

# NEW YORK • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

**A-**

SCORES

Content and Rigor **6/7**  
Clarity and Specificity **3/3**

TOTAL SCORE

**9/10**

## Overview

New York's U.S. history standards are among the most substantively comprehensive and sophisticated in the country. Despite occasional departures from chronology and gaps or shortcomings in content, the overall package could serve as a model for many other states.

## Goals and Organization

New York's social studies curriculum consists of five standards: history of the United States and New York; world history; geography; economics; and civics, citizenship, and government. All five are integrated chronologically in each grade- or course-level history outline.

For grades Kindergarten through sixth grade, the core curriculum provides "content understandings" which constitute grade-level content expectations organized under chronological or thematic headings. These content expectations are linked in a parallel column to conceptual "concepts/themes" (change, culture, government, etc.).

For seventh and eighth grades, subject-specific course outlines are provided. The history course outlines are divided into chronological/thematic "units" and subheadings, for which straightforward and substantive content outlines are provided. Parallel columns link the outline's content to the five standards, to conceptual concepts/themes, and to suggested classroom exercises. High school organization is largely identical, save that the suggested classroom exercises are replaced by detailed historical study questions and suggested documents.

Basic concepts of chronology, citizenship, symbols, and holidays are introduced from Kindergarten through third grade. Fourth grade introduces New York history up to the mid-nineteenth century. Fifth grade introduces "the United States, Canada and Latin America," mainly focusing on economics, governments, and similarly broad themes.

The main U.S. history sequence begins in seventh and eighth grades with a full course called "United States and New York State History," running from pre-settlement to the present; teachers are "encouraged" to devote two full years to the material. At the high school level, a "United States History and Government" course (apparently a single year, though it is not specifically stated) recapitulates the period through the Constitution, then continues to the present, with particular emphasis on issues of politics and government.

## Evaluation

At times, New York's standards are almost overflowing with content. Few states make such an effort to incorporate so much substantive and explanatory detail in their outlines.

### ✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED<sup>1</sup>

**New York Social Studies Resource Guide with Core Curriculum, U.S. history segments (1999)**

**Accessed from:**

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/ssrg.html>

<sup>1</sup> The New York social studies standards have not changed since our last evaluation, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A 2003 Report Card*. The state received the same score (roughly 90%) in each review. However, for this review, we changed our grading scale. In the 2003 review, a 90/100 yielded an A. In this review, a 9/10 yields an A-. For complete discussion of our 2011 grading metric, see Appendix A. For complete discussion of the 2003 grading metric, see: <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/effectivestatehistory.html>.

There are some flaws, beginning with odd gaps in content and thematic headings that occasionally break up chronological coherence. Also, the solid content is hemmed in with theory-laden introductory material, packed with confusing conceptual charts and tables.

A clear tension is evident between the traditional emphasis on *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one—and a more modern, multicultural focus. For example, while the standards reject “long lists of ethnic groups, heroes, and contributions” and stress that “all members of a given group will not necessarily share the same view,” teachers are also admonished that “tolerance for practices such as the Nazi Holocaust, totalitarianism, chattel slavery, the subjugation of peoples, and the infringement of human rights are not acceptable.” Unfortunately, while conceding that such questions “must be studied in historical context,” the standards also insist they must be “evaluated within a values perspective.” But equating more distant historical conflicts and inequities with recent atrocities such as the Holocaust places teachers on shaky ground. Students should be urged to *comprehend* the values of earlier times even if they have now been rejected, rather than condemn the past through a modern-day moral lens.

Still, strengths greatly outweigh weaknesses. New York has made a clear commitment to serious history education.

Early grades are conventional, focusing on basic ideas of chronology, government, and the American past. Yet the fourth-grade overview of New York history, though sometimes lacking in detail, is still remarkably comprehensive for the grade level.

The fifty-plus-page outline for seventh and eighth grades begins with pre-contact cultures (special attention being paid to native inhabitants of the New York region), European exploration, and regional settlement patterns. The level of detail is impressively well-focused and clear. Coverage of the Revolutionary crisis touches on mercantilism, Enlightenment thought, the impact of the French and Indian War, even the rise of a new American identity. The *reasons* for Britain’s policy shift are outlined. The suggested classroom exercises raise valuable analytical questions and recommend document readings.

