

Pathways to Dropping Out

Technical Appendices A & B

A: Study Methodology

Overview of Study Design

In order to maximize the potential for candid conversations with the youth, we recruited and interviewed young people, ages 16-22, at two youth-serving organizations in King County. Most youth had already been receiving some sort of service from the organization, so the interview setting was familiar to them. With the assistance of these partnering agencies, our team of three conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a diverse set of 29 youth volunteers who had dropped out or had a history of serious truancy. We used a semi-structured interview protocol that focused on youths' school experiences and their perceptions of how they came to leave school. We chose this study method because it allowed us to capture detailed portraits of these struggling students' lives—a novel research approach to exploring the student disengagement process. After completing interviews, we used sophisticated data analysis software to code and analyze the digitally recorded and transcribed interviews.

Recruitment of Participants

In order to reach youth with a history of dropping out, the study employed a purposeful, site-based sampling approach, which emphasized in-depth understanding through the examination of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Initially, four sites providing education or education plus other services, were approached about participating in the project. All four sites serve significant numbers of youth who had dropped out previously, and two of these sites expressed immediate interest in being partnering sites with the study. We subsequently developed partnering agreements with these two sites, which served distinctly different populations of youth.

Partnering Sites

The first partnering site was an alternative school located in a suburban community in Puget Sound, which provided credit recovery services and regular classroom-based instruction leading to a high school diploma. This site primarily served area youth 15-19 years old who had dropped out or been expelled from nearby schools. Youth at this site were still interested in obtaining a high school diploma; most had dropped out for less than a year before re-enrolling. We completed three pilot interviews at this site and then returned a month later to complete 15 interviews included in the sample. The second partnering site was located in Seattle, served older out-of-school youth, and provided a broad range of services including education and employment and training services. All of the youth interviewed at this site were 18-22 years old, had been out of school for longer than a year, and were either enrolled in or were contemplating enrollment in a GED class at the time of the interview. We completed 14 interviews at this second site.

Participant Recruitment Process

The recruitment process at each site was tailored to fit the different organizational structures, processes and populations served. At the alternative school site, the project

team worked closely with a classroom teacher who volunteered to be the site liaison. Prior to the recruitment phase, the school notified parents of the school's participation in the study, explained the nature and purpose of the interviews and invited parents to contact the school with any questions. In addition, prior to commencing recruitment, a project team member met for over an hour with the liaison to go over consent materials and procedures and to answer the liaison's question. Subsequently, project team members then made 10-minute informational presentations on the study to students in each of the liaison teacher's three class periods, which included approximately 55 students. Students who thought they might be interested in participating were provided an information packet and a consent form at that time to take home and review with parents or guardians. The teacher liaison also kept additional packets and provided these to interested students who had either lost their materials or had been absent from class on the day of the presentations. The students returned their signed consent forms to the teacher for safekeeping until their interview day.

At the second site, a project team member made the same kind of informational presentation to a small group of nine youth enrolled in a training program and scheduled several youth for interviews the following week. The choice to recruit youth from the training program was based on the fact that it offered a more structured program, whose participants came together as a group on a regular basis. In addition, the project recruited other youth who were participating in a separate, less structured GED preparation program at the same site. A site liaison familiar with the study assisted in the recruitment process, informing these youth about the opportunity to participate in an interview. If a youth expressed an interest in learning more, the liaison connected the youth to project interviewers, who were on site several mornings and afternoons. Interested youth met with an interviewer one-on-one or in small groups of two or three to learn more about what participation entailed and to go over the consent form. Most signed the consent form at that time and were interviewed that same day.

The sites did not pressure or require youth to participate; only a small percentage of eligible youth at each site participated in the study. Almost all seemed genuinely interested in sharing their stories at length with interviewers, but these stories reflected the perceptions and experiences of those who were self-selected into the study, not all youth participants at the site.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria for study participants included three conditions:

- (1) Potential participants had to currently be 16 to 22 years old
- (2) Speak and understand English
- (3) Have previously dropped out of school or skipped significant blocks of school

Prior to being interviewed, all youth had to read and sign a consent form approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division. If youth had difficulty reading and understanding the consent form, an interviewer paraphrased the consent form provisions and answered questions with that youth, one-on-one. In addition, youth under 18 years had to obtain a parent's or guardian's consent.

