



# FOREWORD

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“How unpardonable it would be for us,” the eminent historian David McCullough declared at Hillsdale College in 2005, “with all that we have been given, all the advantages we have, all the continuing opportunities we have to enhance and increase our love of learning—to turn out blockheads or to raise blockheads.”<sup>1</sup>

Unpardonable or not, we have mounting evidence that American education is doing just that—creating a generation of students who don’t understand or value our own nation’s history. Dunderheads if not truly blockheads, one might well conclude, at least in this domain.

On the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for example, not even half of twelfth graders made it to NAEP’s *basic* level in U.S. history—and barely 13 percent were proficient. What does that really mean? Here’s one illustration: When asked to “identify a significant factor that led to United States involvement in the Korean War” and “explain why this factor was significant,” only one high school senior in seven was able to supply a satisfactory answer, such as America’s efforts to curb the spread of communism after World War II.

Though scores in 2006 were up a bit from earlier rounds, the overall results were still appalling. (NAEP tested U.S. history again in 2010; these scores will be made public in a few months.)

Why is this? What causes this alarming vacuum of basic historical knowledge? There are multiple explanations, of course, but the most significant is that few states and school systems take U.S. history seriously. So why should students?

Yes, every state requires students to study American history in some form—often in the traditional junior-year U.S. history course—and every state except Rhode Island has mandated at least rudimentary standards for this subject. Yet few hold their schools accountable for teaching the standards or their students accountable for learning the content. In fact, it appears that only thirteen states include any history or social studies as part of a high school exit exam and just eight assess (or will soon assess) social studies or history at *both* the elementary and high school levels.<sup>2</sup> This under-emphasis on history in K-12 is compounded by the fact that universities seldom require prowess in history as a condition of entrance and almost never make it a graduation requirement of their own.

Since learning history doesn’t really count, schools devote less and less instructional time to it. One analysis,<sup>3</sup> based on federal data, suggests that elementary schools spend a paltry 7.6 percent of their total instructional time on social studies, of which history is only one part—and often a distressingly small part.<sup>4</sup> The evidence

1 Bruce Cole, “The Danger of Historical Amnesia: A Conversation with David McCullough,” *Humanities*, 23 (2002).

2 These findings were derived from two sources: First, from the Center for Education Progress’s *State High School Tests: Exit Exams and Other Assessments*, which was published in December 2010. In addition, Fordham staff conducted a search of each state department of education’s assessment practices in December 2010.

3 Beth A. Morton and Ben Dalton, *Changes in Instructional Hours in Four Subjects by Public School Teachers* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, May 2007) <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007305>.

4 By contrast, English language arts (ELA) consume almost 36 percent of elementary school instructional time. Given the strong link between content knowledge and reading comprehension that has been found by scholars like E.D. Hirsch, the irony is that spending more time on subjects like history would likely do more for student reading achievement than continuing to add hours of ELA instruction to the day.

suggests that even this little slice is shrinking: The amount of instructional time devoted to social studies has been *decreasing* over the past two decades such that, by 2003-04, students were spending, on average, eighteen hours less in social studies classes each year than they did in 1987-88. That means—assuming typical class periods of 45-50 minutes a day—that students lost the equivalent of four weeks of social studies instruction and, even more alarmingly, we have no indication that that trend is reversing.<sup>5</sup>

**TABLE 1 • AVERAGE INSTRUCTIONAL TIME BY SUBJECT, FIRST THROUGH FOURTH GRADE (1987–88 THROUGH 2003–04)<sup>6</sup>**

	1987–88		1990–91		1993–94		1999–2000		2003–04	
	Average # of hours	% of student school week	Average # of hours	% of student school week	Average # of hours	% of student school week	Average # of hours	% of student school week	Average # of hours	% of student school week
English	11.0	35.0	10.5	32.9	10.9	34.0	10.9	33.6	11.6	35.5
Mathematics	4.9	15.4	4.9	15.3	5.3	16.4	5.7	17.4	5.4	16.5
Social studies	2.8	8.7	2.9	9.1	3.0	9.5	2.9	8.9	2.5	7.6
Science	2.6	8.1	2.7	8.4	3.0	9.2	2.6	8.1	2.3	7.1
Length of student school week	31.6	-	31.9	-	32.1	-	32.6	-	32.6	-

*Notes:* Data collected from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), “Public Teacher Data File,” 1987–88, 1990–91, 1993–94, 1999–2000, and 2003–04; “Public School Data File,” 1987–88, 1990–91, 1993–94, 1999–2000, and 2003–04; “Charter Teacher Data File,” 1999–2000; and “Charter School Data File,” 1999–2000.