Exemplary sections handle vital but oft-neglected issues, such as early attempts to govern after independence, clashes between the Continental Congress and the states, and the rise of sectional tensions over slavery. A remarkable unit on “Experiments in Government” offers details on the structure and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, material hardly touched by most state standards. New York’s 1777 constitution is covered in depth, as is the federal Constitution, including the Annapolis Convention and crucial issues at the 1787 Convention.

Despite these strengths, some items are overly broad. An item on colonial settlement patterns simply directs students to consider “who? when? why?” without mentioning specific regions or groups; British acts before the American Revolution are reduced to “Stamp Act and others.” Some issues are skirted: Iroquois accomplishments are detailed, but heavy Iroquois reliance on warfare is not. And there are some chronological oddities; for example, New York’s 1734 Zenger trial appears *after* the Stamp Act. Nonetheless, the overall level of sophistication is impressively high, clearly defining key historical issues and events.

The sections that follow, unfortunately, follow a more thematic organization: “New Government in Operation” jumbles material from the 1790s to 1824, often with thin detail, before moving to the Age of Jackson (which receives better detail), then *back* to the 1790s in a catch-all unit on the “Pre-Industrial Age: 1790–1860s.” The background to the Civil War largely restores chronological structure—even though John Brown and the Fugitive Slave Act, placed under “the emotional impact of slavery,” appear *before* the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the *Dred Scott* decision. The analysis of the Civil War and its consequences is, however, impressive.

Late nineteenth-century economic and social issues are also treated well, though politics are neglected save for a passing reference to the Populists. But politics enter more fully by 1900. Unusually, Wilson’s crackdowns on dissidents are discussed in some detail. Other frequently neglected points appear: the 1920s disarmament movement; the mechanism of the 1929 crash; the Great Depression’s role in the rise of totalitarianism; the Munich agreement; and the Nuremberg trials. A thematic approach reappears in brief units on post-war America, with the Cold War and fall of Communism outlined *before* post-war domestic issues are addressed. Most strangely, McCarthyism is not mentioned at all.

The high school course—focused on issues of government—begins with a solid recap of key issues from Colonial America through the Constitution. There is more in this relatively brief recapitulation than in the full standards of many states. The “suggested study questions” column also adds considerable depth, raising penetrating and sophisticated issues: For instance, it asks students to analyze which elements from the state constitutions were incorporated into the federal Constitution, as well as why national powers were deliberately weak under the Articles.

Theme, nonetheless, sometimes trumps chronology. The development of constitutional interpretation, for example, runs from the 1790s to the 1820s, before politics *in* the 1790s are discussed. But the level of detail nonetheless remains high (for instance, the Know-Nothings, left out in seventh and eighth

grades, now appear). This combination—admirable detail despite some overly-thematic organization—continues with units on Gilded Age business, labor, and social consequences. But chronology reasserts itself again, and mostly holds, with Progressivism, imperialism, World War I, and so forth. The details of the New Deal are presented particularly well, as is the coming of World War II (though the war itself is largely reduced to home front impact). The emergence of the Cold War and American post-war social change, in contrast to seventh and eighth grades, are handled chronologically and in admirable depth (this time including McCarthyism). Despite some continued thematic groupings, the outline closes on a high note, providing a level of content on recent decades that is rarely matched by other states.

## Content and Rigor Conclusion

New York's core-curriculum content outline is not perfect; occasional gaps and deviations from chronology stand out at times, but it is impressive on the whole. The material presented is frequently extraordinary in its substantive thoroughness, not only listing important points but *explaining* key issues. The tension between historical and modern perspectives, though occasionally irksome, is not seriously intrusive. Rigor is remarkable in seventh and eighth grades, though not beyond what students can reasonably handle, especially over two years. A high level of detail is maintained in high school: While the colonial/Revolutionary eras are principally assigned to seventh and eighth grades, the high school recapitulation is itself impressive. If a few substantive gaps were plugged and the outline made fewer thematic departures from chronology, there would be little to criticize. At its stronger moments, New York offers one of the best curriculum guides in the country. The standards earn a six out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

New York's core curriculum is clear, specific, and highly detailed, laying out the required content for each grade or course in straightforward outline format. References to the five standards are unobtrusively integrated, while the suggested classroom exercise questions frequently add significantly to content and interpretation. The sequence is clear and sensible, introducing the Americas generally in fifth grade, devoting all of seventh and eighth grades to U.S. history, and returning to it with solid review and new material in high school. Students and teachers are clearly shown what they are expected to cover and to learn—indeed, if all Americans knew what these standards expect New York students to know, the crisis in U.S. history education would be largely resolved. The detailed and clear curriculum guide earns three out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)