

TENNESSEE • U.S. HISTORY

GRADE

C

SCORES

Content and Rigor 4/7
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

5/10

Overview

Tennessee's U.S. history standards provide some useful content, though much remains patchy and broad. But the standards constitute an organizational quicksand, from which the reader is lucky to escape with any content or comprehension intact. Extracting any content at all can become a mind-bending task.

Goals and Organization

Tennessee's social studies standards provide grade-specific outlines for grades K–8. Each grade is divided into six strands, or “content standards”: culture; economics; geography; governance and civics; history; and individuals, groups, and interactions.

“Learning expectations” are provided for each strand. In the history strand, these are divided by era and constitute directives to understand broad issues of each era (for example, “Recognize the causes, course, and consequences of the Civil War”).

“Achievements” supply each expectation with more specific content expectations (e.g., “Identify sectional differences that led to the Civil War”). Between them, the expectations and achievements constitute what would commonly be called standards.

Finally, the state provides two categories—“performance indicators state” and “performance indicators teacher”—that outline knowledge/skills that students should be able to demonstrate at progressive levels of sophistication (rated as levels 1 to 3). The “performance indicators state” are evaluated on the basis of state assessments, while “performance indicators teacher” are to be assessed “through teacher observation.” The performance indicators—which are *not* divided by era—are often broadly thematic and trans-historical (e.g., the student is able to “identify conclusions about historical events using primary and secondary sources”). They largely recapitulate concepts raised in the expectations and achievements, but they may also invoke specifics not previously mentioned in the achievements (e.g., the student is able to “recognize the rights that workers fought for in the late 1800’s,” such as “wages, hours, insurance, and working conditions”).

At the high school level, subject-specific courses replace the grade-specific outlines. The U.S. history course is first divided into eras, each supplied with learning expectations sorted thematically among the six strands (e.g., a directive to “Understand how industrial development affected the United States culture” is grouped under culture; “Investigate the effect of big business upon the lives of farmers and wage earners” is grouped under individuals, groups and interactions). The achievements are dropped; instead, more specific content now follows in the state and teacher performance indicators. And these are *not* keyed to the learning expectations, but *are* divided by era. The performance

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Tennessee Social Studies Curriculum
Standards: K–12, U.S. history segments
(2006)

Accessed from:

[http://www.tn.gov/education/ci/ss/
index.shtml](http://www.tn.gov/education/ci/ss/index.shtml)

indicators now constitute the content standards, and the ranking of performance levels is dropped.

Kindergarten through third grade introduce basic concepts of chronology, national symbols, holidays, and famous individuals.

The U.S. history sequence includes two full two-year courses. The first is for fourth and fifth grades, the former running from pre-settlement to 1861 and the latter from 1850 to the 1970s. The second course begins in eighth grade and runs from pre-settlement to 1877, finishing in high school (grade unspecified) with 1870 to the present.

Evaluation

Tennessee's history standards are an organizational nightmare. We are told that the Kindergarten through eighth-grade materials, presented in a labyrinth of expectations, achievements, and performance indicators, "should be taught in an integrated manner, not in isolation." But in order to do so, the reader must first digest and disentangle the history strand's content from multiple, frequently overlapping sections—to say nothing of historical content shunted into other strands entirely. The high school course, meanwhile, presents a *different* but still bewildering mass of materials, even though it is meant as a continuation of the eighth grade course. Here, specific content is divided into the performance standards, which are not linked to the separate and broader learning expectations, but are arbitrarily split among the six strands.

Historical coverage starts out with broadly-framed themes and little detail from Kindergarten through third grade. In addition to the usual holidays and national symbols, students are told to study famous persons—yet none are named.

The fourth-grade introduction to U.S. history is broken down into series of familiar overlapping eras derived from common social studies models: "Three Worlds Meet" to 1620; "Colonization and Settlement," 1585–1763; "Revolution and the New Nation," 1754–1820; and "Expansion and Reform," 1801–1861. The final learning expectation for each era addresses Tennessee history. The actual content, when it can be found, touches on some important themes and issues. Nonetheless, the expectations and achievements remain too general. For example, students are simply told to "explain when, where, and why groups of people colonized and settled in the United States" or to "explain the events that contributed to the outbreak of the American Revolution." The Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and sectionalism are mentioned. But more is

not mentioned, including Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Jacksonian democracy, or any of the antebellum crises.

