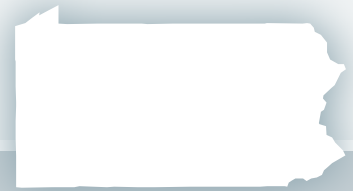


PENNSYLVANIA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

2/10

Pennsylvania presently has two sets of social studies standards. The 2002 standards remain legally in force for the state’s public schools. Yet new standards were completed in 2009 as part of the Keystone State’s new Standards Aligned System (SAS). These new standards are “offered as a voluntary resource for Pennsylvania’s schools and await action by the State Board of Education.” Yet the new SAS version is given considerably more prominence on the state’s website than the 2002 standards. Pennsylvania also cautions educators that new graduation requirements set to take effect in 2015 are keyed to the SAS standards.

As a result, both the 2002 and 2009 versions are reviewed here. Regrettably, the new version is even worse than the old.

2002 STANDARDS'

Overview

Pennsylvania’s 2002 U.S. history standards offer no historical outline and little specific content. They amount to little more than thematic boxes into which fragmentary examples are tossed without context, coherence, or explanation.

Goals and Organization

Pennsylvania’s 2002 social studies standards are divided into four strands—civics and government, economics, geography, and history. (Each strand receives its own separate standards document.) The history strand is divided into four “standard categories,” or sub-strands: historical analysis and skills development; Pennsylvania history; United States history; and world history. Each sub-strand is further divided into fixed thematic “standard statements” and accompanying “standard descriptors” for grade blocks 1–3, 4–6, 7–9, and 10–12.

For the grade blocks from fourth through twelfth grade, four standard statements are used for the U.S. and Pennsylvania history sub-strands: “(A) Political and Cultural Contributions of Individuals and Groups,” “(B) Primary Documents, Material Artifacts and Historical Places,” “(C) How Continuity and Change Has Influenced History,” and “(D) Conflict and Cooperation Among Social Groups and Organizations.” Twenty standard descriptors, or thematic sub-headings, are then distributed among the four standard statements (these include such categories as inhabitants; political leaders; military leaders; cultural and commercial leaders; innovators and reformers; politics; domestic instability; labor

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Pennsylvania Academic Standards for History, U.S. history segments (2002)

Accessed from:

<http://pennsylvaniasocialstudies.wikispaces.com/file/view/E+HISTORY+web03.pdf>

¹ For Pennsylvania’s 2009 standards, see page 129.

relations; and military conflicts). Specific historical examples may then be provided for the various thematic descriptors.

Organization for the block encompassing first through third grade is similar, except that some descriptors are replaced by more basic thematic categories (students are, for instance, to identify historical “role models” rather than political or military leaders).

American and Pennsylvania history are assigned to all grade blocks: First through third grade deals with “Beginnings to Present”; fourth through sixth grade covers “Beginnings to 1824”; seventh through ninth grade covers 1787–1914; and tenth through twelfth grade finishes up with 1890–present.

Evaluation

History, the Pennsylvania standards assert, “is a narrative—a story. In order to tell the story it is not sufficient to simply recall facts; it is also necessary to understand the context of the time and place and to apply historical thinking skills.” The standards also explain that the level of historical content and “the degree of comprehension” should become more sophisticated as the student moves up through the grades.

These are worthy sentiments. But Pennsylvania seems to pay little heed to its own exhortations. Instead, the Commonwealth’s idiosyncratic and disjointed standards drain everything historical from the study of history and fail to establish connections among people, ideas, and events. Indeed, they lack all but the most fragmentary substance; the U.S. history sub-strand, for all grade blocks, is just three pages long.

The state’s course sequence would ordinarily be a further flaw, with the middle school course starting in 1787 and colonial history relegated solely to elementary school. But since Pennsylvania’s standards lack any specific substance or chronological sense of time, place, or context, this problem hardly seems to make much difference.

First through third grade introduces the practice of splitting random and fragmentary examples among arbitrary thematic “descriptors.” Brief lists of names are offered (heavy on women and minorities), along with scattered historic documents and monuments; a few broad concepts are invoked—such as working conditions, military conflict, immigration, and diversity—without explanation or examples.

From fourth grade onward, students are meant to study U.S. and Pennsylvania history in earnest. Yet, instead of focusing on history, the standards focus on their rigid lists of thematic statements and descriptors. The few examples offered for each descriptor constitute little more than checklists grouped by

theme, with no chronological or contextual logic. Moreover, despite the standards’ stated commitment to an increasing level of historical content coverage, the only difference between grade blocks is that the handful of examples for each category relate to that grade block’s assigned time period.