This raises the stakes on each remaining instructional hour that is devoted to social studies and history. Wringing every possible bit of learning from this time is critical if our children are to acquire the knowledge they need to become literate American citizens.

The first and most important step toward maximizing the educational yield from class time and ensuring that all students learn essential content is for states to set clear, rigorous, and specific standards. Such standards are the backbone to which curricula, assessments, teacher training, professional development, and even certification requirements are attached. We readily acknowledge that standards, in and of themselves, do not yield student achievement. We’ve ample evidence that standards, even good standards, absent proper implementation and accountability, do little more than adorn classroom bookshelves. Academic standards are simply the recipe with which the education system cooks; educators supply and mix the essential ingredients. But without clear, consistent standards, you can expect learning goals, curriculum, and instruction to vary wildly from district to district and school to school, and few students to graduate high school knowing all they should about their country’s past and thus its present.

## What We Found

Fordham has a long history of evaluating state history standards. In 1998 and again in 2000, Dr. David Saxe of Penn State University evaluated them for us. In 2003, we enlisted the help of historian Sheldon Stern, founder and former director of the American History Project for High School Students at the John F. Kennedy Library, to review state history standards with an eye toward how well they handled U.S. history.

Now it’s time for a fresh review. By 2010, forty-nine states and the District of Columbia—all but Rhode Island—had set standards for social studies that include—in some form—content expectations for U.S.

<sup>5</sup> Beth A. Morton and Ben Dalton, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

history. Forty-five of those states had changed their standards since 2003. In this report, we evaluate today's standards to see how they measure up.

To conduct it, we again tapped Sheldon Stern's expertise. He partnered with Jeremy A. Stern, who recently earned his PhD in American history from Princeton University.

We approached this review a bit differently. First, the criteria used in this analysis are different—and better. That's because this review is part of a comprehensive series of 2010–2011 appraisals of state standards in all four of the core K-12 subjects. We worked with the expert reviewers for those subjects to construct a common grading metric and to draft improved content-specific criteria. Application of those criteria and the common metric yields—for every state in every subject—a two-part score: “Clarity and Specificity,” which can earn as many as three points, and “Content and Rigor,” which count for up to seven points. Each set of standards thus obtained a total number grade (up to ten) which was then converted to a letter grade from A through F. (See Appendix A for more detail.)

In addition to evaluating *state* U.S. history standards, and mindful that some states, districts, teacher prep programs, and textbook publishers look to the NAEP for curricular clues, we asked the Drs. Stern to appraise the NAEP U.S. history framework for fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades.

The results of this rigorous analysis paint a bleak picture: A majority of states' standards are mediocre-to-awful. In fact, the average grade across *all* states is barely a D. In twenty-eight jurisdictions—a majority of U.S. states—the history standards earn Ds or below. Eighteen earn Fs.

Just one state—South Carolina—has standards strong enough to earn a straight A. The Palmetto State deserves praise for having brought the necessary focus, rigor, and innovation to this essential element of a comprehensive education.

Six other states—Alabama, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, New York, and the District of Columbia—earn A-minuses, and three more received grades in the B range. Bravo for them. But this also means that just ten jurisdictions—not even one in five—get honors marks for grounding their standards in real history and avoiding the worst of the temptations, pitfalls, and neglect that prevail across most of the land.

The NAEP framework earns an A-minus, indicating that the content that informs and undergirds its U.S. history assessment is superior to what most states are using. No wonder student achievement on the U.S. history NAEP is so weak.

What is to be done? Nobody is coming to rescue individual states from folly, slackness, or neglect. This is different from reading and math, where states now have the option—which all but a handful have declared they will use—of substituting the Common Core for their own standards. It's also different from science, where “common” standards are beginning to be constructed and will likely be available for states' consideration by year's end. The reality is that U.S. history standards are entirely up to each state to set for itself.

But that doesn't mean those jurisdictions with weak standards must start from scratch. Instead, they could look to the states with A-range grades—or to the NAEP—and revise their own standards using those as a model. That's what the District of Columbia did. In 2003, its U.S. history standards were abysmal—among the worst in the land. In the past several years, however, D.C. officials looked to the best state standards as models, adapted them, and then adopted them. Now the District's teachers are guided by some of the strongest U.S. history standards to be found anywhere. The twenty-eight states whose standards earned Ds or Fs would do well to follow the District's lead and adopt or adapt history standards from the states whose standards have earned As. (States with C grades—and maybe also those with Bs—would be wise to follow a similar course of action.)

Let us repeat, however, that great standards alone don't produce superior results. Several states with exemplary history standards still aren't serious about course requirements, assessments, and accountability.

