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ABSTRACT

In 1994 the Ohio State Legislature established Venture Capital to support school restructuring. The Venture Capital school initiative is a concept borrowed from the business community in which the corporate entity provides risk capital to parts of the organization to stimulate creative ideas and to provide opportunities for local entities to try out these ideas. Individual Ohio schools are eligible to receive a yearly award of $25,000 for up to 5 years. The Ohio State Department of Education evaluated Venture Capital proposals on the basis on the following nine criteria: focus on learning, improvement strategies aimed at reaching all students, expanded teacher roles, community readiness, community involvement, systematic plans, integrated strategies, supportive policies and practices, and resource leverage. This paper presents findings of a study that assessed how well the Venture Capital schools' report plans aligned with the elements for success and the schools' progress toward the initiatives. Findings are based on results of a 1996 survey of approximately 8,400 staff and planning team members from 510 of the 561 Venture Capital schools in operation. The findings suggest that the Venture Capital initiative has met with mixed success to date. Principals and teachers were highly involved in developing improvements; however, the respondents revealed that they assigned low priority to aligning school plans with the nine Venture Capital criteria. Although some sites were beginning to realize a measure of success, principals and teachers had not been prepared to assume leadership roles required of them. Planning team and staff members need the support of infrastructure, technology, and skilled professionals to help them understand and apply the nine elements to their reform efforts. Eight figures are included. (LMI)

# Venture Capital Initiative: Ohio's School Improvement Effort

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# Venture Capital Initiative:

# Ohio's School Improvement Effort

## Introduction

Public schools in the United States have gone through a long history of educational reform. Recently, educational reformers have started to examine the internal structure of the school because the public school has been recognized as a system and a culture (Fullan, 1993). Thus, recent public school reform efforts have concentrated on restructuring the institution.

In 1994 in the state of Ohio, the state legislature initiated Venture Capital to support school restructuring. The state of Ohio's commitment to school renewal was stated as:

> School improvement can only be achieved if there is a willingness to fundamentally restructure Ohio's education system. School improvement must focus on the development and interrelationships of all the main components of the system simultaneously - teaching and learning, assessment, governance, organization, and professional development. It must also focus on the culture of the system. (Ohio Department of Education, July, 1993, p. 6)

The Venture Capital School initiative is a concept borrowed from the business community where the corporate entity provides risk capital to parts of the organization to stimulate new thinking, creative ideas and opportunity for local entities to propose and try out these ideas. This is initiated with the full realization that many of these ventures may not pay-off, but that a subset of these efforts will produce exciting and powerful results which may move the organization forward at an accelerated rate. Support for this initiative was designed to come through support to individual school buildings in the form of a yearly $ 25,000 award for up to 5 years. These awards would be available on a competitive basis to individual schools who demonstrated a commitment of at least 80% of the teaching staff, central office and board support for the initiative. Local school districts were asked to nominate schools to apply for

Venture Capital awards which they believed were poised to make substantial restructuring efforts. Following the district's nomination, schools were expected to submit proposals describing the nature of their proposed restructuring. Between October, 1994 and March, 1996, almost 2500 proposals were reviewed and 307 schools were funded in 1994. Later, 40 more were funded in Spring, 1995, 105 more in July, 1995, and, 109 more in Autumn of 1996. Presently, there are 561 Venture Schools in Ohio. This represents more than 15% of all public schools in the state.

Purpose

The State Department of Education provided the "eight elements of good planning" (later edited to nine) as the evaluative criteria for Venture Capital proposals. These elements were extracted from the research literature and reflect the planning needed to undergird successful restructuring efforts. These elements are :

1. Focus on Learning -- School improvement strategies focus on learning.
2. Reaching All Students -- Improvement strategies assure that all students learn.
3. Expanded Teacher Roles -- Teachers serve expanded roles in planning and implementing change.
4. Community Readiness -- Community members (including school personnel and officials as well as other citizens) are ready and willing to develop and implement new school improvement ideas and to anticipate change and reshape thinking and behavior.
5. Community Involvement -- Community agencies and groups are thoughtfully and purposefully involved.
6. Systematic Plans -- Planned changes are systemic, significant, and wide-ranging.
7. Integrated Strategies -- School improvement strategies are integrated into the school's structure and culture.
8. Supportive policies and practices -- Policies and practices contribute to the success of all students.

9. Resource Leverage -- School improvement plans leverage existing dollars and resources and identify new monies and resources (if necessary) to support institutionalizing of improved practice. (Ohio Department of Education, 1993, 1995; Venture Capital Assessment Team, 1995).

Total Planning Score -- Composite of all nine planning elements. This score is used an an overall index of planning status for each funded site.

Though the planning elements do not guarantee success, these factors were considered essential to continuous school improvement (Ohio Department of Education, 1993). Though the schools are doing better than one would believe from reading the daily news, both educators and the public feel that higher levels of learning are necessary for all students. Recognizing that many top-down, policy-driven reform efforts have yielded less-than-desirable results, the Ohio general Assembly and State Board of Education initiated Venture capital in 1993 (Wayson & Ishida, 1996). The state was wagering that local planners, building principals and classroom teachers know and understand the problems facing education in their schools and that they have the skills, knowledge and will to address and solve these problems. Unlike all other states, they are betting that the problems confronting education can best be solved at the local building level. By focusing the initiative at the building level the state leadership began the movement into unchartered waters and to some observers this "venture" was likened to "building the boat while you are crossing the ocean". The purpose of this paper is to assess how well the Venture Capital schools report having planned around these elements for success and how well the initiative is progressing.