Some additional specifics appear in the two performance indicator sections, which are arranged only by performance levels, *not* by era. Reasons for colonization are cited ("religious, economic, [and] individual freedom"), along with basic causes of the American Revolution ("taxation, judicial process, lack of representations [*sic*], [and] quartering of troops") and the later failings of the Articles, such as "no single currency, no judicial branch, no [national] enforcement of laws, [and] small and large states having unequal representation"—the last item presumably a reference to the fact that the thirteen states each had a single vote in Congress, regardless of population.

Discussion of the founding documents appears in the separate civics strand; unfortunately, that strand also promotes the myth of the Iroquois League as a key influence on American constitutionalism. Aspects of colonization, cultural contact, sectionalism, and slavery appear in the culture strand as well as the individuals, groups, and interactions strand, both of which are poorly defined.

Fifth grade resumes the course, continuing from 1850 to the 1970s—with identical format and similar lack of depth. The broad basics are touched upon: Civil War, Reconstruction, industrialization, immigration, and so forth. But the achievements remain shallow; for example, "identify sectional interests that led to the Civil War," or "describe the political and economic events that led to World War II." The performance indicators add names of Civil War figures (Chief Justice Taney is mentioned but Dred Scott is not), basic Progressive issues, and key events of the civil rights era. Once again, other historically related material crops up in separate strands.

Eighth grade begins the second, more advanced American history course. The baffling format remains unchanged, but outlining becomes more thorough and achievements more sophisticated. For instance, students are to "discuss the search for religious, economic and individual freedom in the settlement of the colonies"; "recognize the shift from utilizing indentured servitude to slavery within the colonies due to economic reasons and popular uprisings"; and "explain the events that contributed to the outbreak of the American Revolution such as leaders who resisted imperial policy, the English tax on colonists from the Seven Years War, divergent economic interests, and regional motivations." British and European political influences, colonial representative bodies, the Continental Congress, Shays' Rebellion, and other points are at least mentioned—though the last is misspelled and is placed *after* the Bill of Rights. Nebulous items such as "describe the armed conflict of the Revolutionary War" leave much to be desired.

Matters grow worse: The crucial political events of the 1790s—including Washington’s administration, the party schism, and the election of 1800—are still entirely missing. So is Jacksonian democracy, and antebellum crises are reduced to “identify sectional differences that led to the Civil War.” Only a few related specifics are lumped together in the performance indicators with little regard to chronology or context.

In the high school course, the organization is *different*, but not *better*. The content, however, does continue to improve. Many key issues and events are touched upon, including industrialization, economic disparities, Social Darwinism, and political corruption and reform. But the learning expectations, confusingly divided among the six strands, are often vague. For example, students should “understand the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction on the United States politics” and “understand the effects of World War II upon American society.” The performance indicators add some reasonable specifics; for instance, the Panama Canal, “the idea of a superior Anglo-Saxon culture,” and “yellow journalism” are listed in relation to American imperialism. Yet there are substantial gaps, including the rise of Southern racial segregation, a key point in the history of Tennessee.

The content that is included is undermined by a structure that disrupts coherence, chronology, and logic. For example, in the “performance indicators state,” a vague entry on the “major events” of World War II appears *between* specific events of the Great Depression and a list of New Deal programs—while brief references to the evolution of New Deal policies and opposition thereto, along with further items on World War II, are shunted into the “performance indicators teacher.”

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Tennessee’s standards contain the raw material for a basic outline of American history, albeit one that is too broad and riddled with gaps. Unfortunately, the bizarre organization reduces the content to a muddle of decontextualized historical fragments. The full course of American history is covered twice, and there is a noticeable increase in rigor in later grades, outlining more specific and sophisticated concepts and themes. Unfortunately, because the most rigorous content appears only at the high school level, the first half of the course, which appears in grade 8, is shortchanged. On balance, Tennessee manages a four out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Tennessee’s sequence is reasonable and straightforward, and course scope has been outlined with some detail—even if the result is quite uneven. Clarity is another matter. The ill-

considered structure makes it difficult for teachers or students both to *extract* the information contained in the standards and to derive a clear sense of what they should teach or learn. The historical substance contained in the document could give teachers some meaningful guidance in structuring their courses, but without better presentation it is more likely to be thrown aside in frustration. Tennessee’s clear sequence, but erratic detail and organizational chaos, earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)