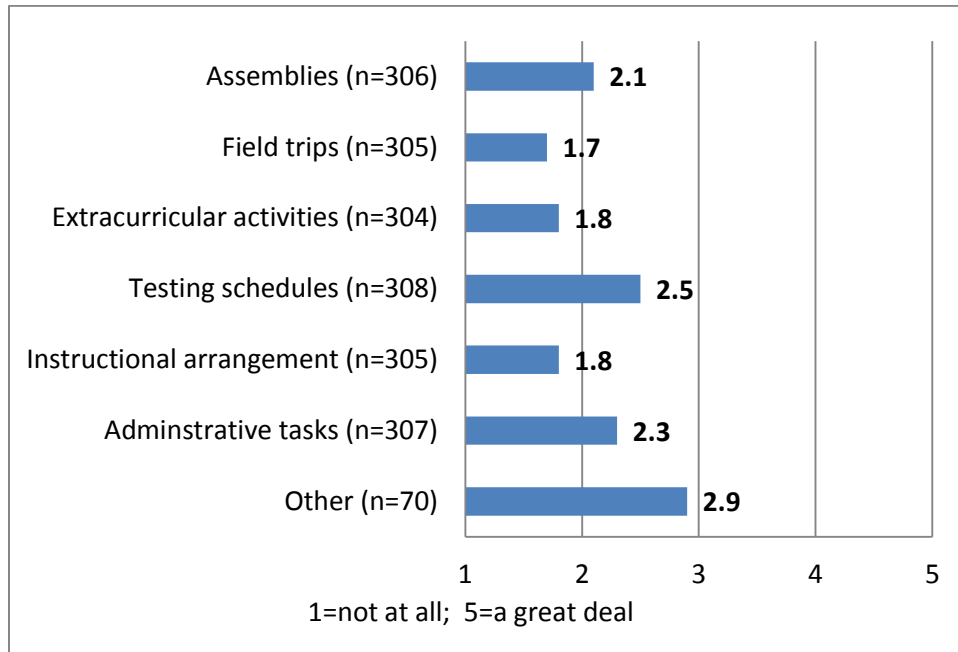


Figure 7 shows middle school teachers' responses concerning the degree of impact various factors have on social studies instructional time.

Figure 7: Factors that Impact Social Studies Instructional Time according to Middle School Teachers

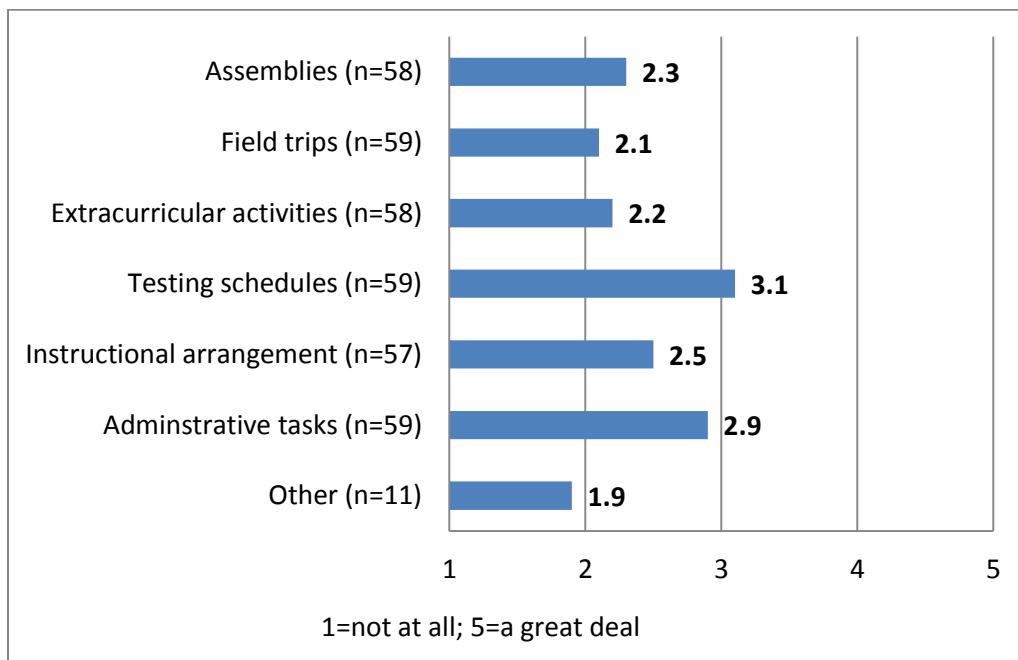


Figure 8 shows high school teachers' responses concerning the degree of impact various factors have on social studies instructional time.

Figure 8: Factors that Impact Social Studies Instructional Time according to High School Teachers

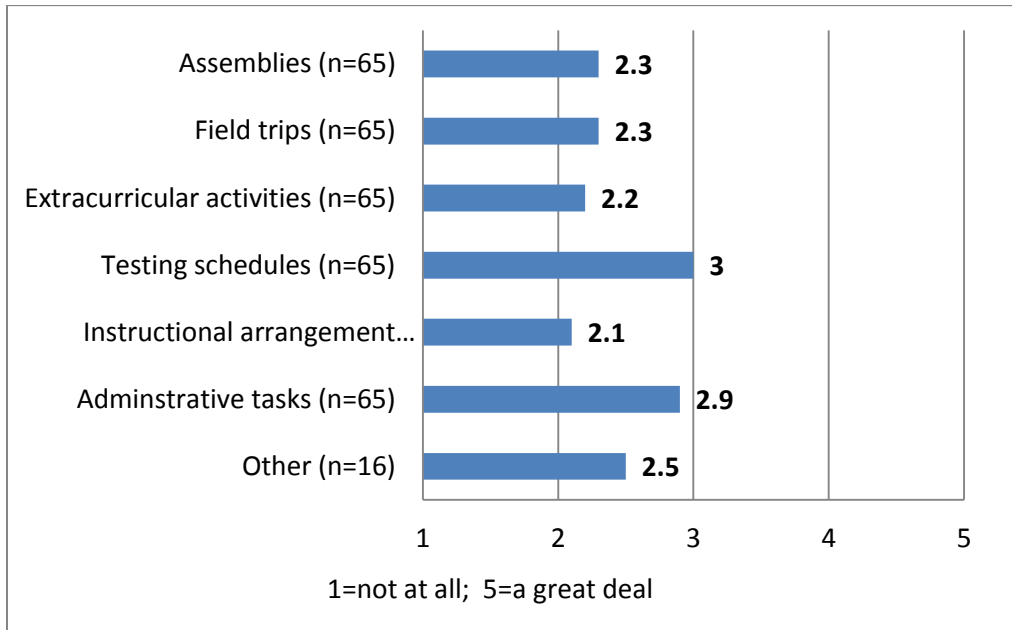


Figure 9 shows how often teachers report that students at the elementary, middle, or high school levels are provided with opportunities to participate in social studies enrichment.

Figure 9: Frequency of Social Studies Enrichment Opportunities for Students by Level

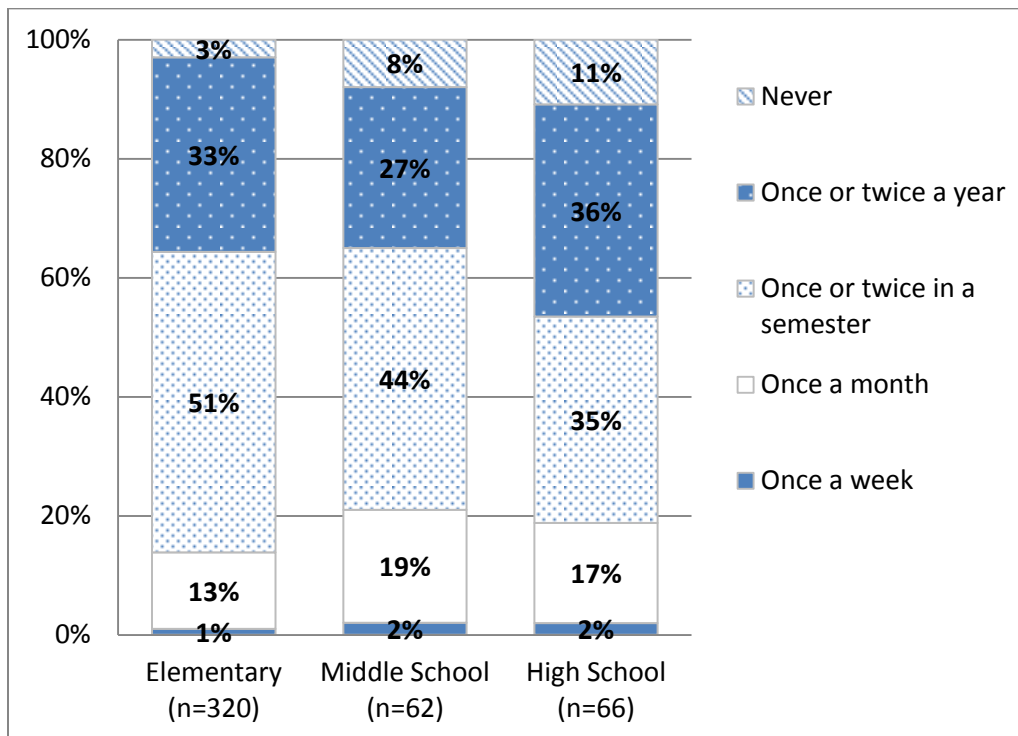


Figure 10 shows how often social studies teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels say they integrate other content areas into social studies instruction during instructional planning.

Figure 10: Frequency with which Social Studies Teachers Integrate Other Content Areas into the Design of their Social Studies Lessons

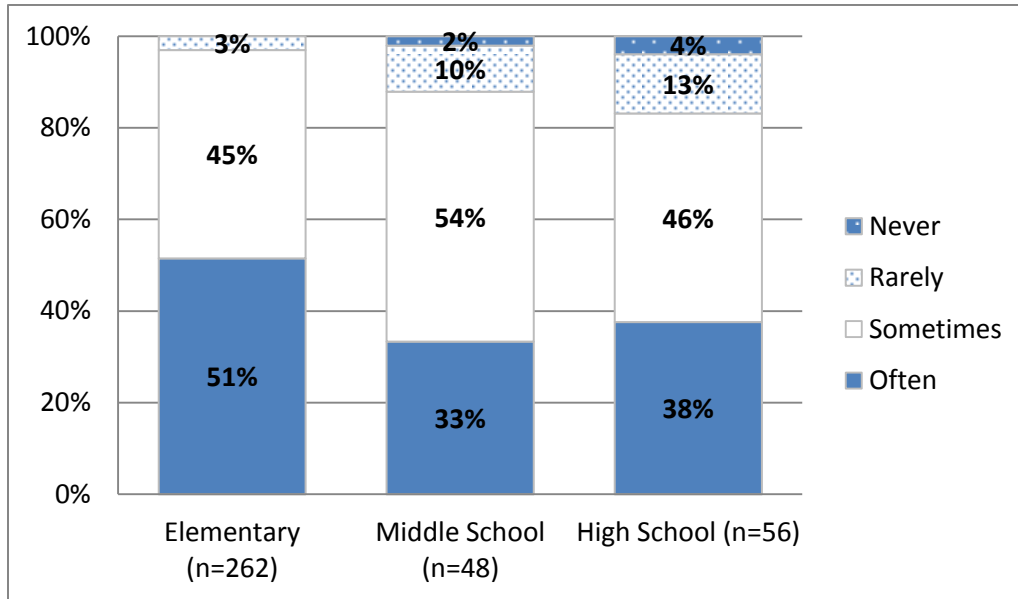


Figure 11 shows how often elementary teachers integrate other content areas into the design of their social studies lessons by grade level.

Figure 11: Frequency with which Elementary Teachers Integrate Other Content Areas into the Design of their Social Studies Lessons, by Grade Level

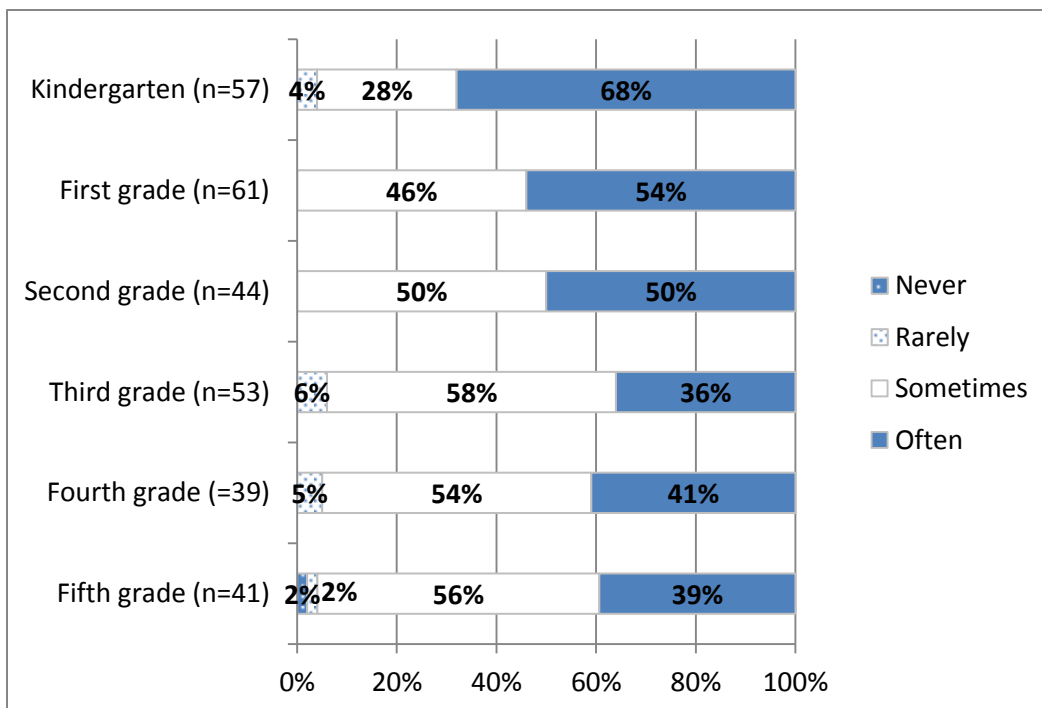


Figure 12 shows how often middle and high school social studies teachers say they collaborate with teachers of other subject areas on cross-curricular lessons each year, not including co-teaching.

Figure 12: Frequency with which Secondary Social Studies Teacher Collaborate with Teachers in Other Subject Areas on Cross-Curricular Lessons

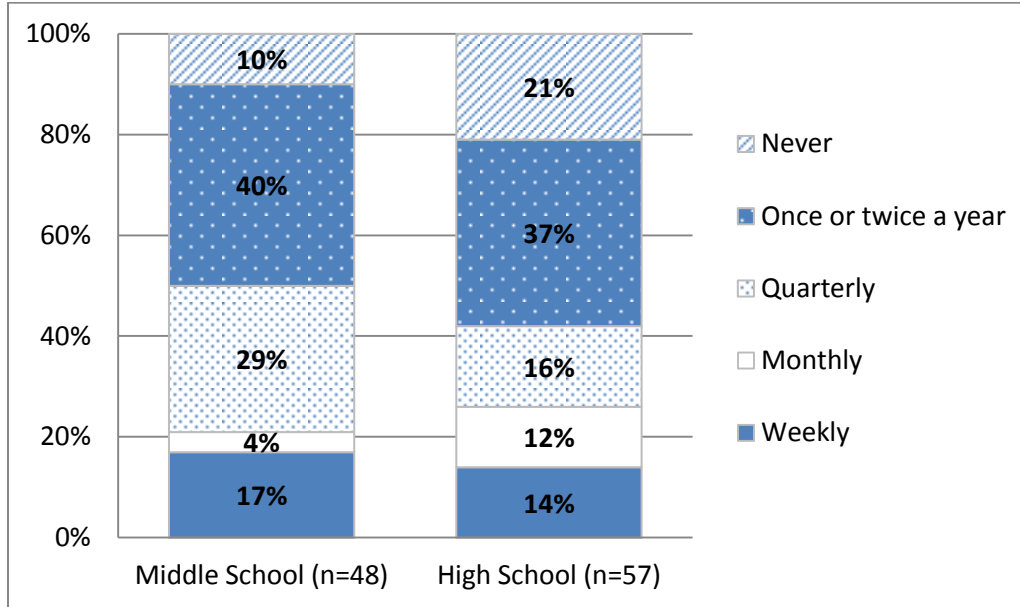


Figure 13 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say they received social studies instructional support from another teacher or specialist.

Figure 11: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers Received Support from another Teacher for Social Studies Instruction

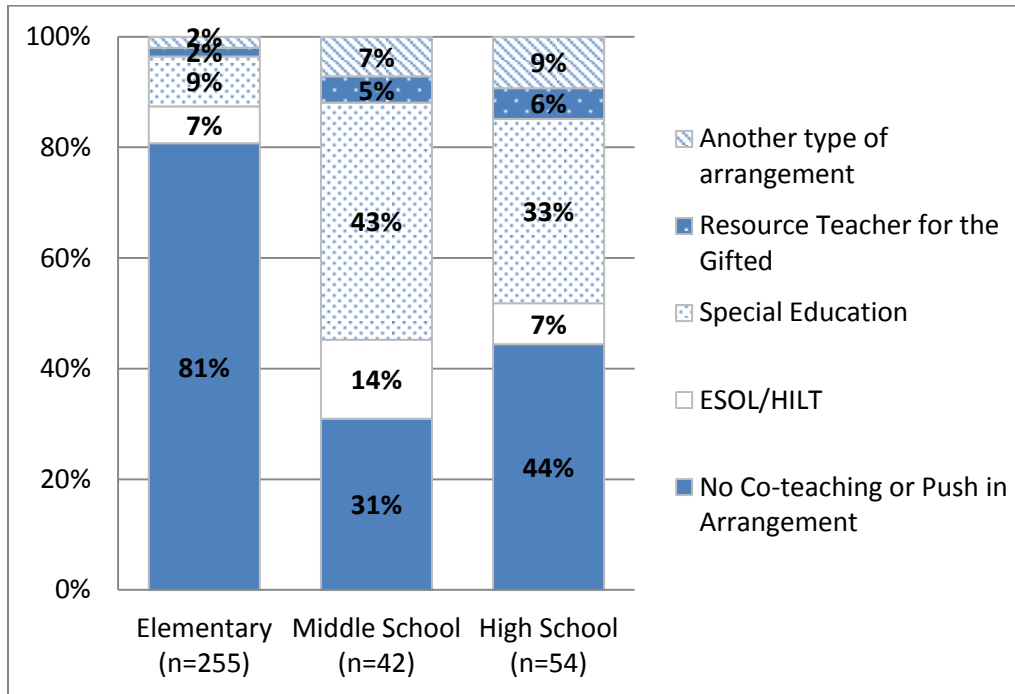
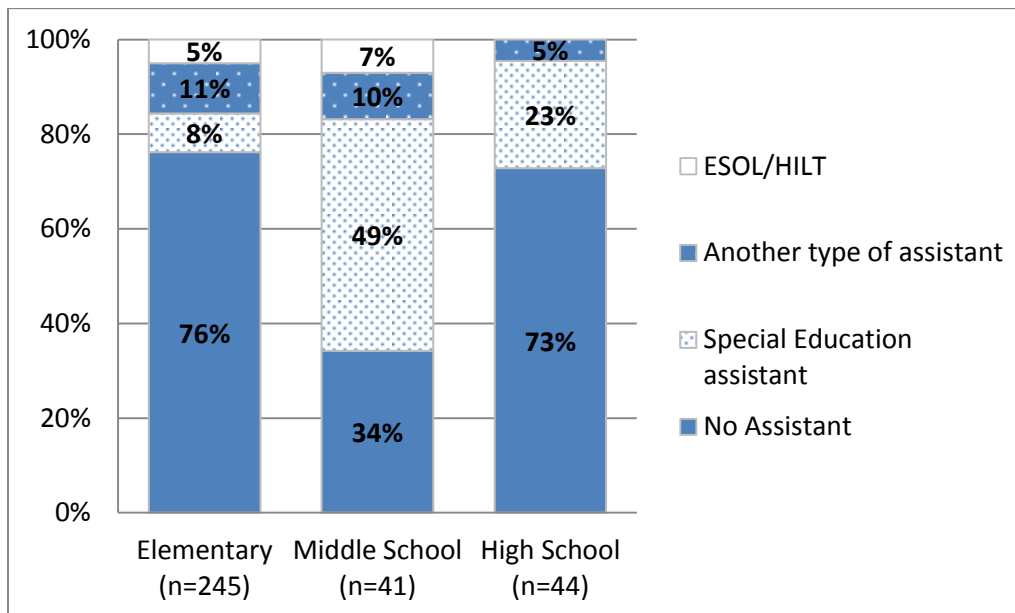


Figure 14 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say they received social studies instructional support from an assistant.

Figure 14: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers received Social Studies Support from an Assistant



The 27 teachers who reported that they receive support from an ESOL/HILT co-teacher or push-in teacher and the 15 teachers who reported that they receive support from an ESOL/HILT assistant were asked about the frequency and type of support they receive.

Figure 15 shows the frequency with which classroom teachers say ESOL/HILT co-teachers are in the classroom during social studies instruction.