Study Definition of “Dropped Out”

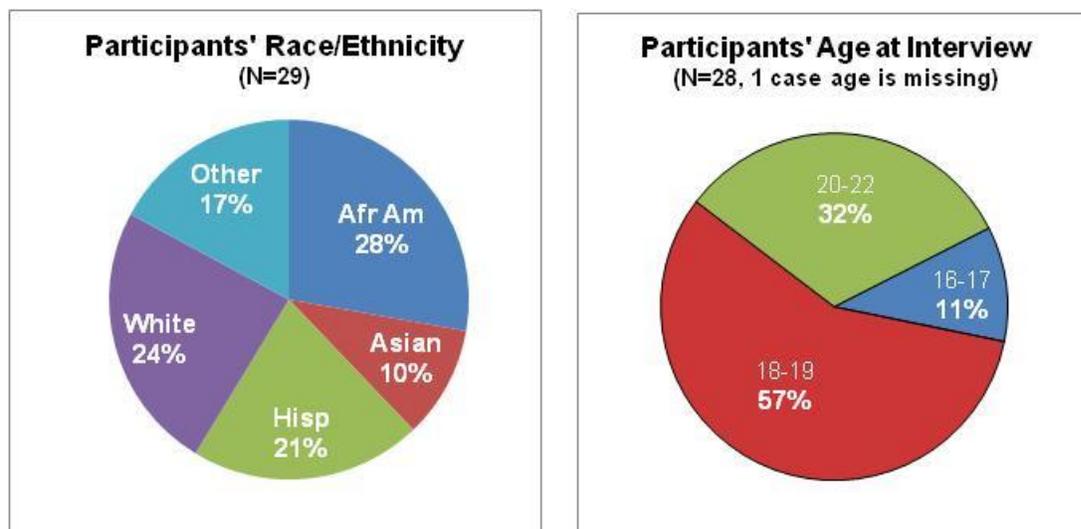
Since the measurement focus at the national and state levels has shifted to reporting whether a student has graduated “on time,” there is relatively little guidance in policy or in the research literature as to how best to define “dropping out.” We wanted to capture the perspectives of youth who had recently made the decision to quit, as well those who had been away from school for longer periods. We also wanted to talk with those who had dropped out and had returned at some point to learn more about their motivations behind this decision and how they experienced their return. Therefore, for this study, we considered anyone who elected to stay out of school for more than a month to have “dropped out.” This definition is somewhat arbitrary, but allowed us to have a chronological anchor for exploring the dropping out process with these different groups of students.

Incentives Offered

As part of the recruitment process, youth were offered a \$15 gift card from a local store such as Target, Fred Meyer or Walmart. Youth were given the gift card at the end of the interview.

Characteristics of Participants

The 29 study participants in this initial study were almost evenly split between male (49 percent) and female (51 percent). The figures below provide a profile of the group in terms of age and race/ethnicity.



As shown in the figures above, the study population was quite diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, with White, African American and Hispanic youth each constituting around a quarter of interviewees. The category labeled “other” included three Native American students (seven percent), as well as students who considered themselves to be of mixed or other ethnic/racial heritage (10 percent). However, the study population was not equally distributed in terms of age at interview. Participants were overwhelming 18 years or older. This distribution is due partly to the characteristics of the dropout

population in general. The largest proportion drop out after the first or second year of high school (usually 9th and 10th grade) and many do not re-engage immediately with alternative educational services, such as a credit recovery or GED program. Therefore, at participating sites, there were likely relatively fewer eligible youth who fell into the 16-17 year old age bracket at the time we made recruitment presentations at the sites. Also, 16 and 17-year-old youth had to obtain parental consent to be interviewed, and this requirement appeared to be a significant barrier to younger students participating in the study. Not only did some youth forget to obtain parental consent, but others did not currently live with a legal parent or guardian and therefore were unable to fulfill the parental consent requirement. This was particularly true at the second site, which served a high proportion of youth who were homeless, runaways or estranged from their parents/guardians.

Other Participant Characteristics.

