

# ALASKA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

**F**

SCORES

Content and Rigor 0/7  
Clarity and Specificity 0/3

TOTAL SCORE

**0/10**

## Overview

Alaska's inaptly named *Content and Performance Standards* outline neither a grade-by-grade sequence of suggested (let alone required) history courses, nor *any* grade-specific history content expectations. Consequently, these "standards" create little confidence that Alaskan students will learn the U.S. history content necessary for all literate American citizens.

## Goals and Organization

Alaska's social studies standards are divided into two categories: three broad "content standards" —labeled geography, history, and government and citizenship—and grade-specific "performance standards/grade level expectations."

The content standards, however, do not actually specify content. Instead, they each describe four to seven broad and abstract goals. In history, for example, one of the four stated goals calls for students to "understand historical themes through factual knowledge of time, places, ideas, institutions, cultures, people, and events." Then, within each such goal, the standards describe (again, broadly) the skills that students must master to meet the stated goal.

Even more vexing, the performance standards/grade level expectations in history are *not* presented by grade level. Instead, the state explains, its history standards lay out "the cumulative knowledge a student must demonstrate in order to fulfill the Alaska history graduation requirement." Thus, no U.S. history sequence is actually specified; students are expected to master the content to which the standards allude, yet no particular subject matter is assigned to any particular grade.

Furthermore, the "cumulative knowledge" targets outlined in the standards are confined *solely* to local Alaskan history. The course of study is limited to five chronological eras: Indigenous Alaskans before Western Contact; Colonial Era—The Russian Period (1747–1867); Colonial Era—The United States Period (1867–1912); Alaska as a Territory (1912–1959); Alaska as a State (1959–present).

Each era is then split—in typical social studies fashion—into thematic rather than chronological subunits: people, places, and environment; consumption, production, and distribution; individual, citizenship, governance, and power; and continuity and change.

While the state does provide a *Social Studies Framework* with sample exercises for various age ranges (not grade levels), these exercises are linked to the analytical themes and skills listed in the content standards, and they provide little additional content or guidance to teachers.

## ✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

**Content and Performance Standards for Alaska Students, U.S. history segments (2006)**

**Accessed from:**

<http://www.eed.state.ak.us/standards/pdf/standards.pdf>

**Social Studies Framework, Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, U.S. history segments (1995)**

**Accessed from:**

<http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/frameworks/ssstudies/first.htm>

## Evaluation

At first glance, the history content standards seem promising. Two pages of rather general “concept skills” indicate that students should be able to: understand chronological frameworks for organizing historical thought and placing significant ideas, institutions, people, and events within time sequences; know that the interpretation of history may change as new evidence is discovered; understand that history is dynamic and composed of key turning points; evaluate the influence of context upon historical understanding; apply thinking skills (e.g., classifying, interpreting, analyzing, summarizing, synthesizing, and evaluating) to understand the historical record; use historical perspective to solve problems, make decisions, and understand other traditions.

These are worthy aims. But even here, there are problems. For example, students are also expected to critique “the mistakes of social organizations” in the past—an open invitation to judge yesterday’s events by today’s standards, rather than to understand them in context. There is also a predictable emphasis on “class, ethnicity, race, and gender,” again encouraging students to decry history’s failure to live up to modern standards of diversity and tolerance, rather than to understand why people believed in what they were doing at the time.

In the end, of course, the success of these standards depends on the substantive historical knowledge and sophistication of Alaska’s teachers—and here the standards do little to assist teachers in developing or applying such knowledge.

Still larger problems emerge when one turns to the history segment of the performance standards/grade level expectations. Again, the abstract aims seem promising, emphasizing “the scholarly approach of the historian,” “knowledge of specifics,” and “knowledge of context.”

This is all well and good—except that the performance standards/grade level expectations that follow (which, as noted above, are *not* presented for individual grade levels) *cover nothing but Alaskan history*.

The core historical skills to be mastered by graduation, including the “critical examination of evidence,” and the “careful weighing of facts and hypotheses,” are spelled out. However, *no* broader study of the history of the United States is specified. It is difficult for students to “weigh” historical facts or evidence if they have never been exposed to the actual history.

Study of the United States beyond Alaska appears to be *tacitly* assumed: Some of the sample exercises in the *Social Studies Framework* mention broader American history, including major cultures, eras, wars, some political leaders, famous individuals,

and so forth. But though these passing references seem to assume a larger history curriculum, no such curriculum is outlined or specified; even the grade levels at which these scattered facts will be introduced are in no way indicated.

The government and citizenship content standards add a few more references to American historical content (e.g., comprehension of the nation’s founding documents and governing principles). The cultural standard section stresses the importance of students’ knowledge of personal and community history and how they relate to traditional practices and the wider society. It also includes a useful set of recommendations about the need to understand that different cultures may have differing but equally compelling outlooks.

Again, however, there is no specific historical overview—indeed, there is no historical curriculum beyond Alaskan history itself.

## Content and Rigor Conclusion

Alaska claims that these standards give “educators, families, and policymakers solid information with which to hold schools and communities accountable for the academic achievement of children and prepare all Alaska students for the future.” Regrettably, the standards cannot achieve such goals without considerably more work.

Local/state history should be a strong part of any good public-school curriculum, and Alaska’s standards do spell out much of this. But they fail entirely to delineate expectations or outline content for any broader American history curriculum. Although the state seems to assume that U.S. history will be taught, teachers are offered no guidance on constructing a curriculum. Since there is no grade-specific content to assess—and hardly any content at all—Alaska earns a zero out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Alaska’s standards offer no sequence whatsoever, assigning no content to any particular grade and creating no guidelines for when and how U.S. history should be taught. They only purport to inform teachers and students what should be taught and learned by the completion of high school. Most U.S. history is not covered at all, and there can be no specificity where there is no content. Alaska earns a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)