

FLORIDA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

C

SCORES

Content and Rigor 5/7
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

6/10

Overview

Despite an unwieldy and visually confusing presentation, Florida's U.S. history standards offer a competent outline of key issues, events, and themes in American history. While detail is sometimes lacking, the document still offers teachers a useful and fairly comprehensive frame on which to build a course.

Goals and Organization

Florida's K–8 social studies standards are divided into five strands: American history, world history, geography, economics, and citizenship/government. Each strand is then divided into standards, and finally into grade-specific “performance benchmarks,” which are supplied in turn with supporting “remarks/examples.” The high school standards are organized similarly, save that a single set of standards is provided for grades 9–12, and a sixth strand (humanities) is added.

The American history strand is divided in the early elementary grades into purely thematic standards. Beginning in fourth grade, these standards constitute a series of thematic and chronological content headings, which grow in number and specificity in later grades.

American history begins in Kindergarten, with basic concepts of chronology, major holidays, famous individuals, and national symbols. In first through third grades, students are introduced to primary and secondary sources, distinguishing fact from fiction, and the achievements of major historical figures. Fourth grade covers Florida history from pre-Columbian beginnings to the present.

The U.S. history curriculum per se begins in fifth grade, which runs from the pre-contact era to the early nineteenth century. A full course in U.S. history is split between eighth grade and high school, with eighth grade running from British settlement to the Civil War, and high school spanning Reconstruction to the present.

Evaluation

Florida's history standards are presented in a visually confusing and unwieldy chart outlining the strands, standards, and grade-specific benchmarks. Yet nearly hidden within this lengthy and complex presentation is a good deal of solid historical overview.

Coverage from Kindergarten through fourth grade is conventional but competent, introducing fundamental concepts of historical development. The much more ambitious fifth grade course in U.S. history includes pre-Columbian North America, exploration and colonization of North America, the American Revolution, the birth of a new nation, and westward expansion. Though the content outline rarely lists specific details, it

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Florida Social Studies Standards Report: Benchmarks and Access Points with Remarks, U.S. history segments (2008)

Accessed from:

<http://www.floridastandards.org/Standards/FLStandardSearch.aspx>

offers a solid overview of key issues, themes, and events. It shows little political bias or tendentious distortion, neither overemphasizing politically fashionable groups or themes nor excluding more traditional political history.

More specifics would, however, make these standards significantly stronger. (The motivations of European explorers, to take one example, are listed as a subject without any further explication.) Teachers will certainly need good textbooks to explicate the terms and events listed in the standards. Nonetheless, the standards do provide a coherent outline on which a respectable course could be constructed.

The fifth-grade segment on exploration and colonization outlines the economic, political, and socio-cultural motivation for colonial settlement (examples include Puritans fleeing religious persecution, debtor settlements in Georgia, and the African slave trade); the characteristics of New England, Middle, and Southern colonies (colonial governments, geographic differences, resources, economic systems, occupations, religions, and social patterns); the political, economic, and social aspects of daily life in the thirteen colonies (town meetings, farming, and education); the importance of the triangular trade linking Africa with the West; and the introduction, impact, and role of slavery in the colonies. Some items are less impressive: The only examples given of “significant individuals responsible for the development of the New England, Middle, and Southern colonies” are “William Penn, Pontiac, [and] Oludah Equiano.”

Generally competent outlining continues through the topic of westward expansion, the closing section of the course. Causes and effects of the Louisiana Purchase are mentioned, though not detailed, as are the causes and consequences of the War of 1812, Manifest Destiny and its impact on Native Americans, the Missouri Compromise, and the experiences of western settlers. A substantial level of content is frequently maintained. Yet fifth grade, somewhat oddly, covers only the beginning of U.S. history, before the full two-year U.S. history course begins in eighth grade (except for pre-contact cultures, which are only covered briefly in fifth grade). American history is thus covered one-and-a-half times.

The eighth-grade course discusses historical sources, even introducing students to some basic historical research of their own. Colonial material considered in fifth grade is examined here in greater depth. Still, some items remain disappointingly vague. Such directions as “explain American colonial reaction to British policy from 1763–1774” and “examine the causes, course, and consequences of the American Revolution” are extremely short on specifics.

The course outline remains generally sound and substantive as it moves into the early national period and the nineteenth century. Important political points, often omitted in other states, are included, such as the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, the importance of the Washington and John Adams presidencies, the Alien and Sedition Acts, the election of 1800, the rise of political parties, *Marbury v. Madison*, the Embargo Act of 1807, and the entrenchment of slavery, continuing up through the Civil War. Unfortunately, the broadly framed benchmarks sometimes group examples out of logical chronological sequence. For instance, an item on westward expansion runs through the Kansas-Nebraska Act, while later items jump back to the 1804 Haitian revolution, Jacksonian democracy, and Florida statehood.

The high school U.S. history course picks up after the Civil War. High school students are introduced to historical methodology and historiography, and teachers can again turn to a reliable set of content guidelines: Reconstruction and the Thirteenth through Fifteenth Amendments, conflicts among Republicans during Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow laws and sharecropping, industrialization and the trusts, social transformation, populism and progressivism, the Spanish American War, and imperialism, among other examples.

The section on the causes and consequences of World War II includes “efforts to expand or contract rights for various groups” and mentions women, African Americans, Japanese Americans, and Hispanic Americans—though it fails to specifically mention the Japanese internment. This is curious, given some states’ almost exclusive focus on the Japanese American internment as *the* feature of the World War II home front.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Overall, the level of historical specifics and the generally consistent adherence to chronology provides significant guidance for teachers in structuring a solid American history curriculum. Most key events and themes are touched upon, including some content that is absent from many state standards. Despite occasional thematic departures from chronology and a lack of specific detail in some units, the Florida standards provide solid guidance to teachers and outline much of the essential content that students need to learn to become historically literate. Therefore, Florida standards earn a five out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The usability of Florida's standards is impaired by their visually challenging spreadsheet layout—an unfortunate surrender to social studies jargon that partially obscures content and clarity. Behind the confusing format, a rational scope and structure for each grade is laid out; yet the progression of material from elementary to middle to high school is not entirely sensible. The expectations for student knowledge are clear, and the standards offer a generally competent and useful outline of U.S. history, but there is sometimes a serious lack of detail. Florida's organizationally flawed and insufficiently specific standards earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)