

VIRGINIA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

C

SCORES

Content and Rigor 5/7
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

6/10

Overview

Virginia's U.S. history standards contain much solid content. Unfortunately, their uneven depth, omissions, politicized emphases, and poor organization all compromise their quality and usefulness. The failure to assign specific content to particular grade levels further undermines the history curriculum.

Goals and Organization

Virginia's standards offer grade-specific course outlines for grades K–3. Content in these grades is broken among four strands: history, geography, economics, and civics. After third grade, the standards “do not prescribe the grade level at which the standards must be taught or a scope and sequence within a grade level,” but are instead split into subject-specific courses, to be offered at whatever level “local divisions” feel “best serves their students.” Courses in history, after introductory units on geography and social studies skills, follow a mainly chronological structure, with a straightforward outline of numbered standards laying out course-specific content expectations.

The *Standards*, in turn, are supplemented by the *Curriculum Frameworks*, which expand upon each numbered standard with “essential understandings” (an overarching concept summarizing the material’s import), “essential questions” (analytical queries about the material), “essential knowledge” (additional specifics and factual details), and “essential skills” (analytic skills).

Kindergarten through third grade introduce basic concepts of chronology, national symbols, holidays, and famous people. Second grade focuses on Native Americans. Third grade emphasizes early European explorers and Native American contact.

Following the early elementary grades, subject-specific courses are outlined, assigned to no particular grade or age level. Those relevant to U.S. history are “Virginia Studies,” “U.S. History to 1865,” “U.S. History from 1865 to the Present,” and “Virginia and United States History.”

Evaluation

“History,” the Virginia Standards of Learning assert, “should be the integrative core of the curriculum,” in which the humanities and the social sciences “come to life.” In order to achieve this goal, however, Virginia needs to improve its inconsistent content and lack of chronological focus. The organization is also poor, with content awkwardly divided among the standards and the curriculum frameworks. A tendency toward tendentious politicization is pervasive throughout.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, U.S. history segments (2008)

Accessed from:

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/history_socialscience/next_version/stds_all_history.pdf

Virginia History and Social Science Standards of Learning Curriculum Frameworks, U.S. history segments (2008)

Accessed from:

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/history_socialscience/index.shtml

The early grades introduce conventional basic concepts, but devote arguably disproportionate space to Native American history. They also take care to note the culture, government, and trade of the medieval African Kingdom of Mali, but the fact that the kingdom's wealth derived largely from slavery and the slave trade are *not* mentioned. The Virginia Studies course, presumably intended for later elementary grades, does include a brief but reasonable outline of the state's "rich history."

The *Standards'* outline for "United States history to 1865," which declares that it's meant to impart the "ideas and events that strengthened the union," instead reveals a politicized emphasis. Native Americans are again given disproportionate space and contrasted with Europeans in a biased manner, "with emphasis on the American Indian concept of land." Nothing is said about the rise of representative government in the colonies, and especially the crucial role of Virginia, leaving the next unit—extremely general directives to explain "issues of dissatisfaction" and "political ideas" leading to the Revolution—oddly rootless. After general items on the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, and "the first five presidents" (neglecting to mention that four of the five were Virginians) the outline jumps to a brief segment on westward expansion before moving on to an equally brief unit on the Civil War. Therein, students are to explain "cultural, economic, and constitutional issues that divided the nation" and how "states' rights and slavery increased sectional tensions"—but no specific events are mentioned.

Much of the detail absent from the standards is meant to be provided in the *Curriculum Framework*. Unfortunately, this document is seriously flawed. Three of its four sections—the essential understandings, essential questions, and essential skills—are entirely general. Only the essential knowledge items add some specifics, and they do so with inconsistent quality. The *Framework* for the first U.S. history course helpfully fleshes out motives and background for European explorers. Discussion of West Africa mentions the exchange of European goods for gold, but it does *not* mention the African role in the slave trade. The reasons for various colonial settlements are sketched adequately, as are regional economic differences. But the rise of representative government is *still* left out, undermining an otherwise fairly sound discussion of Revolutionary grievances.

