

MINNESOTA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

C

SCORES

Content and Rigor 5/7
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

6/10

Overview

Despite some gaps and omissions, Minnesota has made a genuine effort to include significant substance in its U.S. history standards. Unfortunately, visual presentation is confusing and detail frequently erratic, undermining clarity, context, and chronology. Further, the assignment of courses to broad grade blocks (as opposed to individual grades) makes it unclear exactly what content should be mastered in each grade.

Goals and Organization

Minnesota divides its history and social studies standards into seven strands: U.S. history, Minnesota history, world history, historical skills, geography, economics, and government and citizenship. Each strand is presented as a unit, broken into sections by grade bands—K–3, 4–8, and 9–12—without individual grade-level standards. (The Minnesota history strand includes standards only for grades 4–8.)

For each such grade band, the content is presented in a table and broken into “strands,” “sub-strands,” “standards,” and “benchmarks.” In addition, the final column provides “examples” for most benchmarks.

In the K–3 block, the U.S. history strand briefly introduces changes in lifestyle between past and present, famous people and events, and the various cultures that converged in North America. A course on Minnesota history appears in grade block 4–8.

The U.S. history strand places a full U.S. history course, from pre-settlement to the present, in grade band 4–8. A second full course, covering the same all-encompassing time span, is placed in grade band 9–12. But, as scope is defined only within age blocks, specific content is not assigned to specific grades.

Evaluation

The ultimate goal of Minnesota’s U.S. history standards is to help “students understand that the United States is a nation built on ordinary and extraordinary individuals united in an on-going quest for liberty, freedom, justice, and opportunity” and to recognize “how much courage and sacrifice it has taken to win and keep liberty and justice.”

It’s a promising start. The title of Minnesota’s document, furthermore, suggests an unusual distinction between history and the other domains of social studies: History is clearly regarded as primary—the other strands seem intended as subject-specific adjuncts.

A respectable (though sometimes patchy) level of content is included. Unfortunately, the standards’ complicated tabular organization undercuts the clarity of this content. The

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Minnesota Academic Standards in History and Social Studies, U.S. history segments (2005)

Accessed from:

http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=006219&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

separation of the examples from the broader benchmarks tends to turn the examples into visually confusing checklists, lacking context or explanation; detail is too often lacking, especially prior to high school.

Following the conventional content of the early grades, a full U.S. History course is introduced between fourth and eighth grade—though it is not specified how many years the course constitutes, or in what grades it will be taught; it seems such questions are left to the judgment of local districts.

This course opens with important Native American tribes, selected European explorers, conflict and cooperation in cultural contacts, and so forth. Religious, political, and economic motives for European settlement are discussed, as are regional differences among the colonies and the establishment of the slave trade and slavery. Detail often remains skimpy. The bare examples (“Pequot War, French and Indian War,” for example) do not adequately explain “the differences and tensions between the English colonies and American Indian tribes.” After the American Revolution, for which basic events and selected individuals are mentioned, students are to “know reasons why the United States developed the Constitution, including the debates and compromises that led to the final document”—but the “examples” given are both highly selective and torn from context: “Interstate commerce, Shay’s [*sic*] Rebellion, 3/5 Compromise, [and the] Bill of Rights.” The 1790s, when the Constitutional system took hold, are skipped altogether.

Similar segments cover westward expansion, technological change, and the debate over slavery, sectionalism, and secession. But the lists of examples remain fragmentary and often chronologically jumbled. Those for the sectional and secession crisis, for instance, are “Harper’s Ferry, the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the *Dred Scott* case, [the] rise of the Republican Party, [and] Harriet Beecher Stowe.” Aside from this chronological mishmash, where are the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act (to name a few examples)? Likewise, the “13th Amendment [and] Reconstruction” do not even begin to explain “the aftermath of the [Civil] war and its effects on citizens.”