Data Source and Analyses

Sample: The Venture initiative is now in its third full year of operation, with a new cohort of schools being added each year. The first cohort consists of 307 schools, the second

cohort consists of 145 schools and the most recent cohort consists of 109 schools. One more cohort of Venture Schools will be funded in Autumn 1997 to bring the total group up to 700 (approximately 20% of all public schools in Ohio). Beginning in Winter 1995 and repeated in Autumn 1995 and Autumn 1996, a mail survey requested data from 15 staff members and 10 parents associated with each of the funded initiatives. The local school contact selected the respondents; each respondent was provided with a copy of the instrument, the optical scan sheet and a self-addressed, stamped envelop in which to place the completed scan sheet and drop the envelop in the mail. This aspect of the evaluation design focused on the status and progress on the planning elements. As new cohorts came on-board, they began to participate in the data collection and data sharing process resulting in both a longitudinal as well as a cross-sectional database of information. The Winter 1995 data set has responses from more than 3000 staff members from approximately 270 of the 307 funded sites. The Autumn 1995 data set has more than 4500 responses from building staff and approximately 1800 parents from about 417 of the 452 funded schools. The Autumn 1996 data set has more than 5500 responses from building staff members and more than 2000 responses from parents from 510 of the 561 funded sites. In addition to the survey data, members of the assessment team, who are experienced and knowledgeable about schools and school reform, conducting this study have participated in full day visits to a random sample of 65 of the funded schools (10% of population) at least twice each year. Material from the visitor reports will not be presented in this report, except to indicate that visitor ratings of each schools' status on the 9 planning elements closely parallels the self-report data provided by the 65 randomly selected schools, except that the visitors rating are approximately one scale point lower than the ratings provided by respondents at the local site. Further, data from the random sample of schools closely approximates the data from the entire

set of responses from all schools. Thus, we believe that the responses of those in the schools provide a reasonably accurate picture of local status on the planning elements, albeit with a slight positive bias. When the visitors indicate that the school is strong (or weak) with respect to a given planning element, the school data also tends to reflect this perception.

Instrument: *The School Improvement Inventory, Part I* was developed to assess how well Venture schools have planned around the planning elements contained in the original document describing the Venture initiative. This is a survey instrument which contains 50 items. The first 37 items assess current status on the 9 planning elements; the instrument yields a subscale as well as individual items on each element, plus a total score across all planning elements. The major source of data for this paper is responses to this Inventory. When the survey was conducted for the first time in the Winter of 1995, the Inventory consisted of 100 items: the first 50 items were designed to assess the respondents' perception of how the initiative was progressing at the time the survey was conducted; the next 50 items were the same as the first 50 items, but they were intended to assess the respondents' perception of the initiative at the time the application was submitted. The autumn 1995 and 1996 Inventories, however, consisted of the original 50 items. The Inventory produces subscales, 9 of which are related to the nine elements of effective planning for school improvement. Each item has a 6-point scale, ranging from "Poor (1)" to "Truly Exceptional (6)." The scale was designed so that schools had "room to grow" over the life of the funding period and that to receive a score of 6 on the scale, the school had to be functioning at a level that would produce major restructuring in the school with the likelihood that the change would be institutionalized and endure substantially beyond the life of the funding cycle.

Data Analyses: This report is primarily based on the data collected from approximately 8400 planning team and staff members from 510 Venture Capital schools during the Autumn of 1996 (and summarized information from the previous two years of data). Data were analyzed by generating descriptive information on characteristics of the individual and school level responses. This was followed by generating descriptive data on items and subscales. Following the descriptive analyses, relevant demographic variables were used to look for differences across these independent variables (Demographic Category, Building level-elementary, middle and high school, Funding year, Region of state, and Educational Change Model) with respect to dependent variables (9 subscales and total planning element score ). Subscales were also analyzed using analysis of variance to identify the progress across the different response times. The unit of analysis was sometimes considered the individual and sometimes was the local school site. There were minimal differences found between these two types of analyses and the findings presented in this paper are based on site level analyses.

Findings

Figures 1-4 present data on the 561 funded sites. The sites were funded based upon merit of the application. No considerations in funding were made for region of the state, level of school building, demography of the school community or the change model proposed by the local site. Approximately 60% of the funded sites are elementary buildings, with about 16% middle and 25% high schools. The competitively funded sites tend to reflect population centers in the state with 18% funded in central Ohio (Columbus area), 17 % funded in northeast Ohio (Cleveland area) and 14% funded in southwest Ohio (Cincinnati area) with all other parts of the state also represented. The choice of educational change models proposed by the local sites also reflects a wide diversity; almost 30% of the selected sites proposed using an Effective Schools

process and about 11% decided to use their own custom designed process (about 17% did not specify a change model). The request for proposals (RFP) proffered by the state identified several possible models, but indicated that it was not endorsing any specific change model and that local sites could proceed according to their own choice. The Effective Schools process has been fairly active in Ohio and probably accounts for the relatively high proportion of funded Venture sites. All the models identified by the state in their RFP were chosen by several of the respondents and all proposed change models including some not identified by the state were selected, not on the basis of the model, but in open competition with all other applications. Approximately one in every four applications has been selected for funding in each successive round. As reflected in Figure 4, each of the 8 demographic categories are well represented among the funded sites. Major urban sites comprise almost one-fifth of all funded sites. Again, the funding pattern tends to reflect population centers of the state, but also reflects all levels of the state's demographic categories.

Using the data from the Part I Inventory, a mean score was used as an index of progress on each item, subscale and total planning score. Figures 5 -7 present information on the subscales and total planning score. Figure 5 presents data by cohort. Cohort 1, 2 and 3 represent the three primary dates of funding of Venture sites, with cohort three being funded in Autumn 1996. The figure provides the mean of each cohort on each of the 9 planning elements and the total planning composite (in the scale of the item scores) using the data from the 510 responding sites in Autumn 1996. For cohort 3, this represents baseline data; for cohort 2 this represents the measurement of these sites for the second time; and for cohort 3 this represents the measurement of these sites for the third time. Visual inspection demonstrates three things. First, cohorts 1 and 2 are very similar with cohort 1 usually being slightly higher than cohort 2 and both being

somewhat higher than cohort 3 (as expected). Second, there are marked differences among the perceived achievement status across the nine elements. Perceived status on three of the elements (5, 8 and 9) are strikingly lower than the other planning elements. These elements (Community Involvement, Supportive Policies and Practices, and Resource Leverage) are particularly troubling as not only are the scores relatively lower than those of the other planning elements, they are critical elements for the local initiative if the practices which they develop are to become a regular part of the school culture (institutionalized). Without these elements in place the chances of real, lasting change are substantially diminished. Third, the scores on each planning element hover around the score of 4 on the 6 point scale. While this is the third year of implementation for the first cohort and just the baseline for the third cohort, these scores will need to begin to approach the high point on the scale if the local sites are to realize a lasting and changed educational environment. This is even more troubling when one reflects on the ratings supplied by members of the visiting team which are approximately one full point lower than those provided by the respondents from each local site. This small positive bias is likely to stem from the fact the local school contact selected the building staff and parents who responded.

