

SOUTH CAROLINA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

A

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

10/10

Overview

South Carolina has supplemented its already solid U.S. history standards with extraordinary, narrative “curriculum support” documents. The support texts not only outline what should be covered, but also explain the actual history in depth, maintaining a nuanced, sophisticated, and balanced approach throughout. The result sets a new bar for what states can accomplish: The combined standards and support texts earn the distinction of being the best U.S. history standards in the nation at this time.

Goals and Organization

South Carolina has adopted a highly unusual two-part structure for its social studies standards.

The *Academic Standards* themselves provide grade-specific outlines for grades K–8, and for four high school courses: global studies, United States history and the Constitution, economics, and United States government. Each grade or course is provided with a numbered series of thematic/chronological “standards,” each of which is followed by specific “indicators,” or content expectations. Four “strands”—history, geography, political science/government, and economics—are invoked, but content is *not* broken up among them. Instead, relevant strands are noted parenthetically at the end of each indicator. Sample classroom exercises are also offered for selected indicators.

Far more unusual—indeed unique—are the state’s “curriculum support” documents (offered alongside the *Standards* since 2008, though still described on the state website as a draft). These provide a detailed explanatory text for every grade and course and link each to the numbered standards and indicators. A descriptive narrative then lays out the history that “is essential for students to know,” while a subsequent segment discusses supplementary detail that “is not essential for students to know.” Finally, “assessment guidelines” reiterate points and issues that pupils should be able to explain.

Kindergarten through second grade introduce basic concepts of community, personal links to the broader world, change over time, famous Americans, and national symbols. Third grade introduces an overview of South Carolina history; eighth grade returns to that subject in greater depth.

The U.S. history sequence constitutes two full courses. Fourth grade runs from pre-settlement to 1865 with fifth grade continuing from 1865 to the present. The one-year high school course, “United States History and the Constitution,” again covers the full span of U.S. history.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards, U.S. history segments (2005)

Accessed from:

<http://ed.sc.gov/agency/Standards-and-Learning/Academic-Standards/old/cso/standards/ss/documents/ginezsocialstudiesstandards.pdf>

South Carolina Academic Standards Curriculum Support: Social Studies, K–12, U.S. history segments (2008)

Accessed from:

http://ed.sc.gov/agency/Standards-and-Learning/Academic-Standards/old/cso/social_studies/social.html

¹ South Carolina has a set of draft standards, dated 2011, available here: http://ed.sc.gov/agency/Standards-and-Learning/Academic-Standards/old/cso/social_studies/social.html. Since these standards have not yet been formally adopted, and could likely still undergo substantive changes, they were not included in this review.

Evaluation

South Carolina’s *Standards* are intelligent and competent. The decision to abandon arbitrary thematic strands—though emphasized in the introductory material—is welcome. The standards, the state declares, are “history-driven and are, for the most part, presented in a chronological sequence,” although theme occasionally trumps chronology.

A balanced, “history-driven” approach is indeed evident from the start. The Kindergarten through second grade materials introduce Native American and minority history without marginalizing unifying national themes. The third-grade state history course is unusually sophisticated for the age level, introducing slavery, the state’s role in the Civil War, and its history of Jim Crow. The eighth-grade recap of South Carolina history is admirably detailed and well-linked to national issues. Again, slavery and segregation are covered with dispassionate accuracy.

In the U.S. history courses, the *Standards’* outlines vary in depth and quality. In the fourth- and fifth-grade courses, the indicators do a solid job of delineating key issues, though the level of detail varies, and thematic arrangement occasionally produces a chronological jumble. A trend toward breadth over detail, unfortunately, becomes most pronounced in the high school outline.

This lack of high school specifics would undermine South Carolina’s standards, if the curriculum support documents did not render the objection entirely moot. In essence, the standards are an organizing outline for the detailed content set forth in these unique support materials.

The support documents build upon each grade’s indicators with a lengthy historical narrative. From the start of fourth grade (explaining European competition over the spice routes, summaries of the activities of major explorers, rival European settlements, and Native American culture/regions), the text is impressively thorough and rigorous: Fourth grade receives sixty-seven pages of supporting text; fifth grade receives seventy-nine pages, and the high school U.S. history course receives 116 pages. More important than length is the historical sophistication and carefully balanced outlook of the explanatory text.