Figure 15: Frequency of ESOL/HILT Co-Teachers in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction

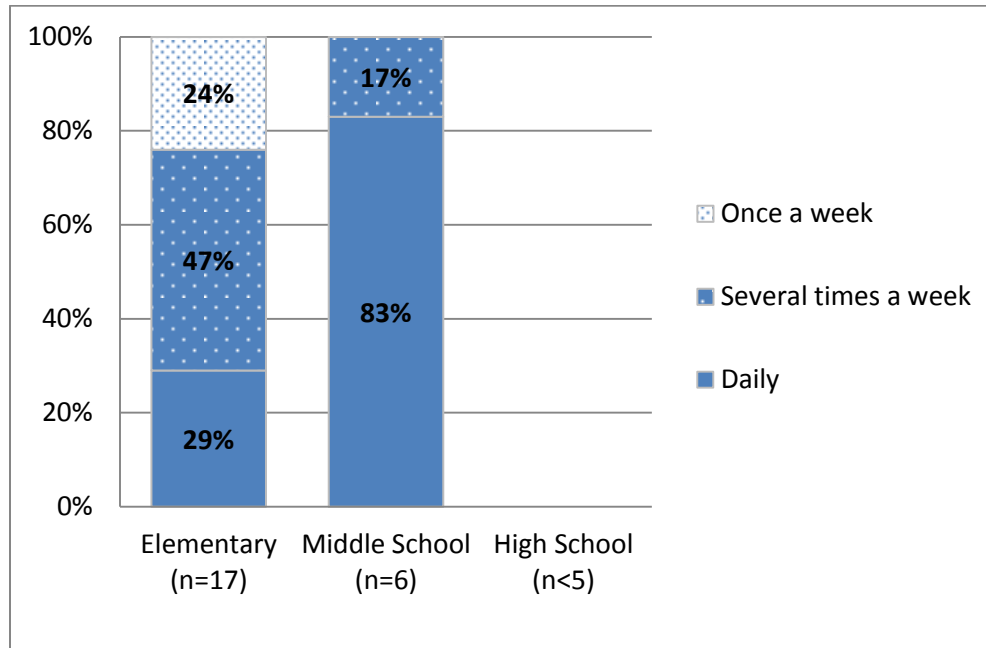


Figure 16 shows the frequency with which classroom teachers say ESOL/HILT assistants are in the classroom during social studies instruction.

Figure 16: Frequency of ESOL/HILT Assistants in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction

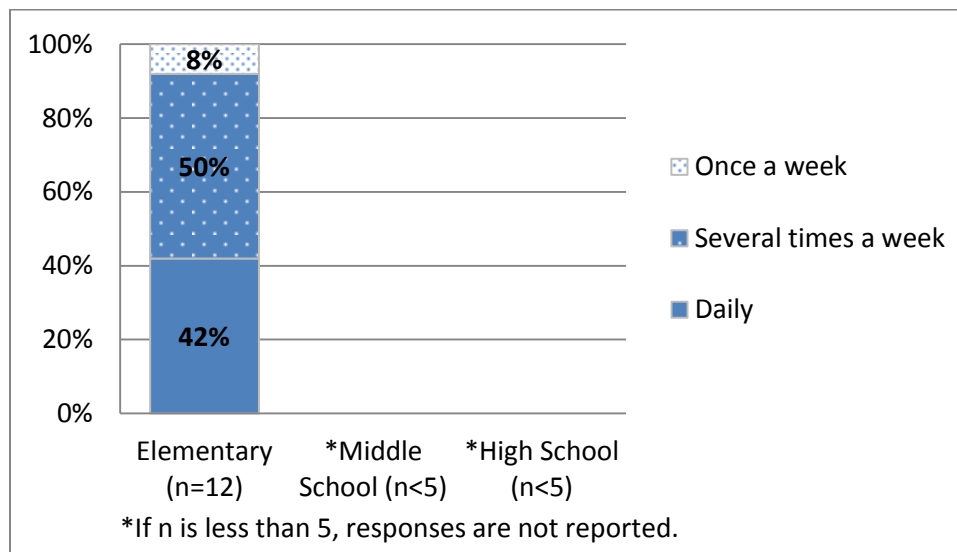


Table 2 shows the extent of the roles the ESOL/HILT teachers play when they are in the classroom during social studies instruction according to classroom teachers.

Table 2: The Roles of the ESOL/HILT Co-Teachers during Social Studies Instruction

Percent of Teachers that Indicate the Following as Tasks which are Performed by the ESOL/HILT Teacher in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction			
	Elementary (n=17)	Middle School (n=6)	High School *(n<5)
Co-planning	18%	50%	
Clarifying directions	71%	83%	
Working with students	94%	100%	
Asking probing questions with small groups	47%	67%	
Delivering instruction	24%	50%	
Clarifying vocabulary	76%	83%	
Dictating	6%	67%	
Checking for understanding	76%	100%	
Helping out with organization of the class	35%	67%	
Addressing student behavior	53%	67%	
Other	6%	0%	

*If n is less than 5, responses are not reported

Table 3 shows the extent of the roles the ESOL/HILT assistants play when they are in the classroom during social studies instruction according to classroom teachers.

Table 3: The Roles of the ESOL/HILT Assistants during Social Studies Instruction

The Percent of Teachers that Indicate the Following as Tasks which are Performed by the ESOL/HILT Assistant in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction			
	Elementary (n=12)	Middle School *(n<5)	High School *(n<5)
Co-planning	8%		
Clarifying directions	75%		
Working with students	100%		
Asking probing questions with small groups	42%		
Delivering instruction	17%		
Clarifying vocabulary	67%		
Dictating	8%		
Checking for understanding	67%		
Helping out with organization of the class	42%		
Addressing student behavior	33%		
Other	0%		

*If n is less than 5, responses are not reported

Figure 17 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say specific elements are part of their co-teaching arrangement with the ESOL/HILT teacher during social studies instruction.

Figure 17: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers say Specific Elements are Part of their Co-Teaching Arrangement with the ESOL/HILT Teacher

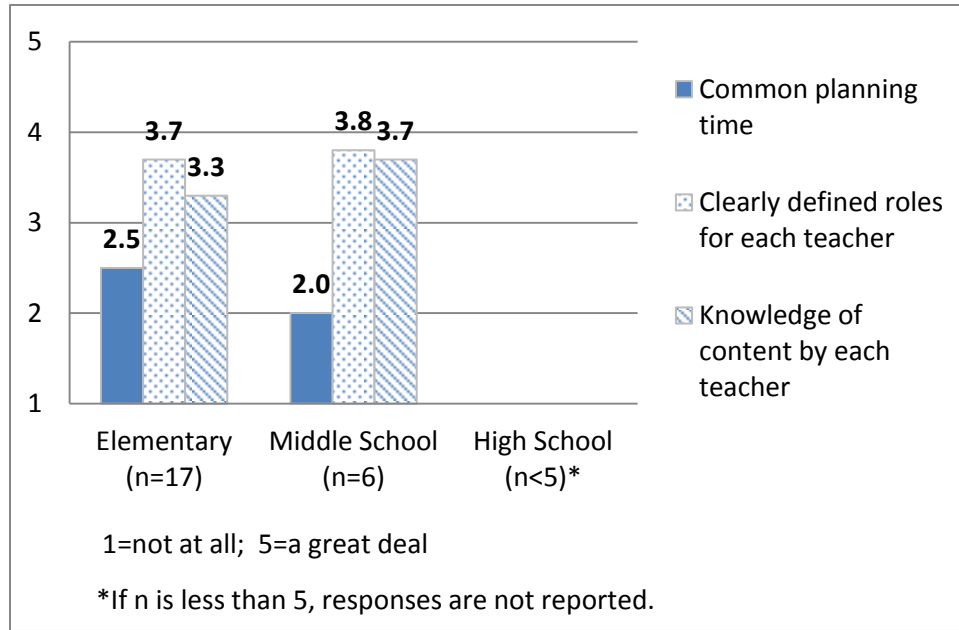
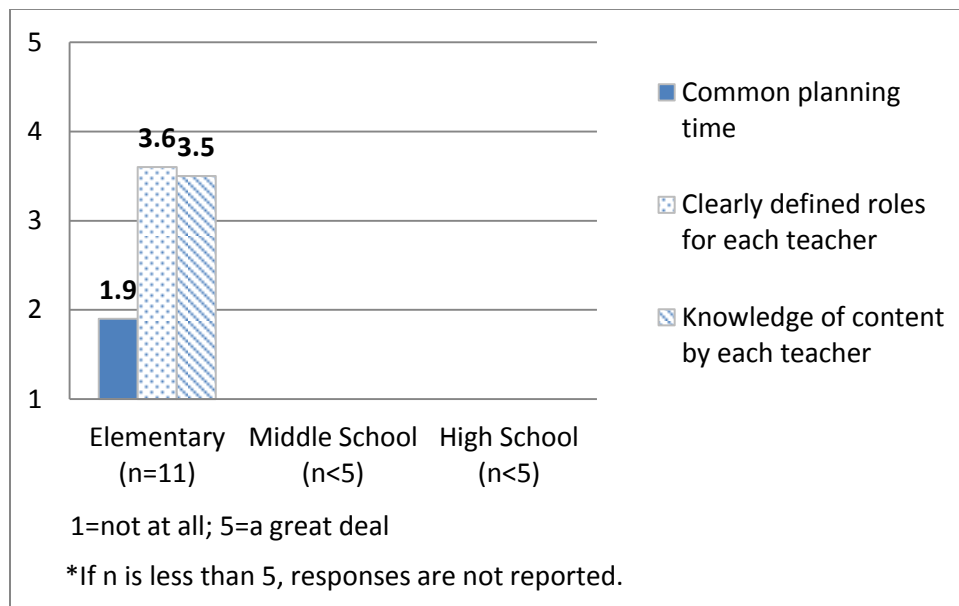


Figure 18 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say specific elements are part of their co-teaching arrangement with the ESOL/HILT assistant during social studies instruction.

Figure 18: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers say Specific Elements are Part of their Co-Teaching Arrangement with the ESOL/HILT Assistant



The 59 teachers who reported that they receive support from a special education co-teacher or push-in teacher and the 50 teachers who reported that they receive support from a special education assistant teacher were asked about the frequency and type of support they receive.

Figure 19 shows the frequency with which classroom teachers say special education teachers are in the classroom during social studies instruction.

Figure 19: Frequency of Special Education Teachers in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction

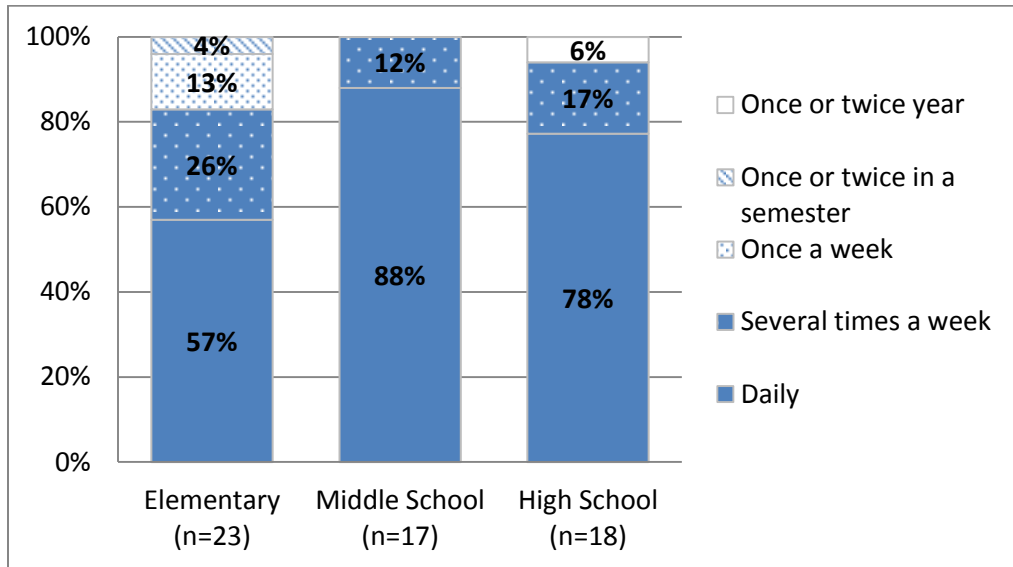


Figure 20 shows the frequency with which classroom teachers say special education assistants are in the classroom during social studies instruction.

Figure 20: Frequency of Special Education Assistants in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction

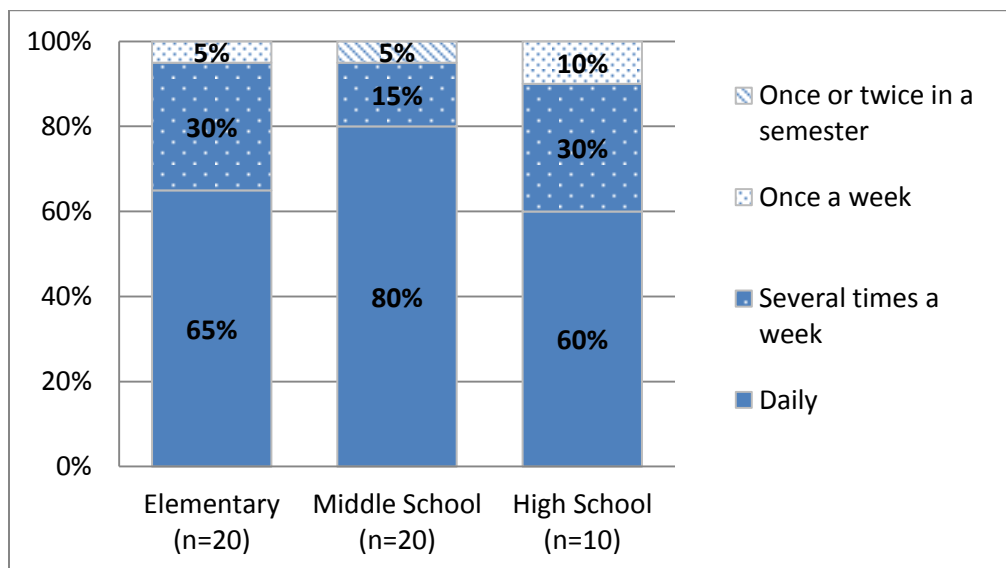


Table 4 shows the extent of the roles the special education teachers play when they are in the classroom during social studies instruction according to classroom teachers.

Table 4: The Roles of the Special Education Teachers during Social Studies Instruction

Percent of Teachers that Indicate the Following as Tasks which are Performed by the Special Education Teacher in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction			
	Elementary (n=23)	Middle School (n=17)	High School (n=18)
Co-planning	22%	41%	44%
Clarifying directions	78%	100%	89%
Working with students	100%	100%	89%
Asking probing questions with small groups	57%	65%	61%
Delivering instruction	52%	41%	33%
Clarifying vocabulary	87%	88%	83%
Dictating	26%	24%	33%
Checking for understanding	83%	88%	67%
Helping out with organization of the class	70%	88%	78%
Addressing student behavior	87%	88%	72%
Other	4%	0%	11%

n = the total number of responses (more than one response could be selected)

Table 5 shows the extent of the roles the special education assistants play when they are in the classroom during social studies instruction according to classroom teachers.

Table 5: The Roles of the Special Education Assistants during Social Studies Instruction

Percent of Teachers that Indicate the Following as Tasks which are Performed by Special Education Assistants in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction			
	Elementary (n=20)	Middle School (n=20)	High School (n=10)
Co-planning	0%	10%	0%
Clarifying directions	65%	90%	60%
Working with students	85%	95%	70%
Asking probing questions with small groups	30%	35%	40%
Delivering instruction	10%	5%	10%
Clarifying vocabulary	70%	60%	30%
Dictating	40%	25%	10%
Checking for understanding	65%	60%	30%
Helping out with organization of the class	45%	65%	50%
Addressing student behavior	65%	65%	60%
Other	0%	10%	30%

n = the total number of responses (more than one response could be selected)

Figure 21 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say specific elements are part of their co-teaching arrangement with the special education teacher during social studies instruction.

Figure 12: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers say Specific Elements are Part of their Co-Teaching Arrangement with the Special Education Teacher

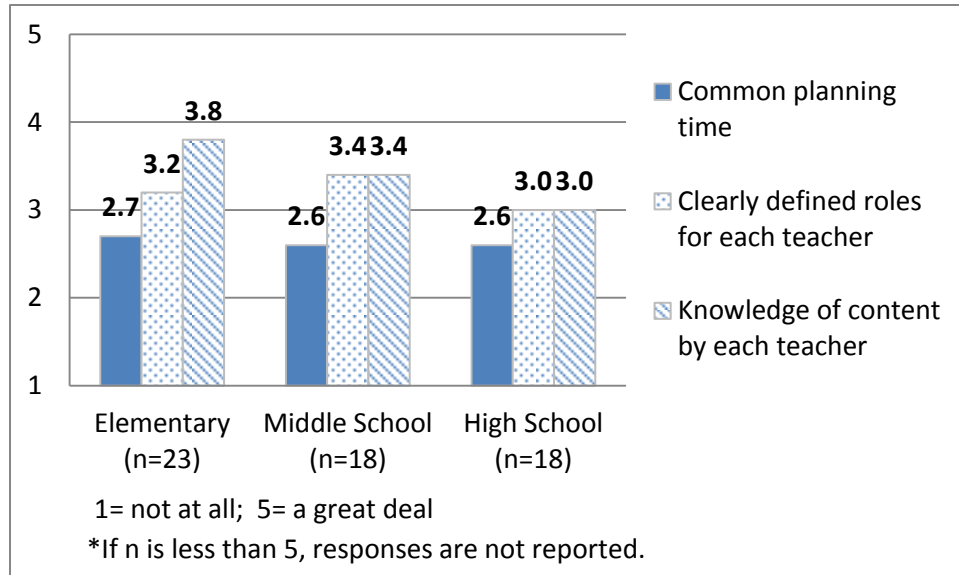
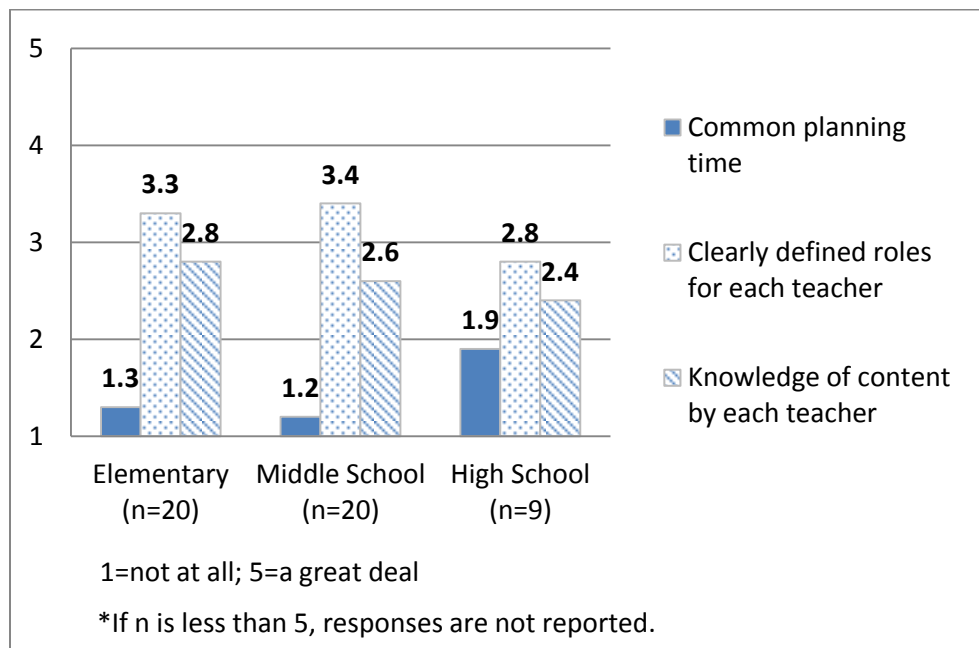


Figure 22 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say specific elements are part of their co-teaching arrangement with the special education assistant during social studies instruction.

Figure 22: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers say Specific Elements are Part of their Co-Teaching Arrangement with the Special Education Assistant



Responses about resource teachers for the gifted (RTGs) are not included because fewer than 5 responses were provided.

The 13 teachers who reported that they receive support from another type of co-teacher or push-in teacher and the 32 teachers who reported that they receive support from another type of assistant were asked about the frequency and type of support they receive.

Figure 23 shows the frequency with which classroom teachers say other types of co-teachers are in the classroom during social studies instruction. . Teachers responding to this question identified themselves as teachers who “teach social studies in another support role” from Figure 1.

Figure 23: Frequency of Other Types of Co-Teachers in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction

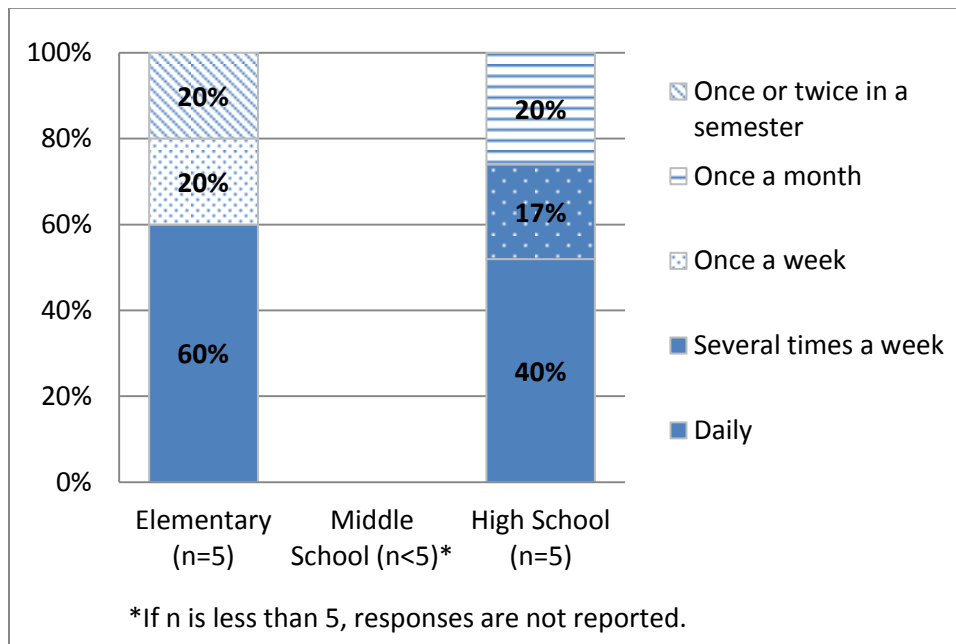


Figure 24 shows the frequency with which classroom teachers say other types of assistants are in the classroom during social studies instruction.

