

MARYLAND • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

C

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

5/10

Overview

Maryland's preference for thematic organization over chronology, together with a frequent lack of detail, results in confusing and fragmentary outlines that obscure historical sequence and comprehension. The state further undermines its content with a poor choice of sequence: It offers a single U.S. history course split over grades five, eight, and high school. This decision is made worse by the state's failure to specify any review of earlier content in later grades.

Goals and Organization

Maryland's social studies standards for grades pre-K–8 are divided into five strands (called “content standards”): political science, peoples of the nation and world, geography, economics, and history. Each strand is further subdivided into thematic subheadings, and grade-specific skills and learning expectations are presented in charts for each subheading.

At the high school level, the strands are replaced with subject-specific courses. History course outlines are divided by chronological or thematic subdivisions, which are then supplied with course-specific content expectations, or “objectives.” The objectives note parenthetically which of the five strands pertain to their content.

From pre-Kindergarten through third grade, concepts of chronology, timelines, and the distinction between “past and present time” are introduced. Maryland's history is introduced in fourth grade.

The U.S. history standards are split into a single course over grades five, eight, and high school. Fifth grade runs from colonization to the Revolution; eighth grade continues to 1877, and high school to the present. No review of earlier periods is specified.

Evaluation

Maryland's history strand asserts that students “will use historical thinking skills” to “examine significant ideas, beliefs, and themes; organize patterns and events; and analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time in Maryland and the United States.”

Regrettably, however, history is listed last among Maryland's social studies strands and historical thinking is often subordinated to broader conceptual themes while detail and specifics receive short shrift. Also, because Maryland has split U.S. history content across three grades, fifth grade provides the only coverage of American history through the Revolution—and it does so with patchy detail and inadequate depth. Broad headings mention—but barely explicate—early colonial settlements; the growth and regional development of the colonies; the “different roles and viewpoints of individuals and groups,

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum: Social Studies (Pre-K–8) and High School United States History, U.S. history segments (2006, curricula mandatory effective July 2009)

Accessed from:

http://mdk12.org/instruction/curriculum/social_studies/index.html

such as women, men, free and enslaved Africans, and Native Americans during the Revolutionary period”; and the causes and effects of the American Revolution. Related content is also divided arbitrarily among the various strands. The rise of representative assemblies and town meetings appears in the political science standard, which likewise directs attention (without specifics) to the influence of European philosophy, regional factors, and class interests on American ideas. It also lists key founding documents and selected founders, as well as the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. Additional historical content is cut and pasted into the peoples of the nation, geography, and economics strands, making it extremely difficult for teachers or students to understand how historical lives and events actually interrelate.

When U.S. history resumes in eighth grade, the material is broken up and decontextualized in much the same way. For example, the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, and early Supreme Court decisions appear only in the political science strand. Cultural and ethnic conflict, immigration and nativism appear under “peoples of the nation.” Points such as regional differences, the Louisiana Purchase, and migration crop up under geography, while regional economic goals and resources, technology, early industrialization, trade, protectionism, and banks appear under economics. Specific events are sometimes mentioned in these thematically-arranged fragments, but specific people are not.

The eighth-grade history strand is more sophisticated than the fifth grade strand, but it *begins* with the Louisiana Purchase and Manifest Destiny. Not only are all earlier periods relegated to fifth grade, the 1790s and election of 1800 appear in *neither* course. Despite some improvement in depth, the eighth grade post-1800 standards are themselves spotty, sorely lacking in detail, and organized too often by theme rather than chronology, making chaotic nonsense of historical development and interconnections. The Jacksonian era, for instance, segues directly to Reconstruction. A section on the “conflict between ideas and institutions” then jumps back to the effects of the American Revolution, foreign policy from 1812 to the Mexican War, industrialization, the expansion of slavery, sectionalism, abolitionism and “the other reform movements.” A catch-all Civil War section jumbles the Constitution’s three-fifths clause, the 1820 Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, the 1798–99 Virginia-Kentucky resolutions, the 1814 Hartford Convention, nullification, political party divisions, Dred Scott, John Brown, the election of 1860, and secession—in *that order*. The Civil War itself is tossed off with a directive to “identify the goals, resources and strategies of the North and the South” and a discussion of Lincoln’s use of black regiments. This organizational scheme may make sense to social studies planners, but it is not history education.

In high school, remarkably, those tangled strands are abandoned in favor of a straight, largely chronological history course. But sadly, nothing before 1877 is studied again at this level, and the standards remain uneven—guidelines are broad, and specifics and real people are barely present. For example, the aftermath of Reconstruction refers to presidential vs. congressional reconstruction plans, but mentions no people or details (President Andrew Johnson does not merit an appearance). The rise of Jim Crow lumps together everything from the 1866 Black Codes to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision.

The sections on the rise of *laissez-faire* capitalism and industrialism are stronger, and they make it possible for students to understand the later responses from government, labor, and the Populists. Events up to World War I are described in reasonable detail (the wartime crackdowns on civil liberties are, unusually, directly associated with the Woodrow Wilson administration). For the 1920s and the Great Depression, the content items again become broader, but do provide a generally coherent framework. After World War II, thematic agglomerations again undermine chronology. In a section on foreign relations, the Vietnam War and the 1960s appear before Sputnik, and the September 11 attacks appear before the Reagan administration. The standards also remain averse to mentioning important individuals: Why, for instance, is the Great Society referred to by name, but Lyndon Johnson is not?

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Like a number of other states (including Indiana and Kansas, which, according to Maryland’s website, “were used as benchmarks for comparison”), Maryland made the unfortunate decision to split the U.S. history content across grades five, eight, and high school. While there is a dramatic change in students’ intellectual maturity across those grades, the Maryland standards only tacitly acknowledge students’ developing sophistication by increasing the substance and rigor of the standards across grades. But even in relation to their assigned grade levels, the earlier courses are inadequate as they stand. Their relentlessly thematic organization disrupts almost all sense of chronology or historical development, and their shallow coverage provides limited guidance to teachers or students. The high school course is in many respects superior, providing a history curriculum with some coherence. Yet even here, a frequent preference for theme over chronology results in some disordering of events, and the level of detail frequently remains skimpy. On balance, Maryland’s disjointed and fragmentary standards earn a three out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Despite its flaws, Maryland's U.S. history sequence is fairly straightforward with the scope of each grade plainly defined. Yet the relentless splitting of material into strands through eighth grade undermines the clarity and utility of the outlines, and preference for theme over chronology creates confusion at the high school level as well. Detail is in short supply at all levels. Maryland's usable but problematic standards barely earn a two out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)