

VERMONT • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

Content and Rigor 1/7
Clarity and Specificity 0/3

TOTAL SCORE

1/10

Overview

Vermont's history standards mention (in passing) that American history happened, and direct students to analyze it. Beyond that, they provide nothing but conceptual generalizations and theoretical abstractions, all concealed within a jargon-ridden maze of strands, grade expectations, thematic headings, and sub-headings.

Goals and Organization

Vermont's "History and Social Science Standards," part of the state's larger *Framework of Standards*, is divided into eight strands: investigation and critical evaluation; history; geography; citizenship; diversity and unity; economics; conflicts and conflict resolution; and identity and interdependence. Each strand is further broken into numbered thematic headings, and each of these is supplied with "evidence" items, constituting specific content expectations, for each of three grade blocks: pre-K–4, 5–8 and 9–12.

The history strand is split among three thematic headings: historical connections, traditional and social histories, and being a historian. The historical connections heading is further divided into the following sections: Vermont, United States, and world. Starting in fifth grade, these sections are further divided into eras.

The separate history and social science *Grade Expectations* lay out further analytical and interpretive exercises, divided among five strands: inquiry; history; physical and cultural geography; civics, government, and society; and economics. The history strand, meant to complement the history strand in the *Framework*, is organized under three sentence starters: "Students connect the past with the present by..." is the first; "students show understanding of how humans interpret history by..." is the second; and "students show understanding of past, present and future time by..." is the third. Specific exercises then complete the sentences, laying out exercises for two-year grade bands from pre-Kindergarten to eighth grade, and for a four-year high school grade block. (For instance, in grades nine through twelve, "Students connect the past with the present by hypothesizing how critical events could have had different outcomes.") These broad exercises may or may not refer to specific historical examples. The *Grade Expectations* use narrower grade bands than the *Frameworks*; but they do not offer specific content outlines or further define what content is assigned to what grade.

From pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade the Vermont standards introduce basic concepts of democracy, famous individuals, national symbols, and holidays.

The materials geared toward fifth through eighth grades are supposed to cover U.S. history from pre-settlement to 1890, and the high school grades from 1850 to the present.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities, U.S. history segments (2000)

Accessed from:

<http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/pubs/framework.pdf>

Grade Expectations for Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities: History and Social Science, U.S. history segments (2004)

Accessed from:

http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/pubs/grade_expectations/rtf_doc_files/history_social_sciences.doc

Evaluation

The Vermont standards claim to be committed to clarifying the “essential knowledge” that “students should *know*,” as well as teaching them how to provide “evidence to back up assertions.” The analytical exercises in the supplemental *Grade Expectations* are intended to be “a valuable resource for teachers and schools as they implement the Vermont Framework,” focusing “on depth of understanding” and “identifying key knowledge.”

Sadly, this commitment is little more than empty rhetoric. Vermont’s standards actually focus almost entirely on broad concepts, abstractions, and trans-historical (or ahistorical) themes and skills with little reference to specific periods or events. Worse, what little content does appear is buried deep in the nested strands, headings, and sub-headings.

In the grade band covering pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade, evidence items under the United States heading mention democratic values, along with related people (such as “Washington, Lincoln, [and] King”), events (e.g., “4th of July, Memorial Day, [and] Labor Day”), and symbols (“flags, eagles”). A passing reference to regional folklore and cultures, without examples, along with a brief reference to the founding documents under the civics strand, completes U.S. history coverage for the entire grade band.

In fifth through eighth grade, a series of chronological headings cover the following: “Native Cultures to 1600,” “Colonization (1500–1774),” “The Revolutionary/New State Era (1775–1791),” and “Expansion (1791–1890).” However, just five evidence items are offered for *all four periods combined*. Students are to “examine two or more native cultures,” noting their “similarities and differences.” They are to “trace the evolution of political, religious, economic and social institutions in the American colonies.” For the Revolutionary era, they are to “investigate the political, social and economic causes of the American Revolution” and to evaluate the “ideas and institutions” of the founding documents. Finally, for the *entire* period from 1791 to 1890, they are to “investigate and analyze the conditions that led to territorial expansion, effects on various groups, and concepts of nationalism and sectionalism.” (“The phrase various groups,” we are helpfully told in the introduction, “includes racial, ethnic, and gender groups, and various socioeconomic classes.”) That is Vermont’s complete U.S. history outline through eighth grade.

In the high school grades, further chronological headings run from 1850 to the present. There is no noteworthy improvement in rigor; six evidence items are given this time instead of five. The closest Vermont comes to *any* specific historical information is the directive to analyze “major forces” shaping America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

for which a few examples are given: “industrialization, urbanization, immigration, imperialism, nationalism, unionism, and the struggle for equal rights.” Otherwise, students are simply to “investigate the social, political, and economic causes and effects of the Civil War,” “analyze causes and effects of WW I and the US role in the world,” “analyze causes and effects of the Great Depression and identify policies designed to fix it,” analyze “causes and effects of WW II,” and “analyze the domestic issues facing the US in post WW II as well as foreign policy issues.”

The other headings within the history strand—“traditional and social histories” and “being a historian”—are brief and abstract. High school students are supposed to “identify and analyze the influence of various groups...on major issues and events under study,” and to “explain why we study human actions in the past.” Scattered historical references also appear in other strands within the “History and Social Science Standards.” For example, under “conflicts and conflict resolution,” students are to “explain a conflict (e.g. Labor Issues, Revolutionary War) by recognizing the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of those directly and indirectly involved in the conflict.” But nothing historically coherent or useful is provided.

The history strand of the separate *Grade Expectations*—which uses different grade ranges than the *Frameworks*—adds only vague theoretical exercises, making occasional reference to disconnected historical facts. Fifth and sixth graders, for instance, are to consider how and why “life in the United States and/or the world has both changed and stayed the same over time,” such as how “the life of a teenager during the American Revolution” would compare to today. Seventh and eighth graders are to evaluate “the credibility of differing accounts of the same event(s),” such as “the Revolutionary War from a colonist’s perspective vs. British perspective” or “the bombing of Hiroshima from the perspective of a Japanese citizen vs. an American soldier.” High school students are to explain “historical origins of key ideas and concepts (e.g., Enlightenment, Manifest Destiny, [and] religious and governmental philosophies) and how they are reinterpreted over time.” Again, there is no historical outline, just fragments in a theoretical frame.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Beyond listing broad eras and mentioning a few landmarks in the American past, Vermont’s standards contain no U.S. history content whatsoever. Their concern is that students “think about” history by following an arbitrary series of theoretical categories—with special reference to marginalized “groups”—all to enrich student personal experience. Rigor

does not increase across grades, for it is absent from all of them. If Vermont students *have* any substantive historical knowledge to analyze, it will be thanks solely to the efforts of their teachers, who receive no meaningful guidance from the *Framework* or the *Grade Expectations*. Vermont's few bare references to historical content earn it a marginal one out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The Vermont *Framework* lays out the most basic sequence for U.S. history. It is clear from the distributions of the brief historical outlines that the period to 1890 is to be covered in grades five through eight, while 1850 to the present is to be covered in high school. But the total lack of detail—and the fragmentation of even theoretical content items into strands, headings, sub-headings, and so on—gives no indication of what is to be taught or when, much less any measurable standard of what students are to know and when. The *Grade Expectations* refer to narrower two-grade spans; but since they address no specific content at any grade level, they add nothing to the sequence or to course specifics. Despite the “History and Social Science” label, history is scarcely found. Vermont's confusing maze, with little of substance concealed within it, merits no points at all for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)