Figure 24: Frequency of Other Types of Assistants in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction

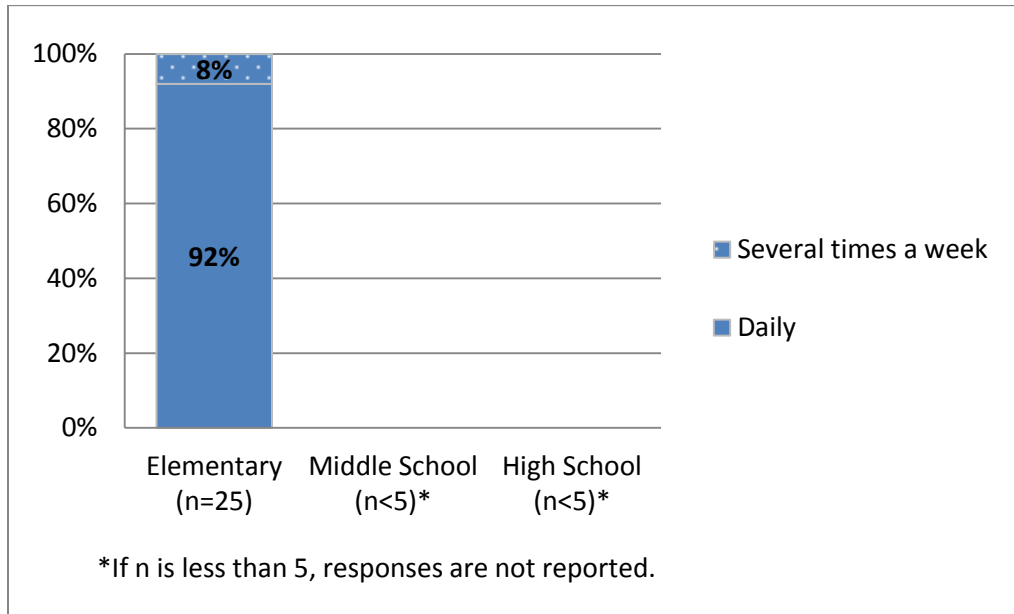


Table 6 shows the extent of the roles other co-teachers play when they are in the classroom during social studies instruction according to classroom teachers.

Table 6: The Roles of Other Types of Co-Teachers during Social Studies Instruction

Percent of Teachers that Indicate the Following as Tasks which are Performed by Other Co-Teachers in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction			
	Elementary (n=5)	Middle School *(n<5)	High School *(n=5)
Co-planning	100%		60%
Clarifying directions	80%		80%
Working with students	100%		80%
Asking probing questions with small groups	100%		40%
Delivering instruction	100%		40%
Clarifying vocabulary	100%		60%
Dictating	20%		40%
Checking for understanding	100%		40%
Helping out with organization of the class	80%		60%
Addressing student behavior	80%		60%
Other	0%		0%

*If n is less than 5, responses are not reported

Table 7 shows the extent of the roles other assistants play when they are in the classroom during social studies instruction according to classroom teachers.

Table 7: The Roles of Other Types of Assistants during Social Studies Instruction

Percent of Teachers that Indicate the Following as Tasks which are Performed by Other Assistants in the Classroom during Social Studies Instruction			
	Elementary (n=25)	Middle School *(n<5)	High School *(n<5)
Co-planning	20%		
Clarifying directions	56%		
Working with students	92%		
Asking probing questions with small groups	36%		
Delivering instruction	32%		
Clarifying vocabulary	40%		
Dictating	8%		
Checking for understanding	56%		
Helping out with organization of the class	68%		
Addressing student behavior	76%		
Other	4%		

*If n is less than 5, responses are not reported

Figure 25 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say specific elements are part of their co-teaching arrangement with other types of teachers during social studies instruction.

Figure 25: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers say Specific Elements are Part of their Co-Teaching Arrangement with Other Types of Teacher

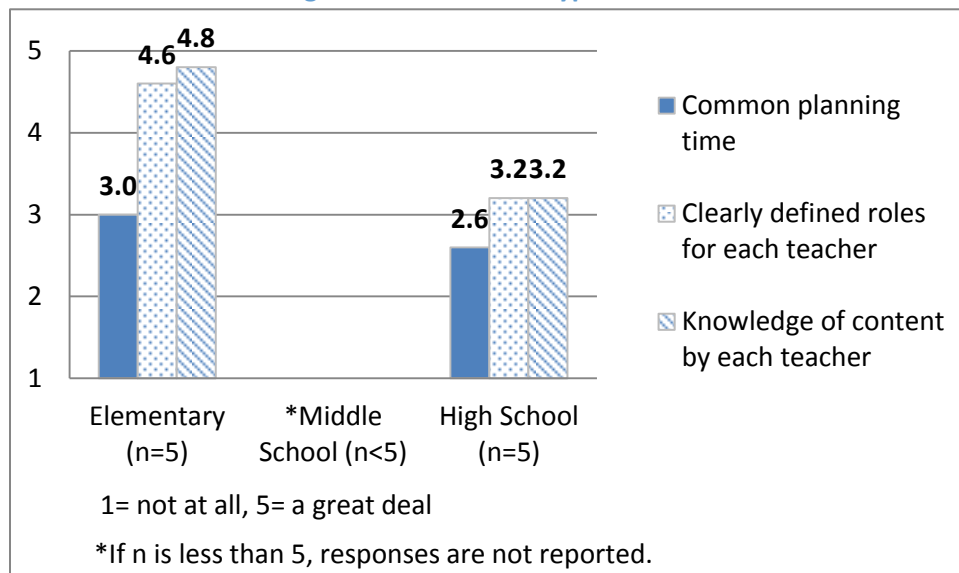


Figure 26 shows the extent to which classroom teachers say specific elements are part of their co-teaching arrangement with other types of assistants during social studies instruction.

Figure 26: The Extent to which Classroom Teachers say Specific Elements are Part of their Co-Teaching Arrangement with Other Types of Assistants

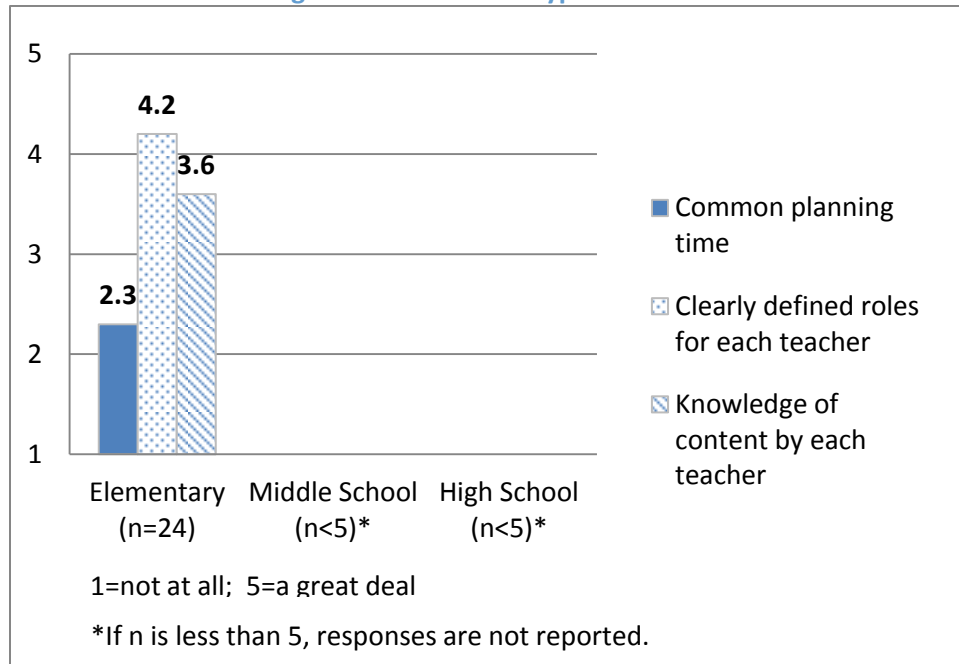


Figure 27 shows the frequency with which support teachers say they are in the classroom to help with social studies instruction.

Figure 27: Frequency of Support during Social Studies Instruction according to Support Teachers

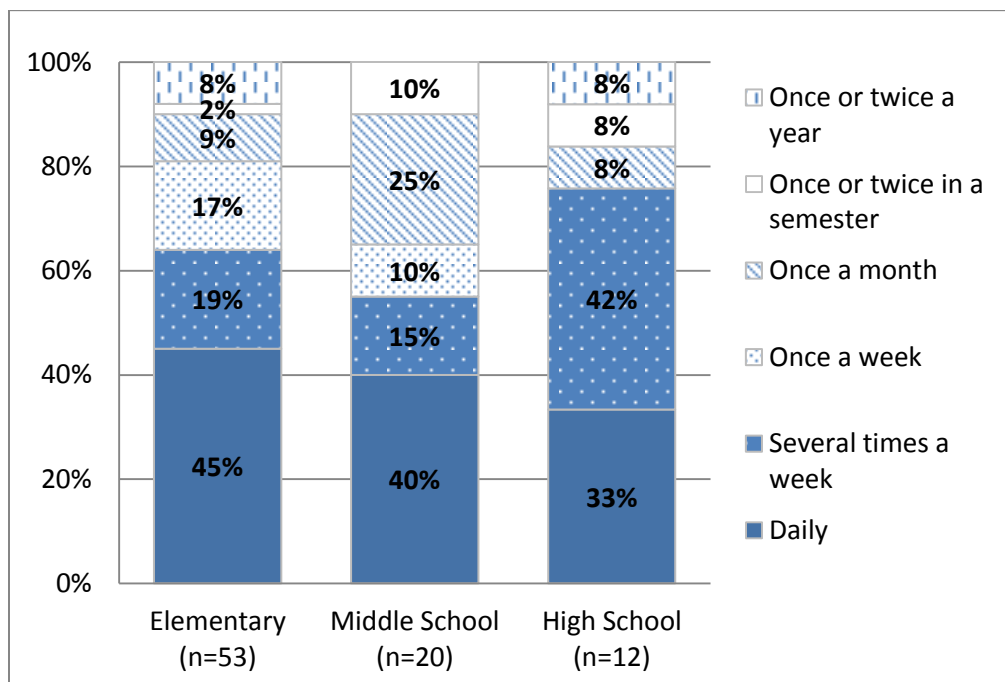


Table 8 shows the extent of the roles support teachers say they play when they are in the classroom during social studies instruction.

Table 8: The Roles of Support Teachers during Social Studies Instruction

The Percent of Support Teachers that indicate the Following Tasks as Being Part of Their Role during Social Studies Instruction			
	Elementary (n=53)	Middle School (n=20)	High School (n=12)
Co-planning	43%	30%	50%
Clarifying directions	68%	70%	75%
Working with students	91%	90%	92%
Asking probing questions with small groups	55%	60%	83%
Delivering instruction	49%	25%	25%
Clarifying vocabulary	66%	65%	75%
Dictating	9%	20%	17%
Checking for understanding	77%	70%	75%
Helping out with organization of the class	62%	55%	67%
Addressing student behavior	70%	65%	75%
Other	13%	15%	8%

n = the total number of responses (more than one response could be selected)

Figure 28 shows the extent to which support teachers say specific elements are part of their co-teaching arrangement with teachers during social studies instruction.

Figure 28: The Extent to which Support Teachers say Specific Elements are Part of their Co-Teaching Agreement with Classroom Teachers

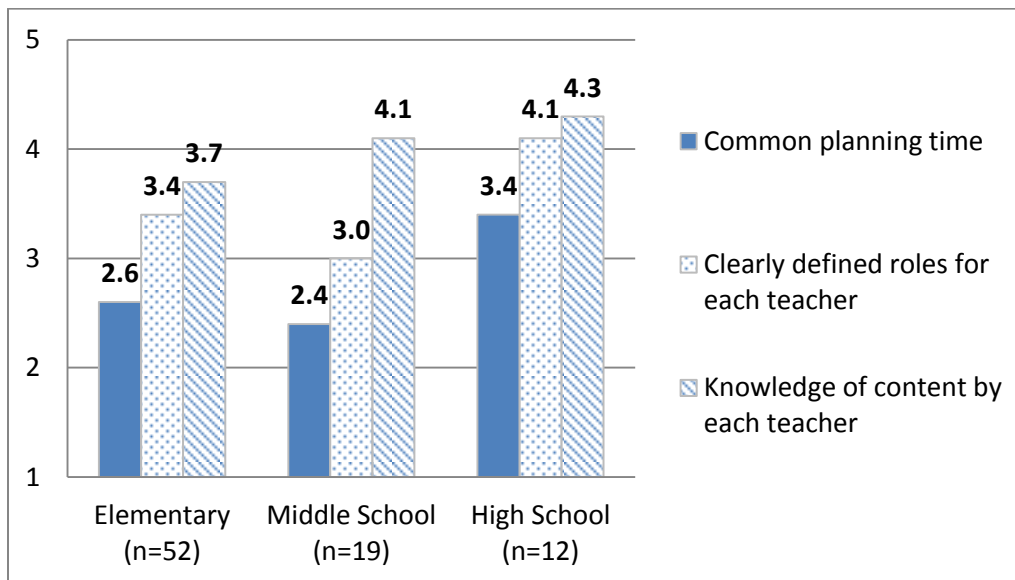


Figure 29 shows the level of training classroom teachers have with the History Alive! pedagogy.

Figure 29: Level of History Alive! Training for Classroom Teachers

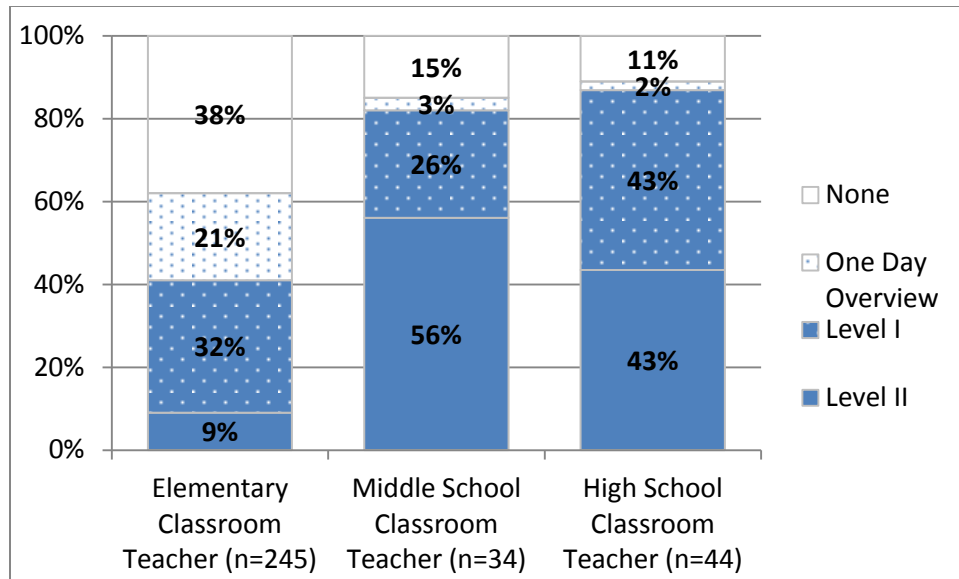


Figure 30 shows the level of training self-contained classroom teachers have with the History Alive! pedagogy. Teachers responding to this question identified themselves as teachers who, “teach social studies in self-contained ESOL/HILT or special education class” from Figure 1.

Figure 13: Level of History Alive! Training for Self-contained Classroom Teachers

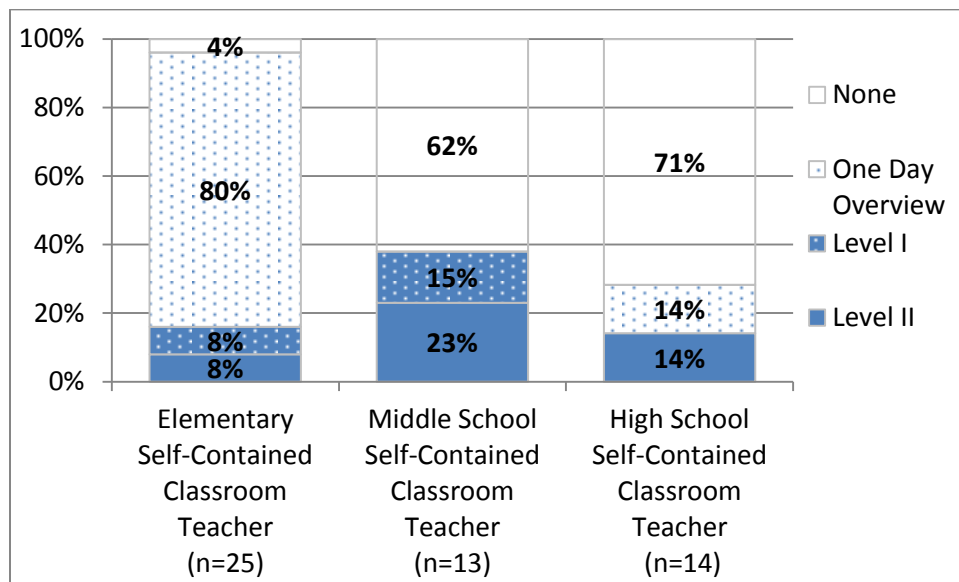
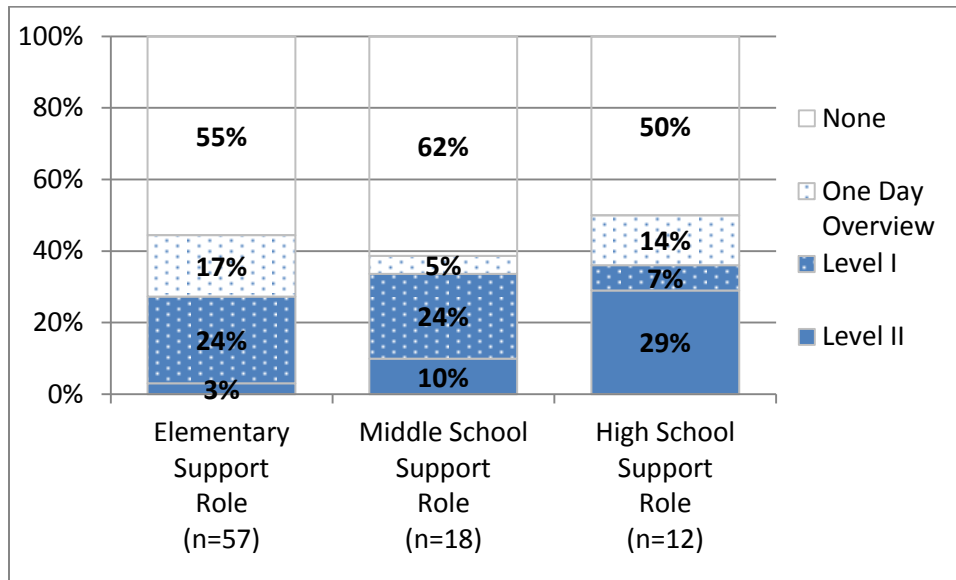


Figure 31 shows the level of training support role staff have with the History Alive! pedagogy.

Figure 31: Level of History Alive! Training for Support Role Staff



Figures 32-34 show how often classroom teachers integrate the History Alive! pedagogy (e.g., visual discovery, skill builder, experiential, writing for understanding, response group, problem solving group work, and interactive student notebook) into their daily classroom practice disaggregated by the level of History Alive! training completed.