Figure 6 uses the same 1996 Part I data set and presents the 9 subscales and total planning composite scores for each of the respective respondent groups (staff, parents and students on the building planning team). While the figure presents data on students, there were only 42 students (above grade 5) who responded to the survey and caution must be exercised in interpreting this part of the data set. This probably also reflects the fact that very few students are part of building level planning teams. Visually inspecting the means across subscales reveals a similar pattern conveyed by the cohort data, i.e., differences across subscales. In addition, these data suggest that the perceptions of staff, parents and students are quite similar, and with minor exceptions,

staff responses are slightly lower than the responses of parents (again, probably explained by a potential selection bias).

Figure 7 presents the data on the 9 subscales and total composite of the planning elements (titled SNEW) across the different data collection points thus providing a longitudinal picture of the status and change. The data presented at each time point includes all respondents in each data set. The data presented for 1994 and Winter 1995 represent cohort 1, the Autumn 1995 data contain information from Cohorts 1 and 2, and, the Autumn 1996 data contain information from all three cohorts. Remembering the data presented by cohort in Figure 5, the differences by cohort begin to explain the relatively flat profile across time points with the exception of the 1994 data point (the least reliable data point). There appears to be the perception of slow positive growth on the planning elements. This is not nearly the kind of growth needed, particularly by those sites in the third year of implementation, in order to achieve and maintain real long-lasting systemic change. In those elements that are consistently rated at lower levels (Community Involvement, Supportive Policies and Practices, and Resource Leverage), the perceived status and rate of growth are particularly troubling.

Figure 8 presents the Part I Autumn 1996 data based on separating the 510 responding sites into quartiles based upon the mean total composite scores. These data are clearly based on self-perception of the local site respondents (and generally validated by the site visitors, but one point lower). There are striking differences between the mean scores of the 127 school sites in the upper quartile of scores compared with the mean scores of the 127 school sites in the lower quartile of schools on each of the planning elements. Whether these perceived differences among the quartile ranking of the sites will translate into real differences in school practices is a question for other aspects of the overall assessment design. Clearly there are differences in

perceived planning efforts within the funded sites. We are in the process of exploring if these differences are related to other aspects of the initiative. We believe that these differences are real differences, based upon the visitors reports. It is particularly interesting to see the perceived level of planning in the lower quartile of schools on the three more difficult planning elements (Community Involvement, Supportive Policies and Practices, and Resource Leverage).

Comparing the current mean scores with those from the start of the funding period showed a positive movement on all subscales, indicating that the respondents reported that the nine elements of good planning have been slowly improving across most Venture Capital schools. The subscales reflecting the greatest development were Systematic Plans (6) and Integrated Strategies (7) followed closely by Focus on Learning (1), Reaching All Students (2) and Expanded Teacher Roles (3). The lowest-rated subscale planning element was Resource Leverage ( re-allocating existing resources to support successful new practices). The next least developed planning element was Supportive Policies and Practices.

When the subscale scores of each response time were compared across the different times, a significant improvement was found with regard to all nine planning elements. This is most directly attributed to the difference among cohort scores as well as the large difference between the 1994 data points and those after that time. Changes after the baseline measurement within cohort are positive, but in general, not significant.

The subscale mean scores were also compared across the 12 geographic regions of the state. Analysis of variance with Scheffe post-hoc comparison was performed on the scores of nine subscales to compare the status and progress among schools in each of the twelve regions of the state. The mean scores of each region were very similar among the regions and to the state as a whole. Similar analyses were conducted using Building level (elementary, middle and high

school), Cohort (first vs. second vs. third), Demographic Level (8 levels), and Model (12 models) with respect to the 9 subscales and total composite of the planning elements. No differences were found based on the proposed change model. The demographic variable yielded differences between the major urban sites (lower) and the remaining demographic levels (not surprising). The cohort contrasts reflected differences between baseline measurement and later measurements, but generally not across cohorts after the baseline measurement. As a group, the scores from the elementary level buildings were higher than those of the middle schools, which were in turn higher than the means of the high schools. However, clear exceptions to this rule were found with specific schools.

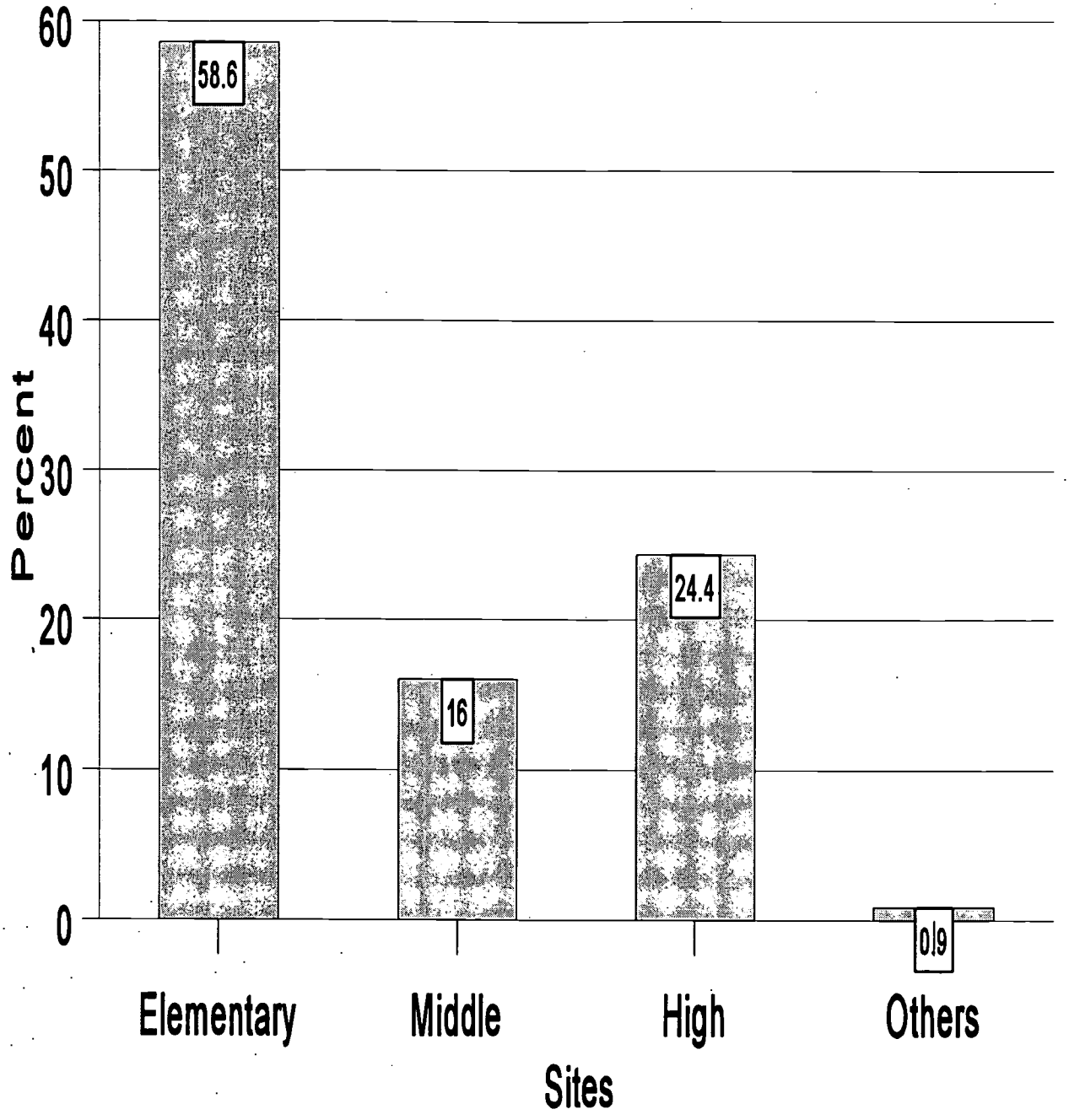
Visitors' ratings for the random sample were compared with self-ratings for all Venture Capital schools and self-ratings from the random sample. The visitors' ratings tended to be about one point lower than self-ratings on most planning elements, indicating that self-ratings are probably slightly positively biased. However, visitors' ratings on Resource Leverage were slightly higher than the self-ratings on that element. Perhaps the status on that element isn't as bleak as reflected in the scores, but clearly not at the level needed to successfully institutionalize the changing practices.