They may have slipshod curricula (if any), mediocre textbooks, and ill-prepared teachers. Top-notch standards alone don't get the education job done. But they're a mighty important place to start.

### » CHANGES SINCE 2003

Of the forty-five states that changed their standards since our previous analysis, fourteen have shown some improvement. Sadly, many improvements are minimal. For example, six states' grades rose only from F to D. A few, though, are dramatic—and praiseworthy. The District of Columbia went from some of the worst to some of the best standards in the nation. South Carolina, both by revising its standards and by adding innovative expository “support documents,” rose from a mediocre C to an outstanding A and now has the best U.S. history standards in the land. Michigan went from an F to a respectable B. Hawaii, Minnesota, and New Jersey moved noticeably in the right direction, going from Fs to Cs, while Florida and Louisiana rose from D to C.

On the other hand, nine states managed to make their history standards *worse* between 2003 and 2011, some dramatically so. Arizona, which received an A in 2003, earned a C in 2011. Delaware, which received a B in 2003, shamefully stripped virtually all historical content from its standards and now earns an F. Smaller but still discouraging declines were found in Kansas and Virginia (both from B to C), Nevada (from C to D), Texas (C to D), Colorado (D to F), Connecticut (D to F), and Idaho (D to F). On balance, the combination of these improvements and drops had little impact on our national average. In both 2003 and 2011, the average grade for state U.S. standards was a D.

TABLE 2 • STATE U.S. HISTORY STANDARDS IN 2011 AND 2003

Jurisdiction	2011 Grade	2003 Grade
Arkansas	D	F
District of Columbia	A-	F
Florida	C	D
Hawaii	C	F
Illinois	D	F
Kentucky	D	F
Louisiana	C	D
Michigan	B	F
Minnesota	C	F
New Jersey	C	F
New Mexico	D	F
South Carolina	A	C
Washington	D	F
West Virginia	D	F
Alabama*	A-	A
Alaska	F	F
California	A-	A
Georgia	B	B
Indiana*	A-	A
Maine	F	F
Massachusetts*	A-	A
Maryland	C	C
Mississippi	F	F
Missouri	F	F
Montana	F	F
Nebraska	C	C
New Hampshire	F	F
North Carolina	F	F

Improved

No change

Jurisdiction	2011 Grade	2003 Grade
North Dakota	F	F
New York*	A-	A
Ohio	D	D
Oklahoma*	B+	B
Pennsylvania	F	F
South Dakota	D	D
Tennessee	C	C
Utah	C	C
Vermont	F	F
Wisconsin	F	F
Wyoming	F	F
Arizona	C	A
Colorado	F	D
Connecticut	F	D
Delaware	F	B
Idaho	F	D
Kansas	C	B
Nevada	D	C
Oregon†	F	D
Texas	D	C
Virginia	C	B

No change

Worse

Notes: Iowa formally adopted U.S. history standards in 2009 (the state's standards received an F in this current 2011 evaluation). Rhode Island has thus far not adopted U.S. history standards. In 2003, neither Iowa nor Rhode Island had state-adopted U.S. history standards. Thus, neither state is featured in this table.

\* In 2003, our grading scale did not allow for pluses and minuses. In 2011, we altered our grading scale to include an A-minus and a B-plus. Therefore, grades for states that earned an A in 2003 and an A-minus in 2011 have, effectively, not changed. Likewise, states that earned a B in 2003 and a B-plus in 2011 have not changed.

† Oregon's content standards have not changed since 2001, prior to our last history standards review, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A 2003 Report Card*. However, the evaluation criteria that we used to judge standards in 2011 have been amended and improved since 2003. (See Appendix A for 2011 grading rubric.) These changes contributed to a change in Oregon's final grade: from a D to an F. The complete 2003 review can be found at: <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/effectivestatehistory.html>.

## » WHAT GOOD STANDARDS DO RIGHT—AND WHAT BAD STANDARDS DO WRONG

Unsurprisingly, Sheldon and Jeremy Stern discovered marked differences between the best and worst state standards for U.S. history. They also found some interesting—and perhaps surprising—patterns. For example, the strongest standards tend to:

- offer coherent chronological overviews of historical content, rather than ahistoric themes organized into different social studies strands;
- offer a clear sequence of content across grades, revisiting the content of early grades in later grades in a more thorough and sophisticated manner, appropriate to students' developing cognitive abilities;
- systematically identify real (and important) people and specific events, and offer explanations of their significance;
- integrate political history with social and cultural history;
- recognize historical balance and context, discussing—for example—both the rise of political liberty and the entrenchment of slavery in America, the growing conflict between these concepts, and the long American struggle toward greater social and political justice;
- recognize America's European origins, while also acknowledging and integrating the roles and contributions of non-Western peoples;

- encourage comprehension of the past on its own terms, discouraging “presentism” — whereby students judge the past through the lens of today’s values, standards, and norms — and avoiding appeals to “personal relevance”; and
- be presented in clear, jargon-free language, with straightforward internal organization.