Figure 32: Frequency with which Elementary Teachers Integrate History Alive! into Daily Classroom Practice by Level of Training

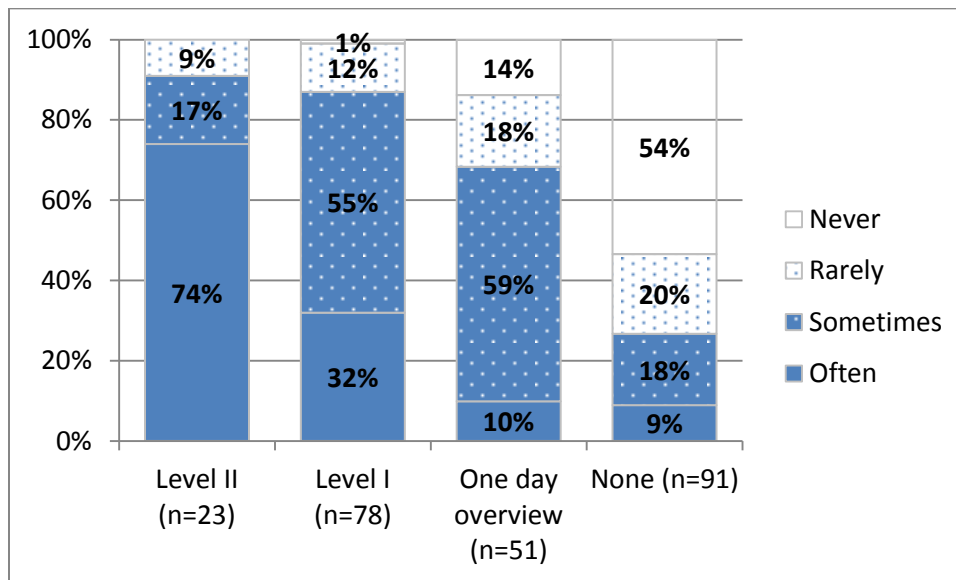
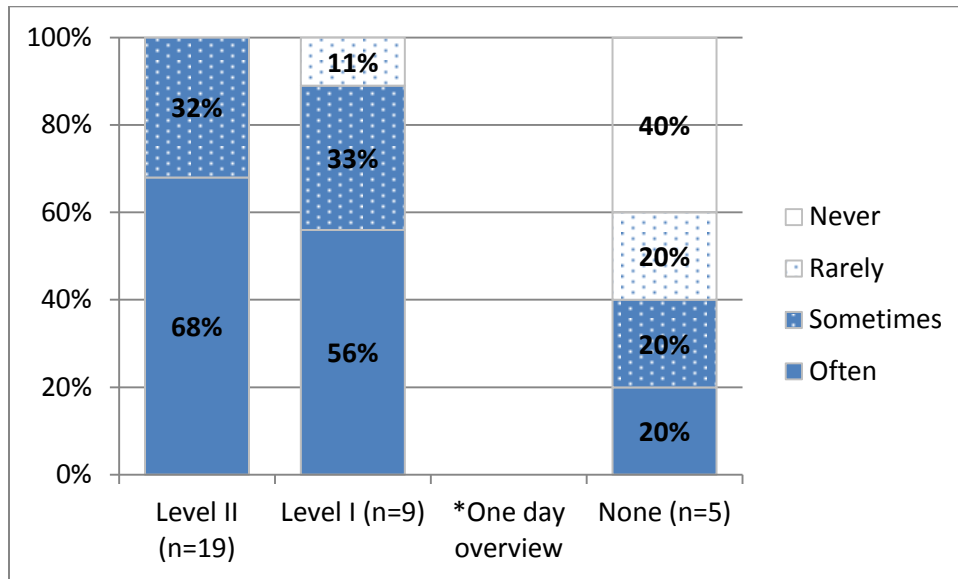
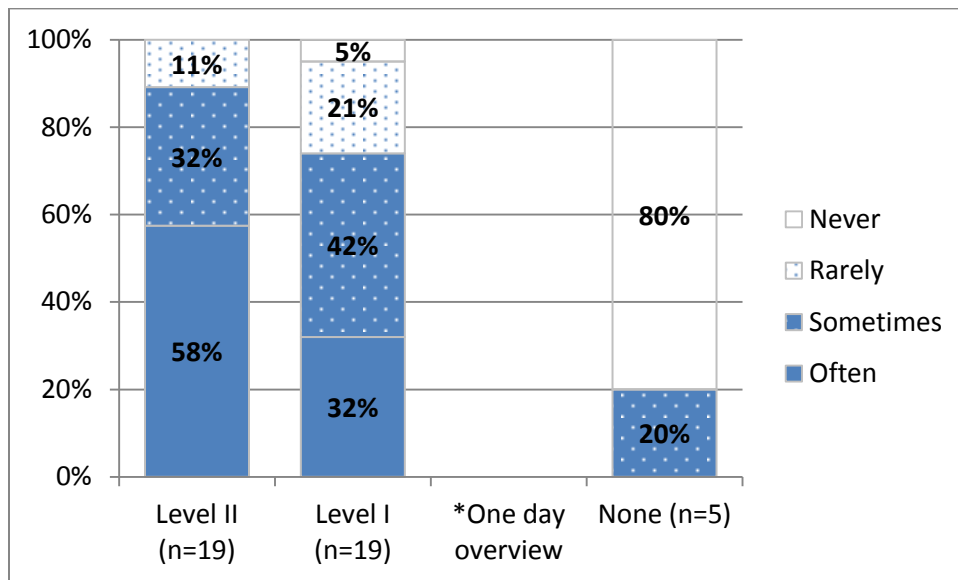


Figure 33: Frequency with which Middle School Teachers Integrate History Alive! into Daily Classroom Practice by Level of Training



*fewer than 5 not reported

Figure 34: Frequency with which High School Teachers Integrate History Alive! into Daily Classroom Practice by Level of Training



*fewer than 5 not reported

Figure 35 shows how often teachers integrate technology into their social studies instruction.

Figure 14: Frequency with which Teachers Integrate Technology into Social Studies Instruction

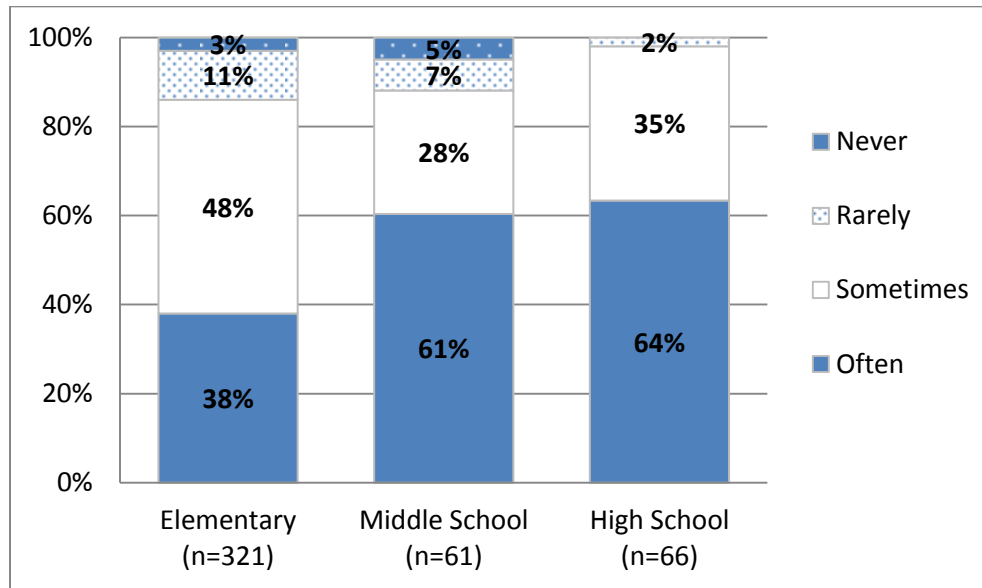


Figure 36 shows the reasons teachers gave that prevent them from using more technology during social studies instruction.

Figure 36: Reasons that Prevent Teachers from Using More Technology in Social Studies Instruction, according to Teachers

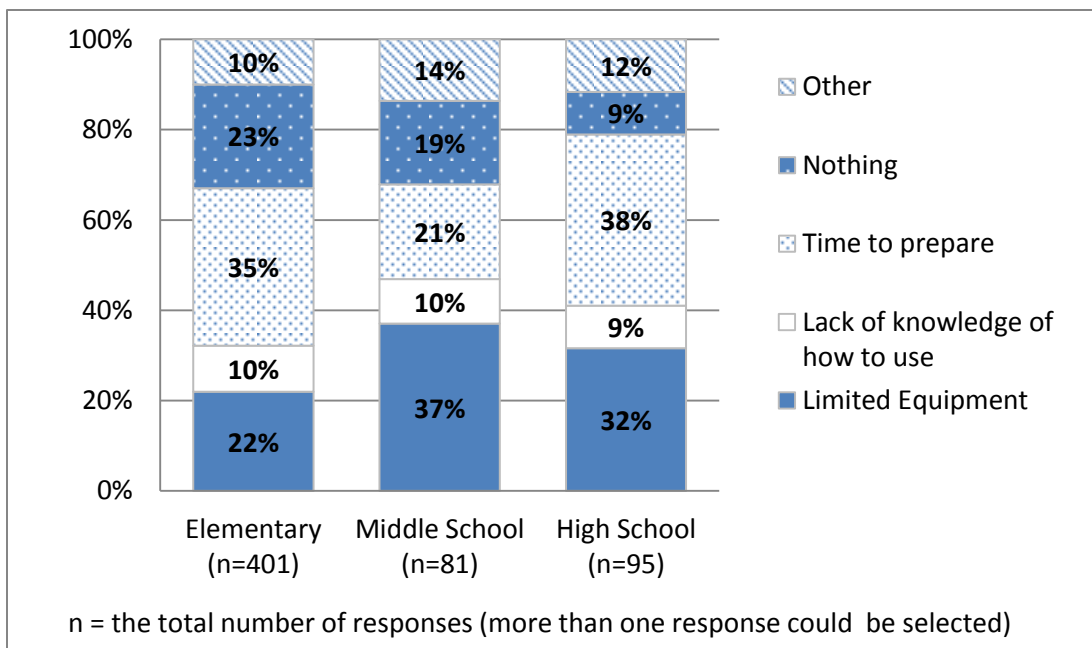


Figure 37 shows the reasons principals gave that prevent teachers from using more technology during social studies instruction.

Figure 37: Reasons that Prevent Teachers from Using More Technology in Social Studies Instruction, according to Principals

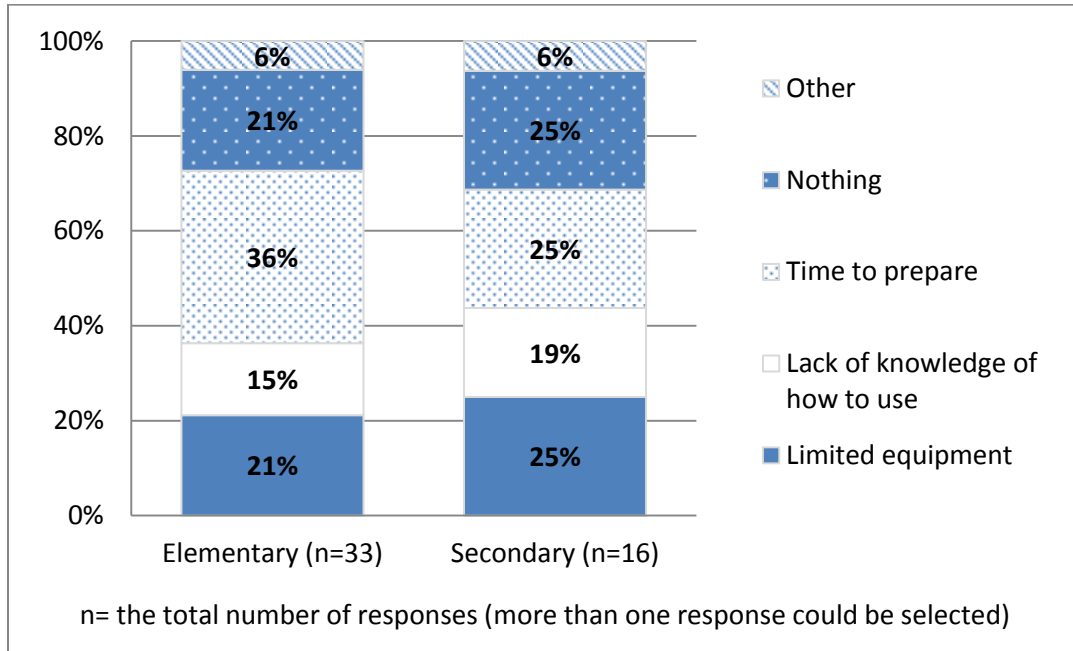


Figure 38 shows how often elementary teachers use digital textbooks, digital maps, and pull-down maps during classroom instruction.

Figure 38: Frequency with which Elementary Teachers Use Digital Textbooks, Digital Maps, and Pull-Down Maps during Social Studies Instruction

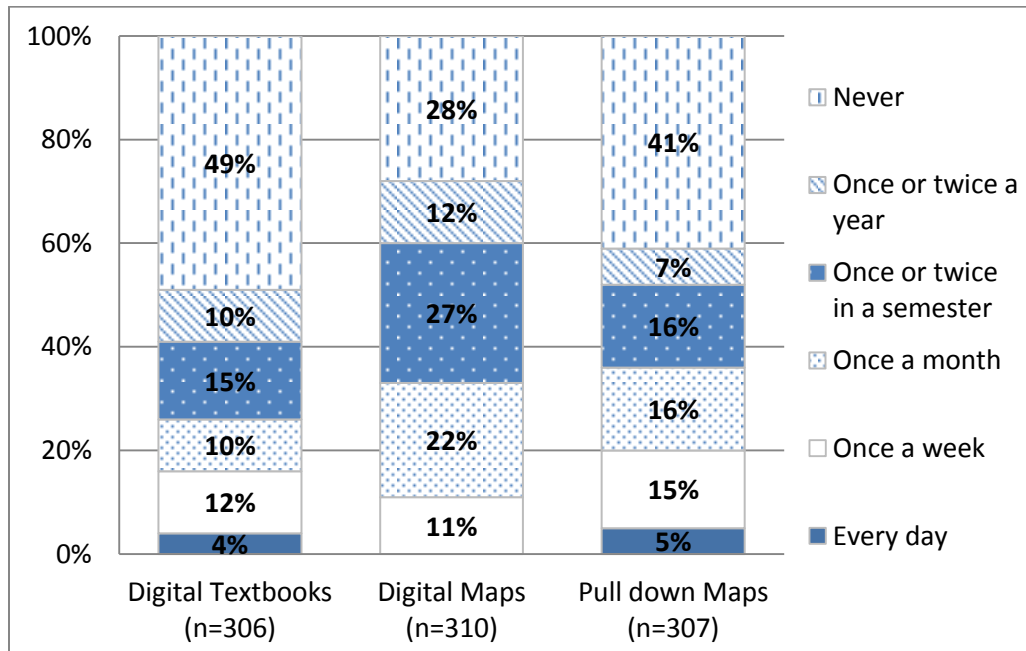


Figure 39 shows how often middle school teachers use digital textbooks, digital maps, and pull-down maps during classroom instruction.

Figure 39: Frequency with which Middle School Teachers Use Digital Textbooks, Digital Maps, and Pull-Down Maps during Social Studies Instruction

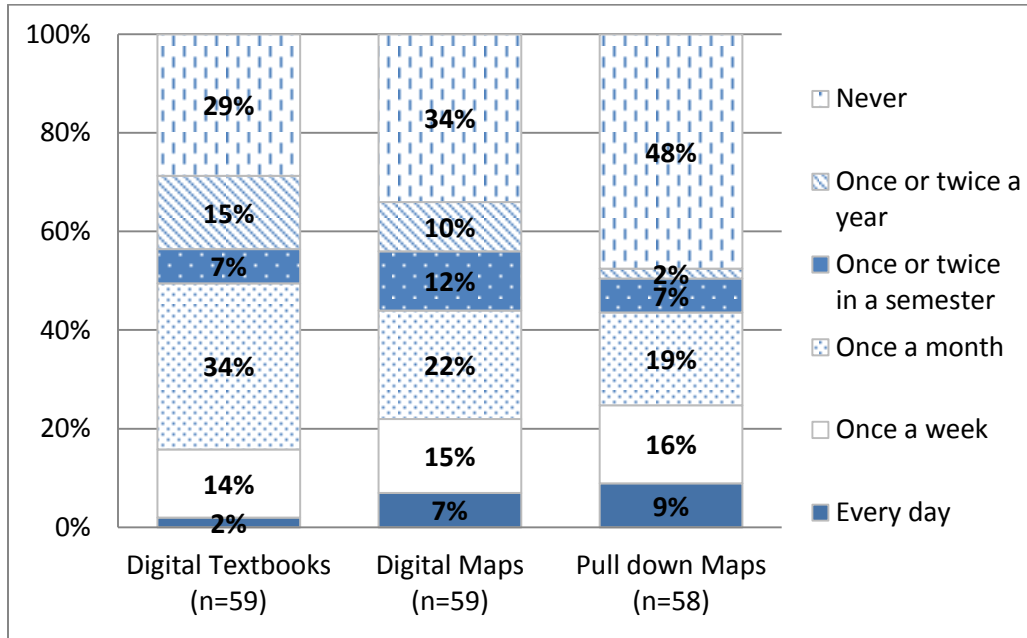


Figure 40 shows how often high school teachers use digital textbooks, digital maps, and pull-down maps during classroom instruction.

Figure 40: Frequency with which High School Teachers Use Digital Textbooks, Digital Maps, and Pull-Down Maps during Social Studies Instruction

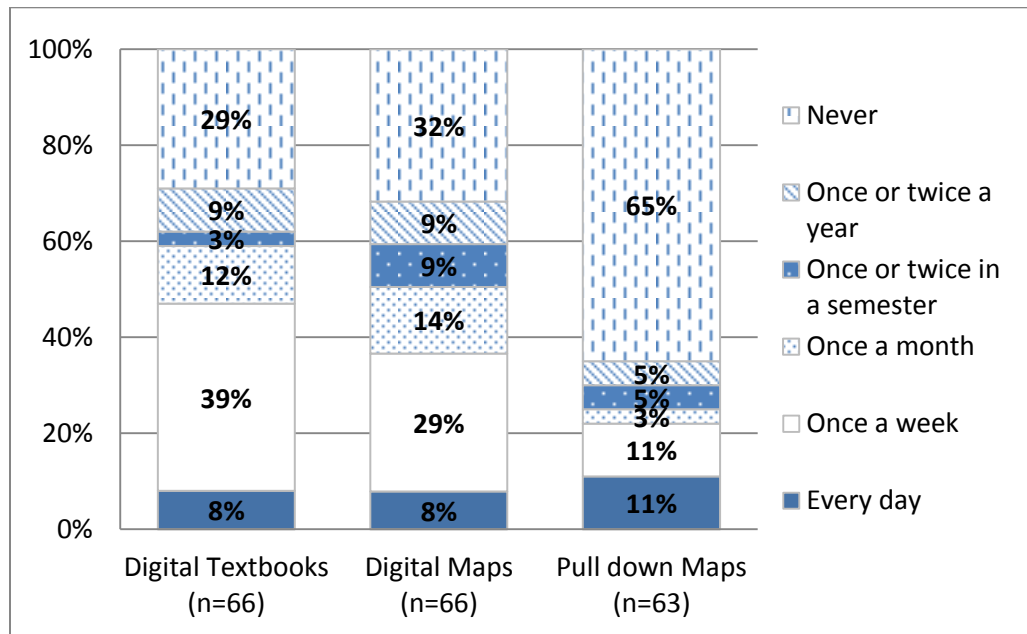


Figure 41 shows how satisfied elementary classroom teachers are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 41: Elementary Classroom Teachers' Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

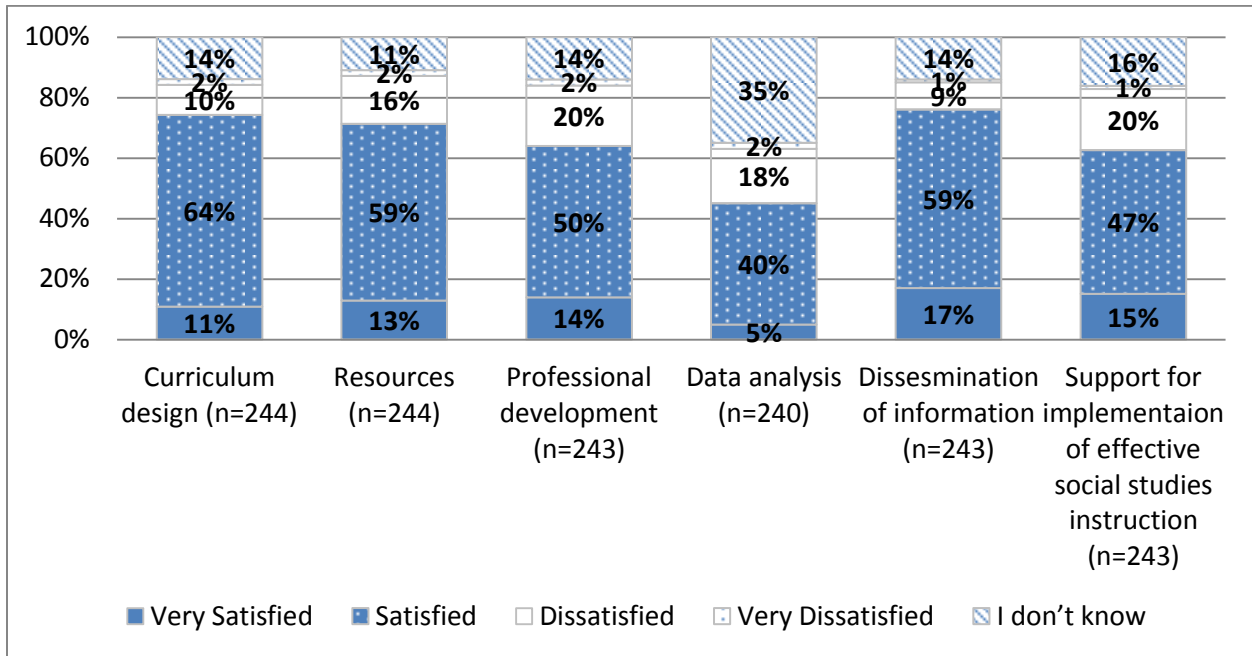


Figure 42 shows how satisfied middle school classroom teachers are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 42: Middle School Classroom Teachers' Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