Conclusion

Venture Capital Schools reported a slight positive movement with regard to all nine elements of good planning. Principals and teachers are apparently highly involved in developing improvements. There were clear perceived differences among individual schools, that were in general confirmed by the external visitors. Respondents believed that improvement strategies focused on student's learning, assured the success of all students and were integrated into the school's structure and culture. However, the respondents revealed that they had low criteria for

improvements on the nine planning elements and had not experienced truly effective planning and integrated activities. Individual schools are taking the Venture challenge and making significant strides toward attaining long-lasting systemic change. However, many schools are struggling to achieve modest degrees of success. Some change is occurring. At this time the data are not yet in with respect to the fundamental question of whether or not these efforts will result in significant gains in student learning. So far the state's gamble on the capacity of the local personnel to produce significant change has resulted in mixed success. Clearly, principals and teachers have not been traditionally prepared to assume the leadership rolls required of them to make this venture a success. Nonetheless, some sites beginning to realize a measure of success in their efforts. Will we be smart enough and tenacious enough to continue to fund and monitor these initiatives so that we might gain significant payoffs from the successful Venture initiatives. An effort to help planning team and staff members understand and apply the elements is being made to promote more effective and significant school improvement. One of the largest problems in this large scale initiative is the limitation of the existing infrastructure to undergird and provide sound, experienced technical assistants to help support and provide strong leadership to this substantial cadre of schools attempting to restructure their basic educational programs...such knowledgeable and skilled professionals are few and far between (but we seem to have no end of individual entrepreneurs willing to offer their wares to schools in what is cynically referred to as the "one-day traveling Jesus shows").

