

# MAINE • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

**F**

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

**0/10**

## Overview

Maine, focused on broad social studies themes and categories to the virtual exclusion of content, defines no grade-by-grade sequence or scope and fails to offer even the most basic content outline for U.S. history.

## Goals and Organization

Maine's social studies *Learning Results* are divided into five strands: applications of social studies processes, knowledge, and skills; civics and government; economics; geography; and history. Each strand is broken into thematic subsections. The history strand is divided into "historical knowledge, concepts, themes, and patterns" and "individual, cultural, international, and global connections in history."

With each of these subsections, the state provides, in a series of charts, "performance indicators and descriptors" for each of four grade blocks: pre-K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–diploma. The indicators are broad headings laying out concepts that students should understand; the descriptors provided for each indicator lay out queries for students to address.

A brief list of historical eras (for both U.S. and world history) appears in the introductory section, accompanying a definition of the word "eras." Beyond this, no specific U.S. history is laid out, and no particular periods are assigned to any particular grade.

## Evaluation

Citing "the great architects of American public education"—Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey—the Maine standards insist "that every student must be well versed in our nation's history, the principles and practices which undergird citizenship, and the institutions that define our government." However, in order to assure that history is more than mere "lists of people, events, and dates," the standards recommend "a clear understanding" of the interrelated social studies disciplines of government, history, geography, and economics "as the pillars of content."

We know there's trouble when, in an effort to clarify this admirable goal, the state sets out to translate the word "understand" into social studies jargon. As used in Maine's standards, the word "refers to a variety of different levels on Bloom's taxonomy and was used intentionally to serve as an umbrella term for the cognitive demand that is described by the descriptors beneath the performance indicators"—whatever that may mean.

Worse, while the state takes such pains to explain what it means by "understand," hardly any time is spent on the specific historical substance that must be understood.

### ✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Maine Learning Results: Parameters for Essential Instruction, Social Studies, U.S. history segments (2007)

Accessed from:

<http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/pei/ss102207.pdf>

Maine’s sole “pillar of content” for U.S. history is a basic list of eras—which is relegated to the introductory text rather than incorporated into the standards themselves: “The Americas to 1600”; “The Colonial Era, 15020–1754”; “The Revolutionary Era, 1754–1783”; “Nation Building, 1783–1815”; and so forth, through to “Contemporary United States, 1961–Present.”

Among the five strands, history ranks last, and there is effectively no guidance as to what actual historical subject matter should be taught.

For the first strand, “social studies processes, knowledge, and skills,” students are to “apply critical thinking, a research process, and discipline-based processes and knowledge from civics/government, economics, geography, and history in authentic contexts.” Yet contexts, “authentic” or otherwise, are not specified. Under civics and government, students are to study the nature of American government and democracy. Apart, however, from a brief reference to federalism and checks and balances, there are no specifics, let alone any history—just hazy directives to understand broad and vaguely defined issues and themes, such as “explain that the *structures* and processes of *government* are described in documents, including the Constitutions of Maine and the United States.”

Of the three sub-units in the civics strand, one focuses on diversity—and the only named group therein is Maine’s Native Americans. Students are to “understand political and civic aspects of unity and diversity in Maine, the United States, and the world, including Maine Native Americans.” There are also diversity subunits in the economics and geography strands, and again, Maine’s Native Americans are the only group specifically mentioned. Students are merely to “understand economic aspects” and “geographic aspects” of unity and diversity, “including Maine Native Americans.”

The history strand for all of K–12 comprises just over two pages. Students, according to the strand’s heading, are to “draw on concepts and processes from history to develop *historical* perspective and understand issues of continuity and change in the community, Maine, the United States, and world.” They are evidently to do this without learning specific historical content, however, since no substance whatsoever is defined in the charts that follow. And, since no historical substance is specified, no distinction is even made between American and world history.

Under the first of two subsections in the history strand, “historical knowledge, concepts, themes, and patterns,” students are directed to “understand” concepts of chronology and causality. For example, in the “performance indicators and descriptors” provided for this sub-unit, students in grades three through five are to “identify various major *historical* eras,

major enduring themes, turning points, events, consequences, persons, and timeframes, in the history of the community, Maine, and the United States.” No further information is offered. At the high school level, students shall “Analyze and critique major *historical* eras, major enduring themes, turning points, events, consequences, and people in the history of the United States and world and the implications for the present and future.” Note that students are expected not merely to analyze but to “critique” the past—reflecting the modern tendency toward “presentism” (whereby students judge the past through the lens of today’s values, standards, and norms) and personal relevance that is evident throughout the document.

The second history subsection is “individual, cultural, international, and global connections in history.” Note that individual perspectives are listed first: Students are again encouraged to see the past principally in terms of themselves. Directives throughout the subsection remain broad: The overall aim is for students to “understand *historical* aspects of unity and diversity.” For example, students in sixth through eighth grades are asked to “identify and compare a variety of cultures through time, including comparisons of native and immigrant groups in the United States, and eastern and western societies [*sic*] in the world.” In high school, they are to “identify and critique issues characterized by unity and diversity in the history of the United States and other nations, and describe their effects.”

The closest to any specific content remains the admonition, at every grade level in this subsection, to study aspects of Native American culture—though even this narrow scrap of substance consists only of vague references to “various cultural traditions and contributions” and “major turning points and events” for Maine Native Americans (in all grades) and Native Americans generally (only in high school). The only other groups alluded to are “various”—but unnamed—“historical and recent immigrant groups.”

## Content and Rigor Conclusion

If Maine teachers, students, and parents are looking for substantive learning parameters and essential instructional guidelines in U.S. history in their state’s standards, they will come up empty-handed. There is, for all practical purposes, no content at all. And, since no content is defined, rigor is meaningless. Finally, the reliance on personal relevance as a tool for judging the past all but guarantees that students will never achieve historical understanding—no matter how many “descriptors” are in place “to define the level of cognitive demand for student performance.” Maine’s historically hollow standards earn a zero out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The Maine standards aim to achieve “essential instruction” and measurable “learning results.” The reality, unfortunately, is that the standards amount to little more than muddled, incoherent, and substance-free jargon. There is no credible and/or specific historical scope or sequence, and it is all but impossible to determine what is being asked of either teachers or students at any grade level. Samson would have no problem bringing down Maine’s “pillars of content”: They are made of paper and built on sand. The state earns a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)