

SOUTH DAKOTA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

D

SCORES

Content and Rigor **2/7**
Clarity and Specificity **1/3**

TOTAL SCORE

3/10

Overview

South Dakota promises rigorous and comprehensive historical coverage. In reality, however, its standards deliver gap-ridden and fragmentary content, split arbitrarily among thematic strands and headings with little regard for context, coherence, or chronology.

Goals and Organization

South Dakota's social studies standards provide grade-specific outlines for grades K–8, each divided into five strands: U.S. history, world history, geography, civics, and economics. Each strand is sub-divided into thematic “indicators.” The two indicators provided for US history, common across all grades, are:

- Analyze U.S. historical eras to determine connections and cause/effect relationships in reference to chronology
- Evaluate the influence/impact of various cultures, philosophies, and religions on the development of the U.S.

The indicators are further divided into chronological or thematic “standards,” each of which is categorized as “analysis,” “application,” “knowledge,” or “comprehension,” and provided with “supporting skills and examples.”

At the end of each strand, the state includes “performance descriptors,” which are rubrics defining student comprehension of the strand’s broad grade-specific content at advanced, proficient, and basic levels.

The standards follow the same organization for grades 9–12, except that there the strands are separated into subject-specific “core” courses, which replace grade-level outlines. The “core” course outlines are supplemented with additional “standards” and “supporting skills and examples” for “advanced” courses; these add a small number of further conceptual targets for each course.

Kindergarten through third grade focus on chronological concepts, national symbols, holidays, and famous individuals. Fourth grade introduces South Dakota history within the U.S. history strand.

The U.S. history sequence enters in fifth grade and runs from pre-settlement to 1865. A two-year course is placed in eighth grade and high school, with eighth grade covering from the Revolution to Reconstruction, and high school—the state does not indicate in which grade—Reconstruction to the present.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

South Dakota Social Studies Content Standards, U.S. history segments (2006)

Accessed from:

<http://www.doe.sd.gov/ContentStandards/index.asp>

Evaluation

South Dakota claims that its “standards are comprehensive and specific, they are rigorous, and they represent South Dakota’s commitment to excellence.” “The essential core content” that students must master is said to be “stated explicitly” therein.

In reality, South Dakota has made only the faintest attempt to identify and outline the basic facts of American history for teachers and students. And the jargon-laden, thematic social studies setup of its strands and indicators robs what little material there is of historical cohesion, coherence, or context.

In the early grades, students are to learn the usual *mélange* of chronological concepts, national symbols, famous people, and so forth, yet the examples given of famous individuals offer only jumbled groups that focus heavily on minorities and entirely disregard chronology.

As more specific historical information begins to appear, with fourth grade’s broad survey of South Dakota history, the arbitrary division of content between the two indicators—“historical eras” and “cultures, philosophies and religions”—becomes disruptive to both chronology and logic. The arrival of gold miners, for instance, is mentioned under the first indicator while the gold rush appears as an example in the second. The local history material also emphasizes Native Americans to the near-exclusion of all else.

In fifth grade, which introduces U.S. history before 1865, coverage remains brief, fragmented, and grossly general. Under the historical eras indicator, the standards and examples discuss Native American lifestyles and early European explorers (only Columbus and Cortez are named), before moving to “influential people and key events during the American Revolution.” A handful of individuals and three battles are mentioned; the coming of the Revolution is reduced to “Boston Tea Party, Stamp Act, [and] Sugar Act”—in reverse chronological order. A single standard spans “key changes leading to and resulting from growth and invention in the U.S. between the Revolution and 1865,” while the examples offer brief references to territorial expansion, technological innovations, and “important leaders of the Civil War”—Lincoln, Douglas, Jefferson Davis, and Generals Lee and Grant. (Stephen Douglas, who died in the spring of 1861, was of course important only *before* the Civil War.)

Other content for the grade is arbitrarily split into the cultures indicator. Defying all historical logic, we jump abruptly back to motives for colonial settlement, the political relationship between the colonies and England (merely described as “representative/ monarchy/democracy”) and sectional divisions (“slavery, states rights”). Other relevant events

appear—albeit in passing—in other strands entirely: the French and Indian War and War of 1812 appear in world history; the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and certain Revolutionary leaders appear under civics; the triangular trade, Louisiana Purchase, gold rush, and Native American removal crop up under economics.