Figure 1. **Percent of Sites by School Type Based on Part I Autumn 1996 Survey**




**N = 561**

Figure 2. **Percent of Sites by Regions**

**for Part I Autumn 1996 Survey**

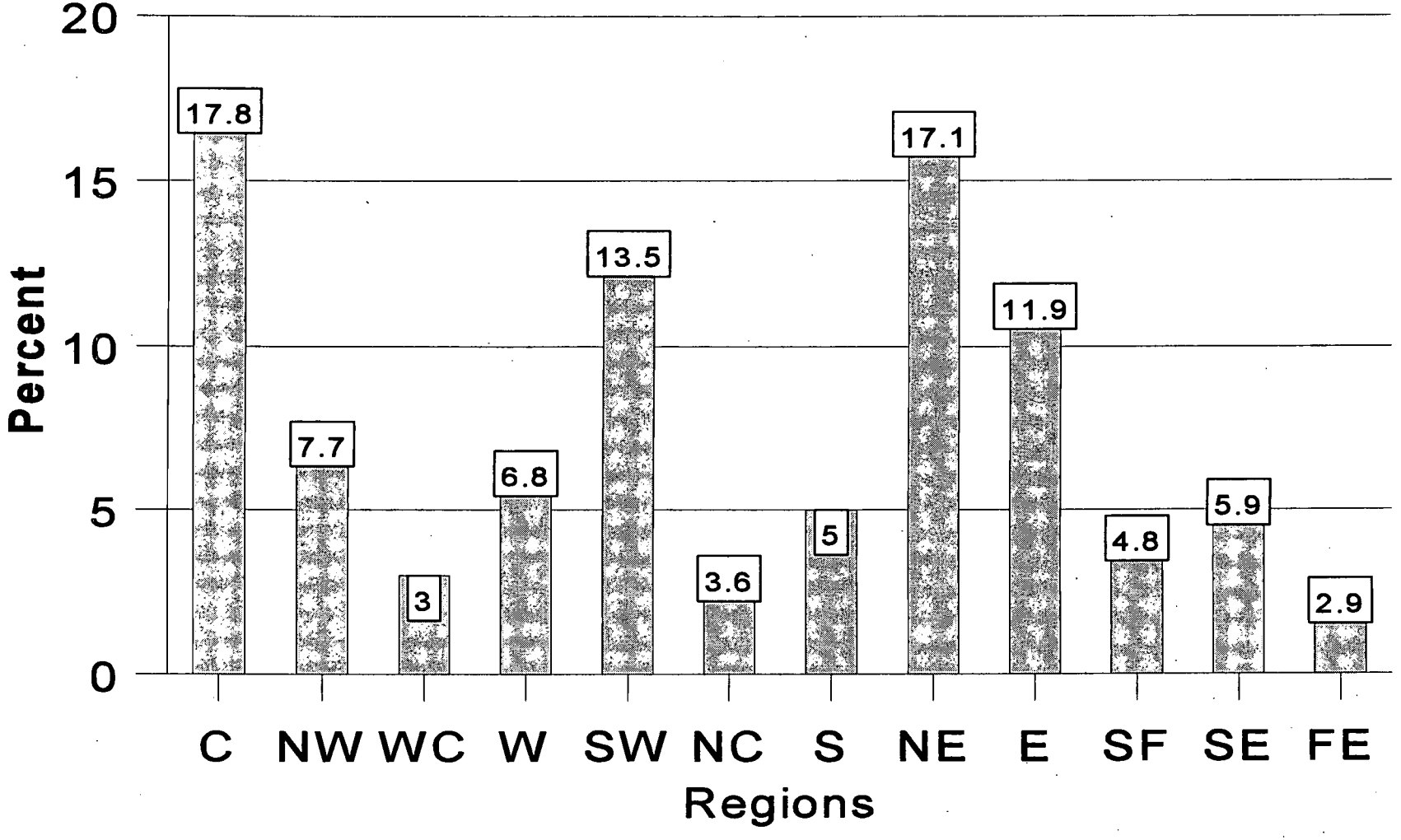


Figure 3. **Percent of Sites by Models**

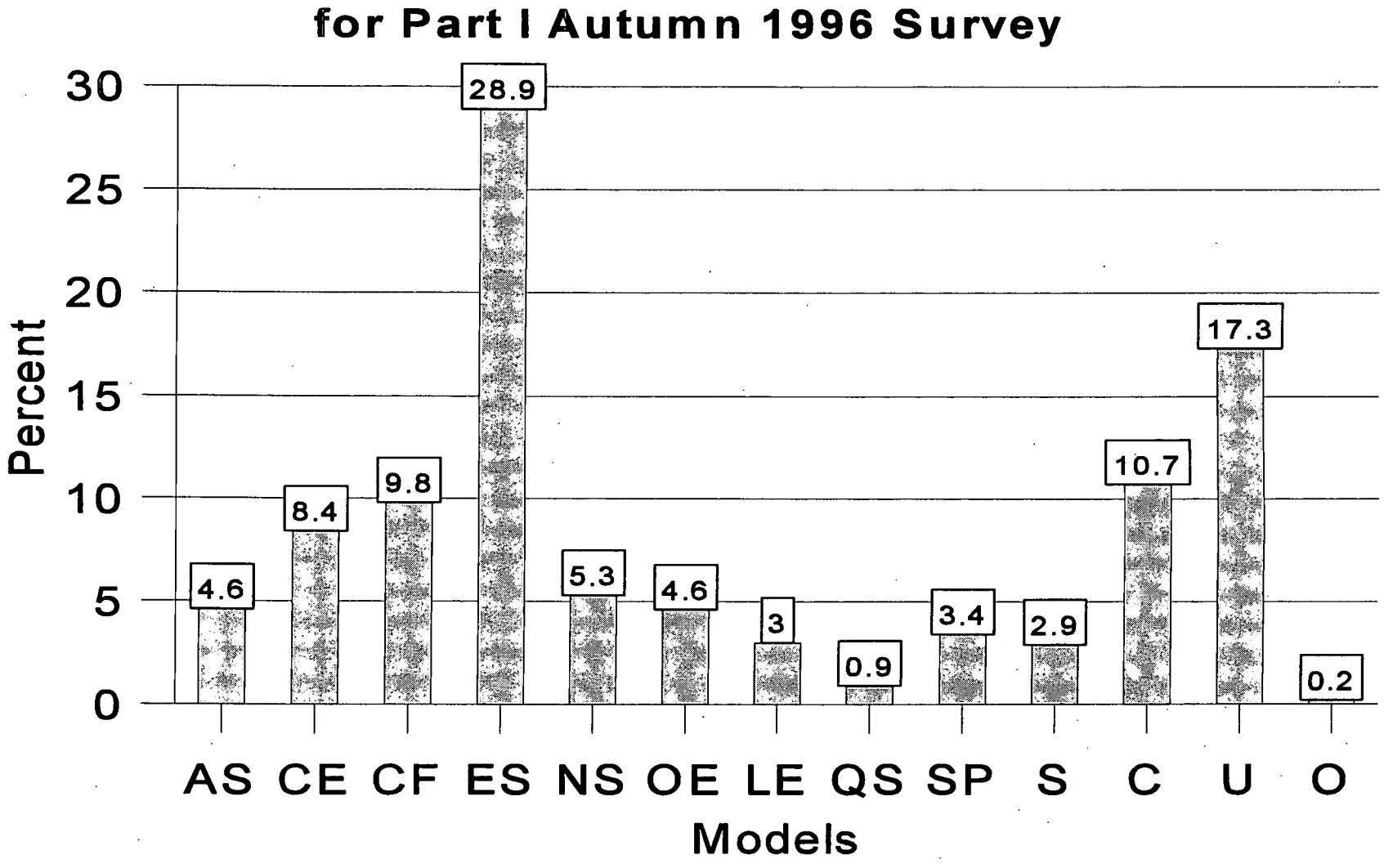


Figure 4. **Percent of Sites by Demographic Categories for Part I Autumn 1996 Survey**