Strong standards, in short, provide both teachers and students with a coherent overview of what should be taught and learned, helping teachers structure their courses while giving students and parents a clear outline of what students are expected to know.

The weakest standards, on the other hand, tend to:

- ignore chronology by separating related content into social studies themes and categories;
- minimize real people and specific events, instead making broad generalizations and invoking specifics only with random and decontextualized examples;
- divide U.S. history across grades such that standards covering early American history are (typically) relegated to elementary or middle school, when students rarely possess the intellectual maturity and sophistication to study it with the necessary rigor or understanding;
- ignore political history in favor of amorphous social issues;
- be politically tendentious, seeking to mold students to specific political outlooks rather than to encourage historical comprehension or independent critical thought;
- present misleading or inaccurate content;
- encourage “presentism” rather than contextual comprehension;
- posit students’ present, personal interpretation of historical events as the main arbiter of history’s significance; and
- be couched in abstruse and often meaningless edu-jargon, and presented in overly complex and confusing mazes of charts and tables.

## » THE SOCIAL STUDIES PROBLEM

Whence do these follies and shortcomings arise? Mostly, it appears, from most states’ ill-considered decision to embed history in “social studies.”

This is not a new problem. In 2003, the year we released our last appraisal of state history standards, Fordham also published a scathing critique of the field of social studies itself, titled *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* At the time, we wrote:

*Evidence also accumulated that, in the field of social studies itself, the lunatics had taken over the asylum. Its leaders were people who had plenty of grand degrees and impressive titles but who possessed no respect for Western civilization; who were inclined to view America’s evolution as a problem for humanity rather than mankind’s last, best hope; who pooh-pooed history’s chronological and factual skeleton as somehow “privileging” elites and white males over the poor and oppressed; who saw the study of geography in terms of despoiling the rain forest rather than locating London or the Mississippi River on a map; who interpreted “civics” as consisting largely of political activism and “service learning” rather than understanding how laws are made and why it is important to live in a society governed by laws; who feared that serious study of economics might give unfair advantage to capitalism (just as excessive attention to democracy might lead impressionable youngsters to judge it a superior way of organizing society); and who, in any case, took for granted that children were better off learning about their neighborhoods and “community helpers” than amazing deeds by heroes and villains in distant times and faraway places.<sup>7</sup>*

7 James Leming, Kathleen Porter-Magee, and Lucien Ellington, eds., *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003), 1, [www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/wheredidssgowrong.html](http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/wheredidssgowrong.html).

Unfortunately, this year’s fresh analysis of state history standards suggests that the “lunatics” remain very much in control across most of the country. As the Drs. Stern explain in their “Introduction and National Findings” (page 10), the single greatest failing of state standards in this field, even the best of them—is that history content remains obscured by the social studies fog.

This is a problem for two reasons. First, because social studies is a mix of several disciplines, and because social studies standards are organized according to themes or strands rather than content or chronology, teachers and students fail to grasp *why* history unfolded as it did. Second, because social studies practitioners focus more on skill acquisition than knowledge acquisition, students wind up with little true understanding of history. Maryland’s standards, for example, declare that students “will use historical thinking skills” to “examine significant ideas, beliefs, and themes; organize patterns and events; and analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time in Maryland and the United States.” Yet—as in many other state standards—this broad assertion is accompanied by little or no historical content, so it’s unclear what knowledge students will deploy when exercising these ambitious “thinking skills.”

## Conclusion

The dismal results that U.S. students achieve on assessments of their own nation’s history rarely command the same media attention or public alarm as greets our slipping international competitiveness in math and science. But they reveal a crisis of similar gravity and pose a comparable threat to America’s future.

Our historical illiteracy, however, is a self-inflicted wound. It is not something that other countries are doing to us. As this report makes clear, today’s crisis in U.S. history is fed by most states’ indifference to this subject, demonstrated by the dismal condition of the academic standards they’re using for schools, teachers, and students. While a few jurisdictions have successfully bucked this trend, most lack the content and clarity needed to provide a solid foundation for effective curriculum, assessment, and instruction. To be sure, getting U.S. history standards right won’t guarantee a great history education for American schoolchildren. Yet it is a critical starting point in our effort to drive outstanding student achievement in this essential—and overlooked—foundation of an educated citizenry. Else David McCullough’s bleak prognostication is all but certain to come true.

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