Virtually all youth participants claimed to have one or more commonly recognized personal or family-related risk factor associated with a broad range of problem behaviors, including delinquency, truancy and dropping out. Since the interview protocol did not directly query youth about personal or family issues, this kind of information only emerged if the youth chose to reveal personal details. Therefore the percentages indicated below likely *under-represent* the true degree of problems experienced by participants. Youth commonly reported having two or more of the characteristics listed below:

Characteristics of Interviewees, Initial Study (N=29)

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Mental Health Issues: Any self-reported mental health issue that interfered with school attendance, behavior, academics, or social aspects of school.	7	24%
Removal from home/foster care: Report of time spent in foster care, including relative care, any kind of temporary or long-term removal from home.	7	24%
Gang member/serious delinquency: Admits to gang affiliation or to committing repeated minor offenses, such as shoplifting or minor assault, or more serious, like robbery, assault, breaking and entering.	8	28%
History of homelessness: If on the streets, at friends or temporary shelter with family at any point while school-age (through 19) or in school	9	31%
SPED or early learning issues: If indicates had an IEP plan, was in special classes or received school-based tutoring because of a learning problem.	11	38%
Significant or early AOD use: Engaged in an ongoing pattern of use of illegal/prescription drugs or alcohol prior to high school, as opposed to more casual experimentation or use that the youth saw as problematic, interfering with school, friendships, family, or if they describe daily use at any point while in school.	16	55%
Serious behavioral issues: Repeated minor disciplinary problems (usually in elementary/middle) or if suspended/expelled for more serious behaviors, such as disrupting class, threatening others and fighting.	20	69%

As reported by the youth, those from immigrant families constituted 28 percent and those raised by a single parent made up 62 percent of the sample.

Non-Representative Aspects of the Sample

Although racially and ethnically diverse, the sample was not representative of the statewide population of youth who had dropped out. For example, it contained a higher proportion of young women than is found in the statewide population of youth who leave school before graduating. Other issues with the sample are discussed later below under *data limitations*. In 2013 the project will collect an additional 30 oral histories from three or more new partnering sites in Western Washington, including at least two sites serving rural youth. By adding these new sites, the expanded sample will be more representative of the dropout population of youth in the western portion of the state.

Major Research Questions

Below are the major research questions we planned to address in the initial study:

- How have dropout youth experienced their elementary, middle and high school settings? What salient patterns or commonalities emerge across individual histories in terms of initiating events and tipping points?
- How have classroom interactions shaped the individual student's identity as a learner? What specific kinds of interactions do students point to as nurturing or failing to nurture their sense of self-efficacy as a learner?
- What specific institutional characteristics do youth perceive to have been most influential in encouraging/discouraging their engagement in school and commitment to graduate?
- How have learning difficulties and school responses to those difficulties impacted student attitudes and behaviors?
- What specific actions can schools and individual classroom teachers take to divert paths toward disengagement and dropping out?

Narrative Inquiry Method

We chose to use a qualitative approach that builds on existing research, articulates an *a priori* conceptual framework and identifies critical areas of inquiry. We utilized a narrative inquiry perspective that emphasizes analyzing and presenting data in a manner that conveys the story of phenomena and participants in context (Chase, 2005). This perspective is important to understanding people and events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); narratives provide coherence to qualitative data and play a central role in communicating with others (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). This narrative inquiry was structured using case study methodology (Yin, 2003), exploring multiple cases across a range of settings. Semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) of truant and dropout youth allowed for in-depth examination of themes within and across cases and promoted an informal and conversation-like atmosphere for participants.

The Interview

The semi-structured interview protocol specified general content areas to be investigated and provided sample probes for each area, but interviewers had the

flexibility and freedom to improvise follow-up questions and jointly construct and clarify meaning through layered exchanges with the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mishler, 1986). A copy of the interview protocol is contained in **Appendix B** of the report. After the first several interviews were completed, we made minor revisions to the protocol, such as adding a new probe or changing the wording of a probe, but the general content areas covered in the protocol remained the same across all interviews.

Three researchers who were experienced interviewers conducted the individual interviews and debriefed with each other after completing interviewing sessions. The confidential interview took place at the site with which the individual youth was affiliated and was digitally recorded, with the youth's permission. Project team members worked with site liaisons to identify appropriate interviewing rooms ahead of time. Rooms were required to be on site and afford auditory privacy so that interviewees were assured that their conversation could not be overheard by others. In interviewing rooms that contained windows, interviewees were seated with their backs to the windows or away from windows in order to minimize visual distractions from passers-by in hallways.