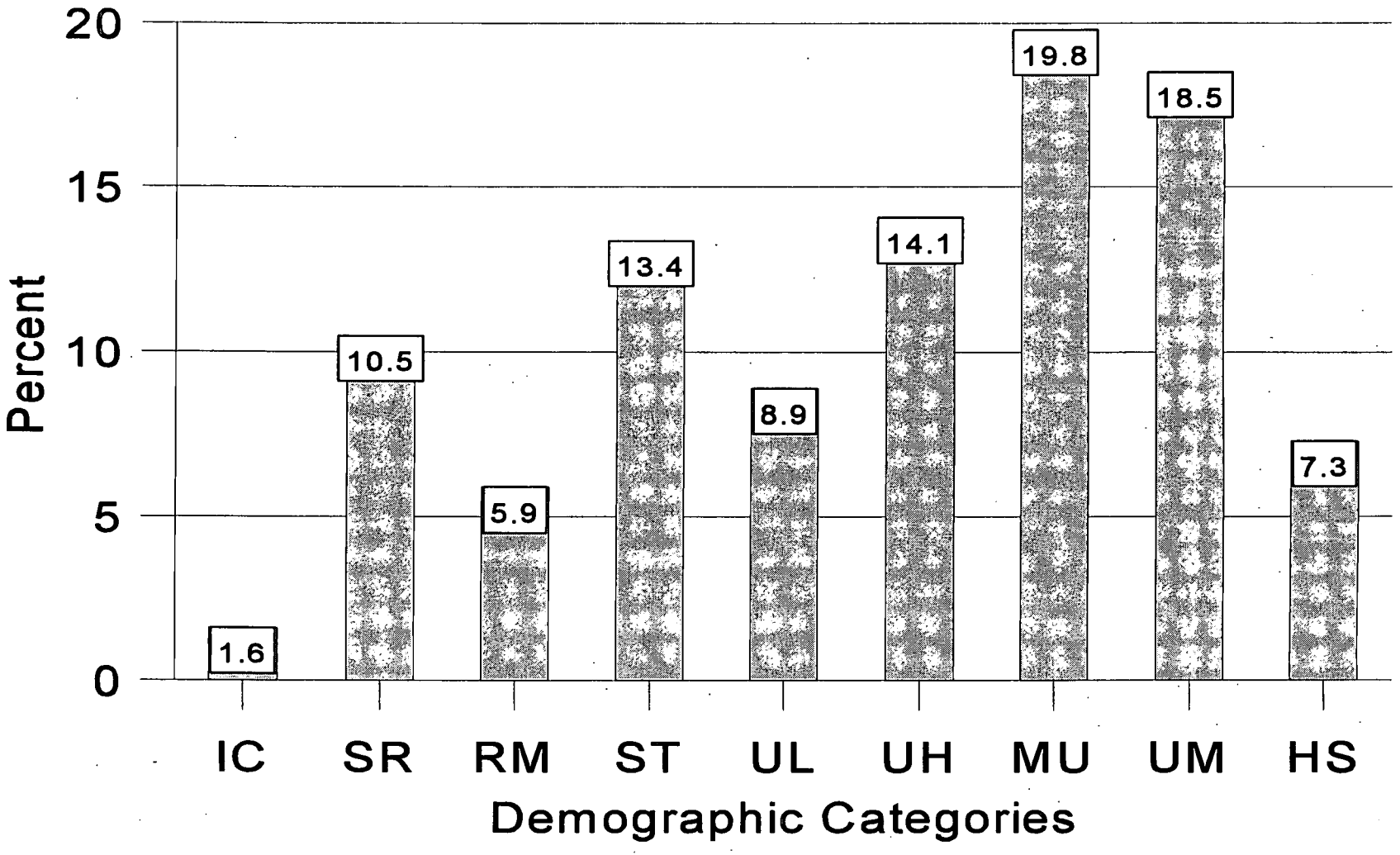


Figure 5.

**The Mean of Subscales by Cohort: Site as Unit of Analysis for Part I Autumn 1996 Survey**

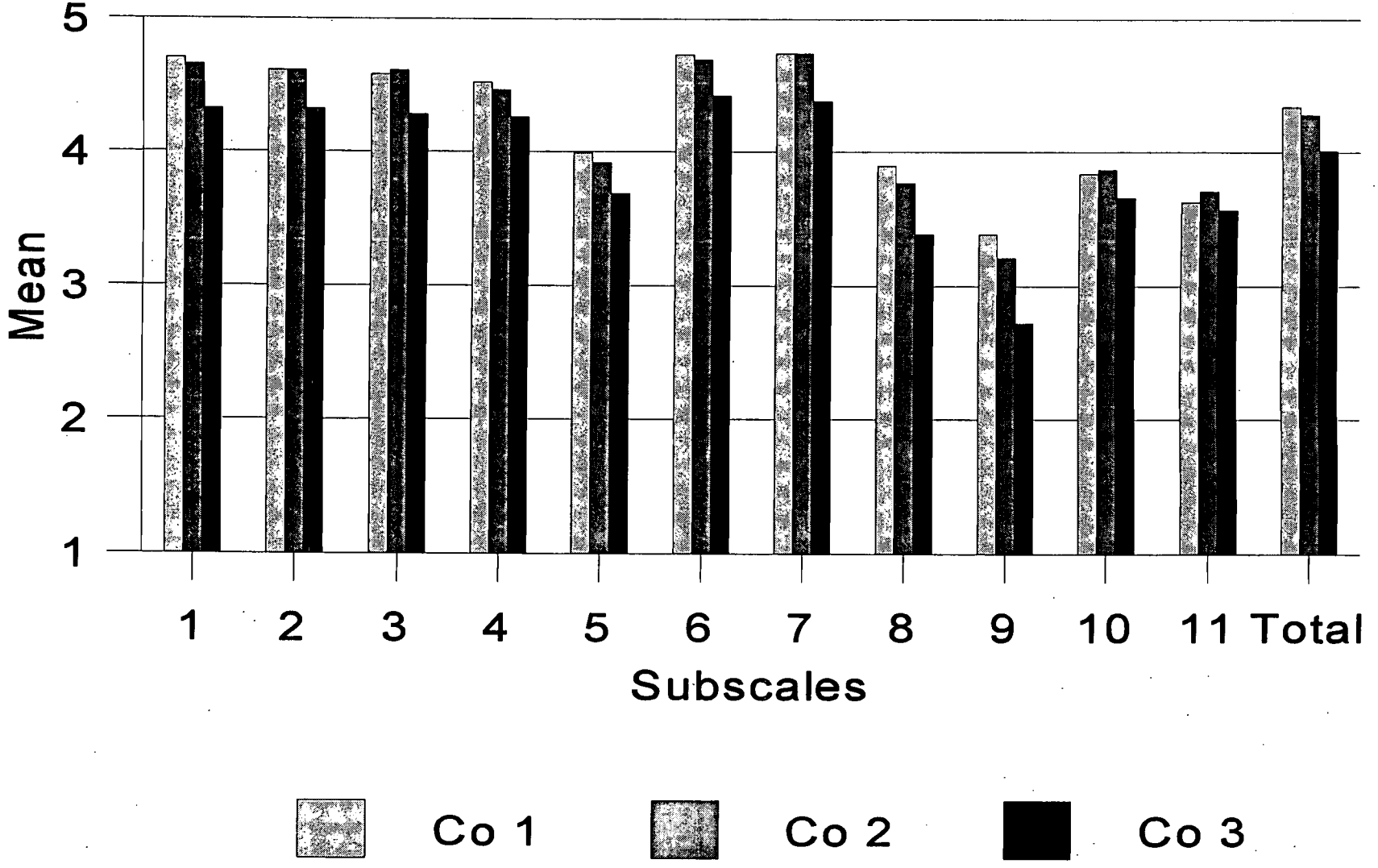


Figure 6. **The Mean of Subscales: Staff, Parents and Students for Part I Autumn 1996 Survey**

