

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA • U.S. HISTORY

GRADE

A-

SCORES

Content and Rigor **6/7**
Clarity and Specificity **3/3**

TOTAL SCORE

9/10

Overview

By adapting its standards from the admirable content of the California and Massachusetts frameworks, the District of Columbia has produced a set of excellent U.S. history guidelines. There are occasional gaps and shortcomings, some derived from the source states, but the overall quality is exceptional. The District of Columbia offers an approach to crafting rigorous and thorough U.S. history standards that many states would be well advised to follow.

Goals and Organization

The D.C. standards offer specific curricula for each grade, K–8, and for subject-specific high school courses (world history and geography, U.S. history, U.S. government, and D.C. history and government). A straightforward format is used throughout: Each grade/course is organized in subdivisions, beneath which appear “broad concepts,” followed by grade-specific content expectations. Sample classroom exercises are offered for selected content items. The curriculum is not divided into typical social studies strands; rather, historical material is presented chronologically and analytical categories pertinent to each content item are noted parenthetically (these include geography, economics, politics and government, religious thought and ideas, social impact, military action, and intellectual thought).

The District’s content is derived from California and Massachusetts, but D.C. has also constructed its own grade-level sequence. Chronological concepts, national symbols, holidays, and important individuals are introduced from Kindergarten through second grade. Third grade then offers a basic introduction to local history and geography.

The U.S. history sequence begins with a two-year survey course in fourth and fifth grades, with fourth grade running from pre-settlement to the Constitution, and fifth grade from 1790 to the present. A second two-year survey, which runs from 1600 to 1914, begins in eighth grade. The second course concludes in eleventh grade, reviewing from the colonial period onward, then covering 1877 to the present.

Evaluation

One purpose of effective state standards is to provide a model for other states and districts. The District of Columbia has, commendably, chosen to adapt its standards “from the highly rated California and Massachusetts curriculum frameworks,” aiming to select “essential topics that build a chronologically organized history...on a solid base of factual knowledge.”

The result is an impressively rigorous and comprehensive set of standards. There are occasional gaps (some originating in the two source states and some introduced in the

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Learning Standards: Social Studies Pre-K through Grade 8, U.S. history segments (2006)

Accessed from:

<http://dcps.dc.gov/portal/site/DCPS/menuitem.06de50edb2b17a932c69621014f62010/?vgnnextoid=3e7d112f62c32210VgnVCM100000416f0201RCRD&vgnnextchannel=22aba12cbf242210VgnVCM100000416f0201RCRD>

Learning Standards: Social Studies High School, U.S. history segments (2006)

Accessed from:

<http://www.dc.gov/DCPS/In+the+Classroom/What+Students+Are+Learning/Learning+Standards+for+High+School+Subjects>

adaptation process) and occasional thematic departures from chronology. But the D.C. standards also supply some material missed in the source states, providing a thorough framework for history education.

The District begins its students' exploration of history in the early grades with conventional coverage of chronological concepts, holidays, symbols, famous individuals, and local history. As noted above, it then offers two full two-year U.S. history courses, one in fourth and fifth grades and the other in eighth and eleventh grades. Fourth grade may be somewhat early to introduce a detailed history curriculum, but the material is all covered again in later grades, and the level of rigor in the early grades does not seem unrealistic.

The fourth- and fifth-grade content outlines are admirable, although they do stress social history and tend to shortchange political history. One suggested fifth-grade classroom exercise deserves particular mention: "Students watch the movie *Glory* and compare its contents to primary source documents" in Colonel Robert Gould Shaw's published letters, and then "discuss Hollywood's depiction of history and how accurate it is." Comparing Hollywood history to the reality of primary documents is a valuable lesson for any informed citizen (though one wonders, given the goriness of the film and complexity of the documents, if this exercise wouldn't be better suited to high school).

In eighth grade, the first part of the second two-year survey, the period prior to the Revolution is covered briefly, but many excellent points are raised. Much of the political history that was missing in the elementary sequence is now included. Issues surrounding the Constitution are given particular emphasis, as are the roots of the Civil War. Yet antebellum nativism does not appear; Andrew Johnson's impeachment is missing; and the Marshall Court and *Marbury v. Madison* are shunted to the separate twelfth-grade U.S. government course (without naming Marshall) and are not mentioned in the main history outline (though, oddly, Marshall and *McCulloch v. Maryland* are mentioned in a suggested eighth-grade classroom exercise on local D.C. history).

The District concludes its second treatment of U.S. history in eleventh grade, recapitulating key ideas back to the colonial period before resuming with 1877 to the present. The District continues to add its own language and examples. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet," World War II U.S. casualties, the Domino theory, the Dixiecrats, and other specifics (absent in the source states) appear here. Yet the Palmer Raids, which occurred during the Red Scare under Wilson in 1919, are lumped misleadingly with the Republican presidents of the 1920s. Additionally, coverage of the post-

World War II period often favors theme over chronology, and the section on recent events is particularly brief and patchy.

By fusing its two models and adding content of its own, D.C. has—despite some flaws—created a document that is in some ways better than either of its sources.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

The District of Columbia's content has gaps and shortcomings but the overall level of historical coverage is quite strong. The standards are enhanced by the decision to include two complete U.S. history courses. Rigor is impressive, though not unrealistically so, in fourth and fifth grades and increases substantially in eighth and eleventh grades. Placing both years of the second course in high school would be preferable, but the eleventh-grade course does review much of the important eighth-grade content. Above all, the emphasis throughout is on *history*: historical fact, context, and interpretation, not abstract social studies doctrine or categories. Weighing its occasional flaws against its many impressive virtues, the District of Columbia receives a six out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The District of Columbia's *Learning Standards* are admirably straightforward. Sequence is evident and practical; the material to be covered in each grade is always clearly defined and outlined. Detail, despite occasional gaps, is substantial. Content presentation is clear, simple, and readable; social studies charts and jargon are absent. The District's planners have chosen their models well and done their job carefully. Despite occasional flaws, the standards give substantial guidance to teachers in structuring their courses and to students in understanding what they are expected to learn. Many states with weak and substance-thin history standards would be well advised to emulate D.C. and make use of the best state frameworks to construct their own high-quality standards. The District's impressive document receives a three out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)