With few exceptions, interviewees were able to understand and respond to the interview questions posed and carry on in-depth conversations about their:

- Early school experiences
- The circumstances and events surrounding their disengagement from school
- Their truant behavior and adult responses to that behavior
- The tipping points they believed led to their decision to drop out

School Rating Exercise

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher first asked the youth to fill out a colorful and easy-to-read "school rating form." The interviewees rated their overall experience of school across five different time periods: *early elementary* (K-2nd grade), *late elementary* (3rd-5th grade), *middle school* (6th-8th grade), *early high school* (9th-10th grade) and *late high school* (11th-12th grade). Youth generally had few problems providing a global rating on a five-point favorability scale for each of the time periods they attended school. This rating exercise helped youth reflect on their educational trajectory and appeared to prime them for substantive discussions about their experiences in each time period. Many youth kept the rating sheet in front of them during the interview and periodically referenced it in their conversations with us.

Interview Length

The average taped portion of the interview ran about 46 minutes in length. The non-taped introduction and question and answer portion of the interview ran about five minutes, making the average total interview time about 51 minutes. Two out of the 29 interviews were exceptionally short, running about 28 minutes in total length; all other interviews were over 35 minutes and more than half were 50-75 minutes in total length.

Data Analysis

Youth interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word format by a professional transcription company and uploaded into *Dedoose*, a web-based qualitative analysis

software program. The software supported the development of a complex coding system whose features included frequent double and triple coding of interview segments, as well as hierarchical coding. Using an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the research team identified 11 major theme-based code categories containing 54 sub-categories. Coding choices were partially guided by a priori themes of importance derived from prior research, but the process was also open to unanticipated categories of meaning emerging from the narratives. Once the coding categories and hierarchy were finalized, we applied coded “tags” to the transcribed content of every interview, using Dedoose’s automated coding function. The assignment of tags then permitted multiple types of automated analyses of the content, including, word and theme searches, frequency counts, and cross tabulations. An iterative process of analysis led to the development of theoretical propositions (Miles & Huberman, 1994) exploring themes that had explanatory value.

Strengths and Limitations of the Data

The narrative inquiry approach used in this study taps an often neglected perspective—that of struggling and disengaged students. The systematic collection of detailed oral histories expands upon the very few survey and focus group studies that have explored issues of student disengagement in the past two decades. The interview data provide a unique portrait of the disengagement process from the point of view of the youth who experienced this process first hand. Interviewees’ stories about dropping out do not necessarily reflect reality as their parents or teachers would describe it. However, these perceptions are important because they help to elucidate the cognitions, motivations and decision-making that lie behind their school behaviors. The major strengths of this approach include:

- *An in-depth and systematic interviewing process that promoted student reflection and exploration of their dropping out process:* Almost all the interviewees appeared to take the challenge of examining their past experiences and state of mind seriously. The length and candor of the interviews are indicators of their commitment to understanding and explaining their actions.
- *A sample that reflected diverse participant backgrounds:* The two study sites from which the sample was drawn served different types of youth with different educational trajectories. One site served younger youth who had dropped out but were currently committed to obtaining a high school diploma; the other site served older youth who were commencing or on a pathway to completing a GED program. Both sites contributed to a sample that was highly diverse in terms of racial/ethnic background.
- *Analysis based on large number of individual cases:* For a qualitative study of this kind, we had a sizeable number of cases on which to base the analysis. The larger number of cases allowed us to see interesting patterns across subpopulations (e.g., pregnant teens) that might not have emerged with a smaller sample. Moreover, it increased our confidence in the meaningfulness of themes that emerged across numerous cases. In some instances, similar school experiences were reported by youth in case after case, increasing our confidence in the veracity, as well as in the significance of their reports.

- *Sophisticated software allowed for “quantification” of qualitative data:* We derived study findings through the application of a sophisticated system of hierarchical coding and automated analyses supported by the software used. Automation allowed us to identify and quantify major themes and attributes of participants and make judgments about the relative strength and importance of different themes.
- *Placement of findings within a larger research framework:* Many of the study findings complement, explain or expand upon previous, largely quantitative research. For example, correlative studies have long shown a strong connection between failure of a core subject in 9th grade and dropping out. From analysis of interviews we identified common patterns and experiences leading up to the 9th grade course failure.