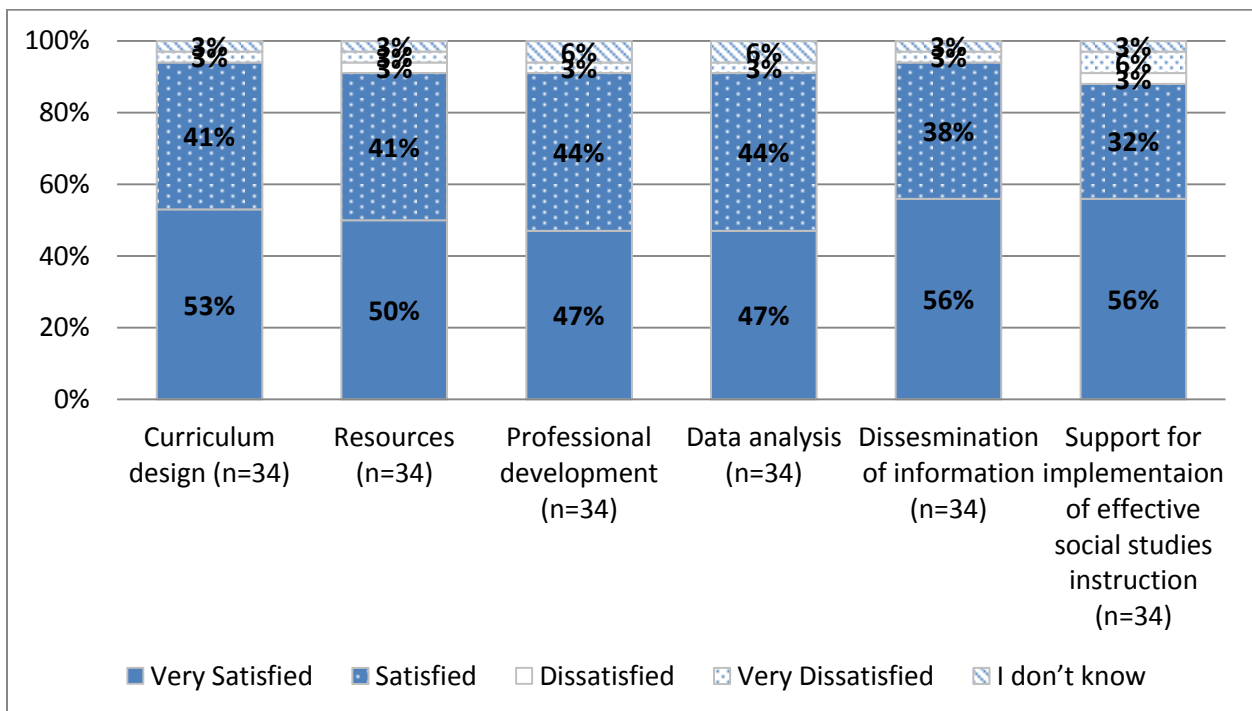


Figure 43 shows how satisfied **high school classroom teachers** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 43: High School Classroom Teachers' Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

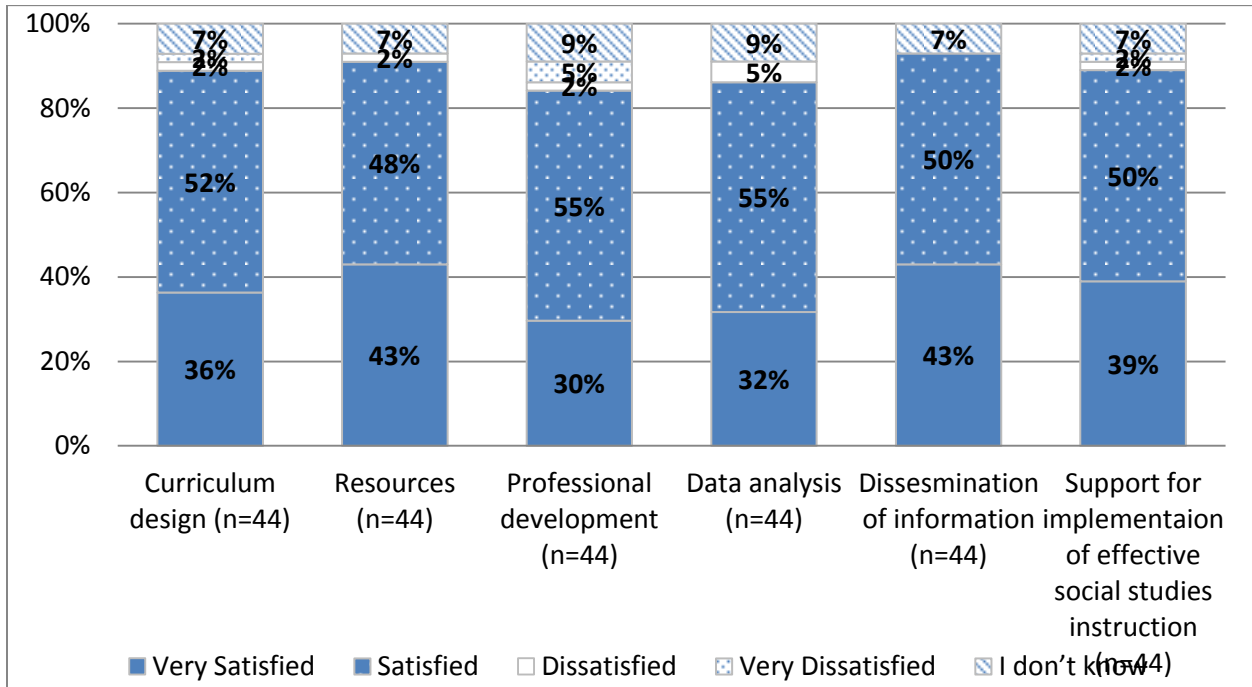


Figure 44 shows how satisfied **elementary self-contained teachers** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 44: Elementary Self-Contained Teachers' Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

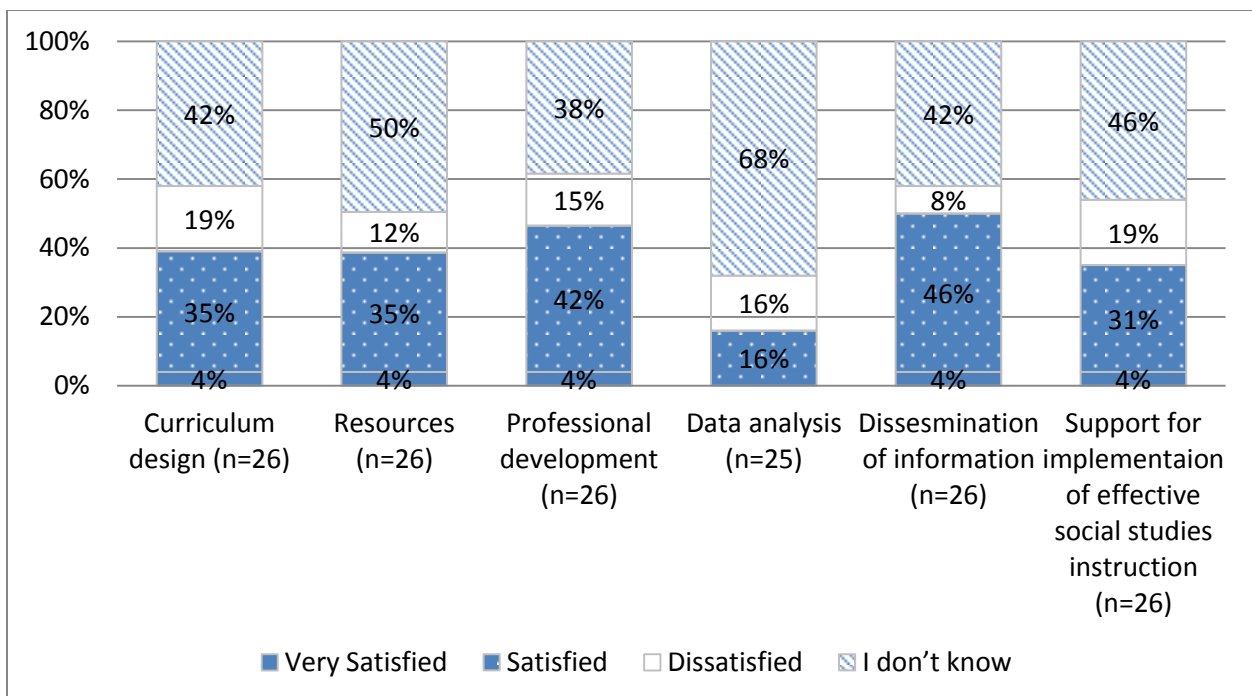


Figure 45 shows how satisfied **middle school self-contained teachers** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 45: Middle School Self-contained Teachers' Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

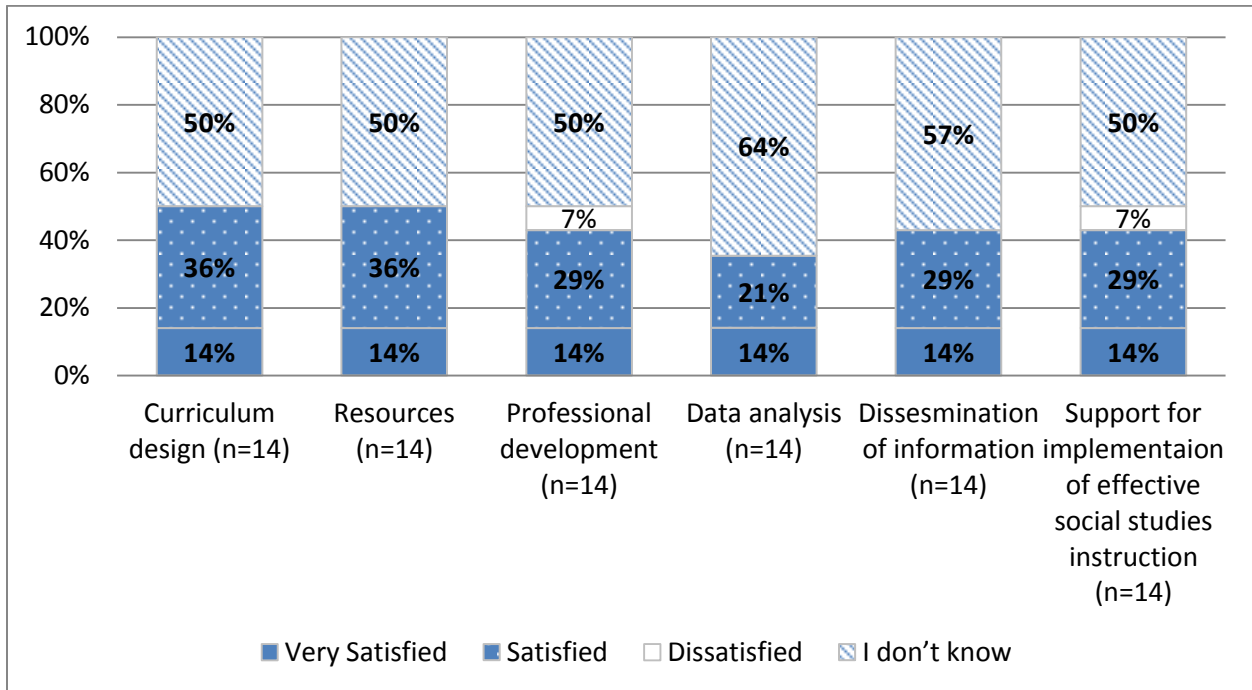


Figure 46 shows how satisfied **high school self-contained teachers** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 46: High School Self-contained Teachers' Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

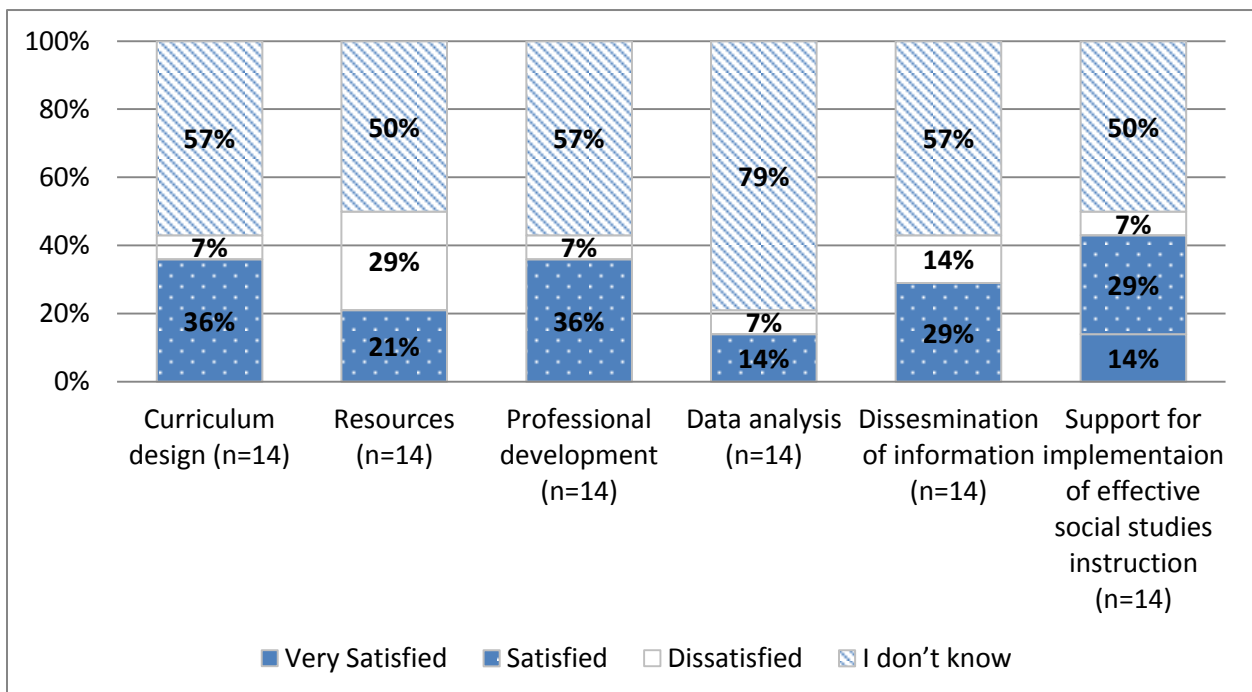


Figure 47 shows how satisfied **elementary support staff** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 47: Elementary Support Staff's Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

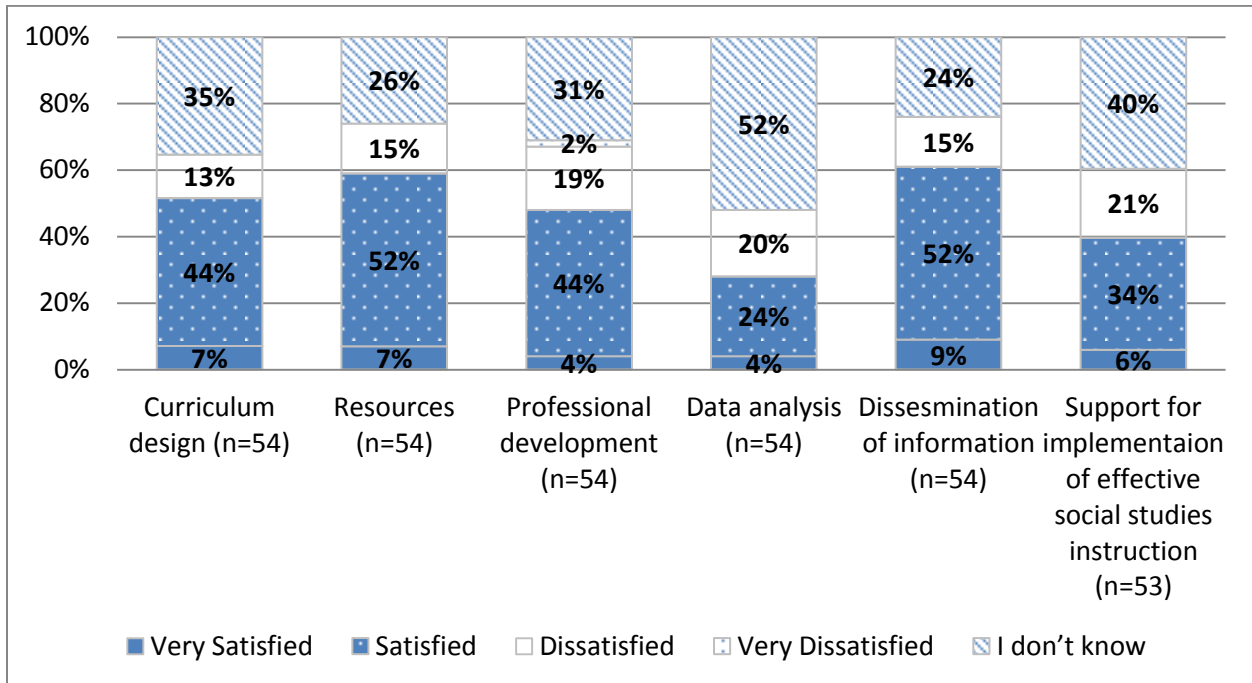


Figure 48 shows how satisfied **middle school support staff** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 48: Middle School Support Staff's Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

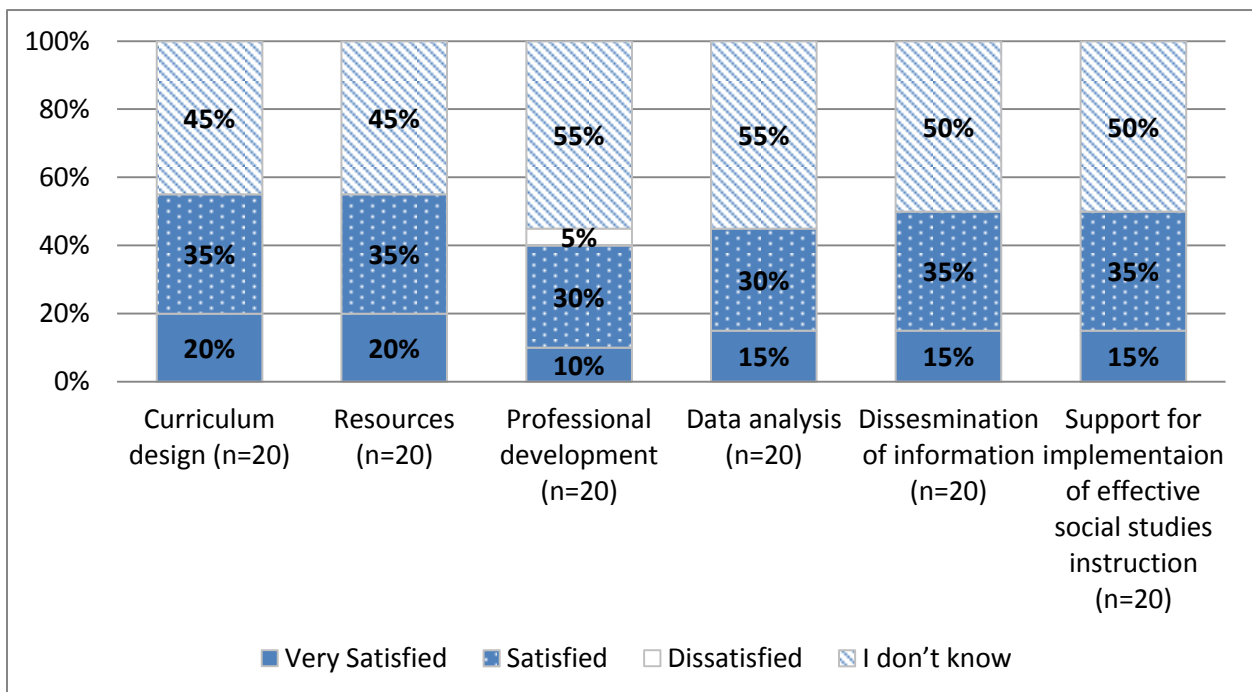


Figure 49 shows how satisfied **high school support staff** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 49: High School Support Staff's Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

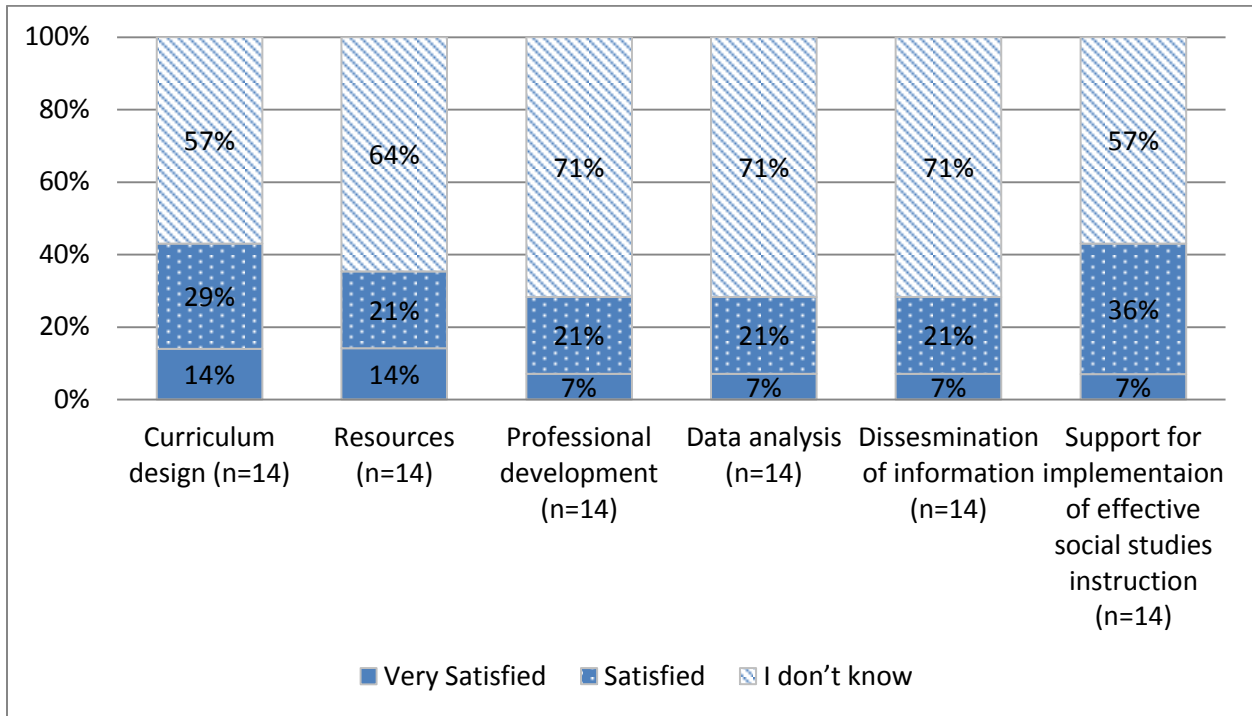


Figure 50 shows how satisfied **elementary principals** are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 50: Elementary Principals' Satisfaction with Support from Social Studies Office

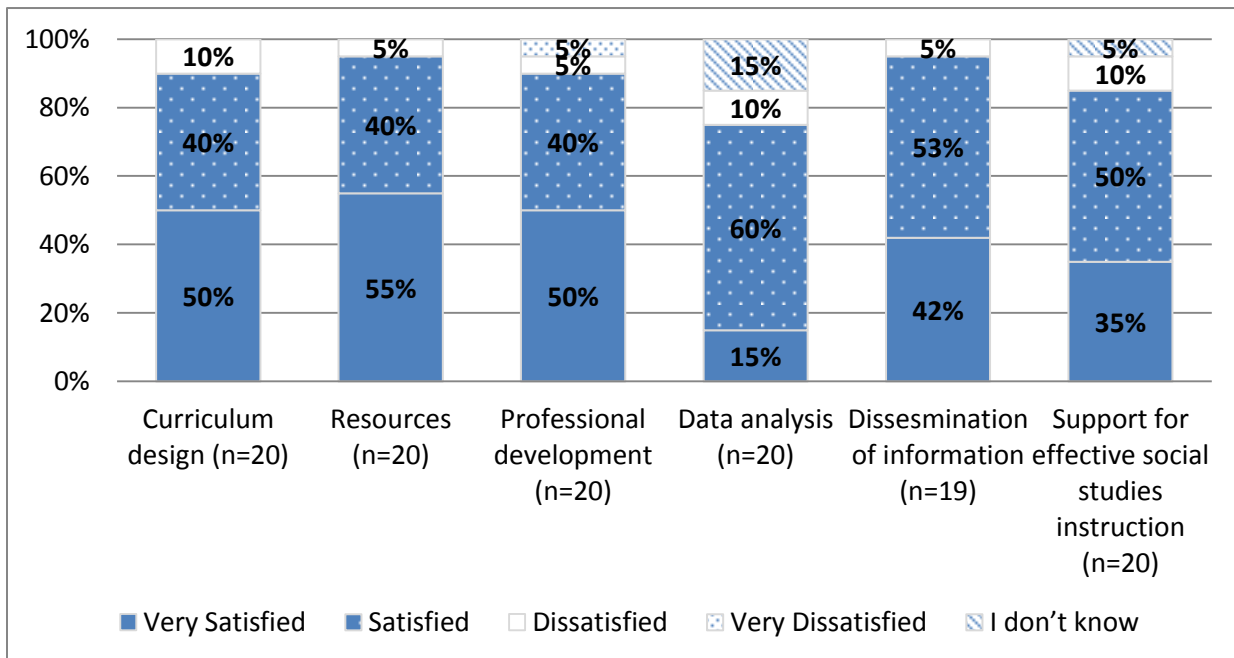


Figure 51 shows how satisfied secondary principals are with the various services offered through the Social Studies Office.

