

DELAWARE • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

0/10

Overview

Delaware’s social studies standards are devoid of any historical content or substance. In fact, the state openly dismisses the importance of essential content: With abstractions and concepts at the fore, students “will not be expected to recall any particular *specific* event or person in history.” It is rare, even in the world of social studies—where themes and categories are routinely preferred over content and chronology—to see standards that so blatantly and complacently reject the need for core historical content.

Goals and Organization

Delaware’s social studies standards are divided into four strands: geography, civics, economics, and history. The five-page section for the history strand is divided into four standards, directing students to “employ chronological concepts in analyzing historical phenomena (Chronology)”;

“gather, examine, and analyze historical data (Analysis)”;

“interpret historical data (Interpretation)”;

and “develop historical knowledge of major events and phenomena in world, United States, and Delaware history (Content).” For each standard, largely abstract statements of target learning goals are laid out for grade blocks K–3, 4–5, 6–8, and 9–12.

The separate *Social Studies Clarifications* documents offer further discussion of each of the four strands. The section “clarifying” the history strand provides a discussion of teaching theory, expanding upon the conceptual themes outlined in the history standards.

The only direct references to course scope appear under the so-called “content” standard: From Kindergarten through third grade, students are to learn—for U.S. and Delaware history—basic ideas about diversity, immigrants, communities, and “important people in our past,” though none are specifically named. In grades six through eight, where U.S. history is meant to begin, the only content specified is a list of periods to be learned: Three Worlds Meet (Beginnings to 1620), Colonization and Settlement (1585–1763), and so forth to the Civil War. For grades nine through twelve, teachers are given a similar list running from Reconstruction to the present.

Evaluation

Each page of Delaware’s history standards is headed with a clear and succinct statement on the nature and value of historical study, emphasizing change and interaction over time, the importance of gathering and interpreting data, and the importance of chronology and of historical cause-and-effect.

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Delaware Social Studies Prioritized Standards (1995, updated 2008)

Accessed from:

http://www.doe.k12.de.us/infosuites/staff/ci/content_areas/socialstudies.shtml

Social Studies Clarifications, U.S. history segments (2010)

Accessed from:

http://www.doe.k12.de.us/infosuites/staff/ci/content_areas/socialstudies.shtml

Yet the documents that follow dismiss any core or common *substance* that students must master in order to achieve such aims. It is fitting that content is the *last* of Delaware’s four standards—for content is entirely missing throughout, even in the standard *labeled* “content.” The standards’ introductory emphasis on the importance of “chronologies” and “cause-and-effect relationships among...events” becomes ironic, as only the most basic chronology is specified, and “events” are completely absent.

In the first three standards, only a single sentence tries to explain the target achievements for each grade block; all of these are abstract, and most are extremely similar across grades. Under chronology, for example, students in fourth and fifth grades are to “study historical events and persons within a given time-frame in order to create a chronology and identify related cause-and-effect factors.” In grades six through eight, they are to “examine historical materials relating to a particular region, society, or theme; analyze change over time, and make logical inferences concerning cause and effect.” In grades nine through twelve, they are to “analyze historical materials to trace the development of an idea or trend across space or over a prolonged period of time in order to explain patterns of historical continuity and change.”

Similar items under “analysis” direct students—again in wholly abstract terms—to do research and study sources; under “interpretation,” they are to study and “compare competing historical narratives.” Under “content,” there is a bare-bones list of eras to be covered—and that, so far as a U.S. history curriculum goes, is it. In short, Delaware’s standards expect students to master chronology, analysis, and interpretation *before* they have built a solid foundation of historical knowledge.

The *Clarifications* document for teachers adds *no meaningful history at all*. The clarification they offer is of theory, not content. This supplement does, however, provide a remarkably honest and candid restatement of the classic, social studies “how-to-learn not what-to-learn” mentality.

For example, even though the first history standard focuses on chronology, we are told that “as a concept, chronology does not mean exact dates, overly detailed timelines, and long exercises putting events in order. Instead, it means understanding (why and how) that one event may or may not lead to subsequent events.” There is no explanation of how teachers and students can understand how one event leads to subsequent events if they have no shared knowledge of those specific events.

Indeed, the *Clarifications* further challenge the basic notion of historical fact: “Nothing changes as much as history, because history is not what happened but what historians say

happened...[since] each historian also comes from a societal and personal background and lives in a particular time and place.” In short, historical content is illusory, since history itself is little more than an artificial construct. In a comic-book-level parroting of postmodernist and deconstructionist dogma, the *Clarifications* admonish teachers: “Remember, *history does not exist* until the historian looks at the sources and decides what is important and therefore what is history” (emphasis added).

Rather than encouraging a balanced and nuanced understanding of the past, Delaware overtly endorses a surrender to relativism and an abandonment of any factual grounding.

Of course, if historical facts cannot be defined, neither can a history curriculum. Students, Delaware assures us, “must know history”—but they “will not be expected to recall any particular *specific* event or person in history.” This rejection of definable substance and content could hardly be more explicit: “A student who is answering a question must know something to use to argue with. But, there is no list of specific events everyone must know,” no need to include “specific people, laws, events, etc.” in the standards, “because no group of historians will ever agree on the essential and necessary facts that everyone should know.” This, we are told, “does not mean students do not have to know anything. It means that a student is free to use whatever historical knowledge he or she gained in that classroom”—whatever, in short, a given teacher happens to teach.

Indeed, “since it is impossible for a curriculum to cover everything that has happened, as a textbook will try to do,” content decisions are explicitly “left for each district or teacher” to make. Delaware does, however, suggest criteria on which to make choices—and historical coherence is not among them. Content should, rather, be chosen “based on its *relevance to contemporary issues*, its importance, its relationship to the big ideas of social studies, and its transferability” (emphasis added). The “big ideas of social studies” are defined as “chronology in broad outlines, and enough trends in history” to give students “a reservoir of information that they can use” in addressing theoretical questions.

In short, if teacher A thinks George Washington is important to American history, that’s fine. But if teacher B thinks dead generals and presidents are irrelevant to “real” and “relevant” history, that’s fine, too.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Delaware’s rejection of specific content in its history standards—beyond a bare list of eras—leaves little to analyze. Worse, the *Clarifications* text specifically insists that all historical

interpretations and approaches are equally valid, thus rejecting even the *concept* of specific substance—a breathtakingly blunt statement of the social studies dogma that has undermined history teaching for decades. There is no content or rigor to assess, leaving the state with an inevitable score of zero out of seven. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Ironically, Delaware’s standards open with a clear and pithy statement on the value of historical learning. In reality, however, the grade-level course sequence is vague to the point of non-existence; all detail is absent. And since measurable knowledge targets are rejected, there can be no substantive guidance for teachers or students regarding required content knowledge or final assessment skills. Though its renunciation of content is both clear and specific, it earns Delaware a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)