Data Limitations

This is an exploratory study based on a small, non-random sample of youth who elected to participate when presented with the opportunity. Findings presented represent the youth’s *perceptions* of their school experiences. We did not have access to the youth’s individual school records and, therefore, had no means to verify the information they provided us on attendance, discipline and academic performance. Sometimes, it was obvious to the interviewer that the youth was providing an incomplete and/or inaccurate account. For example, occasionally youth provided contradictory information about their school performance, behavior or social experiences. In other instances, youth said they could not recall key details of an event or time period, so their personal histories contained certain gaps, as well as some contradictions. Other limitations of the data included the following:

- *Non-representative sample:* We did not establish recruitment quotas based on race, sex or age. As explained earlier, there were barriers to recruiting younger interviewees because of the parental consent requirement. As a result, the sample contained relatively few 16 and 17-year-old interviewees who had dropped out and re-engaged in an educational setting. In addition, for unknown reasons, young women were overrepresented in the study sample. Historically, both nationally and across the state, almost twice as many young men drop out as young women. However, the sample was nearly evenly split between male and female participants. Finally, because this initial study utilized urban and suburban partnering sites to recruit participants, participants largely were youth who had attended nearby urban and suburban schools in the Puget Sound area of the state prior to dropping out. The experiences of rural youth who drop out may differ from those of the urban and suburban youth included in the study.¹
- *Reliance on fading memory:* Many youth had a difficult time recalling specific events or experiences related to their elementary school years, particularly early

¹ In an effort to further expand and diversify the study sample, the *Washington Student Oral Histories Project* completed a second round of interviewing in May 2013, which included three new Western Washington sites, two of which served primarily rural and small town youth. The Project will conduct a new study using this expanded sample; preliminary results are expected by early 2014.

elementary. For example, a number could not remember much about learning to read or about other learning activities. This inability to recall specifics from the elementary time period may have boosted their positive impressions of this time period, which appeared to be largely based on general memories of having a good time socially. In contrast, youth may have had clearer recollections of negative experiences (both social and academic) in middle and high school. In addition, those who were currently 21 or 22 years old and recalling their school experiences might not remember events as clearly as those who were currently 16 or 17.

- *Differing abilities to reflect upon and make sense of experiences:* Depending on age, gender and other personal factors, youth demonstrated varying levels of reflection and self-insight. Often those who were older and had some distance on their experiences appeared to delve more deeply into their own motivations and behaviors and were better able to articulate causal factors leading to their disengagement from school and subsequent truancy and dropping out.

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B: Interview Protocol and School Rating Chart

Youth Interview Protocol Components: Initial Probes

This is a condensed version of the semi-structured interview protocol used in the study described in Appendix A. Interviewers frequently employed relevant probes (questions) following an interviewee's initial response to a question in order to clarify or elicit additional information.

Ice Breakers

How old are you now?

How long have you been here at [current school or program]?

Area 1: Opening Questions

1. What are some of your earliest memories of school—say in kindergarten or first grade?
2. In general, did you look forward to going to school in those first years?

Area 2. Charting School Experiences

Explanation: To help our discussion I'd like to show you this school rating chart [show chart], which asks you to rate your school experiences over time. It combines grade levels into five time periods, starting with early elementary years. Here are the time periods shown across the top (*point—and add comment about time periods that don't apply to the particular individual*). Each has a rating scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest rating and 5 the highest. If you had mostly very positive school experiences during a particular time period, you would give a top rating of 4 or 5. If you had a lot of negative school experiences during a particular block of time, you might give it a low rating of a 1 or a 2. And if the time period was a mix of both positive and negative, you might give it a rating in the middle. [*Pointing on chart accompanies explanation*]

1. So when you think about these different times in school, which one stand outs as overall being the most positive time for you in school?
2. If you had to rate your overall school experiences during this time, what answer would you circle?
3. Now, how about a time period that stands out in your mind for the opposite reason: your experiences in school were generally NOT that positive. How would you rate that time overall on the chart? [Is this making sense to you? Good.]
4. Could you take a moment to think about the other time periods that you were in school and then give them a rating? As we go along, you are free to make any changes in the ratings you want.
5. What do you think about the ratings you have given? Do you notice anything particular about your ratings over time?