The twenty descriptors work like twenty boxes in a mail sorting room: The standards, in effect, take a few historical fragments and drop each into an applicable box—though not necessarily the *most* applicable one. Take, for instance, the five descriptors attached to the first standard statement (“Political and Cultural Contributions of Individuals and Groups”). In the block spanning seventh through ninth grade (covering 1787–1914), examples for the “inhabitants” descriptor include “Native Americans, Africans and Europeans,” listed without further elaboration or explanation. Next comes the “political leaders” descriptor, for which the examples are Daniel Webster, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Johnson. For “military leaders,” we encounter Andrew Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Ulysses S. Grant. “Cultural and commercial leaders” are represented by Jane Addams, Jacob Riis, and Booker T. Washington. For “innovators and reformers,” we are given Alexander Graham Bell, Frances E. Willard, and Frederick Douglass.

Why should Jackson and Grant, both American presidents, be classified as military leaders and not as political leaders? Why should Jane Addams not be thought of as a reformer as well as a cultural leader? Why should Frederick Douglass not be described as a political leader as well as a reformer? And, of course, how can these isolated examples possibly constitute any meaningful outline or historical explanation?

A similar pattern is followed in the other grade blocks and standard statements. Under the “conflict and cooperation” statement for fourth through sixth grade, for instance, the Salem witch trials and Shays’ Rebellion are thrust together as examples of “domestic instability,” while tenth through twelfth grade tosses out both world wars and the “War on Terrorism”—without even giving dates—as examples of “military conflict.”

The same rigidities and shortcomings beset the Pennsylvania history sub-strand as well—the only difference being that the scattershot examples are confined to Pennsylvania. The separate standards document for civics and government, save for a few references to important documents, contains hardly any specifics at all; the geography and economics strands also add no substantive historical content or explanation.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

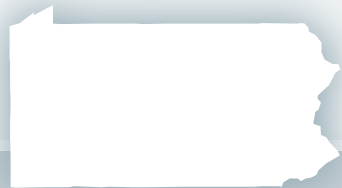
Pennsylvania’s thematic categories are historically hollow and educationally vacuous—unless their purpose is to guarantee

that young people will be bored. No rigor is implied for any grade, and the rote repetition of identical thematic categories precludes any increase in sophistication for later grade blocks. The handful of examples touch on some important moments, people, and issues in American history, but do so without coherence, connection, context, or explanation—and most of U.S. history is missing completely. The authors of the Pennsylvania standards have abrogated the responsibility to set priorities and establish a coherent core of essential knowledge about our national history. Instead, they have created a curious echo of “Trivial Pursuit.” The state earns a bare one out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Pennsylvania lays out its sequence in a simple introductory list. That, unfortunately, is the only moment of clarity in the document. The remainder is a confusing chart of sub-strands, statements, descriptors, and examples, all of which offer little more than generalities. Historical specifics are scattered, shallow, or absent. The minimal outline of course scope earns the state a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

PENNSYLVANIA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

Content and Rigor 0/7
Clarity and Specificity 0/3

TOTAL SCORE

0/10

2009 STANDARDS¹

Overview

Pennsylvania claims that its 2009 social studies standards—reviewed here despite their “voluntary” status—will guide its students to a “common cultural literacy.” But, in a theory-based rejection of mere “recall,” these standards *omit historical facts altogether*, offering nothing but abstractions about unspecified content. As weak as the state’s 2002 standards are, this new version is even weaker. The 2002 version was already rigidly thematic, providing only disjointed historical specifics. The 2009 version follows a similar organization—but deletes even the meager historical specifics found in the earlier version.

Goals and Organization

The 2009 standards divide social studies into four strands: civics, economics, geography, and history. As in the 2002 version, each strand receives its own separate standards document. The history strand is divided into four sub-strands, identical to those in the 2002 standards. The U.S. and Pennsylvania history sub-strands are divided into four thematic headings or “standard statements,” again taken from the 2002 standards: contributions of individuals and groups; historical documents and artifacts; impact of continuity and change on U.S. [or Pennsylvania] history; and conflict and cooperation.

Under each standard statement, a single, purely theoretical content expectation is individually provided for each grade three through nine and for twelfth grade. In tenth and eleventh grades, three subject-specific courses—“U.S. History 1850–Present,” “World History 1450–Present,” and “Civics and Government”—replace the individual grade-level standards; like the grade-level standards, each course receives a single content expectation for each standard statement. (It is not specified how the three courses are to be arranged over the two years).

Pennsylvania’s 2002 standards did assign particular time spans to broad grade blocks. But the 2009 version, though it now offers standards for individual grades and courses, does not include even the most basic grade-level sequence. The content expectations in the 2009 standards are wholly conceptual and thematic, mentioning no specific history. There is, therefore, no indication of what periods or subjects are to be taught in a given grade, the sole exception being the U.S. history course assigned to grades ten and eleven, which specifies “1850–present” in its title.

