

MISSISSIPPI • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

2/10

Overview

Mississippi's U.S. history framework offers brief content outlines and mere fragments of historical specifics, arranged with little regard for chronology or coherence. Worse, students aren't even required to learn the limited content included in these flimsy standards.

Goals and Organization

Mississippi's social studies framework is organized into "competencies," or topics for grades K–8. The state then provides "suggested objectives" for each competency, which constitute the grade-specific expectations.

Four strands—civics, history, geography, and economics—are identified, but neither the grade-level outlines nor the competencies are divided by strand. Instead, relevant strands are noted parenthetically next to each competency. In addition, the K–8 document includes "suggested teaching strategies" and "suggested assessments" for each grade that are linked to the various "competencies" and "objectives."

The high school standards are organized identically, save that individual grade-level standards are replaced by subject-specific competencies and objectives.

Basic concepts of community, chronology, and citizenship are introduced from Kindergarten through third grade. Fourth grade is devoted to "Mississippi studies."

Fifth grade introduces a broad "United States studies" course, which touches on America's founding heritage. Eighth grade covers U.S. history to 1877. "United States History: 1877 to the Present," a one year course, is offered anywhere in grades nine through twelve.

Evaluation

The stated goal of the Mississippi social studies framework is to provide the state's teachers with a "comprehensive and logical" structure for teaching "the knowledge, skills, and understandings pertinent to social studies." The framework outlines "what students should learn" before graduation in order to become "life-long, responsible, accountable, global citizens in a democratic society."

In fact, the document never *explicates* in the slightest detail what students should learn. And while the highly general and thematic competencies are required to be taught, the suggested objectives, in which the standards' minimal specifics appear, are optional for schools and teachers. Thus, eighth graders are, for instance, *required* to "analyze the

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

Mississippi Social Studies Framework and Guide, U.S. history segments (2004)

Accessed from:

<http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/acad/id/curriculum/ss/frame.html>

¹ Mississippi has a set of draft standards, dated 2011, available at: http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/acad/id/curriculum/ss/History_Framework/2010_K_12_Revised_Frameworks.pdf. Since these standards have not yet been formally adopted, and could likely still undergo substantive changes, they were not included in this review.

development of the foundations of American democracy.” Yet teachers may *choose* whether or not to include the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, or Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the rise of political parties.

The Kindergarten through third grade materials pay brief and general attention to relations among individual, family, and community and to basic notions of chronology and democratic citizenship. In the fourth grade “Mississippi studies” course—notably *not* called history—the only historical content is found in vague directives to “understand” the state’s peoples, their interaction, and key individuals. No specifics are given, and the suggested teaching exercises merely propose activities in which students are to demonstrate knowledge that is never outlined. (For example, it is suggested that students “create an ‘I Am Proud to be a Mississippian’ Booklet.” Yet such celebration is not to be balanced by, for instance, covering the history of slavery in the state, which is never mentioned.)

United States studies—not history—is introduced in fifth grade. But it takes the state just two pages (and seven competencies) to articulate all the content for the grade. The first competency directs students to “examine the historical development of the United States of America”; its suggested objectives mention the motives for early settlement, the founding of the British colonies, westward expansion, addition of states and territories, and “past and present patterns of rural/urban migrations.” A second competency asks students to “discover how democratic values were established and...exemplified”; its suggested objectives mention women’s suffrage and civil rights, and “flag, voting, inaugurations, etc.” Similar competencies touch on geography, constitutional government, citizenship, and the effects of technology on the environment.

The suggested teaching strategies—which consume far more space than the standards themselves—add no meaningful specifics. Students might “illustrate and evaluate the meaning of the words and/or phrases” in the Constitution, using “online resources,” “library resources,” and “other acceptable resources,” displaying their findings with “presentation software.” Or they might “compare/contrast a patriot and loyalist through graphic organizers, charts, and journal entries,” or “dramatize events such as the Boston Tea Party, Continental Congress, and signing of the Declaration of Independence.” But how could students be expected to “analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation compared to the Constitution through debates, charts, diagrams, and primary resources” when the state standards have never specified any such content?