Area 3A. High Point: [Using chart responses]

1. Tell me about (*time period marked highest*). What led you to rate it as you did?
2. **Teacher:** Was there a particular teacher you especially liked? Tell me about the teacher and why you liked being in his or her class
3. **Curriculum:** Do you recall particular subjects or classroom activities that you especially liked? Tell me some more about what you liked and why.

4. **Academic:** How were you doing academically at this time?
5. **Sense of self efficacy:** Do you remember how you felt about your abilities to do reading, math and other assignments?
6. **Reading:** When you think about reading during this time, what stands out?
7. **Theory of Intelligence:** Some people believe that a person does well in school because they are born smart. Others believe that a person does well in school because they work hard. During (the period being discussed) what did you believe about your school abilities?
8. **Social interactions:** What was school like for you socially at that time?
9. **Attendance:** [ask only if time period occurs after 5th grade]. During this time, how regularly were you coming to school?

Area 3B. Low Point: [Using chart responses]

1. Now I'd like to hear about (time period marked the lowest). What was going on at school at that time?
2. **Academic:** How were you doing academically during this time period?
3. **Learning:** We've talked a little about academic challenges. Tell me more about any learning difficulties you experienced with reading, math or other skill areas.
4. **Learning:** How did the school and your parents respond to this problem?
5. **Academic:** How did these learning challenges with (reading/math/other) influence you as a student?
6. **Reading:** When you think about reading during this time, what stands out?
7. **Teachers:** What were your relationships like with teachers at this point?
8. **Sense of self as learner:** Do you remember how you felt at this point about your own abilities to do the required school work?
9. **Attendance:** During this time, how often were you coming to school?
10. **Social:** What was school like for you socially?

Area 4. Dropping Out/Truancy Process

1. **Problem initiation:** When did you first start having difficulties at school?
2. **Initiating points:** I'd like to understand more about what made you start to not like being in school. Tell me about any [other] experiences that you think may have negatively influenced your feelings about school during ____.
3. **Sense of self as learner:** [if not already pinpointed earlier] Did you have any classroom experiences that may have affected your confidence in yourself as a learner? Tell me about that.
4. **Learning:** Currently, what do you see as your strengths or your weaknesses as a reader?
5. **Reactions/ Interventions:** When you were starting to have troubles with [attendance/ academics/teacher, etc], how did your parents/guardians react to this situation? How did the school react?
6. **Confirming point of dropping out:** (Using the visual chart) Was there a time you stopped going to school altogether? When was that? How long were you completely out of school?

7. **Development of truancy pattern:** Tell me more about your decision-making process: Did you consciously decide to stop going to school [regularly] or was it a gradual process of missing more and more school?
8. **Influences/ Tipping Points:** What things influenced your decision to stop coming to school [regularly]?
9. **Aspirations:** So how did you see your future at that point— did think you would return to school at some point?
10. **Parents' reaction:** At the time, how did your parents/guardians react to your school decisions?
11. **School reaction:** [If not already covered] How did the school react to your dropping out/ not showing up regularly?
12. **Student response:** What affect did these attempts by others to keep you coming to school have on you?
13. **Hindsight thoughts:** [If not already covered] Thinking back on that time, what, if anything, could others have done to help you stick with school?
14. **Return to school:** [If not covered above] Did you try going back to your original school? Another school? When was this? How did that work out?
15. **Reading:** Tell me about a book you are reading now or have read recently.
16. **Reading:** How much do you think you will use your reading skills in the future, say for work or for school?

FINAL Q: This last question is completely voluntary: We've been asked to ask each participant we talk with the following question: Which of the following do you consider yourself:

African American Asian American Hispanic Native American White Other

My School Ratings:

How would you rate your school experiences?

	Early Elementary [K-2 nd grade]	Late Elementary [3 rd -5th grade]	Middle School [6 th -8th grade]	Early High School [9th-10th]	Late High School [11 th -12th]
Liked a Lot	5	5	5	5	5
↑	4	4	4	4	4
↑	3	3	3	3	3
↑	2	2	2	2	2
Disliked a Lot	1	1	1	1	1
	Early Elementary [K-2 nd grade]	Late Elementary [3 rd -5th grade]	Middle School [6 th -8th grade]	Early High School [9th-10th]	Late High School [11 th -12th]