

LOUISIANA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

C

SCORES

Content and Rigor 4/7
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

5/10

Overview

Louisiana offers a confusing dichotomy between its overarching benchmarks and its more specific grade-level expectations; each defines different and sometimes contradictory grade-level course content. Most U.S. history substance appears in the expectations, but detail and quality are erratic. On balance, isolated patches of excellence do not create a consistently solid content outline.

Goals and Organization

The first section of Louisiana's social studies standards is divided into four strands: geography, civics, economics, and history. Each is in turn divided into grade blocks (K–4, 5–8, and 9–12), for which the state provides target “benchmarks”—broad descriptions of what students should know and be able to do in each grade band.

A second section, organized entirely differently, sets out grade-specific expectations for K–8; the grade-level expectations for each grade are again divided among the four strands. At the high school level, the strands are separated into subject-specific courses, and the expectations are provided by course rather than grade.

From Kindergarten through fourth grade, the benchmarks introduce concepts of chronology, the nature of primary and secondary sources, and the different perspectives of different groups. The grade-level expectations add references to historic symbols, holidays, American democracy, etc.

Strangely, starting in fifth grade, the content and sequence defined in the benchmarks *do not match* those outlined in the grade-level expectations. The benchmarks explicitly cover *all* of American history in fifth through eighth grades, and briefly recapitulate earlier periods at the high school level before moving to the twentieth century. But the expectations split U.S. history content across grades five, seven, and high school, with fifth grade running to the Revolution, seventh grade spanning from the Revolution to 1877, and the high school U.S. history course covering from 1877 to the present.

Evaluation

Louisiana insists that its social studies framework is intended only as a “blueprint” for local curricula “and promotes local flexibility in curricular design, course sequence, assessment methods, and instructional strategies...A reasonable balance between breadth of content and depth of inquiry must be achieved.”

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Louisiana Content Standards, Benchmarks, and Grade Level Expectations for Social Studies, U.S. history segments (2005)

Accessed from:

<http://www.doa.louisiana.gov/osr/lac/28V121/28v121.pdf>

Yet no standards can provide clear expectations for schools when the overview benchmarks and specific grade-level expectations contradict each other even as to the content of each year's scope.

The broad benchmarks describe rather than detail the knowledge that students should acquire. For instance, students in Kindergarten through fourth grade are to understand “that people in different times and places view the world differently.” They are also to explore the development of democratic principles, as “exemplified by historic figures, events, and symbols” (not specified), as well as understand “the causes and nature of various movements of large groups of people into and within Louisiana and the United States throughout history” (not specified).

For grades five through eight, the benchmarks are divided into conventional historical eras: “Three Worlds Meet” (to 1620), “Colonization and Settlement (1565–1763),” “Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s),” and so on to the present. Directives are especially brief for the twentieth century, but remain exceedingly broad throughout. For instance, students are expected to explain “the causes and course of the American Revolution and the reasons for the American victory,” “the impact of the American Revolution on the politics, society, and economy of the new nation,” and how “the institutions and practices of government established during and after the American Revolution” relate “to the foundation of the American political system.” The benchmarks for grades nine through twelve briefly reconsider the period from pre-colonization, but focus mainly on the twentieth century. Here, for example, students are asked to explain “the economic, political, social, and cultural transformation of the United States since World War II.”

Such benchmarks provide only the most basic checklist with which to structure a course. They are supplemented by the grade-level expectations but, as noted above, the sequence outlined by the expectations is *not the same* as that which the benchmarks describe. The expectations are more thorough than the benchmarks, though detail is still generally thin.

According to the fifth grade expectations, students are to describe pre-contact American cultures and early global trade ties; compare and contrast European, African, and Native American cultures; describe the Spanish conquests in the Americas; and describe the rise of the slave system. The topics are relatively few, and tend to remain general; for example, students are asked to describe “the political, social, and economic organization and structure of the thirteen British colonies.” The expectations often touch on key points, such as how European culture, politics, and institutions were reflected

in American life, or why some colonists rebelled while others remained loyal. But detail and explanation are meager at best.