In eighth grade, United States studies give way to United States history. But any increase in depth or specifics is minimal. The standards still comprise barely two pages and just eight competencies. Fragments of history crop up without context, explanation, or chronological logic, and are divided purely by theme. The first competency focuses on the impact of “geography, economics, and politics” on “the historical development of the United States in the global community.” Its objectives mention, in a seemingly random jumble, pre-Columbian cultures and European exploration, “the causes and effects of the American Revolution,” “how the expansion of slavery led to regional tension,” “the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on the United States,” and “the causes and effects of the Civil War,” finally asking students to “examine Reconstruction.” Save for this passing reference, slavery is hardly mentioned, and its particular significance in Mississippi is ignored.

A second competency focuses on democracy, its objectives mentioning—though not identifying or detailing—the founders, founding documents, and rise of political parties. Others touch on “spatial and ecological relationships,” the Constitution, citizenship, economics, and technology. A list of historical shards—“exploration, colonization, immigration, sectionalism, industry in the North vs. agriculture in the South, tariffs, etc.”—appears suddenly under an economics competency, *followed* by a reference to Alexander Hamilton’s policies on the national debt.

The eighth-grade teaching suggestions again expect students to use knowledge never actually covered. Students might make a chart comparing “the lifestyles of New England, Middle, and/or Southern colonists,” or “draw a political cartoon illustrating colonial dissatisfaction with British policy.” This continues, as similar fragments of history appear without context or explanation.

The high school U.S. history course, running from 1877 to the present, is even worse. The outline—barely longer than a page—consists of just six competencies, with almost the entire history of the era shoehorned into the first: “Explain how politics have influenced the domestic development and international relationships of the United States since 1877.” The first of this competency’s two suggested objectives asks students to “explain the emergence of modern America from a domestic perspective”; briefly listed are the frontier, industry and labor, Populism and Progressivism, the women’s movement, the New Deal, and civil rights. The second asks students to “explain the changing role of the United States in world affairs since 1877 through wars, conflicts, and foreign policy”; the accompanying list of conflicts runs from the Spanish American War to the Vietnam War. That’s it. And even these scattered specifics are “optional.”

Further competencies touch on technology, environment, and “social studies tools.” Another, devoted to Americans’ “civic contributions and responsibilities,” expects students to understand “various reform movements,” such as the civil rights, women’s, temperance, and Chicano movements, as well as “the government’s role in various movements” and “the interaction of society, business, and government with the economy of the United States.” An economics competency scatters references to such issues as the Open Door policy, the Great Depression, and the Marshall Plan. The teaching suggestions again contain random references to particular events as part of creative learning exercises. There is never any explanation or context.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Mississippi’s framework outlines content for each grade level or course with such broad strokes that it provides no substantive guidance. Students are essentially *told* to understand and analyze what happened and why—with no details or specifics beyond occasional, decontextualized references to the most general issues or events. The suggested teaching exercises seem to assume that course content does or will exist, but none is ever outlined. Grade-level appropriateness is moot, since content is equally absent at every age level. Mississippi’s scant references to actual history earn it a one out seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The structure of Mississippi’s framework is reasonably straightforward: It is organized grade-by-grade or course-by-course, each grade or course being given a single content outline, not broken into strands. However, this organizational clarity achieves nothing, since the course outlines provide such meager specifics. The scope of each course is sketched so broadly as to be all but meaningless; detail is minimal and fragmentary. The so-called “competencies” offer only overarching directives to understand vast swaths of otherwise unspecified history—and districts and schools may use these in whatever order, sequence, or manner they choose. Most of the framework is devoted to suggested classroom exercises, often little more than games, meant to build on content that students are somehow, somewhere to have acquired—if they are lucky, from teachers with the knowledge and skill to build a curriculum on their own initiative. Mississippi’s largely empty frameworks barely earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)