

NEW JERSEY • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

C

SCORES

Content and Rigor 4/7
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

5/10

Overview

New Jersey's standards mention many important issues in American history, especially at the high school level, but they do this with few specifics and many substantive gaps. Content is also relentlessly split between thematic standards and strands, robbing the material of chronological coherence. A tendentious focus on presentism—that is, judgment of the past in terms of modern values—further undermines historical comprehension and context.

Goals and Organization

New Jersey's social studies expectations are divided into three standards: 1) U.S. history: America in the world; 2) World history/global studies; and 3) Active citizenship in the twenty-first century. The U.S. history standard is subdivided by grade block, laying out what students are to achieve by the end of pre-Kindergarten and fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. (The world history standard includes sections for the end of grades eight and twelve, and the citizenship standard includes sections for the end of grades four, eight, and twelve.)

For the pre-K and K–4 grade blocks, the U.S. history standard is divided among four strands: civics, government, and human rights; geography, people, and the environment; economics, innovation, and technology; and history, culture, and perspectives. For each strand, the state provides “content statements” that lay out the broad themes that are to be covered. Finally, “cumulative progress indicators” provide content expectations for each statement.

The U.S. history standard for grade block 5–8 is organized similarly, except that it is first divided into broad chronological eras, then into content statements and cumulative progress indicators. Grade block 9–12 follows the same arrangement, save that some eras contain multiple content statements that even further subdivide the era by theme.

Concepts of democratic government, selected founding documents, symbols, holidays, and basics elements of New Jersey history are all introduced from pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade.

Grades five through eight introduce U.S. history from pre-settlement to Reconstruction. The high school materials begin again with early European settlement and continue to the present.

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies, U.S. history segments (2009)

Accessed from:

http://www.state.nj.us/education/cccs/2009/std6_ss.doc

Evaluation

From the start, New Jersey stresses present-day relevance and personal connections as the principal goal of social studies. New technologies and digital resources are emphasized over more traditional research and teaching skills, allowing “21st-century learners to transcend the limits of time and place and experience historic events virtually.” Unfortunately, coherent presentation of historical content is given far less priority. American history specifically—framed from the outset in terms of “America in the world”—is meant to give students “knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage.” But students are apparently meant to achieve these lofty aims with a deeply flawed and often marginally coherent historical overview.

Pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade offers conventional basic content organized solely by theme. Multicultural perspectives are heavily emphasized, encouraging presentism—judging the past in terms of the present—over context and comprehension.

In fifth through eighth grade, the history standard is divided into overarching “eras,” starting with the conventional (but historically misleading) “three worlds meet” model—meant to place equal emphasis on European, Native American, and African cultures and contacts up to 1620—before moving into the colonial period and beyond. The division of each era’s content into thematic strands undercuts chronological sequence and historical connections, while the broad cumulative progress indicators fail to provide explanatory structure or detail.

In the section on colonization and settlement, for example, general reference is made to religious freedom and participatory government, the impact of “race, gender and status,” imperial rivalry over resources, and slavery and indentured servitude. But no specifics whatsoever are supplied: Virtually no persons, dates, or actual events are mentioned for the entire colonial period. More specifics appear in the Revolutionary and early National periods; but, for example, the Alien and Sedition Acts, which are placed in the civics strand, are mentioned well *before* the Seven Years War, which is pushed into the catch-all “history, culture and perspectives” strand. Isolated historical issues appear in the period before the Civil War and Reconstruction, including Manifest Destiny, Jacksonian democracy, and the National Bank. But these references are shorn of all context or logic. Worse, much crucial content is absent: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, the Marshall Court, and John Brown are all excluded. Directives to “prioritize the causes and events

that led to the Civil War from different perspectives” do not substitute for a factual historical summary.

High school U.S. history jumps back to early European settlement and then runs to the present. The cumulative progress indicators become more numerous and reference more historical specifics. By focusing on narrower issues and time spans, they come closer to providing an actual outline and include a fair amount of important content, at least in passing. But the continued division of content into strands seriously damages coherence and chronological structure, and substantial gaps remain. Judicial review is mentioned, lumped together with issues of the 1780s and 1790s, but the Marshall Court is still absent. The election of 1800 is missing. The Missouri Compromise, nullification, the Mexican War, the Compromise of 1850, and the *Dred Scot* decision appear, but they are isolated and out of context, mentioned amidst sweeping thematic headings on society, economics, and government. A cumulative progress indicator on the pursuit of equality thrusts together “the Declaration of Independence, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address.”

The modern era is somewhat tighter. Content statements covering narrower periods and issues, such as Progressive reforms or World War I, provide a measure of focus. But specifics continue to be erratic and patchy, and organization often remains illogical. The atomic-bomb decision is discussed, for example, yet Pearl Harbor and the Nazis never appear. Chronology is routinely bent in order to fit events or issues into the thematic strands, and the cumulative progress indicators are often nebulous. It is not enough to direct students to “analyze the impact of the Great Depression on the American family, migratory groups, and ethnic and racial minorities,” or to “analyze the roles of various alliances among nations and their leaders in the conduct and outcomes of the [*sic*] World War II,” without providing further information. Teachers will have to supply their own substantive outlines if their students are to have sufficient content knowledge to “analyze” and “explore.”

Even as historical structure, chronology, and factual coherence are often evaded, heavy emphasis is placed on issues of race, class, and gender, all helping students to relate “content knowledge to current issues.” Students in fifth through eighth grades are, for example, to “examine the ideals found in the Declaration of Independence, and assess the extent to which they were fulfilled for women, African Americans, and Native Americans during this time period.” Likewise, high school students are to “judge the fairness of government treaties, policies, and actions that resulted in Native American migration and removal,” and to “determine if American policies regarding Japanese internment and actions against

other minority groups were a denial of civil rights.” Such questions reek of politics and presentism and ignore historical context and comprehension.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

New Jersey’s standards are not devoid of content; the cumulative progress indicators mention many important issues and some important specific events. Unfortunately, these examples are arbitrarily split among overarching thematic strands and are frequently grouped by theme even within those strands. Even in the somewhat more detailed high school guidelines, many crucial people and events are absent. Educators are given little guidance with which to *teach* the content students are asked to analyze and evaluate. The entire document, furthermore, is politically loaded and tendentious: Students are not asked to develop historical comprehension, but to judge the past by today’s standards in order to make it relevant to modern and personal concerns. New Jersey’s content, fragmented and patchy, can only earn a four out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

New Jersey’s array of content charts—laden with standards, strands, content statements, and cumulative progress indicators—result in a confusing document. The failure to distinguish between individual grade levels further undercuts the usefulness of these disjointed guidelines: Is content for grade block 5–8, for instance, aimed at fifth graders or at more sophisticated eighth graders? Further, the thematic and erratically specific cumulative progress indicators provide only partial detail, leaving course scope poorly defined, especially prior to high school. The document makes clear what *attitudes* students are meant to acquire about U.S. history—but it puts too little emphasis on what they are expected to *know*. The confused and confusing document earns a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)