

# COLORADO • U.S. HISTORY

GRADE

**F**

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

**0/10**

## Overview

The 2009 Colorado social studies standards, we are told, were “designed for clarity, rigor, and coherence,” aiming for “fewer, higher and clearer standards.” The result is meant to be “a vision” of “what all students should know and be able to do at each grade level through eighth, and then through high school.” Unfortunately, thematic abstractions dominate the standards—to the near-total exclusion of historical or chronological coherence, obscuring what limited content there is in a confused tangle of categories, sub-categories, and jargon.

## Goals and Organization

Colorado’s K–12 *Academic Standards* for social studies are divided into four strands—history, geography, economics, and civics—that are common to all grades. Within each strand, the state provides grade-level expectations for individual grades from K–8, and for high school (grades 9–12) as a block. Each such expectation consists of a thematic heading—labeled “concepts and skills students master”—laying out broad conceptual themes to be covered. For example, one eighth-grade history grade-level expectation directs students to “formulate appropriate hypotheses about United States history based on a variety of historical sources and perspectives.”

The state then provides a series of “evidence outcomes” for each concepts and skills heading. These are thematic summary statements of knowledge that students must master as well as “21st century skills and readiness competencies.” The latter are comprised of “inquiry questions” (more specific queries about the content), “relevance and application” points (drawing parallels between the content and current issues) and, in the history strand, “nature of history” points (regarding the nature of historical study).

This jargon-laden snarl of nested categories severely fragments any historical content, making chronological presentation impossible. With content summaries so broad, general, and disorganized, even the basic scope of each year’s course can be difficult to discern.

At the early elementary level, the expectations address basic concepts of chronology and family/cultural traditions in first grade; introduce historical sources in second grade; discuss distinctions between historical fact and fiction in third grade; and introduce Colorado history in fourth grade.

Fifth grade is meant to cover the period from 1491 to the post–Revolutionary era. Eighth grade is meant to cover the period from the American Revolution to Reconstruction. At the high school level, there is a nominal focus on events from Reconstruction to the present.

## ✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Colorado Academic Standards, Social Studies, U.S. history segments (2009)

Accessed from:

[http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/UAS/AdoptedAcademicStandards/Social\\_Studies\\_Adopted\\_12.10.09.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/UAS/AdoptedAcademicStandards/Social_Studies_Adopted_12.10.09.pdf)

## Evaluation

According to the state’s social studies standards, Colorado students are expected to graduate with the skills to understand “how people view, construct and interpret history” and grasp “key historical periods and patterns of change over time within and across nations and cultures.”

Unfortunately, concepts and skills must be matched with content and substance if genuine historical clarity and rigor are to be achieved. Yet Colorado seems much more interested in abstract goals than specific substance.

At the early elementary level, the grade-level expectations in U.S. history comprise entirely conventional explorations of basic concepts such as chronology and sources. In fifth grade, according to the expectations’ concepts and skills headings, students are to “analyze historical sources from multiple points of view to develop an understanding of historical context,” applying these skills to “historical eras, individuals, groups, ideas, and themes in North America from 1491 through the founding of the United States government.” By eighth grade, they should be able to “formulate appropriate hypotheses about United States history based on a variety of historical sources and perspectives,” focusing on the period from the American Revolution to Reconstruction. In high school, the concepts and skills headings become so abstract that no specific historical era is even mentioned.

The evidence outcomes within each grade-level expectation are presumably meant to expand upon these broad generalizations and lay out the specific course content, yet they fail to provide much more in the way of content guidance. Some evidence outcomes do make sporadic reference to historical events (the American Revolution, Reconstruction, etc.), but these are tossed out without adequate context or explanation and with no suggestion of an actual overview or outline.

High school evidence outcomes, for example, direct students to “investigate causes and effects of significant events in United States history,” with “topics to include but not limited to WWI, Great Depression, [and the] Cold War.” Or to “analyze the complexity of events in United States history,” with “topics to include but not limited to the suffrage movement and the Civil Rights Movement.” Eighth-grade evidence outcomes direct students to “determine and explain the historical context of key people and events from the origins of the American Revolution through Reconstruction including the examination of different perspectives.” Fourth graders are to construct “a timeline of Colorado history with events in United States and world history.” And so forth.

The inquiry questions, relevance and application, and nature of history points are meant to expand upon these evidence outcomes (and, in the process, to develop “21st century skills

and readiness competencies”—whatever those might be). But, like the evidence outcomes themselves, all content in these categories remains abstract, overly general, and substance-free.

For example, fifth graders are told to explain, “Why is [sic] important to understand the historical context of events?”; or “How did historical events and individuals contribute to diversity in the United States?” Eighth graders are to consider, “How have the basic values and principles of American democracy changed over time and in what ways have they been preserved?” And, incredibly, high school students are asked: “What impact have individuals had on history?”

The closest we come to history in the fifth-grade inquiry questions are such vague queries as: “How might history be different without the Declaration of Independence?” and “To what extent did individuals and their ideas contribute to the foundation of the United States government?” Eighth grade questions are equally abstract, such as, “To what extent was the Civil War an extension of the American Revolution?” At the high school level, there are no historically specific “questions” at all.

The standards never offer the slightest suggestion of outline, explanation, context, or factual substance. Actual historical people, details and events never appear—just bits of historical flotsam in a maelstrom of social studies “concepts.”

## Content and Rigor Conclusion

Colorado’s K–12 *Academic Standards* in social studies provide virtually no subject-specific content in U.S. history. There is hardly anything in U.S. history that teachers are *specifically required to know or to teach* at any particular grade level. A complete lack of specific content means that substantive rigor cannot be identified, measured, or evaluated. Even a few vague and brief references to specific eras or concepts cannot raise the score above a zero out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Colorado teachers seeking specific guidance about grade-level knowledge and skills in U.S. history will not find it in these standards. The document is completely lacking in specifics, the language and historical questions are substantively vacuous, and scope and sequence are essentially an illusion. Teachers are vaguely guided to teach particular eras in particular years, but receive no details about what to include or how to structure a course. The reader is left with almost a “through the looking glass” feeling about the entire undertaking. The Colorado standards began by claiming “change is necessary” as their guiding principle. And until there is substantial change, Colorado cannot earn more than a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)