

# IDAHO • U.S. HISTORY



## GRADE

**F**

## SCORES

Content and Rigor 1/7  
Clarity and Specificity 0/3

## TOTAL SCORE

**1/10**

## Overview

Idaho's U.S. history content is vague to the point of nonexistence. General thematic "goals" give way to almost equally nonspecific "objectives," leaving even a basic course scope barely defined. Students are directed to understand American history, but hardly any content is outlined with which they might begin to do so.

## Goals and Organization

Idaho's social studies standards are divided by individual grades from K–5, then into topical courses such as U.S. History I (grades 6–12) and U.S. History II (grades 9–12). There is also a course titled American Government listed for grades 9–12.

Within each grade level or course, the standards are divided into five strands (which are actually called "standards"): history, geography, economics, civics and government, and global perspectives. Each strand is then divided into a set of "goals." Both the strands and goals are common across all grades and courses. Finally, the goals are provided with between one and seven grade- or course-specific learning "objectives" (though objectives are not provided for every goal in every grade or course).

Five of the history strand's nine goals relate to American history:

- Build an understanding of the cultural and social development of the United States;
- Trace the role of migration and immigration of people in the development of the United States;
- Identify the role of American Indians in the development of the United States;
- Analyze the political, social, and economic responses to industrialization and technological innovations in the development of the United States; and
- Trace the role of exploration and expansion in the development of the United States.

In addition, some of the five civics goals are relevant to U.S. history, such as: "Build an understanding of the foundational principles of the American political system," or "Build an understanding of the organization and formation of the American system of government."

American history first appears in fifth grade; no chronological scope is specified, but the broadly thematic objectives refer to events from pre-settlement through to the Constitution. The U.S. History I course, assigned anywhere between grades six and twelve, appears—as far as one can tell—to return to the colonial period, before running up to the

## ✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

**Idaho Social Studies Content Standards,  
U.S. history segments (August 2009)**

### Accessed from:

[http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/content\\_standards/ss\\_standards.htm](http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/content_standards/ss_standards.htm)

Civil War. The U.S. History II course, meant to fall somewhere in grades nine through twelve, seems intended to run from the Civil War to the present.

## Evaluation

Idaho's social studies content standards are poorly named, for they contain hardly any content. Abstract and thematic goals lay out a uniform set of decontextualized, non-chronological issues or concepts. And the objectives, which are meant to outline grade- and course-specific content, are nearly as vague. Take, for example, the U.S. History I course's jaw-dropping directive to "discuss the causes and effects of various compromises and conflicts in American history such as the American Revolution, Civil War and Reconstruction."

The substance, such as it is, of American history begins in fifth grade, with a sampling of non-chronological objectives split among various goals. These mention: Native Americans, other cultural groups (not specified) and individuals (not specified) that shaped American history, the motives of European settlers, the lives of indentured servants, the slave trade, the motives for and experience of Western expansion, and the concept of Indian reservations. In the civics strand, students are to explain the important concepts in the Declaration of Independence, discuss the significance of the Articles of Confederation, and understand the basic concepts of the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. Yet there is no historical context or explanation with which to understand or explain any of these examples.

The U.S. History I course, still using the same fixed set of five goals, tosses out just *eighteen* broad, nonspecific objectives for the entire history strand. Students are, for instance, to "compare and contrast the different cultural and social influences that emerged in the North American colonies"—though there is no mention of *what* those influences might be. Additionally, they are expected to "describe the experiences of culturally, ethnically, and racially different groups existing as part of American society prior to the Civil War," and to "analyze the common traits, beliefs, and characteristics that unite the United States as a nation and a society."

Chronological outlining is completely absent. Students are simply told to "summarize the major events in the European settlement of North America from Jamestown to the end of the 18th century," or to "identify the United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861 and explain internal and external conflicts." A few moderately specific facts are mentioned, but not explained or contextualized: The slave trade, Manifest Destiny, Native American policy, and Native American resistance to assimilation are among the examples. The consequences of science and technology are mentioned

without specifics; the role of various countries in settling the American colonies is referenced—but none of those countries are named.

As in fifth grade, political history is shoehorned into the civics strand, touching on "the development of constitutional democracy in the United States," with references to "the Mayflower Compact, colonial assemblies, [and] Bacon's Rebellion." The "fundamental values and principles" of the founding documents are mentioned but are not presented or explained. A few events linked to foreign affairs—the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, the Mexican and Spanish American Wars—appear in the "global perspectives" strand. Again, there is no historical frame to guide teachers in contextualizing any of this material.

The U.S. History II course continues this pattern and, incredibly, the history strand's fifteen objectives are even less specific than U.S. History I. Much of modern U.S. history is not even touched upon, and what is mentioned receives no meaningful context or explanation. Students are to "analyze" how arts, beliefs, and values "have enriched American society." They are also to "discuss the causes and effects of various compromises and conflicts in American history." Immigration, a key issue of the period, is at least mentioned—though students are merely told to discuss the "motives" behind it, and the "changes in the political, social, and economic conditions of immigrant groups." They are likewise asked to explain industrialization and its socio-political consequences, "the causes of the Great Depression and its effects upon American society," and the shift from an industrial to a technological society in the twentieth century. But that is all: Students are *told* to understand these broad concepts, but are given no historical or intellectual content with which to do so. *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education* pop up, without explication, in the civics strand. Passing references to the world wars, the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War appear in the "global perspectives" strand, merely listed as "principal events in the United States' relations with the world."

The high school American government course adds "historical milestones that led to the creation of limited government in the United States" as exemplified by the founding documents. A reference to state constitutions and charters is the closest the course ever comes to mentioning relevant substantive information, aside from brief, unexplained references to the Magna Carta and other background documents in the civics course's own civics strand.

The only additional guidance for history teachers is a series of vocabulary lists provided for each grade level and course—but these words seem random, and though they are listed, they

are not defined. Moreover, it is specifically noted that these lists are “not to be taught to students”; they merely reflect “concepts that students may encounter in classroom or state assessments,” and are “intended to match the language of instruction to the language of assessment.”

## Content and Rigor Conclusion

Idaho’s inaptly named “content standards” do not *completely* fail to mention specific historical fact, but they come perilously close. Occasional events and concepts from American history are invoked but never explained in context. Rigor is nonexistent: Students are simply directed to understand broad themes of history, without any course structure or content outline. They are thus expected to *apply* knowledge that is never to provided them. As social studies doctrine dictates, schools are to teach children *how* to learn; the learning of actual content is not the concern of these standards. Bare references to a few points of substance earn Idaho a marginal one out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Idaho’s curriculum guidelines are poorly structured from the outset: Kindergarten through fifth-grade guidelines are individually outlined (so far as they go), yet U.S. History I is to be taught anywhere from grade six to grade twelve and U.S. History II anywhere from grade nine to grade twelve. It is impossible to establish coherent standards for a course that could be offered to students at vastly different levels of development and intellectual sophistication. Scope is difficult to determine, since so little content is provided in each course outline. Idaho’s formalistic layout, with identical standards and goals inflexibly applied to every grade and course, reduce history to a set of rigid, ahistorical categories. *Telling* students to know history without providing content or specifying expectations is not adequate. Idaho’s unclear and non-specific standards earn a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)