The *Standards'* brief reference to the first five presidents is poorly fleshed out: Of three items devoted to Washington (which omit his decisive contribution to legitimizing the fledgling national government), the third is largely devoted to the role of Benjamin Banneker, an African American, in laying out the District of Columbia—hardly the defining event of the period. The one item for John Adams—stating that "a two-party system emerged during his administration"—is simply

wrong: The two-party system had emerged much earlier, hence the contested and very close 1796 election. The items that follow add some further content, but, since they follow the brief and thematic structure of the "standards," they have little sense of chronological, historical development.

The *Standards'* outline for the 1865–present course opens with brief reference to the Reconstruction amendments and Reconstruction's impact, followed by short references to westward expansion and its impact on Native Americans, Jim Crow, big business, and Progressivism. Similarly shallow items continue through World War II, with an exceedingly brief final unit on the post-war period. In an odd contrast to the earlier political predisposition, now students are asked to identify "the role of America's military and veterans in defending freedom during the Cold War"—an equally biased directive (if skewed in the opposite direction).

The *Framework* adds some detail but again does so inconsistently. Reconstruction is explained reasonably well, as are later nineteenth-century social and economic changes. But political history is still largely absent and there is little chronological grounding. Handling of the 1920s, the New Deal, and World War II are generally sound. The post-war period, however, is chronologically jumbled and patchy: McCarthyism, for example, is missing.

The high school course on Virginia and United States history is oddly titled, since it hardly focuses on Virginia. This course is meant to explicate "the historical development of American ideas and institutions from the Age of Exploration to the present," with a focus "on political and economic history." The result overlaps awkwardly with the main U.S. history courses, supplying some of the political history missing therein—though separated from broader context—while re-treading some of the same ground. But it by no means closes all the gaps. How "values and institutions of European economic and political life took root in the colonies" is mentioned, and contrasted with the rise and impact of slavery. But representative government is *still* not specifically covered. The unit on the American Revolution offers Locke and *Common Sense*, but otherwise remains non-specific. Washington and Madison are mentioned, as is the Marshall Court, but the election of 1800 is missing; the War of 1812 and Jacksonian democracy are included but the Mexican War and acts governing slavery in the territories are not. This erratic pattern continues on into the modern era.

The *Curriculum Framework* for "Virginia and U.S. History" adds more substance—briefly including, at last, the rise of representative government in the colonies. The materials expand upon Locke and *Common Sense*, but not other Revolutionary ideas. Matters improve with the Constitutional

Convention, the Marshall Court (out of historical sequence), the party schism, and the election of 1800. The Mexican War finally appears, before jumping back to the War of 1812. Key events of the sectional crisis are finally mentioned but are chronologically jumbled. There is a dramatic improvement in the coverage of the political issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction, with significantly more detail and explanation offered, as well as a more solid chronological structure. If Virginia's standards were consistently on the level of this section, they would be formidable.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Although it is not necessarily obvious at first glance, the Virginia standards contain a good deal of historical material, some of it of quite high quality. Unfortunately, depth and rigor are uneven. Explanatory material is split up over multiple documents; the division of related content into semi-overlapping courses means that students will encounter integral aspects of the same material in different courses and grades. Grade-level appropriateness is impossible to judge, since the subject courses may be placed anywhere from fourth to twelfth grades. Political bias is also frequently evident. It is particularly disappointing that Virginia, the most important state in the founding of our constitutional system and a state justifiably proud of its rich history, earns only a five out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Poor organization seriously undermines Virginia's U.S. history standards. The division between standards and supporting frameworks could be workable—if the standards were sufficiently specific to allow clear organization of the supporting information. Sequence is not specified, since all grade-level decisions are left to local districts. Detail, once extracted from the confusion of documents and courses, is generally adequate; at times, it is even quite strong. But the strange splitting of U.S. history between the main sequence and the more politically focused “Virginia and U.S. History” course disrupts the coherence and cohesion of the content and undermines the scope and logic of each course. Virginia's confusing organization earns just one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)