Figure 51: Secondary Principals' Level of Satisfaction with Support from the Social Studies Office

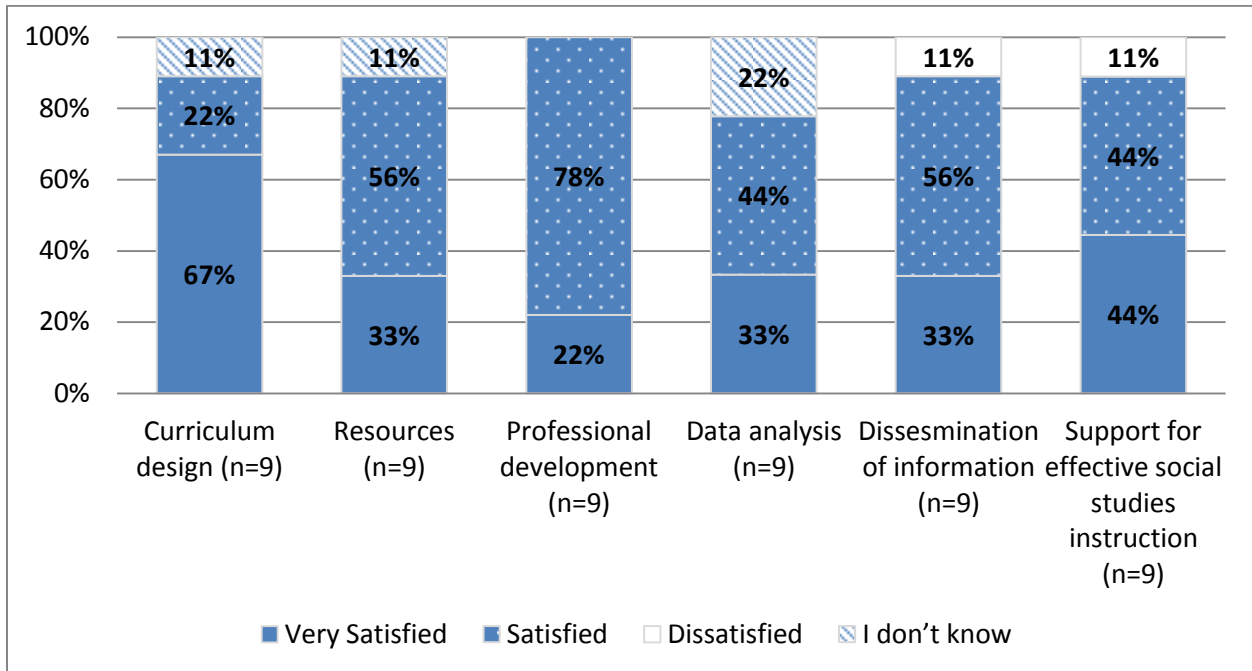


Figure 52 shows the percent of teachers who identify specific tasks as part of the lead teacher/department chair role

Figure 52: Percent of Teachers who Indicate the Following Tasks as Being Part of Lead Teacher/Department Chair Role

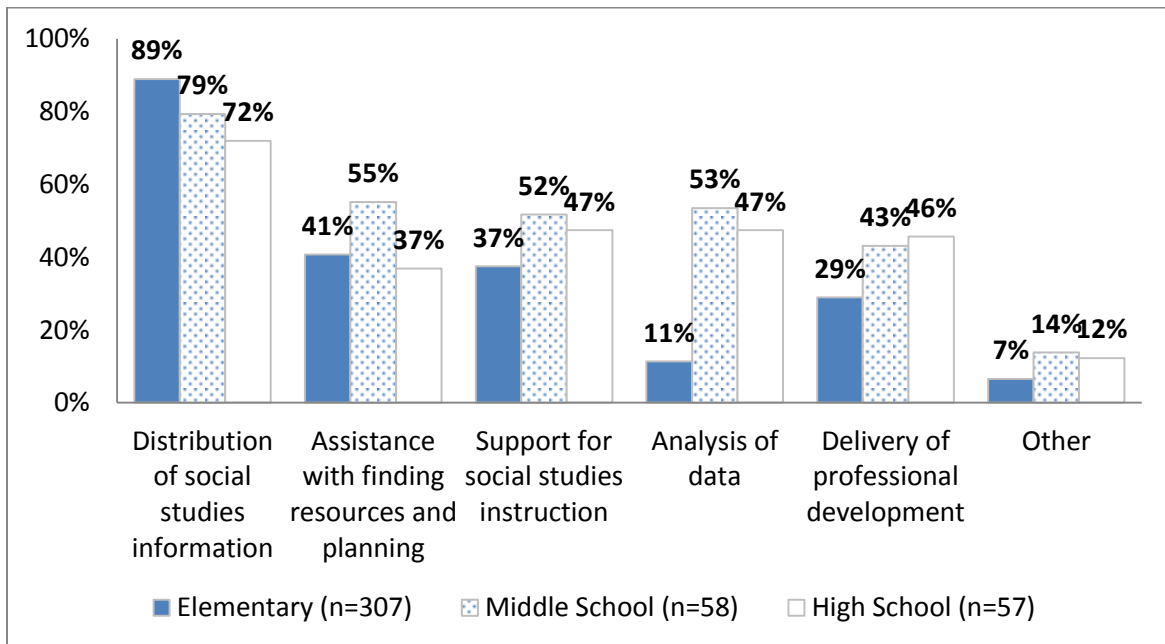


Figure 53 shows the percent of lead teachers/department chairs who identify specific tasks as part of the their role

Figure 15: Percent of Lead Teachers/Department Chairs that Indicate the Following Tasks as Being Part of Their Role

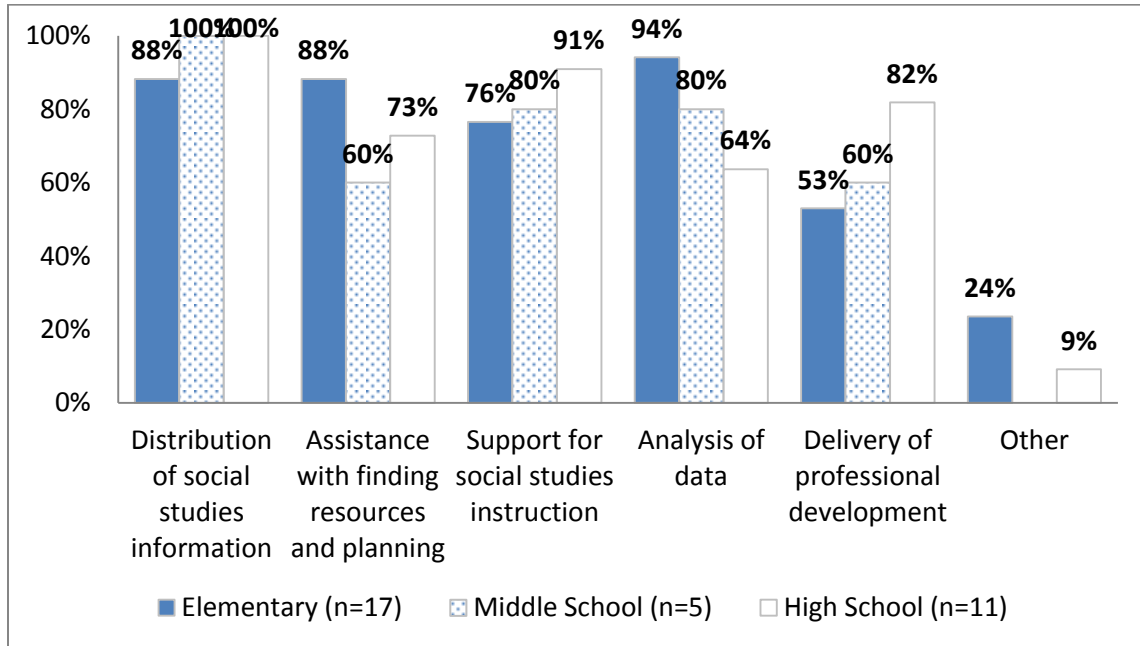
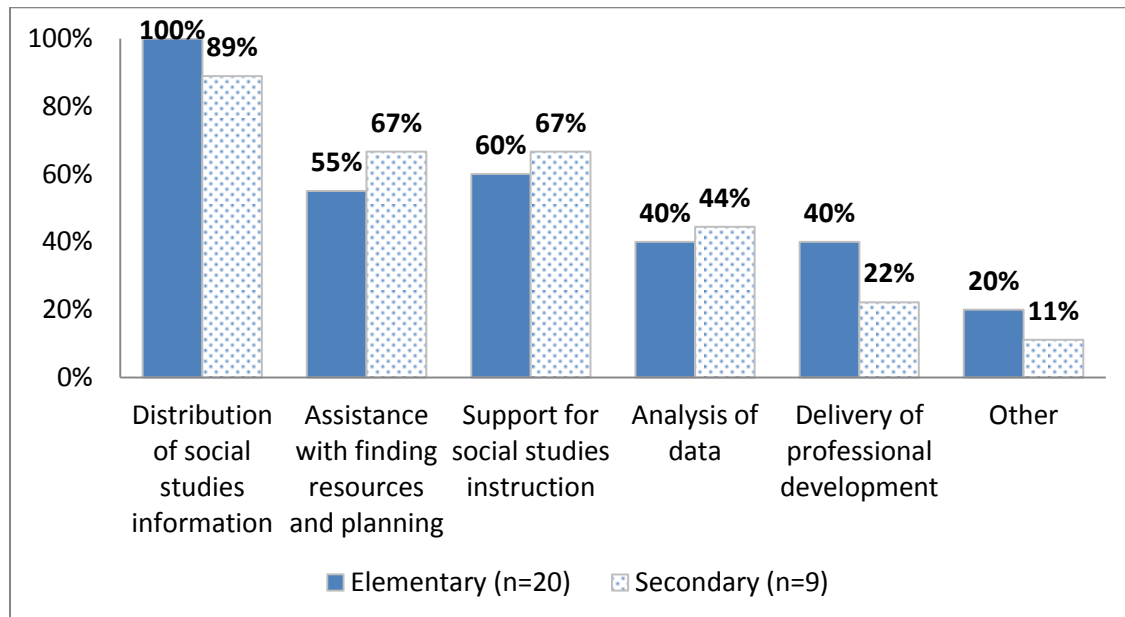


Figure 54: shows the percent of principals who identify specific tasks as part of the lead teacher/department chair role

Figure 54: Percent of Principals that Indicate the Following Tasks as Being Part of Lead Teacher/Department Chair Role



Site-Based and Community Satisfaction Surveys

The biannual Site-Based Survey is designed to provide school-level feedback from students, teachers, and parents on issues including school climate, instructional support, cultural competence, the physical condition of the buildings, and related information. In alternating years, the Community Satisfaction Survey provides a district-level snapshot, focusing on similar questions with a smaller sample of respondents. The 2013 Site-Based Survey and the 2014 Community Satisfaction Survey included questions about social studies instruction for the purposes of program evaluation.

The margin of error for both surveys and all respondent groups are included in Table 1. The population size for parents varies over the two years because of how households are selected to participate in each survey. The Site-Based Survey is sent to each household for the oldest child at each school; therefore, one household may receive more than one survey if they have children who attend different schools. Households are selected for the telephone Community Satisfaction Survey based on the oldest child in their household, regardless of the school they attend.

Table 1: Margin of Error for 2013 Site-Based Survey and 2014 Community Satisfaction Survey

Survey	Response Group	Population Size	Responses to Social Studies Question	Percentage of Population	Margin of Error (95% Confidence Interval)
SBS 2013	Elementary parents	8,878	2,857	32%	1.5
	Middle school parents	3,804	1,660	44%	1.8
	High school parents	4,258	905	21%	2.9
	Alternative program parents	809	98	12%	9.3
	5th grade students	1,639	1,450	88%	0.9
	Middle school students	4,202	1,660	40%	1.9
	High school students	5,747	1,251	22%	2.5
CSS 2014	Alternative program students	1,132	830	73%	1.8
	All parents	15,891	602	4%	3.9
	Students	22,454	1,160	5%	2.8

The margin of error is calculated at a 95% confidence interval, meaning that we can be 95% confident that the sample result reflects the actual population within the margin of error. In other words, in 19 out of 20 cases the data obtained would not differ by any more than the percentage points in the margin of error in either direction if the survey were repeated multiple times employing the same survey methodology and sampling method across the same population. When the margin of error is greater than 5, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Figures 1 and 2 show the extent to which students agreed or disagreed with the statement, “I enjoy learning about social studies,” in 2013 and 2014.

Figure 1: 2013 Student Responses: “I enjoy learning about social studies.”

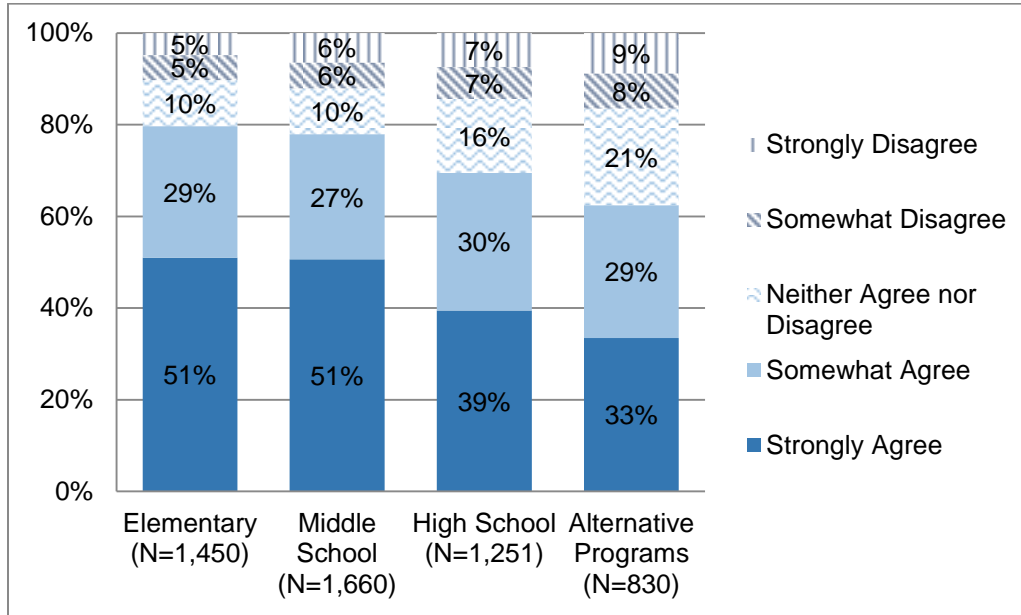
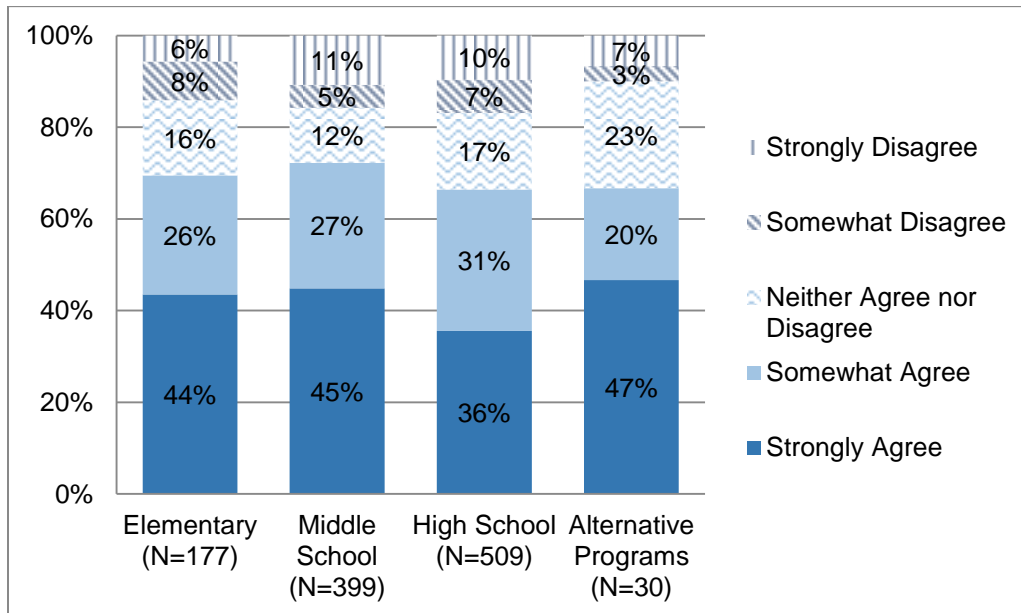


Figure 2: 2014 Student Responses: “I enjoy learning about social studies.”



Figures 3 and 4 show parents' level of satisfaction with the social studies instruction their children received in 2013 and 2014. Note that the 2013 parent SBS included a question about children's grade level, while the 2014 CSS did not.