The post-Reconstruction units are somewhat more comprehensive, covering immigration, industrialization, the rise of Jim Crow, the rise of the labor movement, and Progressivism; through the Great Depression, World War II, and a brief section on the Cold War and civil rights. But selective focus is again a problem. The World War II home front is, for instance, reduced to “Japanese internment, Tuskegee Airmen, and ‘Rosie the Riveter’”—apparently only women and minorities experienced the burdens of the war.

Unlike many other states, the entire span of U.S. history is covered again in high school, though the standards are again silent as to which grades and how many semesters are to be devoted to this subject. The high school standards are far more substantive than those in fourth through eighth grade (the Compromise of 1850 now appears, for example). But detail, though sometimes impressive, remains uneven, and the same organizational faults persist. Examples are needlessly split from the benchmarks into mere checklists lacking explanation or context, while arbitrary thematic divisions and confused chronology undermine historical clarity.

Nonetheless, some of the material included is rarely found in high school standards. The examples for the American Revolution and its aftermath mention the ideas of Locke and Montesquieu, the loyalist perspective, and specific achievements under the Articles of Confederation. In the antebellum period, there are references to the impact of nativism, the free labor versus pro-slavery arguments over slavery in the territories, and Cherokee support for the Confederacy. In the late nineteenth century, the leading role of local and state progressivism is raised. For the Cold War era, the doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” and President Eisenhower’s “military-industrial complex” speech are included.

Unfortunately, a politically tendentious streak, already evident in fourth through eighth grade, continues at the high school level. The course highlights pre-Columbian achievements, but never mentions the role of warfare, slavery, or human sacrifice in those cultures. Students are asked to describe key characteristics of West African kingdoms and the development of the Atlantic slave trade—but nothing is said about those kingdoms’ dominant role in *supplying* the slave trade. As in the earlier grades, the World War II home front is limited to the impact of the war on women, African Americans, and Japanese Americans.

The separate government and citizenship strand contains a good deal of historical material. Some of it also appears in the U.S. history strand, but all of it—such as discussion of the founding documents—arguably should. Regrettably, political bias intrudes again here: In fourth through eighth grade, for instance, students are to “identify people who have dealt with challenges and made a positive difference in other people’s lives.” But in the examples given, apart from Washington, Franklin, Lincoln, and a general reference to the founders and political leaders, *every person named* is a woman or minority (Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, Sequoyah, George Washington Carver, Clara Barton, Frederick Douglass, Abigail Adams, and Rosa Parks).

Content and Rigor Conclusion

A great deal of history appears in Minnesota's *Standards*, particularly at the high school level, but it is too often poorly organized, chronologically confused, and divorced from context. Moreover, there is a vast difference between fourth and eighth graders, and the standards do not specify where in this range the first U.S. history course will be taught. These rather broad and patchy standards for grade block 4–8 are arguably more appropriate for fourth or fifth grades than for more sophisticated middle schoolers, though the inadequate context and explanation will be problematic at any age level. Even in the more thorough outline for high school, lists of facts and people seem too often to have been dumped in with inadequate planning, explanation, or contextualization; the tendency to break chronological periods into thematic blocks also disrupts coherence, lumping disparate events together because of artificial thematic similarities. Political bias also makes unwelcome intrusions at all levels, at the expense of balanced historical perspectives. Despite these failings, the standards often contain significant substantive content—though teachers will have to fill the gaps themselves, in order to understand facts and events and connect them to broader themes. Minnesota's flaws lower its score to a five out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Minnesota's U.S. history scope and sequence are, unfortunately, none too clear. The use of broad grade bands rather than grade-by-grade curricula makes it difficult to understand what is to be taught when, and how many semesters are to be devoted to any given subject at any given level. The level of detail, though frequently considerable at the high school level, is uneven overall. Organization and presentation cause problems as well: The division of the curriculum into rigid charts of strands, sub-strands, standards, and benchmarks splits historical development into dissociated fragments. These shortcomings are particularly regrettable since Minnesota has, with obvious effort, pulled in an abundance of historical material. It's a pity it isn't presented more coherently. Minnesota's significant organizational weaknesses earn it a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)