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Pennsylvania Academic Standards for History: Elementary Standards, Grades 3–8, U.S. history segments (2009)

Accessed from:

<http://pennsylvaniasocialstudies.wikispaces.com/file/view/HISTORY+ELEMENTARY+STANDARDS+JUNE+1+2009+FINAL.doc>

Pennsylvania Academic Standards for History: Elementary Standards, Grades 9–12, U.S. history segments (2009)

Accessed from:

<http://pennsylvaniasocialstudies.wikispaces.com/file/view/HISTORY+SECONDARY+STANDARDS+JUNE+1+2009+FINAL.doc>

¹ For Pennsylvania’s 2002 standards, see page 126.

Evaluation

Pennsylvania’s new history standards, we are told, “describe what students should know and be able to do at third through twelfth grade.” But, in fact, the state focuses on broad analytical “concepts” even more relentlessly than in the earlier version. In 2002, there were inadequate historical specifics. Now, in a total surrender to the “how-to-think not what-to-learn” mantra of social studies, there are literally *none*.

While promising to promote a “common cultural literacy,” Pennsylvania’s 2009 standards stress “the need to move beyond recall”—as if retaining factual knowledge would interfere with broader student understanding. The standards, we are told, are not meant to provide “a list of facts to recall,” but rather to “provide a history framework” for schools and teachers: All content provided “is general and does not represent a course or even a portion thereof.” Here, at least, the state’s claims are indisputable: These standards lack even a hint of facts, and the content provided certainly fails to provide “even a portion” of a course outline.

Individual schools are “encouraged to move beyond these standards.” They had better, or there will be no history education at all in Pennsylvania.

The 2009 standards, it must be reiterated, contain *no history whatsoever*. At no point is a single person, event, or era mentioned—not even the most basic landmarks in American history such as the Revolution and the Civil War. In the separate standards for the civics strand, the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights are merely listed. That is as close to historical substance as the 2009 social studies standards ever come.

The Standards Aligned System website claims that the new standards “increase in complexity and sophistication as students progress through school.” But, in fact, the single abstract (and meaningless) content expectation offered under each of the four thematic statement headings is usually repeated, almost verbatim, at each successive grade or course level.

Under the “contributions of individuals and groups” heading, for example, third graders are told to “identify and describe the social, political, cultural, and economic contributions of individuals and groups in United States history”—and that’s all. Fourth graders are to “differentiate common characteristics” of these contributions. Fifth graders are to “compare and contrast” these common characteristics. Sixth graders are to “explain” individual and group contributions. Seventh graders are to “classify” them, and so forth. Even the sole subject-themed U.S. history course, high school’s 1850–Present unit, merely asks students to “compare the role groups and individuals played in the social, political, cultural,

and economic development of the U.S.” In no grade or course is any specific historical example given to supplement these absurdly broad directives.

Under the “continuity and change” heading, students are—at all grade levels—to consider how continuity and change have impacted “belief systems and religions,” “commerce and industry,” “technology,” “politics and government,” “physical and human geography,” and “social organizations.” These categories adapt some of the thematic descriptors from the 2002 standards, but *without* even the limited historical specifics offered in the earlier standards. Under the “conflict and cooperation” heading, students at all grade levels are to discuss how “conflict and cooperation among groups and organizations” have affected “ethnicity and race,” “working conditions,” “immigration,” “military conflict,” and “economic stability.” Again, some of the previous standards’ descriptors have been adapted—and again, even the previous standards’ meager historical examples have been deleted.

And that is the sum total of Pennsylvania’s 2009 U.S. history standards (the content standards for Pennsylvania history repeat the U.S. history expectations almost verbatim). The three other strands offer further brief, general, and theoretical content expectations for each grade and for the tenth- and eleventh-grade courses. Yet again, the content expectations are almost identical at each grade or course level, adding no historical substance or specifics.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Pennsylvania has, in its 2009 standards, largely recycled the rigid thematic categories it imposed in 2002. Now, however, the state has removed even the few historical specifics present in the original document. In short, the authors have taken a bad document and made it worse. Pennsylvania’s content-free standards earn a zero out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Clarity and specificity apply no better to these standards than do content or rigor. Detail—already skimpy in the 2002 version—does not exist at all in the 2009 standards. The 2002 document at least assigned specific time spans to its grade blocks; here, there is neither sequence nor any hint of the substance to be taught at any level, save for a vague indication, only in the course title, that U.S. history after 1850 will be covered in tenth and eleventh grades. Pennsylvania’s website touts its “clear, high standards”—but it has set no bar, and offered no guidance or instruction. The standards deserve and receive a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)