Figure 3: Parent Satisfaction with Social Studies Instruction by Grade Level, 2013

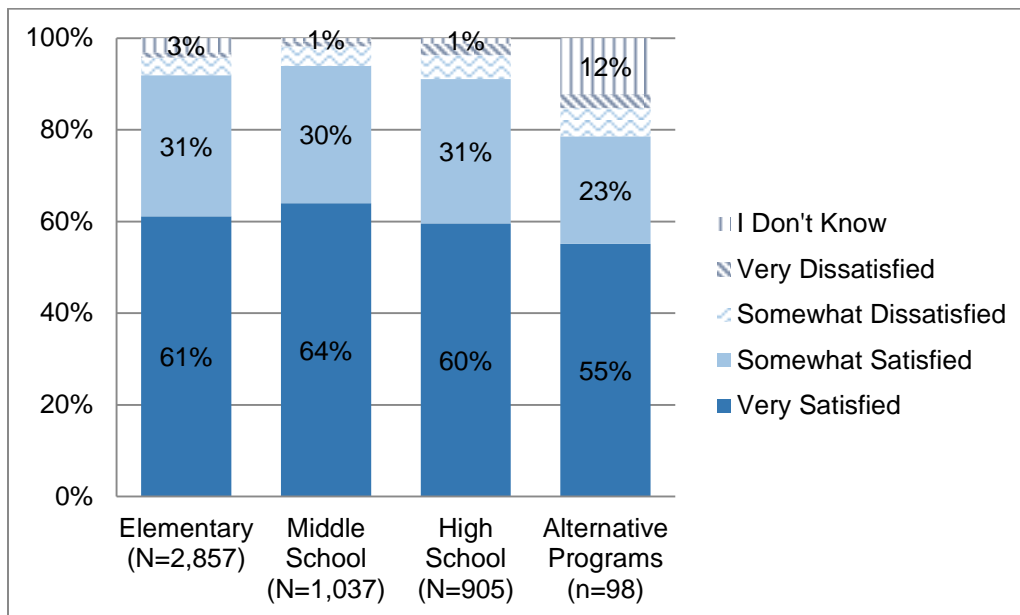
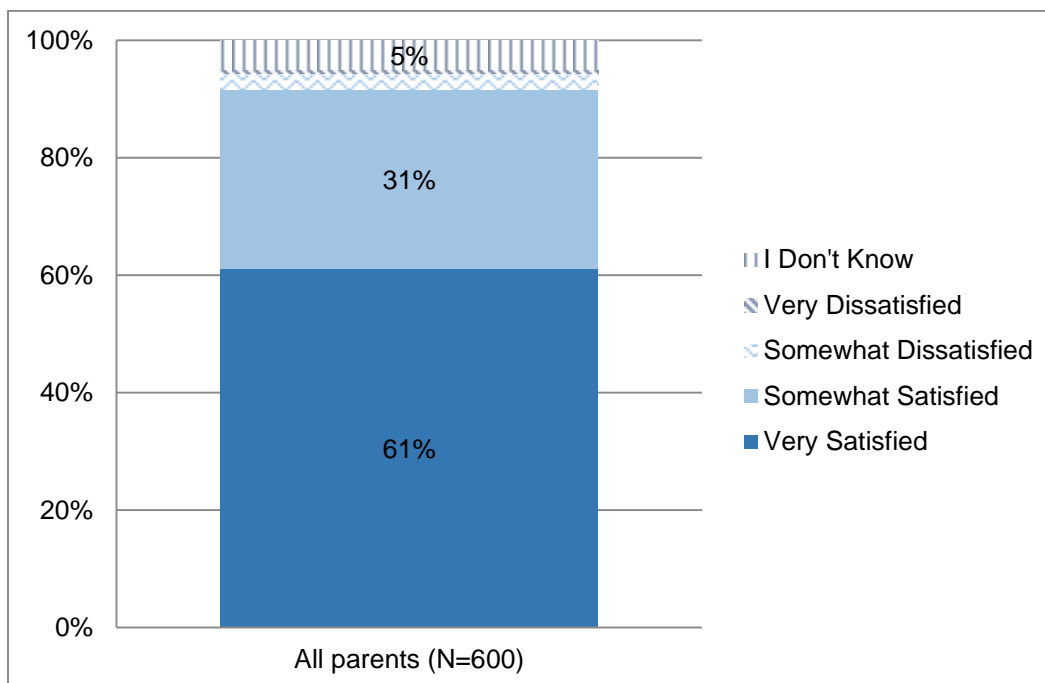


Figure 4: Parent Satisfaction with Social Studies Instruction, 2014



Arlington Public Schools
Focus Group Research with Elementary-, Middle-, and High School Students on
Social Studies Education

April 24, 2014

Background

The Arlington Public Schools (APS) Social Studies program is founded on the premise that democracy demands citizens who are informed, interested in the welfare of individuals and society, and committed to the success of democratic processes and values.

A multi-faceted evaluation of the APS Social Studies program is underway. The evaluation explores the Social Studies program using many different means including classroom observations, teacher surveys, enrollment and scheduling data, testing data, administrator surveys, and technology inventories. This report summarizes qualitative research findings from a set of eight focus groups conducted with students in March and April 2014. All of the evaluation's data should be considered as a whole. In other words, focus group findings will be most meaningful when considered together with findings from other facets of the overall Social Studies program evaluation.

Research Purpose

The overarching goals of the focus groups were to:

- Understand students' experiences in social studies classrooms with a particular focus on the teaching strategies and tools their social studies teachers have used.
- Explore students' understanding of the reasons for teaching and learning about social studies.

Research Method

Eight 60-minute focus groups were conducted by an independent researcher, not employed by APS. Two discussions were held at APS elementary schools, 2 at middle schools, and 4 at high schools. Students were selected randomly to be invited to participate. In all, 56 students participated—27 boys and 29 girls. The participants included 18 elementary school students (4th graders), 14 middle schoolers (8th graders), and 24 high school students. Among the high school students, 13 were freshmen or sophomores, and 11 were juniors or seniors.

The discussion guide is attached as Appendix A. The questions were developed in collaboration with the Office of Planning and Evaluation and the Social Studies Office. In brief, the discussion guide explored:

- **Approaches to teaching that students have observed** (e.g., items they see in their social studies classroom, what they do in class, perceptions about whether they participate or simply receive information, and lessons that stand out).
- **How teachers help students learn** (e.g., how individual students are helped when they struggle, how a teacher facilitates learning for the class as a whole).
- **The perceived role of social studies** (e.g., why we learn social studies, how social studies knowledge applies to daily life).

In interpreting the findings presented in this report, it is important to note that focus group discussions are a qualitative research method. While the discussions produce rich, detailed information about the perspectives of those interviewed and opportunities to further explore relevant new perspectives, focus group findings are descriptive in nature and cannot be generalized due to sampling approaches and small sample sizes.

Findings

Elementary School

Social Studies Top-of-Mind

Elementary Topics

As a warm-up activity, the two groups of elementary school students were asked what comes to mind when they think of social studies. Most students thought of topics (especially Jamestown, George Washington, Virginia history, and what makes Virginia unique), or field trips (Jamestown, Gunston Hall), or particular lessons. These lessons included:

- An “historic tug-of-war” in which the students were designated British, French, or Patriots and given relevant advantages and disadvantages in an actual tug-of-war held outdoors.
- Using supplies like pizza boxes and clay to map Virginia geography and land features.
- Giving presentations dressed as historical figures.
- Making a life-size body tracing, coloring it to look like a colonial person, and adding relevant information around the borders.

In both groups, elementary students could easily call to mind topics they had studied both this year and in past years. They were most heavily focused on the colonial period and the Revolutionary War in their descriptions. They also mentioned the French and Indian War and the Civil War. When asked to look across all of their elementary school years, they mentioned Ancient Greece, and Ancient China, and Ancient Egypt.

Really recently we’re learning a lot about the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and how they struggled with writing it.—Elementary Student

[We have studied] how we colonized and made Virginia so unique and have so many cultures—Germans, Irish, British, African Americans, and even the Indians are squished up in the back.

[In the past, we studied] Ancient Egypt and it was the very last subject of the year. We got to learn about how the Pharaohs ruled and how the ancient people lived.

[I liked] learning about the contributions that ancient people made to today, like aqueducts.

Approaches to Teaching that Elementary Students Have Observed

Elementary Classrooms: Surroundings, Materials, Technology

Students at both elementary schools said that they have social studies every day. Students at one school were certain their class lasts 50 minutes. At the other, students debated whether it was 45-, 50-, or 60-minutes long.

Students described classrooms at both schools as being decorated with social studies material—roll-down maps, timelines (both student projects and formal, purchased timelines), a compass, and photos of students in costume.

Smart Boards were instantly mentioned as a prominent feature of social studies class. On Smart Boards, students find such content as instructions for beginning class or essential knowledge for the unit. The boards are often used for showing videos. On occasion, the students will use laptops or iPads either to do research or as part of an exercise such as moving from station to station to complete activities (e.g., in one such exercise, students at one station made propaganda flyers promoting Jamestown as the place colonists should choose to live, at another they watched a video. Between stations the teacher signs their “passport” showing completed stations.).

In the beginning of every chapter we see “essential knowledge” [on the Smart Board], and it’s all the things we have to learn. And, I think we learn so much because at the beginning of every chapter I’m like, “Who is it? What is it?” And at the end I get it.

Elementary Classrooms: Teaching Approaches, Student Participation

These elementary students did not feel like they are limited to receiving information. In both schools, they described many ways they participate—with some activities, such as giving a speech, role-playing in a debate, or making observations about a portrait, specifically enabling them to contribute knowledge and views. Several indicated that they need to learn some material first, before they know enough to participate in such activities. Examples of what students say they do in social studies class are shown in Table 1.

It’s both [receiving information and contributing]. Sometimes she’ll be telling you, but in the end she’ll give you some activities.

[Students were assigned a role—patriot, loyalist, or neutral.] And you have to say I agree or disagree [from the assigned viewpoint]. Like, “Well I disagree with you. We should stand up against the king. He is not following the Virginia Charter.”

Sometimes we read a textbook before doing something because we might not know. So she asks us to read a book before we go to a station.

Table 1. A sample of what elementary students said one would see them doing in social studies class

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing work, head down close to desk to be focused. • Getting vocabulary words from the back. • Getting our binders. • Writing down notes in some parts of our notebooks and really focusing on the Smart Board and what the teacher is doing. • Reading books about colonial times. • Writing in our binders about the new nation. • Making a “Y” chart. • Doing stations (computer station, paper station). • “We answer questions on a paper for homework. When we bring our answers back we get to tell what our answers were.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Right now, we’re working on famous people—doing life size posters and doing a bunch of research on them. Each table gets their own person.” • “She puts something on the board and she says, ‘Does anyone want to say anything about this painting or document?’ and people would stand up and comment. [Another student] We have to say what observations we have [e.g., looking at a painting of George Washington].” • “So, we do this one thing ‘stand so you can speak.’ You stand then you can say your opinion and then someone else can.” • “Sometimes we have partners and we’ll read a book or she’ll partner us and we’ll tell the answer, like ‘turn to the person next to you and tell the answer.’”
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Elementary Classrooms: Standout Lessons and Perceived Level of Challenge

The interactive lessons stand out to these students. Prominent among the standouts they mentioned were debates and activities that enable a person to experience feelings that a person living in the past might have felt.

The things [I like best are] when we actually get to feel what people felt like back then. We did this activity and it made some people really mad but that’s what it supposed to do. We got goldfish and were taxed [and had to give away goldfish such that a couple people accumulated many].

Overall, social studies classes were perceived as fairly easy. As a discussion prompt exercise, students ranked this year’s class on a 1 to 10 scale, with 10 being the most difficult. Nearly all chose a number

below 5. In terms of likes and dislikes, the students said they liked almost everything except sedentary work such as “worksheets” and remembering dates.

It's a 1. I like learning about these things. It's fun.

It's actually more fun than...well, it depends on what you like and what you don't. If you do like what you're learning then you're going to get the facts straight and you're going to be a good student at it.

When we're starting a new unit it's like a 6, but then [later] it's like a 4. Learning it is kind of exciting but it's also different to get new information into your head.

It's a lot to remember, especially remembering dates.

How Elementary Teachers Help Individuals

These students observed their teachers giving reminders. At one school, students said they can make appointments for extra help. A few commented that teachers help them by allowing them to learn or review and then do a related activity.

When I come up to return the test, she makes sure we did everything to make the test a good grade. “Did you do your best work? Did you double check? Did you use your testing skills?”

How Elementary Teachers Help the Class

From these students' perspectives, the primary ways teachers help their social studies class are by making learning fun and providing study guides. Although they agreed that their teachers shared the class schedule and posted helpful content like the Essential Question, they did not perceive these actions as designed to help the class. They were very focused on what helped them personally understand and remember content.

She teaches in fun ways, so you can remember, like tug-of-war.

She gives us chants [mnemonic devices]. “American Indians, we were always here, we were everywhere.”

She gives us a study guide. You have to find the answers and that makes the study guide.

The Role of Social Studies

Elementary Students on Why We Study Social Studies

By far, avoiding mistakes of the past was the most prominent reason these fourth graders saw for social studies. A distant second was the possibility that a person might choose a career such as historian or archeologist that requires social studies knowledge.

We study social studies because there were mistakes and things that happened in the past. And, when we know what happened in the past if there is anything like mistakes or problems then we know how to fix them. "Oh wait a second, there was a war because of this...don't make that mistake again."

History can teach us for the future. It can help us learn not to make those mistakes again.

Students had few examples of noticing the value of social studies knowledge in everyday life. For them, it was rather difficult to come up with examples of this occurring. And, those with examples mostly pointed to visiting historic or geographic places they had talked about in class.

I went to the Chesapeake Bay and we had read a book about what John Smith thought about the Chesapeake Bay and all the birds he saw. And, while I was there I saw all kinds of birds too.

When I went to Mt. Vernon, I read the bulletin boards (plaques) and I found one about the slaves and how many slaves there were. And, I was like, "Oh I learned that."

Middle School

Social Studies Top-of-Mind

Middle School Topics

Like the elementary students, middle school students shared something memorable about their social studies classes at the outset of the focus group discussion. Their answers focused on enjoyable activities, appreciation for learning current events, and whether or not they like social studies—which most said they do. For the two who dislike social studies, one feels the past is irrelevant to today and the other dislikes taking notes. Examples of the memories students shared include:

- Field trips—4th grade Williamsburg, 3rd grade Mt. Vernon
- Acting out colonial times (dress, food, writing)
- Using a Jeopardy-style game to study for a test
- Learning about current events, particularly in 8th grade
- Learning about the Civil War—because everyone was eager all school year to learn about this topic
- Making a 3D model to study Asia—for example, if your topic was an emperor, you could create his house or build something with Legos or if you created flowers you would put facts on the leaves
- Making a public service announcement (PSA) on the topic of water in South Sudan (after reading *A Long Walk to Water*)

Both focus groups could easily list social studies topics they had addressed in the recent and more distant past. They named the Middle East, North America, South America, Africa, Asia, cultural geography (the study of people), physical geography (the study of the land), Industrial Revolution, Egypt, and other ancient civilizations.

Approaches to Teaching that Middle School Students Have Observed

Middle School Classrooms: Surroundings, Materials, Technology

The surroundings in social studies classes feature maps and timelines on the walls. Posters also figure prominently. Students picturing their classrooms mentioned posters related to geography (e.g., “5 main things you need to know about geography”), as well as culture, civilizations, and languages. Other facets of the surroundings that were mentioned, but not as prominently were the Essential Question, which is written on the board, and background guides or packets, as well as textbooks and atlases.

There are maps on the wall, timelines on the wall, questions about the unit...We’re introduced to [the Essential Question] when we start the unit. Then we forget. We circle back. We’re always focused on that one thing. I’m aware that we’re supposed to be focused on that question....An example would be “What does it mean to be Latin?”

Smart Boards were used in all of the students’ social studies classrooms. The most common use of the Smart Boards was said to be as a video player. Other technology tools students use include: Google Drive (“so you can work on a group project on your phone”), computers to take tests, overhead projectors teachers use when they talk, and there are occasional opportunities to use personal phones for online research projects. When they were asked directly whether they use primary sources such as letters or diaries, these students could not think of examples of doing that. However, it was not clear whether their lack of recall was because they simply do not associate the term “primary source” with some of the primary items they *are* actually using. Examples they were given to help recall were “letters” or “diaries,” and students may not have thought of pictures, paintings, journals or other items.

Middle School Classrooms: Teaching Approaches, Student Participation

All of the students at one school and most of those at the other generally felt that they get to participate greatly as students in social studies class. For example, they agreed that there were projects in which *they* taught the class. And, they felt that discussing current events particularly lends itself to participatory learning.

It’s evened out between the teacher asking and us answering. I guess I would consider it kind of like a conversation with the whole class and the teacher.

After the weekend, we can bring in news stories [that are relevant to the topic] and share them.

We can ask questions.

Next year we're going into high school so [teacher] will talk and have us take notes to help us practice what we're going to be doing. Instead of just giving us the work, he has us first write down what we think is important.

Although they were in the minority, a few students were adamant that they do little else besides take notes and a couple described their participation as answering knowledge and “check in” questions from the teacher to confirm they understand material. These students could all point to past social studies classes that were not lecture- and note-taking-based.

We write so much notes. Pretty much the whole class, we're just writing notes.

He will talk about the subject and explain on the board, but at the end he makes sure to ask us if we understand.

For us, we have the word of the week. When we studied India, we had a quote of the week for Mahatma Gandhi. [Another student responds] I feel like your class does a lot more than my class does...My class doesn't really do anything. We just sit there and listen to [him/her]. [A second student responds] But the videos break it up [break up the monotony of note taking].

Table 2. A sample of what middle school students said one would see them doing in social studies class

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening. • Taking notes. • Doing worksheets, “We do a lot of worksheets.” • “What he does, our teacher, he gives us a packet of like 2-3 pages front and back and he will give us a day or two to go through the textbook and answer and fill in the blanks, and it takes forever but it helps a lot. It’s like a study guide.” • “We also will do a lot of map activities—like coloring in based on GDP, colonialism, writing the names of the countries. We do it repeatedly which really helps it stick in your mind.” • Watching videos (“like documentaries, people’s travels, how people live”). • Taking tests. • Computer activities—starting a program run by Google Earth, you can “go around” and it helps you see physical geography. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[I] liked learning Civil War in 7th grade. We reenacted...learned about things like what diseases were going around.” • “We do a lot of activities where we get up and move around...we were doing the United States and how population increases effects in urban societies. We put our desks in a rectangle. We put some people in. And one time we put everyone in [to represent crowded urban society].” • “One time, we had [chips] and we did rock, paper, scissors—it showed us how the economy went. We were learning about socialism, and communism, and capitalism. We were showing that with...who we had to give our chips to. She would let us bargain.” • “Sometimes we do pictures and have to talk about what is in the picture and what our opinions are about it.”
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Students especially liked debates and situations in which they take on different viewpoints. But, one group pointed out at length that students need to learn much, and varied information, in order to debate effectively. In one debate students worked from the same information and felt that they were repeating one another in the debate, but were obligated to do so because they had to contribute several times to the conversation in order to receive credit.

Everybody kind of got the same information and we all sat there saying the same thing. We were all learning the same thing. I would have rather had it like you passed if you at least talked some [and if people had different information to work from].

I like it when we're all just in a circle and we don't have to raise our hand.

Middle School Classrooms: Standout Lessons and Perceived Level of Challenge

For one full group of students, making a PSA on South Sudan's water needs was the standout lesson. The second group was hard-pressed to think of their standout lesson, although they had provided examples of different types of learning earlier in the group. They mentioned one teacher's enthusiasm and enjoying having music in class that is relevant to the culture they are studying.

South Sudan Safe Water PSA [was the most memorable]. We had to present to the whole 8th grade...It was a cool thing seeing how [different groups of peers] showcase what they did and what they came up with. [Another student] Also, the students felt like what they did mattered [because the activity raised funds that were sent to South Sudan.]

These middle schoolers perceived social studies as somewhat more difficult than did the younger and older students. On a 1 to 10 scale with 10 as most challenging, most of these students chose 5, 6, or 7. Their reasons were centered around the memorization required and the volume of information.

Have to memorize a lot of time periods. It's a lot of thinking. The information just comes and comes, and in the end you have to put it all together.

I don't like memorizing some dates.

How Middle School Teachers Help Individuals

Much help is available to individual students. But, students made it plain that the onus is on the student to seek the help—for example, by asking or attending help sessions. Specific tools that were singled out as helpful were the organized notebooks students keep and online tools such as Student View and Blackboard.

There is after school help.

Our teacher will tell us to come see him after school or during lunch.

It's mostly the student who has to initiate. If you're not getting something, it's the student who has to take the step to say, "I'm not getting this."

In 8th grade, if you're missing something, they don't remind you—they tell you once.

I honestly think the notebook is the most helpful thing I've had during middle school. That is the reason she is so strict with the homework, so she gets us the resources. She is trying to get us ready for high school.

How Middle School Teachers Help the Class

Whole-class-focused help that students noticed ranged from putting homework on the board to providing vocabulary sheets and relevant information for notebooks. Reviews were a key way that teachers were thought to help the whole class.

Warm-ups are used to review.

One time we got to write things on notecards. It was really helpful [another agrees]. It was the different landforms. He gave us a card and you put all the information you could fit on the front and back and you could use it during the test. He graded us on the notecard. It was a study guide.

The Role of Social Studies

Middle School Students on Why We Study Social Studies

Again, avoiding mistakes of the past was the first and most prominent reason that people learn about social studies in these participants' view. Several of the middle schoolers expanded this thinking saying that we also need social studies so that we:

- Learn how the world works.
- Understand current events.
- Know ourselves by knowing our history.

And, again, preparing for specific careers—such as working for the State Department, one said—was mentioned although it was not a prominent theme.

[Teacher] was telling us that if we didn't learn history then it could repeat itself which would be really bad.

[We study social studies] to learn where we come from.

For social studies I think it's important because if you're watching the news you can understand what they're saying. You know what's going on in the world because you know also the past.

In discussing the value of social studies knowledge in everyday life, students focused on the usefulness of understanding government and politics, the economy, and the reasons for wars.

In 7th grade, we learned about government. You have to learn the different branches.

When the elections come around, it's good know about politics. It's good to know what people are trying to vote for.

Geography affects wars and countries.

High School

Social Studies Top-of-Mind

High School Topics

These high schoolers had many fond memories of social studies. Some had encountered, or were currently in, classes in which they mostly “receive” information as opposed to contributing. But, largely, they believed that social studies topics make it easy for students to be involved. As shown in the summary lists below, when they answered this question upperclassmen tended to characterize their social studies classes *overall* while the 9th and 10th graders’ memories were related to a specific lesson.

Ninth and 10th graders mentioned these social studies topics and activities as memorable to them:

- “Wars, we tend to go into detail a lot.”
- “History, learning about the past. You have to memorize a lot. Sometimes I feel like we’re not going in depth and understanding. Just this year, this year, this year.”
- “I like learning about what happened before I was born and what that changed.”
- American history, Civil War.
- A hallway activity in which the teacher asked questions about things like culture and depending on your answer you were to cross to the other side or stay.
- “[With] World Geo teacher, we learned how to create a government, the teacher sat down [letting us carry out the activity] and he didn’t talk at all.”
- Learning about World Wars.
- “Learning about adolescence and brain development and things like if you’re optimistic you live longer.”
- A 4th grade “regions of Virginia” project. Everyone learned about their region like Piedmont. “On one day we presented—you dressed up as a person from history or an occupation.”