In the document detailing grade-level expectations, seventh-grade U.S. history picks up at the American Revolution, where fifth grade left off, and continues to 1877—even though, according to the benchmarks, grades five through eight continue up to the present.

Unfortunately, the seventh grade substantive outline is bewilderingly inconsistent. Hardly a single specific event or person is mentioned before 1800; instead, students are simply told to understand the American Revolution and early federal eras. Yet the section beginning with the Louisiana Purchase marks the standards' high point, laying out the War of 1812 (including sectional divisions over the war and the British alliance with Native American groups); the Monroe Doctrine; western migration and Native American policy; Manifest Destiny; Texas independence and the Mexican War; Jacksonian democracy and Native American removal; technological change; national policy on banking, tariffs, and internal improvements; and so forth. Even the conflict between immediate and gradual emancipationists is mentioned, a key issue hardly ever raised in school standards.

This substantive burst fades with the coming of the Civil War. Vague directives to explain “the impact of the compromises on the issue of slavery and the *Dred Scott* decision on increasing tensions between the North and South” and “the immediate and long-term causes of the secession of the Southern states and the outbreak of the Civil War” cannot make up for omitted events such as the Missouri Compromise, the nullification crisis, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This unevenness continues: A broad directive to discuss the course, conduct, and long-term impact of the Civil War is placed alongside an admirably specific reference to the Emancipation Proclamation, conflicting Reconstruction plans, tensions between Andrew Johnson and the Congress, the election of 1876, and the Compromise of 1877.

The high school U.S. history expectations run from 1877 to the present. Here the benchmarks specify a review of earlier periods, but the expectations do not.

The expectations for high school echo the problems found in seventh grade but reveal far fewer bright spots. Students are to examine the rise of industry and big business and how they changed American society, “the changing relationship between the federal government and private industry,” “the phases, geographic origins, and motivations behind mass migration to and within the United States,” and more. But no historical or explanatory detail is provided for *any* of these broad topics. This vague approach continues to characterize coverage from

World War I through the New Deal and World War II. Again, students are simply directed to explain why a large-scale event or issue—like the Great Depression or World War II—occurred. There is factual carelessness as well: “Threats to civil liberties” are wrongly placed in the 1920s, while Woodrow Wilson—who in fact oversaw the Sedition Act and the First Red Scare—is mentioned only as a Progressive reformer. The post-World War II period is rushed and often chronologically confused. For example, the end of the Cold War appears before discussion of the Great Society.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Louisiana’s benchmarks are vague and general, providing only the broadest outline of required content. Most of the standards’ substance appears instead in the grade-level expectations. Unfortunately, the expectations not only contradict the scope of the benchmarks, but also are wildly inconsistent in quality. The level of substantive detail is sometimes adequate, occasionally even impressive. But, far too often, the expectations constitute little more than directives to “describe” or “explain” a period or event with few or no specifics. Since the content detail is so variable, no single grade maintains a consistently solid level of rigor. The decision—at least as the expectations are organized—to split American history content across grades five, seven, and high school is a further blow to substantive rigor; earlier material is relegated to earlier grades, where students’ comprehension, sophistication, and retention are less developed. On balance, Louisiana’s mixed-bag outlines earn a four out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The division of Louisiana’s standards between the benchmarks and the grade-level expectations introduces not only confusing overlap but also outright contradiction and mystifying scope and sequence. Readers are left with uncertainty about what is to be specifically taught and when, leaving unclear what knowledge students at various grade levels are expected to have mastered. Except for the high school expectations, content is split among thematic strands, further undermining the clarity and logic of presentation. A visually overcrowded and confusing layout makes it harder still to distinguish among different sections and subsections. The expectations, by themselves, do provide some substantive guidelines to teachers and students—but they are often undermined by inadequate and inconsistent levels of detail. This leads to unclear classroom expectations. The muddled organization leaves the state with a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)