

ILLINOIS • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

D

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

4/10

Overview

Illinois's official U.S. history standards are exceptionally vague. Only general content expectations are delineated for ill-defined age blocks, making a coherent American history curriculum difficult to discern. The state does provide a separate assessment framework with a better (though still flawed) content overview. Unfortunately, Illinois explicitly declares that this framework "should not be considered state curricula," which suggests that the few enhancements it provides do little to ensure that Illinois students will learn the content necessary to become historically literate citizens.

Goals and Organization

The Illinois social science learning standards are divided into five strands, or "goals": political systems, economics, history, geography, and social systems. These are divided, in turn, among "skills" headings; and finally into learning directives (or standards). These learning directives are not, however, presented by grade. Instead, they are arranged by non-specific age levels: early elementary, late elementary, middle/junior high school, early high school and late high school.

Following a brief list of U.S. and world historical eras, the history strand is divided into five skills headings:

- Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation;
- Understand the development of significant political events;
- Understand the development of economic systems;
- Understand Illinois, United States, and world social history; and
- Understand Illinois, United States, and world environmental history.

The separate *Illinois Social Science Assessment Framework* offers additional content guidelines for social science courses in grades five, eight, and eleven, dividing material thematically among the social science goals (i.e., history, geography, political systems, etc., although the framework identifies these only by number—civics is "goal 14," history is "goal 16," and so forth).

As part of its history goal, the framework offers specific, chronologically organized outlines of U.S. history for grades five, eight, and eleven. Each grade, as laid out in the framework, constitutes a full, independent course on American history from settlement to the 1960s, with greater detail provided at each level; eleventh grade briefly carries the story to the present.

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Illinois Learning Standards, Social Science, U.S. history section (1997)

Accessed from:

http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_science/standards.htm

Illinois Social Science Assessment Framework, Grades 5, 8 and 11, U.S. history section (2007)

Accessed from:

http://www.isbe.state.il.us/assessment/pdfs/IAF_Soc_Sci_9_2007.pdf

It's crucial, however, to note the admonition that the framework is "not designed to replace local curricula and should not be considered state curricula." The Illinois Department of Education website explains that the framework is provided at the request of teachers. Its use is clearly optional.

Evaluation

Illinois's history standards open with Santayana's oft-repeated quote about repeating history. "Students who can examine and analyze the events of the past," they continue, "have a powerful tool for understanding the events of today and the future. They develop an understanding of how people, nations, actions and interactions have led to today's realities. In the process, they can better define their own roles as participating citizens."

Lofty and praiseworthy aims, to be sure, but unfortunately, the standards provide essentially no substance to back them up. Instead, the standards concentrate on conventional social studies skills and categories. No specific content is outlined for any grade level—just decontextualized, non-chronological standards. Students are told to understand concepts of chronology and causality, but the history standard provides "themes" instead of chronological or causal structure. Fragments of historical content are arbitrarily scattered across the thematic skills headings.

In the late elementary grades, for instance, students are asked to "describe how the European colonies in North America developed politically" and to "identify major causes of the American Revolution and describe the consequences of the Revolution through the early national period, including the roles of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin," and so on. Similarly vague issues of political history persist into the twentieth century. These items are reasonable starting points, but they provide no specifics with which to develop a coherent historical narrative—or with which teachers might structure their classes.

Later grades fall into the same trap. Middle school students are expected to "explain how and why the colonies fought for their independence." Early high school students are to "identify political ideas that have dominated United States historical eras (e.g., Federalist, Jacksonian, Progressivist [*sic*], New Deal, [and] New Conservative [*sic*])." Late high school students are asked to "analyze how United States political history has been influenced by the nation's economic, social, and environmental history."

Slavery, westward expansion, and industrialization are lumped under the history strand's economic systems heading, scattered among age blocks. The social history heading includes such sweeping topics as the motives for colonial

settlement and the influence of key individuals and groups, including "Susan B. Anthony/suffrage and Martin Luther King, Jr./civil rights."

Some items appear in separate sections of the standards altogether. For instance, the political systems strand (again, *not* to be confused with the "understand the development of significant political events" heading within the history strand) mentions "the historical events and processes that brought about changes in United States political ideas and traditions." The examples given—"(e.g., the New Deal, Civil War)"—reveal careless disregard for basic chronology. Such arbitrary divisions into themes and strands—artificial constructs which subvert context and chronology—make it nearly impossible to understand causal connections or relationships. Historical figures are hardly ever mentioned.

Thankfully, the separate *Assessment Framework* supplies some of the detail omitted in the learning standards. Unlike the mostly conceptual standards, it includes many specific people, events, and concepts, with content becoming more detailed and rigorous at each grade level.

But the *Assessment Framework* itself divides much related material into separate strands, frequently defying chronological logic. An item on the Supreme Court in the U.S. government strand, for instance, jumps from *Marbury v. Madison* to *U.S. v. Nixon*; similarly, an item on civil rights runs from the *Dred Scott* decision to the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Chronological inconsistencies in the optional *Framework* continue. Some historical content is pressed into thematic content items out of chronological sequence, and there are odd gaps and oversights in the history outline itself. Slavery and the slave trade are the first items in each grade's outline, appearing *before* discussion of European exploration and settlement. Hardly anything is said about the development of the colonies before the American Revolution. And the outlines skip almost everything between the Constitutional Convention and the Jacksonian era.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

The Illinois U.S. history curriculum seems to suffer from a content-and-rigor split personality. The official learning standards focus on theoretical social studies skills and categories, providing little historical detail and splitting what does appear into counterintuitive themes and strands. The assessment framework—despite its own flaws of omission and thematic arrangement—*does* include significantly more specific U.S. history content than the official standards, but this document it is explicitly *not* official or required. Its existence partially boosts the state's content offerings, but its

optional nature can raise the score to no more than a three out of seven in Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Illinois's learning standards provide minimal guidance on scope or sequence. Amorphous age groups are presented instead of individual grades; students are directed to explain broad historical issues while specific facts and chronology are not outlined. Detail is nearly absent and there is only the vaguest sense of measurable objectives. The assessment framework does provide specific course descriptions for grades five, eight, and eleven, each of which is meant to cover American history in its entirety; its organization, though complex, is comprehensible and is presented in clear prose. Yet the utility and impact of this optional framework are uncertain. Illinois's standards, overall, can earn no better than a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)