In eighth grade, the thematic organization remains unaltered, and the level of detail improves only slightly; the colonial era, relegated exclusively to fifth grade, is not reviewed again. Under the eras indicator, a few events and leaders of the Revolution are listed, and the Declaration of Independence is mentioned. Westward expansion is given a few words: the examples provided are “Louisiana Purchase, Florida, Oregon, [and] Texas,” along with the “Texas Revolution, Mexican War, Cherokee relocation, [and] Seminole War.” Explanation of reform movements is limited to “women, slavery.” For the roots of the Civil War, examples are confined to “political, geographical, and economic differences,” followed by a few political/military leaders, a handful of battles, the Gettysburg Address, and the Emancipation Proclamation—again out of chronological order. (Stephen Douglas is again listed as one of the “key individuals...in the Civil War.”) Reconstruction is reduced to the “Freedmen’s Bureau, Jim Crow laws” (which appeared *after* Reconstruction), “Carpetbaggers, military districts,” and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The cultures indicator once again jumps back, briefly mentioning confederation vs. federalism, loyalists vs. patriots, and Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists, through to Manifest Destiny, conflict with Native Americans (through the Battle of the Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee), abolitionism, inventions, and the cultural impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction. And again, a few decontextualized historical fragments appear under civics (including the Constitutional Convention’s Great Compromise and three-fifths clause, the Northwest Ordinance, and the Bill of Rights). The War of 1812 and sharecropping pop up under economics.

The high school course continues in equally shallow and disjointed fashion. Exceedingly brief standards and a handful of arbitrary examples touch on urbanization, westward expansion, big business, imperialism, Progressivism, World War I, the Great Depression, and so forth, totaling barely more than 300 words from the 1860s to the September 11 attacks. The cultures indicator then jumps back in time, again considering the Native American wars and a smattering of cultural, political, and religious movements. Yet again, isolated historical fragments (Supreme Court decisions, the Monroe Doctrine, the Roosevelt Corollary, the Iran-Contra affair, and others) appear in other strands.

The brief supplemental standards for the “advanced” U.S. history course add no specifics, merely directing students to

“chronicle” urbanization, “critique” the causes and impact of western expansion and U.S. imperialism, “describe” the effects and limits of Progressivism, “explain” the relation between domestic and foreign policy, and “evaluate the significance of interactions between the U.S. government and diverse cultures in relation to cultural preservation versus cultural assimilation.”

Throughout, the vague and insubstantial standards and examples are often phrased in language that is not only historically meaningless but grammatically challenged and all but incomprehensible. What is a fifth grader to make of this: “Identify the reasons that led to the development of colonial America”? What is a high school student to do with this: “Explain the cause-effect relationships and legacy that distinguish significant historical periods from Reconstruction to the present”? Or this: “Relate previously learned information of these time periods to the context of succeeding time periods”?

Content and Rigor Conclusion

South Dakota’s standards promise “rigorous” coverage of “essential core content.” In reality, while some basic history is occasionally mentioned, overly broad standards and scattered, decontextualized examples, split among strands and thematic indicators, rob the material of historical connection, coherence, or historical logic. A disproportionate amount of space is devoted to Native Americans—an understandable focus in South Dakota, *if* basic U.S. history were covered as well. The colonial period, as in a number of other states, is relegated to fifth grade only—though, with hardly any increase in rigor in later grades, all periods are equally shortchanged. South Dakota’s standards earn two out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

South Dakota’s jargon-filled *Standards*, with their tables of strands, indicators, examples, performance descriptors, and the like, are confusing and unclear, arbitrarily dividing content among the strands and tossing chronology aside. Despite claims that they are “comprehensive and specific,” the standards offer minimal detail; students, according to the introductory text, are expected to attain a high degree of factual knowledge—yet only isolated specifics are ever laid out. The sequence is flawed as well, failing to recapitulate colonial material after fifth grade. South Dakota promised much, but delivered little. The state’s jumbled and disorganized standards barely earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)