

CONNECTICUT • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

Content and Rigor 1/7
Clarity and Specificity 0/3

TOTAL SCORE

1/10

Overview

Connecticut's unofficially adopted social studies standards, insofar as they cover U.S. history at all, offer isolated historical scraps which are devoid of context, explanation, or meaning. And even these arbitrary thematic shards are merely "suggested" to teachers, not required.

Goals and Organization

Connecticut's framework is divided into three standards: content knowledge, history/social studies literacy, and application. Each standard is subdivided into strands that are common across all grade levels. The content knowledge standard is divided into thirteen strands, including U.S. history, Connecticut history, world history, geography, and various aspects of environment, migration, government, citizenship, and economics. The other two standards are divided into eight more strands between them, focused on research, writing, and presentation skills.

A chart supplies each strand with grade-level expectations for individual grades from pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade, and for high school (grades 9–12) as a block. Specific historical examples are offered for some expectations, but these are merely "suggested," showing "possible approaches" for classroom use.

The Connecticut framework offers "Suggestions for Content to Address Grade-Level Expectations by Grade," which lays out a proposed grade-by-grade sequence. Pre-Kindergarten through second grade focus on concepts of community, chronology, and human interdependence; third grade focuses on the local town, and fourth grade on Connecticut history.

Fifth grade turns to U.S. history, covering the period through the American Revolution and the Constitution. Eighth grade deals with the period from the Constitution "through the 19th century," and high school covers the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with "review of earlier events where necessary to provide appropriate background and context." Only the high school course is listed as "required." At other grade levels, teachers need only ensure "that social studies instruction is an integral component of instruction."

Evaluation

Connecticut's social studies framework claims to enable "teachers to understand what students should know and be able to do from prekindergarten through high school." The emphasis throughout, however, is on social studies skills and concepts rather than on specific historical content.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

Connecticut Social Studies Curriculum Framework. Grades K–12, U.S. history segments (interim draft, October 2009)

Accessed from:

http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/curriculum/socialstudies/ssfrmwk_10-6-09.pdf

¹ Due to staff retirements and budget issues, Connecticut's draft framework has not been subject to final review or formal adoption. However, teachers have been advised to follow the draft for the present, and it is therefore being used in state schools.

The framework also aims to help “students build empathetic awareness” about historical and contemporary issues: Classes are to integrate “current events” in order “to provide opportunities for responsible student engagement with real problems in the school, community, and the world around them.” Connecticut students, as a result, will learn to make “connections between past and present and between their social studies curriculum and the everyday world.”

Thus, from the start, social studies theory and personal, present-day relevance are stressed over specific historical knowledge. And, indeed, specific historical content appears in the standards almost as an afterthought: History is presented as a tool for understanding social studies, rather than vice versa.

Teachers are asked to emphasize “local history” and to make progressively more “extensive” use of primary sources. But what those primary sources might be, or what content each course should address, is left essentially undefined. Since Connecticut’s grade-level topics are merely “suggested” before the “required” modern U.S. history course in high school, teachers may even decide to focus on different content altogether, creating little confidence that students across the state will be exposed to a consistent, comprehensive, and rigorous U.S. history curriculum.

The meager U.S. history content that does appear is mostly placed in the first strand of the content knowledge standard—for example, “demonstrate an understanding of significant events and themes in U.S. history.” But, overall, the content knowledge standard is inappropriately named; it includes no historical events or concepts, no chronology or interconnection—just overbroad concepts and random examples divorced from any context or coherence.

Second graders, for example, are asked to “explain the contributions of historical figures.” The diversity-driven examples include: “George Washington, Harriet Tubman, Sacagawea, Squanto, Abraham Lincoln, César Chávez, Martin Luther King, Jr., [and] Rosa Parks.” Third graders are to “explain the significance of events surrounding historical figures”—and the suggested examples consist of the *same list* of random names.