These texts—though clear and manageable for teachers preparing their courses, or for students seeking information—are far too extensive to do justice to in a short review. The fourth- and fifth-grade summaries are already comprehensive, and the high school texts often offer still further depth, with some “not essential” material from the earlier grades now considered “essential.” The emphasis throughout is not on rote facts, but on *contextual comprehension*.

Few if any other states, after discussing the issue of taxation without representation, point out “common misconceptions that should be avoided or corrected,” explaining that “the colonists were not protesting against the taxes because the taxes were too high nor were they attempting to form a new kind of government,” a critical point that few Americans understand today. Likewise, few states explain *why* the newly independent Americans deliberately made the central government so weak under the Articles of Confederation. Similar examples continue throughout all courses at all levels. The text becomes increasingly impressive the more one reads from it.

Even in more recent material—closer to today’s concerns, and thus more susceptible to politicization—South Carolina’s documents not only remain remarkably detailed and specific, but also repeatedly urge teachers and students to avoid simplistic clichés.

In discussing nineteenth-century industrial development, for example, the texts caution teachers “to emphasize the role of government in providing the environment in which entrepreneurs could be successful. It is a common misunderstanding...that American individualism was sufficient to promote America’s emergence as an industrial power in the late 19th century.” The texts are careful to note that it can be debated whether the often ruthless late nineteenth-century business leaders “should be labeled robber barons or captains of industry,” and continue that “it is important for students to understand that unfettered competition led to economic uncertainty and eventually to a public call for government regulation of industry.” After discussing the 1925 Scopes trial, the text calls attention to the debate, then and now, “between social conservatives who advocate conformity to a traditional moral code and liberals who advocate individual rights,” stressing that “students should understand the positions of both conservatives and liberals in the 1920s.”

These examples of nuanced, complex, and balanced history are, it should be stressed, *typical and representative* of the South Carolina support materials.

To be sure, there are occasional gaps and slips. Although the origins of slavery are treated in detail, the text only reveals that “slaves were transported first from the interior of Africa to the slave ships”; it does not reveal *by whom* they were transported. As such, the African role in the slave trade has been ducked. Locke is said to have written *The Social Contract*; he wrote *about* the social contract, but the book of that title was actually written by Rousseau. The nativist “Know-Nothing” party is never mentioned. Andrew Johnson’s impeachment is missing from fifth grade’s otherwise superb overview of Reconstruction (though it does appear in the high school text).

Yet these are mere drops in the bucket against the volume of superior content.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

South Carolina’s *Standards*, by themselves, are solid, if overly broad. But by fleshing out the standards with the extraordinary narratives of the “curriculum support” documents, the state has achieved an unprecedented level of substantive depth. These documents not only identify key points and facts, but offer sophisticated historical explanation—and do so with remarkable balance. The support documents avoid overloading students by distinguishing between more and less essential material; opinions will of course differ on what is or is not essential, but the decisions made are generally sensible. It might be argued that the fourth- and fifth-grade courses are too in-depth for those age levels (they are actually superior to many high school courses in other states). But anything that students fail to understand will be recapitulated in high school, and there is surely no harm in providing teachers in the early grades with sophisticated guidance. South Carolina’s combined standards and support documents well deserve a seven out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

South Carolina has set out an ambitious sequence (a two-year U.S. history course in fourth and fifth grades a full additional course in high school, plus detailed coverage of South Carolina history in third and eighth grades)—and it backs up that sequence with support material of comprehensive scope and extraordinary detail. History is stressed over social studies methodology, with unclear thematic strands rejected in favor of a jargon-free, chronology-based curriculum. The two-part system of standards and support documents might seem unwieldy, but the easy-to-follow linkage of the support text with the numbered indicators makes the combination straightforward and user-friendly. It is consistently clear what students are expected to know—and they are held to an impressively high standard. South Carolina has made a huge advance in showing what history standards *can* be. Teachers around the country would be well advised to make use of South Carolina’s extraordinary content. The state’s strong sequence and well-designed documents earn a three out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)