

MICHIGAN • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

B

SCORES

Content and Rigor **5/7**
Clarity and Specificity **2/3**

TOTAL SCORE

7/10

Overview

Michigan's U.S. history standards, seeking to avoid both theoretical generalizations and overly confining content outlines, produce a curious result: Many of the historical content items raise important and sophisticated issues, but—especially before the high school level—supporting and explanatory detail is frequently lacking. Local districts and teachers will have to pick up the slack themselves in order to develop rigorous U.S. history courses from these intelligent yet overly broad outlines.

Goals and Organization

Michigan's social studies standards offer grade-specific content expectations for grades K–8. Each grade-level outline is divided into four strands—history, geography, civics/government, and economics—each of which is further subdivided thematically or chronologically and is supplied with grade-specific content expectations.

At the high school level, standards are organized by course (World History and Geography, U.S. History and Geography, Civics, and Economics), rather than by grade or strand.

Kindergarten through second grade cover broad social studies concepts, such as “places and regions,” “human systems,” and “purpose of government.” Third grade focuses on “Michigan Studies,” a general overview of the state through its admission to statehood. Fourth grade is described as “United States Studies,” but actually continues its overview of Michigan, using “examples from Michigan history (from statehood to the present) as a case study for learning about United States geography, economics, and government.”

The U.S. history sequence is treated as a single course, divided among grades five, eight, and high school. Fifth grade runs from pre-settlement to 1800, and eighth grade from 1754 to 1898. The high school U.S. history course briefly reviews the period to 1877, then continues to the present.

Evaluation

Michigan's standards commendably recognize that when “standards documents stress ‘thinking’ at the expense of ‘substance,’ teachers and educational critics often argue these appear vague and offer little guidance for deciding what content should be taught and tested.” But they also assert that “standards that specify more substantive detail face their own critics who argue that such detail is too prescriptive.” Michigan's standards claim to bridge this gap with a balance of age-appropriate and grade-specific content and skills that nurture historical “habits of mind” that enable students to move from inquiry to analysis, interpretation, and understanding.

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Michigan Social Studies Grade Level Content Expectations: K–8, U.S. history segments (2007)

Accessed from:

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SSGLCE_218368_7.pdf

Michigan High School Social Studies Content Expectations, U.S. history segments (2008)

Accessed from:

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SS_HSCE_210739_7.pdf

The result of such hedging is, predictably, a curious amalgam of valuable substance and worrisome omission.

Early grades emphasize standard-issue social studies concepts of place, people, time, and government; third and fourth grades are largely limited to Michigan's own past. But, by fifth grade, where the U.S. history curriculum is introduced, the standards announce "a departure from the social studies approach taken in previous grades...to a more disciplinary-centered approach concentrating on the early history of the United States."

Following a concise narrative introduction to the period, the fifth grade course is divided into three historical eras: Beginnings to 1620; Colonization and Settlement (1585–1763); and Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1800). These are subdivided into chronological and thematic headings, such as "American Indian Life in the Americas" and "European Exploration," touching on colonization and cultural contact, the European contest for North America, slavery, colonial life, the roots and consequences of the Revolution, and on through to the Constitution.

Significant historical substance is outlined. Students are, for example, to "describe the development of government including establishment of town meetings, development of colonial legislatures and growth of royal government"; to "describe the role of the French and Indian War, how British policy toward the colonies in America changed from 1763–1775, and colonial dissatisfaction with the new policy"; or, to "describe the issues over representation and slavery the Framers faced at the Constitutional Convention and how they were addressed in the Constitution."

Despite such intelligent summary points, there are failings in detail. The standards do not, for instance, describe what British policies *were*, or *how* they were rooted in the French and Indian War. Students are told to discuss the triangular trade's "trade routes," but the standards do not specify what they were. They are expected to discuss how "immigration patterns" led to "ethnic diversity in the Middle Colonies"—without being told what immigrant groups were arriving. The standards lay out many important and sophisticated historical questions, but too often fail to supply supporting detail. Curriculum writers and teachers will have to fill in the gaps if students are to address the issues raised.

The same pattern persists in eighth-grade U.S. history—although, strangely, the useful narrative introduction is omitted. The course is divided into four partly overlapping "eras": 1754–1800s, 1792–1861, 1850–1877, and 1870–1898. Again, there are lists of thoughtful and intelligent content items: "explain the development of the power of the Supreme Court through the doctrine of judicial review, citing *Marbury*

v. Madison, *McCulloch v. Maryland*, and *Dartmouth College v. Woodward*"; or "describe the competing views of Calhoun, Webster, and Clay on the nature of the union among the states (e.g., sectionalism, nationalism, federalism, [and] states' rights)." But again, there are serious gaps in supporting detail. The basic facts of the sectional crisis must, for instance, be learned before the competing views of leading statesmen can make sense. A brief listing of events from the Missouri Compromise to the *Dred Scott* decision offers a checklist, but no explanation or context.

The third and final portion of the U.S. history sequence, offered at the high school level, briefly recaps the period prior to 1877, then provides a generally solid six-page content outline for the period from 1877 to the present. Many of the eleven largely chronological topics (from the growth of industrial and urban America through changes in America's role in the world since 1980) are admirably rich. Supporting detail is better integrated than in earlier grades. The content items are often phrased in a more explanatory and expository manner—although specific events are still too often mentioned without being defined, and historical figures are rarely referenced.

A useful item, for instance, mentions "consequences of New Deal policies" and provides explanatory examples: "promoting workers' rights, development of the Social Security program, banking and financial regulation, conservation practices, [and] crop subsidies." Another asks students to discuss post-World War II policy decisions and legislative actions, listing rarely-mentioned specifics: "G.I. Bill of Rights (1944), Taft-Hartley Act (1947), Twenty-Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1951), Federal Highways Act (1956), [and] National Defense Act (1957)." A weaker example asks students to discuss urbanization and "the resulting tensions among and within groups," without specifying any such groups. Another asks students to "explain the causes of World War I, [and] the reasons for American neutrality and eventual entry into the war," without any further information. Such content items outline many key issues and themes—but they would be far stronger and more useful if they went beyond *mentioning* such issues and *explained* them as well.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Michigan's standards offer largely content-oriented U.S. history standards that provide a serious start at building historical understanding. Unfortunately, while the content expectations outline many of the key issues in America's story, they frequently fail to provide explanatory detail. Seeking to avoid both social studies generalizations and overly confining guidelines, Michigan has found a curious middle ground, promoting serious historical inquiry without adequately

defining historical content. This odd amalgam, rich yet full of holes, is boosted by the more comprehensive high school outline to a five out of seven in Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The scope and sequence of the Michigan's standards reflects the deliberate choice, beginning in fifth grade U.S. history, to depart from "the social studies approach" and adopt "a more disciplinary-centered approach." Jargon is avoided in favor of substantive discussion, and the *Content Expectations* do challenge students to deal with sophisticated content—yet, especially in elementary and middle school, they do not adequately outline the content that students are expected to learn, leaving course scope ill-defined. The sometimes excellent substance and detail are somewhat uneven, leaving teachers to fill in the gaps when structuring their courses. On balance, Michigan earns a two out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)