The fifth-grade materials, which are supposed to introduce the serious study of U.S. history, offer just five grade-level expectations in the U.S. history strand. Students might, for example, “explain how specific individuals and their ideas and beliefs influenced U.S. history,” the random examples being “John Smith, Anne Hutchinson, Uncas, [and] Benjamin Franklin.” Or they could “compare and contrast the economic, political, and/or religious differences that contributed to conflicts (e.g., French and Indian Wars [*sic*], American

Revolution).” Additional items mention how “conflicts have been resolved through compromise” (such as “U.S. Constitution, Northwest Ordinance”), how “individual events... contributed to the American Revolution” (no examples given), and “the significance of the results” of the Constitutional Convention (no examples given). Colonial settlement and relations with Britain are tossed into the world history strand, also without any specifics. The other eleven content strands offer little more than general, conceptual points about the role of economics and geography.

In eighth grade, the U.S. history strand now receives nine grade-level expectations. For instance, students are again to describe “conflicts that have been resolved through compromise.” The bizarre example highlights “compromises over slavery”—a textbook example of a conflict that was *not* resolved through compromise, as the Civil War would seem to indicate. Other expectations briefly mention reform movements and the arts. One, with breathtaking insouciance, expects students to “explain how specific individuals and their ideas and beliefs influenced U.S. history”—with no examples offered. Pupils might then compare and contrast the causes and effects of the American Revolution and Civil War, the “precedents established during the Federalist era” (mentioned *after* the Civil War), and westward expansion and its impact on Native Americans—before jumping back to “the compromises made at the Constitutional Convention.” The world history strand adds scattered references to the slave trade and foreign relations.

High school students—who receive no fewer than twelve expectations in the U.S. history strand—might examine migration, “citizens’ rights” (e.g., Palmer Raids, struggle for civil rights, women’s rights movement, [and the] Patriot Act”), the changing role of the United States in the world, the developing American economy, and the impact of natural resources. They might also examine “various American beliefs, values and political ideologies (e.g., political parties, nativism, Scopes trial, [and] McCarthyism),” along with nationalism, sectionalism, the “evolving heterogeneity of American society,” technology, the arts, and, again, the impact of “significant individuals” (the rather odd list for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is as follows: “Malcolm X, Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., [and] Ronald Reagan”).

The remaining standards—“history/social studies literacy” and “application”—are ostensibly included to outline the skills that students must master to critically analyze history. The “literacy” standard, for example, focuses on the ability to read and interpret maps and sources, create written work (including blogs and web pages), and engage in discussion. The “application” standard wishes students to understand and evaluate historical interpretations, analyze “alternative points

of view,” and apply social studies concepts to “contemporary problems” and their solutions. All such directives are purely theoretical and non-specific (e.g., “detect bias in data presented in various forms”). How are students to analyze, understand, evaluate, or apply abstract concepts if they lack the actual historical knowledge required to analyze, understand, or evaluate?

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Connecticut’s social studies frameworks are relentlessly focused on social studies concepts and priorities. Historical content is, at best, an afterthought. There is no meaningful outline, explanation, or guideline explaining what teachers are to teach or students are to learn. Instead, there is a series of broad, theoretical themes with scattershot, decontextualized, and often tendentious (if not irrational) examples tied to arbitrary and artificial thematic subdivisions. More than twenty strands merely direct students to analyze whatever content teachers happen to introduce. Key concepts and events receive no coverage or emphasis. Personal and contemporary “relevance” are constantly stressed over historical understanding. Grade-level appropriateness is moot, since there is no measurable rigor at any level. Limited specifics, however random, earn Connecticut’s standards a one out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Connecticut’s history standards barely outline curricular scope. A thin sequence is defined—vaguely identified eras are assigned to individual grades—but even that is merely a “suggestion.” Students, teachers, and parents are given virtually no guidance as to what students should actually learn—they are only told what conceptual skills they should master, to be applied to whatever content their teachers select. Detail is fragmentary at best, and far more often absent entirely. The framework reviewed, though already in use in schools, is only a draft: Parents should demand drastic changes before this self-described “comprehensive document,” that purportedly “assists teachers in teaching content,” is officially adopted. The standards merit a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)