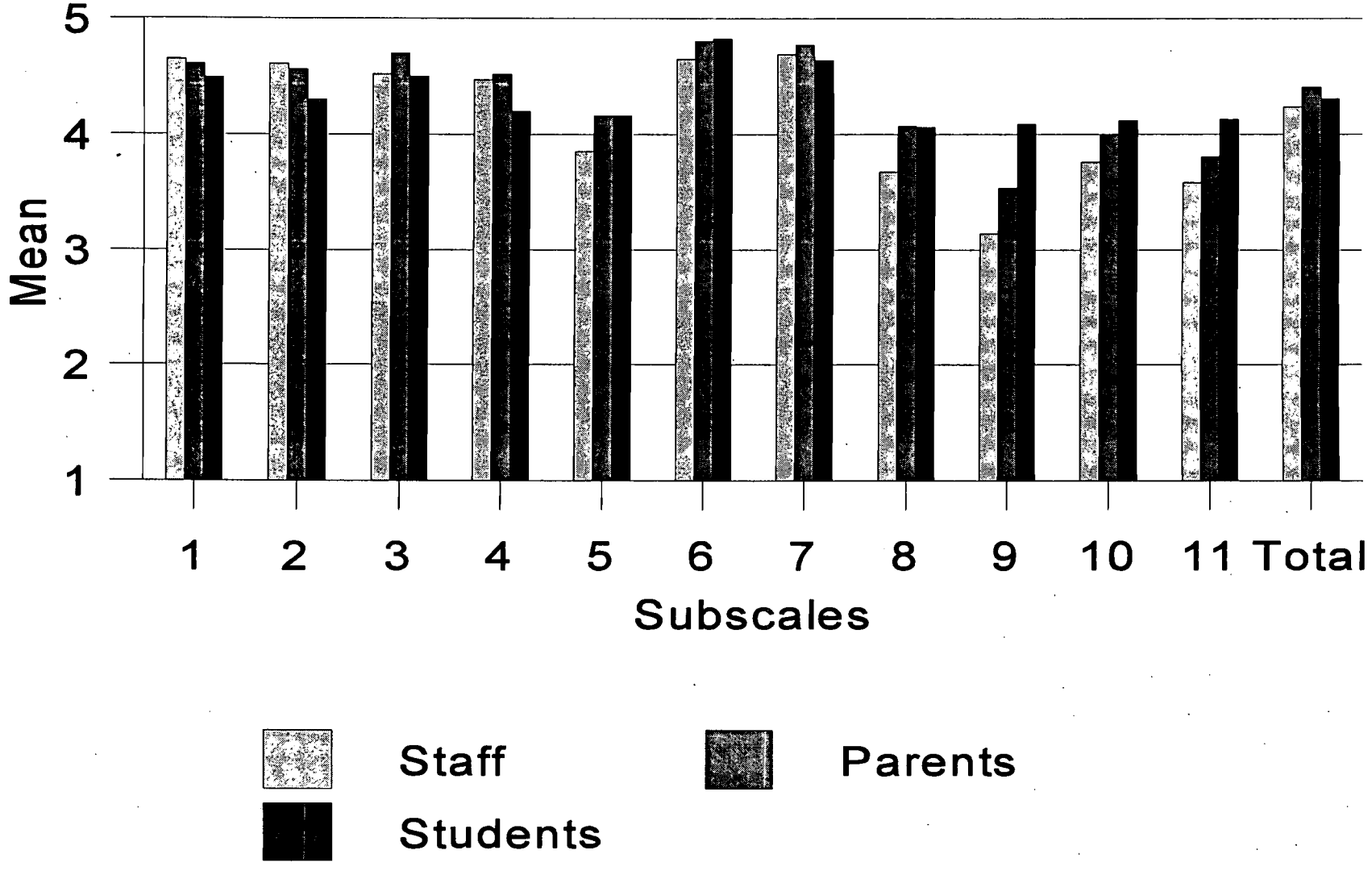


Figure 7.