Eleventh and 12th graders shared the following as memorable about social studies:

- Interactive 12th grade class. Social studies is a class where it is easy to be interactive, collaborate, talk, go over current events.

- “I hate politics, but [teacher] makes government fun. The way he does that is he makes the class interactive. We talk all the time. He manages to make the conversations interesting and teach us about government at the same time. We sort of end up teaching ourselves by talking.”
- Jamestown field trip in 4th grade, “It was the first time I was out of Arlington.”
- “In my class a big part of it is not just understanding facts but how they relate to why things are as they are now....the way I notice it is [teacher] actually asking us ‘how does this connect, how does this influence that?’”
- Freshman social studies—it was my first exposure to student-driven learning.
- 12th grade social studies—beneficial to understand how things came to be (e.g., this whole year we’re learning about totalitarian regimes).
- “Mainly what I remember from social studies classes are the interactive things because it really puts you in the shoes of the people,” [for example an interactive class in which everybody was assigned a country- or region-of-origin during the Silk Road period].
- “In 8th grade we reenacted the trenches. It was fun.”
- “Last year, we wrote an essay a week and by the end the AP Exam was really easy because it was old hat.”
- “In 7th grade we had a field day and we ran our own businesses. One day you were an owner and one day you were a consumer. [Side gambling operations cropped up.] You kind of saw the illegal side of the businesses.”

Both focus groups could easily list social studies topics they had addressed in the recent and more distant past. They named WWI, WWII, the Great Depression, totalitarian regimes, Holocaust, ancient civilizations, “the Framers and how they came up with their ideas for government and how those ideas apply today,” the Renaissance, Unification, Imperialism, Industrial Revolution, religions, slave trade, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr.. In both groups of older students, a few expressed the view that they have covered the same topics since elementary school—but with a more in-depth or sophisticated approach as they got older.

For the first half of the year, we learned about U.S. government. The second half of the year we’re talking about comparative government, which I think is a really helpful class—to be able to see the different political structures that other countries have. We’re talking about China, Mexico, Russia, Great Britain, Nigeria, and Iran. And, I think it’s really cool. It’s a good idea. We have a unit for each one. We get groups and each group does a presentation.

I feel like each year...I don’t want to say we learn the same thing every year but it’s like you learn the same things but just more in-depth.

Elementary school [social studies] was like a baby version of middle school [social studies].

WWII is something we’ve always talked about. That’s why I think classes like sociology and psych are more interesting because we haven’t talked about them before.

Approaches to Teaching that High School Students Have Observed

High School Classrooms: Surroundings, Materials, Technology

According to these high schoolers, classrooms are adorned with posters of people and events such as Gandhi and Tiananmen Square. Flags and maps are common as are quotes such as “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” A couple students mentioned appreciating class surroundings that help them imagine the time they are studying—for example, looking across *Time Magazine* “Person of the Year” covers or other items that people at the time really saw such as a Rosie the Riveter poster or Soviet Union flag.

She creates this environment so we’re kind of encompassed by what we’re learning.

[Class has a] bulletin board with different Time Magazines with the Person of the Year on them. It’s kind of cool, you can kind of see... It’s like a tour [of the past]. When we study something the teacher will point it out [among the magazine covers].

Smart Boards were top-of-mind when high school students were asked about their surroundings. Like younger students, high schoolers said that a primary use of Smart Boards was to show videos. But, unlike the younger students, these groups said they also viewed Power Point content that accompanied lecture. One mentioned a teacher who uses current material from sources like the Daily Show and House of Cards, sharing it via the Smart Board. These older students described a greater range and more frequent use of technology—specifically, iPads, Chrome Books, and laptops. One group had a brief side discussion regarding the preference most had for laptops as more work-oriented and work-useful tools than iPads.

High School Classrooms: Teaching Approaches, Student Participation

High school students in these focus groups were quite mixed as to whether they mostly receive information or learn in a more involved way in their social studies classes. Even the ones who feel they receive information this year could always point to an APS social studies class that had operated differently. In addition, some classes seemed to be especially ready-made for student involvement, they thought—specifically classes that cover current events, types of government, and different religions.

One of my favorite things we did is that we all did presentations on different topics going on in the government. That required us to talk a lot about what was going on. Most of [the projects were on] amendments that were new and court cases. Like I did health care. The project forced us to look at both sides...another person did the chicken question [legality of raising backyard chickens]. That was the point. [The point] was that we would teach. But most days we are talking both with [teacher] and the students. And sometimes when a student is talking [teacher] will go sit with the students [who are listening].

We do share views, [although] we haven't really had a debate this year. We did an activity where we have to trade and not go into debt, buyers and sellers. We got to talk about it.

[Last year they used electronic voting and it tallied answers to a question the teacher posed and the class discussed the different opinions.] We read Mein Kampf. We talked about, "Do you agree with it? Do you think he's evil?"

This year there are a lot of lectures. I feel like, with lectures, there are two different kinds. There is the kind that is just a lecture and the kind where there is a lot of student interaction. My class this year does not have a lot of student interaction. When there is, it just like [the teacher] asks one question, it's not opinion-sharing and I don't think that's good.

When [teacher] speaks, he is really interesting. Everybody asks questions after he lectures.

Basically we just sit there and take notes. Last year we had a project where you present on the screen. [Another, responding] We never even touch the screen.

I feel like my teacher tries to take [an interactive] approach, but it just doesn't work it. She's so into what she's talking about. She'll ask questions like, "What do you know about the Philippines?" But if someone brings up an interesting point, I feel like she doesn't expand on that. I feel like there's this rush.

Still, a few cautioned that they either really preferred to simply receive information or felt that piece—lectures, note-taking, reading—was still critical to learning and being able to engage more participatory activities. Table 3 offers an additional sample of what students say they do in class.

This year it's more like we're just listening in. I prefer that. I'm pretty quiet. Other times, teachers will have us present things. It depends on the teacher.

Some of them have different techniques. My class now is totally hands on. And, yeah, I'm having fun but I don't feel like I'm learning as much as with note taking.

In psych I can take notes all day and it's not an issue. I love everything we're doing in that class. When it comes to APUSH, (AP U.S. History) no.

I like when you get information before an activity. You can apply it.

When they're teaching this year, you kind of just need to sit there and learn it. Because if you don't know, there isn't much else you can do besides someone just telling you.

Table 3. A sample of what high school students said one would see them doing in social studies class

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We have presentations and projects. When we take notes, she answers all of our questions.” • “I feel like in the class I have right now, we’re either taking a quiz, taking notes, or doing a project. When you come to class, it’s one of those three things. [Recently] we just completed a project. Then [we had] 3 days of notes after taking a quiz and there is another quiz on Friday. [Others agree. Ratio they said is mostly note taking, quizzes second (1+ per week). Typical pattern is 3 days of note taking, then a project.]” • Taking notes • “Normally, we walk in and sit down and he’ll typically just start teaching. Not a lot of people take notes, but it’s a good idea to. Sometimes he’ll give us worksheets or time to read. So, if he’s throwing a ton of material at us we can catch up.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sometimes we get in small groups and do worksheets or something. We don’t do that many hands on activities.” • “Psych teacher has very interactive methods of teaching (for example, memory test in which parts of class remembered same list using different memory techniques to see which worked best).” • “Sometimes we do the popsicle sticks. Everyone’s name is on a stick. She picks it out and if she calls your name you answer the question, so we’re kind of forced to give input.” • “We’re going through capitalism right now. He gave us sheets of paper. You have a business on your sheet and you stand where you would be in the capitalist system.”
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Echoing the middle school students, many high school students said that they especially like debates. A couple emphasized that they learn their position well when a debate is well-structured. Specifically, they do not want to look foolish representing, for example, a Supreme Court Justice’s views. So, they learn thoroughly before the debate. There was caution that sometimes debate does not work well, for example, if some students get stuck on one facet of a more complex issue. Likewise, many liked instances in which they learned different people’s perspectives on an issue.

I like gov because we have simulations and debates. We had to pretend we were in Parliament...you have to know what you’re talking about so you don’t make a fool of yourself in front of class....It’s a better way of learning things because you have to take time and do research on your own. It’s not like you just heard it but you have to really get it.

Debate was teaching us, but a lot of people wanted to focus on one single question.

I would rather talk about something that is interesting. If I’m taking notes on something that’s boring to me, I’m not learning. I’m just paraphrasing what is on the board and not learning it. If I debate it, it’s more applied to myself and I get a better grasp of it. [Moderator: Do you get those opportunities?] In APUSH not at all. It’s just notes. We’ve had one time this year where

we stood up and had an opportunity. Where in APWorld [AP World History] last year, that was all we did. It was rare that we would have an all-note-taking day.¹

[I like] Giving multiple perspectives—like we had to do something from the perspective of a Confederate soldier.

High School Classrooms: Standout Lessons and Perceived Level of Challenge

When it comes to what stands out, for the high school students, specific topics stand out to a greater degree than do individual lessons. Many said that certain topics stand out as fascinating or personally relevant.

Loved history in elementary and middle school. Loved learning about the Civil War. It's an interesting topic. Really American. But, also when that was happening that's when America started to advance and become like modern America.

Biggest topics I always recall when we go over it have always been WWI, WWII, Vietnam War, Holocaust, Great Depression. [They stick with me because] of personal investment. Except for the Holocaust, my family members have all been through all of that.

The Renaissance Era sticks out—the liberation of art and creativity, a new way of thinking, a time of new ways of thinking and discovering who you are. It's neat that that can happen.

With a few exceptions, the high school students said that their social studies course this year is not especially challenging although they feel they are learning much. When given a 1 to 10 scale where 10 is most challenging, most of the students—especially 9th and 10th graders—ranked their class below a 4. Exceptions, that is classes singled out as challenging, were AP History (lots of reading, taking notes, independent study), “AP Topics” (strictly participation-driven; “you really have to be involved;” write 4 in-class essays every two months, “torturous, but it’s probably the best class I’ve taken”), and “AP Gov” (“a lot of information”).

Students who perceived social studies as generally easy said it is so because the content is interesting to them. Still, one challenge of social studies is the volume of information to remember, most said.

[I rank my class] a 2. I like hearing about the stories. I'm personally interested.

*Soc[iology] is around a 3 maybe lower. We focus on current events, I love that. Gov is about 7-8 because it's **a lot** of information.*

¹ A second student speculated that world history class is somehow not as beholden to standardized testing because it is an elective so teachers maybe freer to do different kinds of class work. A third who moved to AUSVA from APUSH finds AUSVA more interactive because the teacher provides a lecture outline, which makes note taking less time consuming.

[I rank my class] a 1 on day-to-day basis, but the test is a 9.5 because every single little fact you've learned in two weeks is on the test so you have remember everything.

How High School Teachers Help Individuals

Help is readily available. Just one student said he felt students are on their own. But, even that student said the onus is on students to get help. The others pointed to study sessions that they could attend and teachers' willingness to help if approached by students. One specifically said he would meet his teacher once or twice weekly because he found it difficult to learn from the book.

[I do] not see the teacher helping too much. You're on your own. If you need help, come and get it.

In high school, you're expected to ask for help. Teachers have so many students. It's about students wanting to get the help.

How High School Teachers Help the Class

Likewise, overall help for the class was generally evident to these students. Several mentioned teachers pausing to allow some class time for class members to spend "catching up" on what they need to. A few mentioned that they rely on online resources such as an agenda and the teacher's website with links to useful content.

My teacher always makes you feel like it's not a dumb question. Encourages asking.

To help everybody, [teacher] will push quiz back, like if we have had too many snow days or if he can see by looking at the class that they don't understand.

The Role of Social Studies

High School Students on Why We Study Social Studies

Echoing middle and elementary school students, high school students said that we study social studies topics to help us keep from repeating past mistakes. But, these groups expanded their thinking greatly beyond that of their younger counterparts. Specifically, they spoke of the importance of knowing one's own past, and being knowledgeable well-prepared global citizens, and being able to understand others' perspectives.

It's important to know your history, especially so people don't repeat history.

Like if you live in the US it's always good to know what happened before you were born, why we are the way we are now. It's also always good to know about the world outside of the where we live.

We may be citizens of America, but we are also citizens of the world. And, you need to be aware of the people around you. Not everyone in this world is just confined to one area their entire life. Eventually we all are going to want to explore the world. So it's important to have some background information...the people, the culture, the language.

I think it's important to learn about where you come from, how we got to where we are right now. ...being appreciative of what has happened in the past. [Another agrees] Yes, recently we learned about Hiroshima and what happened when we dropped the bomb, like how people were dying. I think that affected some of the people in the class who used to say, "Well we'll just nuke this country."

[Social studies] tells me about difference between people and how they experience things, especially advanced classes—when you move on from looking only at these important people. "Ok, what about the women? There is this dominant group and there are these other groups." You learn how historical events impact them differently.

In discussing the value of social studies knowledge in everyday life, students focused on the usefulness of being knowledgeable when discussing news and current events with others. Understanding history, geography, and religions were singled out most often as useful day-to-day.

You can understand things in the world. Like all these wars in Africa are because we split it up this way. Why do you think they're happening? It's a chain reaction.

If someone is talking about a current event, and you know the history you can say that is why this is going on.

High school students were asked about reasons to take advanced courses and reasons not to. Generally students (regardless of whether they took AP classes or not) said when they or peers select AP they are motivated at least in part by looking "good" on college applications—both by showing they take advanced classes and by gaining an extra GPA point. Overall, students' enjoyment of social studies topics was also an important influence in deciding to take advanced courses. As noted previously, regardless of whether they chose AP, most of these students said they enjoy learning social studies topics. When it comes to choosing AP, many students who *had* taken AP classes said that they like these courses because other students in those classes are motivated learners and take class seriously. Younger students, especially 9th graders, pointed to their teachers' recommendations as their primary reason for taking a higher-level class. Two students in the groups had signed up for AP classes—motivated by college applications—and later switched to non-advanced classes because their grades suffered.

I've always just gotten really good flow in social studies. I can handle it. And, I think sometimes in AP you get to cover more stuff.

I took regular history last year because I had too many APs. I heard APUSH was really stressful. The class I was in I hated because nobody cared. It was easy and I didn't learn that much. Kind of like taking a middle school class. The teacher was nice and tried hard to get us engaged but generally people really didn't care. In an AP class people care more and are more invested.

If you like the subject and you think you could keep up, no reason not to be in a higher class.

Conclusions

- **Overall, students at all grade levels felt very positive about social studies as a whole.** Generally, they felt that the topics they study are interesting and valuable to learn.
- **All age levels have clearly absorbed the idea that one important purpose of social studies is to enable people to learn from the past in order to avoid repeating past mistakes.** Older students had expanded their thinking to include the importance of understanding the past in order to grasp the reasons for situations that exist today and the importance of being an informed global citizen
- **Students in all of the discussions gave many and wide-ranging examples of ways they learned that were participatory.**
- **Across the age groups, debates were very much enjoyed as were any activities that students felt gave them a window into the feelings or experiences of another person.**
- **Smart Boards were ubiquitous. The most prominent use of them, by far, was showing videos.** Videos, in particular, were singled out by all of the age groups as something they especially like about social studies—ranging from documentaries to song parodies that teach (e.g., “Too Late to Apologize: A Declaration”). Older students—high schoolers, especially—used more technology and more varied technology than younger students.
- **Also across age groups, the content learned in social studies was perceived as rather easy to understand and absorb. Yet, social studies classes are seen—even at the elementary level—as requiring a great volume of learning.** It is this volume that tends to make social studies classes challenging at times. For example, students mentioned needing to learn lots of dates, take lots of notes, and label from memory many countries and land forms on a map.
- **Complaints about note taking and about lecture used as a teaching approach came more from the 8th, 9th, and 10th graders than the older and younger students.** These complaints were clear, but were not pervasive across the groups. Some students said they preferred this style of working due to shyness or their wish to simply do their work and quietly move on. Others thought taking notes on lectures would help them prepare for lecture-based college courses. Some amount of lecture and note-taking was regarded by older students as necessary in order to know enough information to participate in activities.

- **Many students were conscious of their teacher's efforts to prepare them for their next educational step.** This view was not a strong theme, but was mentioned in several groups. Generally speaking, middle school teachers were thought to be teaching organization. And, teachers who require considerable note taking were thought by middle schoolers to be helping prepare them for high school and by high schoolers to be helping prepare them for college.
- **All students felt that help is available for any student who wants it, but middle and high school students emphasized that the student must seek the help.** In other words, individual help is student-initiated.
- **A vocal minority of the high school students felt that they learn the same material each year, but always going into more depth as appropriate for their age.** In some ways they did not mind because they indeed learned additional information or new views on previous knowledge. On the other hand, they thought their social studies learning felt repetitive.
- **All groups generally agreed that social studies is relevant to everyday life.** Younger students focused most on times when they visited places that had come up in social studies (e.g., Chesapeake Bay, China). Older students in these groups found learning about current events, types of government, and different religions to be especially useful and relevant to everyday life. They appreciated being able to understand and explain news events, for example.

APPENDIX A – DISCUSSION GUIDE ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS (APS)
Focus Group Research with Middle School Students
Regarding Social Studies Education

March-April 2014

Discussion time: 1 hour

1. WELCOME, PROCEDURES (10 minutes)

- First, **thank you** so much for your time and help.
- **Introduce** self (name, independent researcher not employed by APS).
- **Purpose** today is to talk about your experiences and thoughts related to social studies courses. Each year, APS evaluates different aspects of education to see how to serve students best. This year, one focus is social studies.
- **Open, honest opinions**—both positive and negative—are most important of all.
[Moderator will work through this a bit, and involve the group in: 1) agreeing everyone has different experiences/opinions and 2) buying into shared goal of being comfortable with their own view and everyone else’s.]
- Our hour together may even surprise you—it will be enjoyable. I have some questions you might not have ever thought about.
- I would like to **audiotape**, to help with my report. But, all answers are **confidential**. I will keep the tape. My report will not use any names, rather it will describe what “participants” said, and talk about the group as a whole. Is taping ok with you?
- **Some basics** to help make sure that I still learn all I need to from you.
 - You are here because you have experience taking social studies in Arlington. This conversation is all about experiences, which means there are no “right/wrong” answers and everyone will probably have something to say (no silent participants).
 - Talk one at a time, loudly enough for tape to pick up.
 - No side conversations, put opinions on the table for all of us to hear.
 - Many questions to get through. So, I apologize in advance if I give you that feeling like I’m “moving us along.”

2. PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS (5 minutes)

In a moment we'll do introductions, starting with [NAME] and going around the table. Tell us your **first name**, what **grade** you're in, and something memorable about **social studies classes you've taken** so far in [elem., middle, high²] school.

3. APPROACHES TO TEACHING (25 minutes)

Let's zero in on this year.

- a. [Elementary only] How often do you have social studies class in a normal week?
- b. What topics have you covered in social studies? [Easel list.³]

And, help me to imagine class day-to-day.

- a. Besides chairs/desks/tables, what kinds of items related to teaching and learning would I see? [If needed, prompt...]
 - What materials do you use in class to learn (e.g., textbooks; primary sources such as letters, diaries, documents, photos; literature or stories; videos; websites).
 - What technology do you use?
 - What is on the walls? On the shelves? On the computers? What handouts do you recall?
- b. Picture yourself in social studies class, what do you see yourself doing? [Explore beyond listening to teacher. Prompt, "Anything else?"]
- c. I think we can agree that one way to teach is by talking—standing in front of the room or walking around. Yes?⁴
 - When you think back on this year, has your teacher used *other* ways of teaching? [Get examples]
 - How about you—do students get to talk as a part of the class and learning (not, social chatting)? [If needed, prompt... What I'm wondering is whether you feel more like you 'receive' information or participate in a give-and-take. And, what gives you one or the other feeling?]

When you think back on this year, what social studies lesson stands out to you?

- a. And, most importantly, why?
- b. [If learning is not mentioned as a reason...] In terms of learning, how helpful to you or not was that lesson?

² Ask elementary schoolers about elementary school, middle schoolers about middle school, and high schoolers about high school.

³ The list is intended to help students effectively recall social studies through the year. Leave list up during group.

⁴ This question is just a "check box" question to acknowledge the lecture approach and help students move on, if they can think of other ways teachers help them to learn.

4. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL STUDIES (15 minutes)

Let's think more broadly, about all the social studies classes you have had in school. Let's add to our list. Including all of the grades you've been in, what topics do you recall learning about in social studies. [Easel list.]

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the most challenging 1 is the easiest, how challenging is this year's social studies class to you?⁵

- a. What makes it so?
- b. If you, or someone else, is struggling to learn or has grades that slip, how does the teacher help?
 - Let's think about this question another way. What ways the teacher help all students be successful. [Prompt for... "any tips or tricks or support?"... If needed, specific... "for example, a schedule on the board, word wall or other helpful tools on walls, study sessions?]

You've learned about social studies for a few years. As far as you know, what are the reasons people need to learn about social studies?

- a. Thinking back, what have you liked about social studies?
- b. And, what have you disliked?
- c. Are there particular social studies topics you have found "good to know" or useful?
- d. How does social studies information apply to everyday life, if it does?

[HS only. Confirm who has taken advanced SS course or is considering it, and who has/is not.]

- a. [For the "no's"] Tell me some of the reasons.
- b. [For the "yes's"] And, the flip side, what are the reasons you have decided to take or think you will decide to take advanced social studies.

5. CLOSING (5 minutes)

Our time is nearly up. Are there any final thoughts you would like to share?

Thank you so much for your time and all your help.

⁵ The 1-10 scale is meant to give students a way to express how challenging, but the "real" question is the "why" question, "What makes it so?"