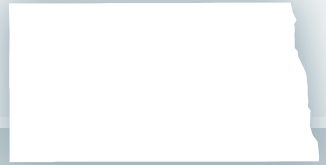


NORTH DAKOTA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

2/10

Overview

North Dakota's standards provide the bare bones of a historical outline, but there is little substantive detail with which to clothe them. A small number of brief "benchmarks" touch on overarching themes in U.S. history, but the few historical examples are scattered, fragmentary, and sometimes politically biased. Much of the standards' space is given to "achievement descriptors," which tell us little more than that proficient students should perform proficiently, without ever explaining what that actually means.

Goals and Organization

North Dakota divides social studies into six strands, or "content standards": skills and resources; important historical events; economic concepts; government and citizenship; concepts of geography; and human development and behavior.

Each content standard is then divided by grade level, individually from K–8 and as a single unit for 9–12. "Benchmark expectations," constituting broad statements of target student achievement, are then provided for each grade or grade block and are grouped under thematic/chronological headings. "Achievement descriptors" are provided for each benchmark, but these do little more than restate said benchmarks, explaining that students at various levels of proficiency (advanced proficient, proficient, partially proficient and novice) will demonstrate comprehension that is "insightful," "relevant," "superficial," or "irrelevant."

Kindergarten through third grade introduce concepts of chronology, holidays, national symbols, and famous Americans. Fourth grade introduces North Dakota history.

The main U.S. history course is divided among grades five, eight, and high school. Fifth grade covers from pre-settlement to independence, eighth grade from independence to the late nineteenth century, and high school (grade unspecified) from "industrialization to the present."

Evaluation

The North Dakota social studies standards claim to represent "an important step in defining and implementing what constitutes a quality education for North Dakota citizens." Even though they are intended to "encourage" a dynamic and living curriculum created at the local school-district level, North Dakota parents are nonetheless assured that they provide "guidance in core curriculum areas" and "focus on essential content."

Content, however, is hardly prominent in these standards. The relegation of history to a strand labeled "important historical events" immediately suggests an alarmingly selective

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

North Dakota Content and Achievement Standards: Social Studies, Grades K–12, U.S. history segments (2007)

Accessed from:

<http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/standard/content/ssstudies/index.shtm>

approach—as if Mel Brooks’s satirical “Highlights from Hamlet” had inspired these “Highlights from History.” And indeed, the benchmark expectations remain extraordinarily broad, with a random smattering of specific examples parenthetically tossed in. The achievement descriptors offer no additional detail or guidance, merely noting that an advanced-proficient student can meet the benchmark very well, a proficient student can meet it well, and so forth.

The decision to divide U.S. history into a single sequence over grades five, eight, and high school is, though common in many states, a further problem: Early material is relegated solely to early grades, where students’ comprehension is limited. Yet the brief and general benchmarks present little detail in *any* grade, failing to exploit high school students’ greater sophistication.

Early grades introduce the usual concepts of chronology, symbols, and famous people, pausing to emphasize “the exchange of ideas, culture, and goods between the Native Americans and the white settlers.” A politically slanted and chronologically muddled selection of famous persons offered to second graders is “George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Susan B. Anthony, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, César Chávez, [and] Sacagawea.” The fourth-grade introduction to North Dakota history is also exceedingly sketchy.

The fifth-grade U.S. history course opens with introductory benchmarks on “symbols” and “people and events.” Students are, for instance, to “explain the significance of scientists, inventors, and historical figures,” such as “Christopher Columbus, Juan Ponce De Leon, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Paul Revere, Benjamin Rush, David Rittenhouse, [and] Thomas Paine.” Subheadings divide the remaining benchmarks between “exploration and migration” and “colonization,” but only *eight* actual benchmarks cover the entire period through 1776.

Students are, for instance, to “explain how regional Native American groups influenced U.S. history”—but the only examples given are “historical events [and] development of the U.S.” They are also to explain the motives for European colonization, and describe the daily life of “large landowners, farmers, artisans, women, [and] slaves.” For the American Revolution, students are to “identify the reasons...for conflict between England and the American colonies,” the examples given being “Boston Tea Party, the Stamp Act, [and] English Laws.” Note that the 1773 Tea Party is placed *before* the 1765 Stamp Act. They are also to identify “the key people” of the Revolution, the examples being “George Washington, King George III, John Adams, [and] Paul Revere,” and “events and consequences of the Revolutionary War,” for which “Lexington,

Concord, Bunker Hill, Benedict Arnold, [and] Valley Forge” are alone named.

Although some of the most basic historical issues are touched upon, this outline provides no meaningful guidance to teachers or students. The examples, ripped from any context or explanation, are educationally useless.

Eighth grade, meant to cover the period from independence to the late nineteenth century, does so in just eleven benchmarks. After first analyzing “the transformation of the nation” across the entire period, students are, for instance, to consider early political parties and the issues they faced (“e.g., payment of debt, establishment of a national bank, strict or loose interpretation of the Constitution, [and] support for England or France”). They are also to explain how political leaders shaped national policy. The examples given—“Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Martin Van Buren, [and] John Tyler”—are bizarre. Harrison’s term lasted only thirty days and he had no influence on national policy; his successor, Tyler, popularly derided as “His Accidency,” had very limited influence. What about Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, or James K. Polk, among many others? Similarly rushed and fragmentary items push through the antebellum era, Civil War, Reconstruction, and its aftermath.

The high school course opens with tribal governance in North Dakota and then moves to a single historical subheading: “U.S. Periods, Events, Figures, Movements to Include but Not Limited to Industrialization to Present.” Under this arcane heading, just ten benchmarks are provided. The first (nearly identical to that in eighth grade) directs students to evaluate “the transformation of the nation” across the period. They are then to cover World War I “at home and abroad (e.g., neutrality, military technologies, isolationism, Zimmerman Note, Lusitania, home front, [and] Wilson’s Fourteen Points)”, inter-war developments (“Red Scare, Roaring 20’s, Great Depression, [and the] New Deal”), the “causes, course, and legacy” of World War II (“totalitarian regimes, Pacific theater, European theater, [and the] home front”), and so forth, with similar items touching on the Cold War (“containment policy, arms race, [and] fear of communism”), civil rights, the Vietnam War, recent presidencies, and major contemporary issues (“e.g., immigration, environment, poverty, terrorism, and discrimination”).

A few additional details on the American Revolution and Constitution are mentioned under the civics content standard—but again without context or explanation.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

North Dakota provides, at best, the skeleton of a historical outline. Though some key themes are mentioned in broad terms, the majority of American history is passed over. The few arbitrary details offered are divorced from context or chronology, and many suggest a politically motivated focus on minority groups at the expense of more comprehensive historical knowledge. Teachers attempting to follow these standards will find scant guidance for structuring a proper course, and students will find little summation of the “content” they are supposedly being asked to master. The decision to split U.S. history into a single course over elementary, middle, and high school is unfortunate, but grade-level rigor is essentially irrelevant at all levels. Little is in evidence anywhere, and the over-general benchmarks are much the same in every grade or grade block. Fleeting references to overarching historical issues merit no more than a one out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The North Dakota standards offer only spotty coverage of essential U.S. history, and the typical division of all material into strands breaks up even the limited clarity offered by the extremely non-specific benchmarks. Detail is all but missing; the vagueness of the benchmarks makes it difficult to measure student success. The achievement descriptors merely tell us, in a classic edu-speak tautology, that proficient students will demonstrate proficiency. In the end, the *Content and Achievement Standards* contain hardly any content, and they offer few specifics with which to encourage or measure achievement. They earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)