

GEORGIA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

B

SCORES

Content and Rigor **5/7**
Clarity and Specificity **2/3**

TOTAL SCORE

7/10

Overview

Despite some gaps and omissions—and despite an unnecessarily convoluted arrangement of content—Georgia’s standards outline much of the essential U.S. history material with grade-appropriate depth and rigor. The decision to offer full U.S. history sequences in both elementary and high school is especially noteworthy.

Goals and Organization

Georgia’s K–8 *Performance Standards for Social Studies* are first divided into four strands, or “understandings”: historical, geographic, government/civic, and economic. Grade-specific standards are then provided for each strand, subdivided by chronological and/or thematic headings. At the high school level, these overlapping “understandings” are abandoned and standards are presented by course for government/civics, geography, U.S. history, and world history, again arranged under chronological and thematic headings.

Kindergarten through third grade introduce basic holidays and national symbols, a sampling of historic Americans, elements of Georgia history, and some of the basics of constitutional government.

The formal U.S. history curriculum begins in fourth grade, covering the two-and-a-half centuries up to 1860. Fifth grade covers the period from 1860 to the present. A second, full U.S. history course appears at the high school level.

Evaluation

Georgia makes an effort to delineate a substantive U.S. history curriculum, outlining two full courses—one in elementary/middle school and another in high school. There are, however, some problematic gaps in content. And, unfortunately, the splitting of related material among different strands (government/civics material, for instance, frequently bears directly on the historical outline) undermines the clarity and usefulness of the material.

Historical content from Kindergarten through third grade is conventional. Selected bits of history are introduced, including holidays, national symbols, famous individuals (such as: “Benjamin Franklin, inventor/author/statesman”), and elements of local history. A basic introduction to the principles of constitutional government is a welcome feature.

The fourth-grade introduction to pre-Civil War American history has notable strengths as well as curious gaps. The material on the colonial period, for example, discusses Native Americans, European exploration, regional differences in the British colonies, and the lives of “large landowners, farmers, artisans, women, indentured servants, slaves, and Native

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Georgia Performance Standards for Social Studies, K–8, U.S. history segments (2004, revised 2008)

Accessed from:

https://www.georgiastandards.org/standards/Pages/BrowseStandards/GPS_by_Grade_Level_K-8.aspx

Georgia Performance Standards for Social Studies, High School, U.S. history segments (2004)

Accessed from:

<https://www.georgiastandards.org/standards/Pages/BrowseStandards/SocialStudiesStandards9-12.aspx>

Americans.” But it then segues directly into “the causes, events, and results of the American Revolution” without, for example, considering the origins of representative government or slavery in the colonies. Likewise, students learn about the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and the major issues of the Constitutional Convention, including the compromises over slavery and the slave trade. Yet the crucial events of the 1790s, the election of 1800, and the Jacksonian era are left out.

Fifth grade follows much the same pattern. The standards include the sectional conflicts over states’ rights and slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the replacement of slavery by sharecropping and Jim Crow laws. But the coverage of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is *extremely* spotty and incomplete: Populism and Progressivism, for example, are entirely omitted.

At times, the outlines for both fourth and fifth grades seem unrealistically dense, presenting more detail than children at those ages seem likely to absorb. At other points, however, the outlines are too patchy, leaving out key content and issues without which students will be unable to grasp the causes of later events.

Georgia students do not study American history again until high school, but the eighth-grade course on Georgia history is generally well-integrated with American history (although the importance of slavery in the state’s history is barely mentioned until the “issues and events that led to the Civil War”).

It is unclear, however, how long the high school course is meant to be, since it is simply assigned to grades nine through twelve. Is it to be one year, or two? Is this decision left to local districts? Two years would certainly allow teachers to study the content in greater depth. But the standards do not specify.

Here the content is organized chronologically rather than by strand—a welcome change, logically keeping related content together. And, while the standards do not fully make up for all the omissions in earlier grades, much of the content missing from fourth and fifth grades is addressed here. For example, the curriculum mentions the Virginia House of Burgesses, New England town meetings, and the importance of the colonial legislatures. The Atlantic slave trade is included (without, however, mentioning the key role of African slave traders) as well as the Great Awakening, social mobility in the colonies, French-British imperial tensions, the French and Indian War, and other noteworthy examples.

Unfortunately, omissions continue to be a problem. The conflicts at the Constitutional Convention are handled well, yet the crucial Washington and John Adams presidencies are given short shrift. Jefferson’s purchase of Louisiana and sponsorship of the Lewis and Clark expedition are discussed, but the election of 1800 is again excluded. On the other hand,

the crises over slavery—the rise of sectionalism, the Missouri Compromise, the nullification crisis, the Mexican War, the Wilmot Proviso, and Compromise of 1850—are catalogued with a level of detail unusual in a high school standard.

In the twentieth century, the domestic crackdowns and Red Scare of 1919–20 are correctly included in Wilson’s era rather than the 1920s. The New Deal is covered in considerable detail. But the section on World War II is actually less thorough than it is in fifth grade. For example, German and Japanese aggression is left out and Hitler is not mentioned (all were discussed in fifth grade), while the Japanese American internment is stressed.

The Cold War and post-war periods include much useful detail. McCarthyism is discussed in the context of foreign (though not domestic) Communist expansion; the civil rights movement, the Warren Court, the agitations of the 1960s, Nixon’s foreign-policy achievements, and Watergate are all considered. However, a tendency to break material into thematic blocks results in some unfortunate chronological jumbles. For example, the Vietnam War appears before the baby boom, Jackie Robinson, or the space race. The final period, from Carter to the present, comes across as a rushed afterthought.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

On the whole, the Georgia standards contain much solid detail, but there are problems throughout. At times, the content for fourth and fifth grades is unrealistically dense for those age levels—yet some key issues (e.g., the rise of representative government and slavery), to which students at any level should be exposed, are either touched upon only tangentially or omitted entirely. The confusing, strand-based organization of the elementary standards leaves gaps in both content and context. The high school material is more coherently organized, and often offers admirable sophistication and detail—but there remain troubling omissions and thematic departures from chronology. Taken together, these standards earn the Peach State a five out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Georgia’s grade-level sequence is both rational and straightforward. The standards generally make clear what students are expected to know. Yet the reliance upon social studies jargon (content areas defined, for example, as “understandings”) undermines clarity of presentation, and the division of material among overlapping strands unnecessarily breaks up related content. It is also unclear how much time will be devoted to the high school U.S. history course. These weaknesses pull Georgia’s Clarity and Specificity score down to a two out of three. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)