

NORTH CAROLINA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

2/10

Overview

North Carolina’s social studies standards openly abjure detailed substantive content: Teachers are to be given “flexibility,” and students are not to be subjected to learning tedious facts. The result is a nearly content-free document that lays out only broad concepts and generalities, and fails to offer teachers and students meaningful historical guidance.

Goals and Organization

North Carolina’s standards provide outlines for individual grades, K–8. Each grade’s content is divided into five strands: history, geography and environmental literacy, economics and financial literacy, civics and governance, and culture. Each strand is then subdivided into a series of thematic “essential standards,” each of which is in turn provided with “clarifying objectives,” which are issues that students are expected to explain or discuss, with some historical specifics mentioned as examples. At the high school level, grade-specific outlines are replaced with subject-specific courses, each focusing on a single strand (history, government, etc.). Short introductory texts lay out the goals for each grade or high school course.

In Kindergarten through third grade, students are introduced to “change over time,” and similar general concepts. North Carolina history enters in fourth grade.

Lack of substantive detail leaves course scope barely defined; nonetheless, course titles and headings indicate that fifth grade is meant to run from pre-settlement to Reconstruction; eighth grade revisits the period from the American Revolution onward, then continues from Reconstruction to the present. Two full-year courses are provided at the high school level: U.S. History I covers from pre-settlement to Reconstruction; U.S. History II continues to the present.

Evaluation

To create “enduring, clear, and measurable” standards, North Carolina sought to “pare down” its already weak standards “to identify what is essential.” The resulting document focuses explicitly on “broad concepts of social studies,” *not* on historical content. The “clarifying objectives” are said “to include more specificity,” but they merely mention scattered, random issues and events without any context, explanation, or chronological coherence.

Students are expected to “expand their ability to think like a historian by asking questions that historians ask,” going “beyond memorization of isolated facts to the development

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

**North Carolina Essential Standards:
Social Studies, U.S. history segments
(second revised draft, 2010)**

Accessed from:

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/acre/standards/phase2/>

¹ Though these North Carolina social studies standards are still in draft form, they have already undergone multiple rounds of revision and are likely to see only minor tweaks before implementation. The standards from 2006, which will be phased out with the adoption of the 2010 standards, can be found here: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/>.

of higher level thinking skills.” But how, one must ask, are students to “think like a historian” if no core of historical knowledge is delineated? The Tar Heel State standards leave all such matters to local districts and teachers, who are to be given “flexibility in the content examples that they may elect to use in order to support the concepts.”

In the early grades, students are simply directed to understand huge, general concepts such as “change over time”; the only detail given is a list of commemorative holidays. The fourth-grade local history course merely offers such directives as “analyze the chronology of key historical events in North Carolina history.” The linked “clarifying objectives”—meant to add specifics—tell students, for instance, to “analyze North Carolina’s role in major conflicts and wars from the Pre-Colonial period through Reconstruction.”

Fifth grade ostensibly introduces American history through Reconstruction. Yet apart from the course title, the scope would hardly be discernible from the vague and non-specific content. Students are, for example, to “analyze the chronology of key events in the United States,” with clarifying objectives that briefly mention, for instance, “the political, economic and social aspects of colonial life in the thirteen colonies,” or “the impact of major conflicts, battles and wars on the development of our nation through Reconstruction.” They are also to “understand the role of prominent figures.” Here, examples simply list “the contributions of ‘the Founding Fathers’ to the development of our country,” “key historical figures [that] have exemplified values and principles of American democracy,” and “the changing roles of women and minorities” in America “from Pre-Colonial through Reconstruction.” The economics strand invokes market economics and personal choice. The civics and governance strand mentions democracy and citizenship, briefly invoking the Constitution and Bill of Rights with no explanatory detail. The culture strand mentions diversity.

Despite its near-total lack of specifics, the civics strand does find space to perpetuate the myth of the Iroquois League as a major influence on American government, listing “Iroquois” along with Roman, Greek, European, and British as the key ideas that “influenced the development of the United States government.”

Eighth grade is meant to offer “more rigorous study” of U.S. and North Carolina history. But the headings remain thematic and hopelessly broad; for instance, students are asked to “apply historical thinking to understand the creation and development of North Carolina and the United States.” And the clarifying objectives remain vague to the point of incoherence; for example, students should “explain the impact of economic, political, social and military conflicts,” such as “war, slavery, states’ rights and citizenship and immigration policies.”

Thematic blocks make nonsense of chronology, as well: An item on migration dizzily lumps together “westward movement, African slavery, Trail of Tears, the Great Migration and Ellis and Angel Island [sic].”

Often, there are no examples at all. One item simply tells students to “explain how individuals and groups have influenced economic, political and social change in North Carolina and the United States.”

Tendentious and politicized emphases also recur. In the government strand, students are to “analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g., enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).” Note that only historically marginalized groups are included.

North Carolina originally intended to include only post-Reconstruction U.S. history at the high school level, until public backlash forced state officials to place a full, two-year U.S. history course in high school. But given that course’s sketchy and disorganized specifics, it seems to make little difference what time span the standards purport to cover. Students are, for instance, to “analyze key political, economic and social turning points in United States history using historical thinking”; examples include “conflicts, legislation, elections, innovations, leadership, movements, Supreme Court decisions, etc.” Or they are to “analyze how conflict and compromise have shaped politics, economics and culture” in the United States. The accompanying examples, with theme again trouncing chronology or context, are “mercantilism, Revolutionary Era taxation, National Bank, taxes, tariffs, territorial expansion, [and the] Civil War.”

Indeed, the two-part high school course is so generalized that the thematic headings for U.S. History I & II are *identical*. Only the examples differ. Each outline is barely six pages long, including the introduction, and much is empty space, both literally and figuratively.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Apart from thematic issues, historical content is more or less absent from these standards. Indeed, specific content is all but dismissed as too confining for students and too limiting for teachers. In the near-absence of content, rigor is impossible. What content there is, nonetheless, manages to stress political bias and presentism—that is, judgments of the past through the lens of today’s values, standards, and norms. There is no hint of a historical outline, and no meaningful guidance to teachers, students, or parents about constructing one. A few bare references to historical facts earn a marginal one out of

seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

North Carolina’s sequence is perfectly clear and superficially sensible: U.S. history is introduced in fifth grade, reiterated and expanded in eighth grade, and revisited in its entirety in high school. Unfortunately, scope is another matter altogether. The standards *have* no scope, since they do nothing more than mention disconnected themes and issues, with scattered and decontextualized facts tossed in as “examples.” Actual historical content is left solely to local districts and teachers, who are given no meaningful guidance in constructing their courses. Students cannot “analyze” or “understand” what they do not know, and these standards seem entirely uninterested in identifying or furnishing basic and necessary historical knowledge. North Carolina’s clear sequence and otherwise empty guidelines leave it with a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)