# Venture Capital State Data on Planning Elements:

## Subscales for 1994, Winter 1995, Autumn 1995, and Autumn 1996

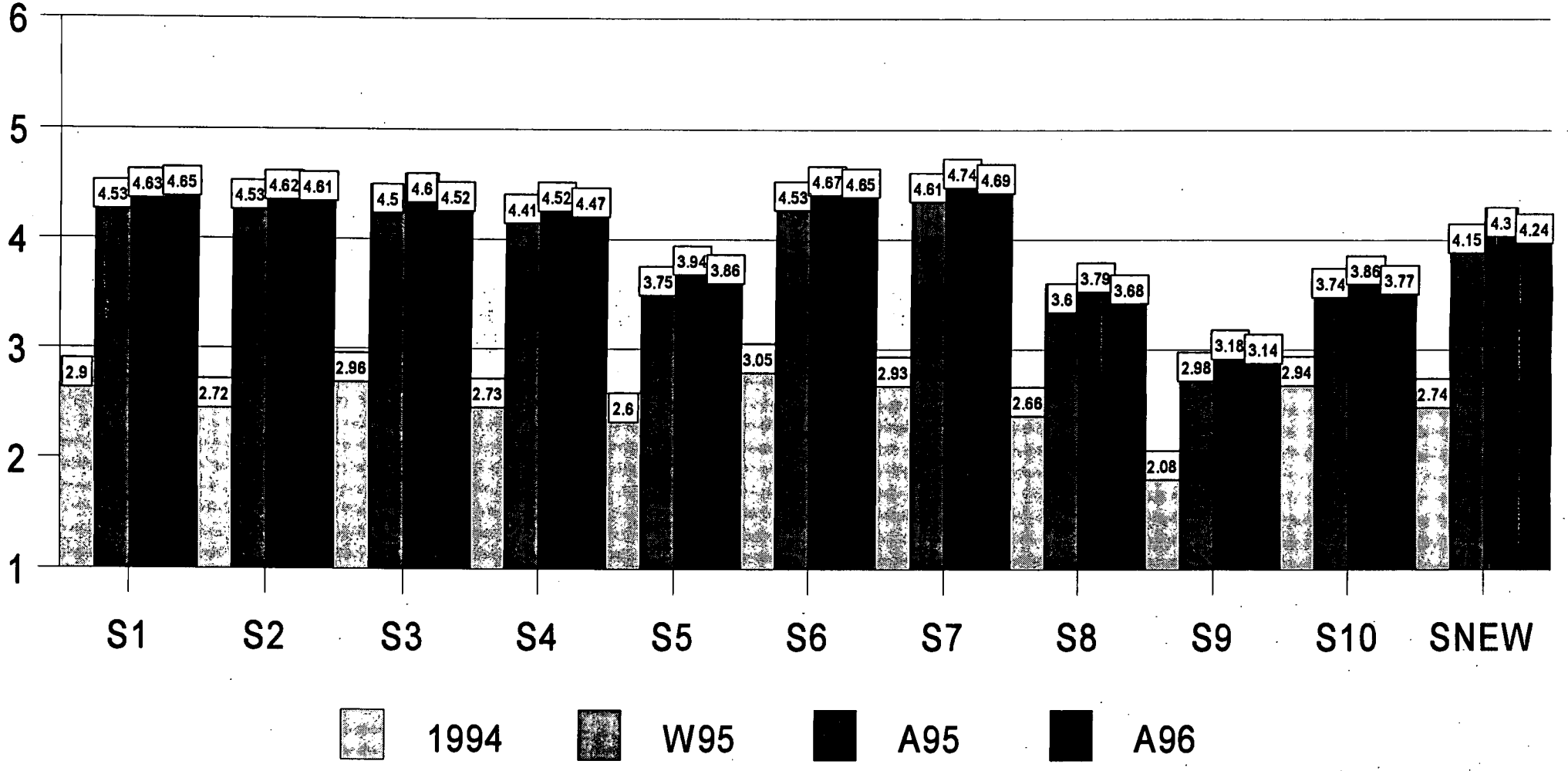
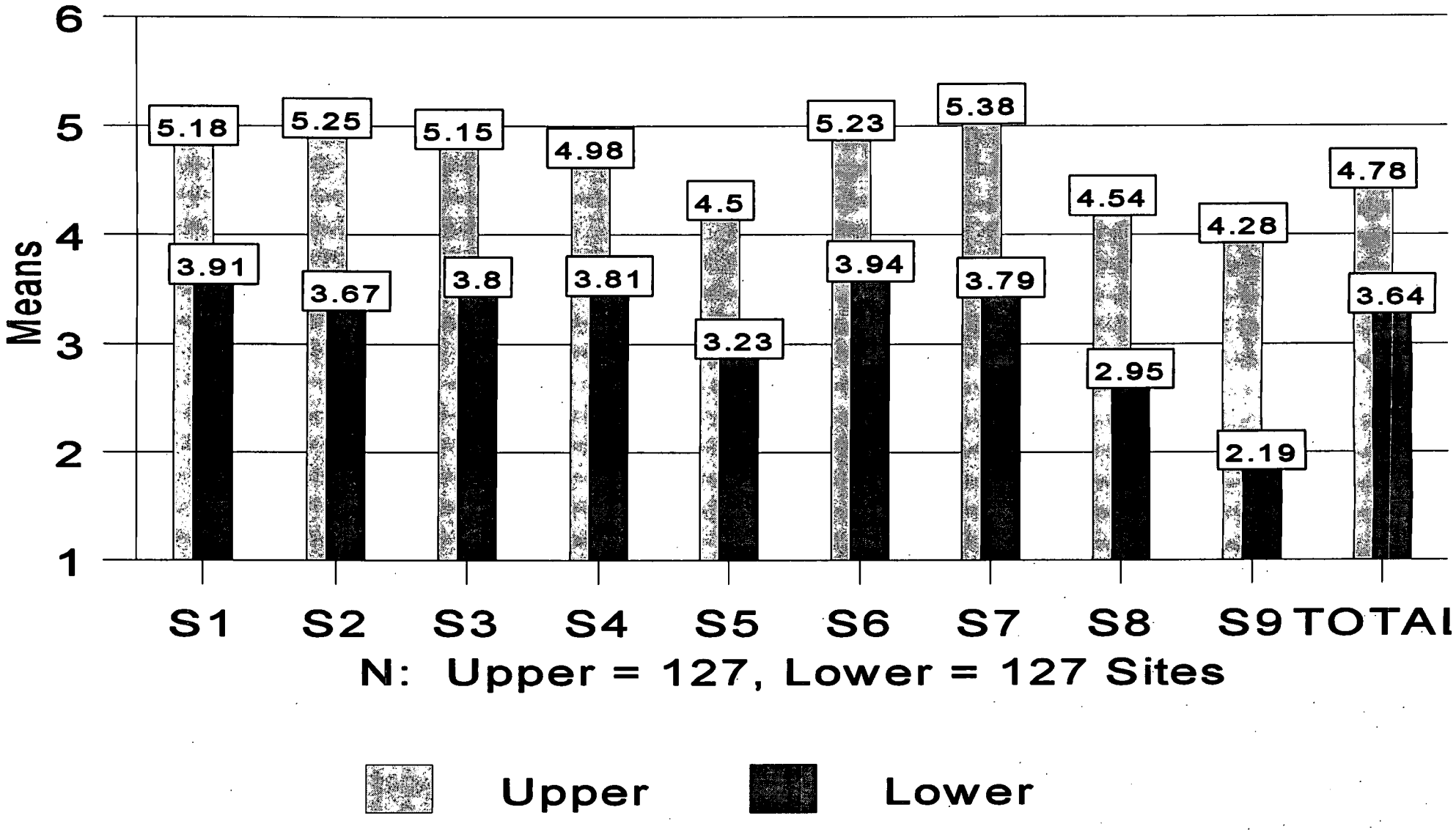


Figure 8.

**Means of Upper and Lower Quantiles Based on Total Score of The Program Planning Subscales: Part I Autumn 1996 Data Using Sites as Unit of Analysis**



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