

KENTUCKY • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

D

SCORES

Content and Rigor **2/7**
Clarity and Specificity **1/3**

TOTAL SCORE

3/10

Overview

Kentucky's heavily abstract and thematic standards not only fail to outline specific content in each grade, but also give little sense even of the historical time spans meant to be covered. Details of U.S. history make only fleeting appearances amid myriad strands, themes, and sub-themes.

Goals and Organization

Kentucky delineates grade-specific social studies standards for grades 4–8 only. Additional standards are provided for primary grade bands (i.e., grades K–3), and for high school (grades 9–12).

The standards in each grade or grade band are first divided into five “big ideas,” or strands: government and civics, culture and societies, economics, geography, and historical perspective. Each big idea is then subdivided into “understandings” which constitute broad statements of target knowledge (for instance, students are to “understand that U.S. History can be analyzed by examining significant eras...to develop chronological understanding and recognize cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation”). These understandings are supplemented by “skills and concepts,” which provide grade- or grade-band-specific learning objectives (such as “explain and draw inferences about the importance of major events in United States history”). Finally, the state lays out “related core content for assessment,” indicating which material from the skills and concepts will be targeted by state assessments.

Early grades (defined as an undifferentiated K–3 block) focus on rights, democracy, social differences, national symbols and holidays, and the Plains Indians. Fourth grade focuses on Kentucky history.

The U.S. history sequence begins in fifth grade, but the vagueness of the specific content makes the scope barely discernible. Fifth grade appears to cover the entirety of U.S. history, while eighth grade runs from pre-settlement to Reconstruction, and high school from Reconstruction to the present.

Evaluation

Kentucky's standards, according to state education officials, “define what students should know and be able to do upon graduation from high school.”

In reality, searching for specific content in these documents is like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack. “Historical perspective” is, notably, the last of Kentucky's five social studies big ideas. And *perspective* is not the same thing as *content*. How is

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Kentucky Combined Curriculum
Document: Social Studies, U.S. history
segments (2006)

Accessed from:

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uments+and+Resources/Teaching+Tools/
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perspective to be achieved without specific knowledge? American history, where it can be found at all, is chopped up, pasted, and buried under the mountain of social studies charts, concepts, and assessments. Students are expected to understand, analyze, and interpret historical events, conditions, trends, and issues with the goal of developing historical perspective. Yet Kentucky's U.S. history standards are virtually content-free.

Primary grades (K–3) focus on general concepts of American democracy, local Native American tribes, and national symbols and holidays. Students are also “to use a variety of primary and secondary sources (e.g., artifacts, diaries, [and] timelines) to interpret the past.” But no specific subject matter—beyond the grade block’s broad generalizations—is spelled out.

Fourth grade focuses on the state’s own government and background. A series of broad thematic queries mention interactions between European settlers and Native Americans, Kentucky symbols, and the reasons for settlement of Kentucky. Students are again “to describe significant events in the history of Kentucky and interpret different perspectives,” but almost no content is outlined.

In fifth grade, students are first introduced to U.S. history—but it is not immediately obvious what material is to be covered here or in other grades. A single understanding, which appears almost verbatim in the historical perspective strands for grades five, eight, and high school, does however tell students to consider certain “significant eras” in order “to develop chronological understanding and recognize cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation.” For fifth grade, the eras listed run from colonization to the twentieth century. For eighth grade, they run from exploration and the “Great Convergence” of cultures to the Civil War. And for high school, they run from Reconstruction to the present. Each grade level’s scattered items of specific content fall within those same time spans.

The fifth-grade civics strand asks students to examine the basic functions of government and to understand the fundamental values embodied in the founding documents, e.g., “justice, equality, responsibility, [and] freedom.” Under the cultures and societies strand, students are to “identify early cultures (e.g., English, Spanish, French, [and] West African) in the United States and analyze their similarities and differences” and “describe various forms of interactions (compromise, cooperation, [and] conflict) that occurred between diverse groups (e.g., Native Americans, European Explorers, English colonists, [and the] British Parliament) in the history of the United States.”

But no chronology or factual foundation is provided for tackling these huge trans-historical themes. Indeed, under the historical perspective strand, the “Mayflower Compact, Emancipation

Proclamation, [and] Dr. Martin Luther King’s speech: *I Have a Dream*” are indiscriminately thrown together with no sense of their vastly different historical contexts.

Eighth-grade American history continues to ask students to analyze broad and generalized themes while furnishing them with no specific content. Under civics, students are to “describe and give examples to support how democratic government in the United States prior to Reconstruction functioned to preserve and protect the rights (e.g., voting), liberty and property of their citizens by making, enacting and enforcing appropriate rules and laws (e.g., constitutions, laws, [and] statutes)” and to describe how the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights “established democratic principles and guaranteed certain rights for all citizens.” Under the historical perspective strand, there are passing references to exploration, the “Great Convergence” of cultures after European contact, how ideals of equality and liberty informed the American Revolution, and how democracy expanded in the early United States. Students are to compare “political, social, economic and cultural differences (e.g., slavery, tariffs, industrialism vs. agrarianism, [and] federal vs. states’ rights)” before the Civil War, and evaluate the impact of the era’s science and technology. That, unfortunately, is about it.

The high school standards are provided in a single band, making it impossible to discern what students should know and be able to do in each high school grade. Indeed, in most of the strands, U.S. and world history are indiscriminately mixed together; many “skills and concepts” direct students to apply various themes to “the modern world (1500 A.D. to present) and United States History (Reconstruction to present).”

In one brief segment within the high school historical perspective strand, a few modestly specific fragments of content appear. Students might “explain how the rise of big business, factories, mechanized farming, and the labor movement have [*sic*] impacted the lives of Americans.” Or they might “examine the impact of massive immigration (e.g., new social patterns, conflicts in ideas about national unity amid growing cultural diversity) after the Civil War,” or “explain and evaluate the impact of significant social, political and economic changes during the Progressive Movement (e.g., industrial capitalism, urbanization, political corruption, [and] initiation of reforms), World War I (e.g., imperialism to isolationism, nationalism) and the Twenties (e.g., economic prosperity, consumerism, [and] women’s suffrage).” After World War II, they might discuss suburbanization, civil rights, and “conflicts over political issues (e.g., McCarthyism, U.S. involvement in Vietnam).” Shorn of all context or explanation, however, such content is unlikely to clarify the broader scope of American history for students, or help teachers organize effective courses.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Kentucky's vague and inconsistent effort to lay out broad thematic concepts for American history fails to provide teachers with any useful guidance on historical content. Occasional fragments of substantive outlining appear in eighth grade and in high school, but these only hint at chronology or context. The level of rigor expected or required at particular grade levels is difficult to discern, since the content itself is both hit-or-miss and confusingly organized. It is nearly impossible to understand how teachers could use these documents to organize their courses or determine student proficiency. The state earns only a two out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The Kentucky standards obscure and decontextualize the specific details of American history in a maze of jargon, charts, skills, concepts, and assessments. The standards are historically vague, disorganized, and incoherent. Teachers will find it difficult to determine what U.S. history content is essential and what specifically should be taught at which grade level; they will search in vain for a practical level of historical specificity and chronology or a clear and usable scope and sequence. Kentucky earns one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)