

WASHINGTON • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

D

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

3/10

Overview

Washington's U.S. history standards present both meager and broad historical examples splintered among arbitrary strands and thematic headings; what little history the state provides urges politicized condemnation rather than comprehension or analysis. All final decisions on scope and content are left to local teachers and districts, supposedly to address their students' "particular interests and needs."

Goals and Organization

Washington's standards provide grade-specific outlines for grades K–12, although districts are free to "reorder" the material "within grade bands (i.e., 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12)."

Each grade is divided among five strands, called Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs): civics, economics, geography, history, and social studies skills. Each strand is then divided into a fixed set of thematic headings, or "components." The history strand has four such components at all grade levels: historical chronology; causal factors that have shaped major events in history; multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events; and using history to understand the present and plan for the future. Components are supplied in turn with grade-level expectations for which the state provides suggested examples; together, the grade-level expectations and examples comprise the grade-specific content expectations.

Each grade-level expectation, thematically arranged under the strands and components, is also linked to a "suggested unit," listing "chronological eras and major developments or themes." A separate *Suggested Unit Outlines* document rearranges the grade-level expectations and their related examples using the "suggested units" as organizing headings.

Kindergarten through second grade introduce basic concepts of community and change over time. Third grade focuses on cultural diversity, particularly Native Americans and recent immigrants, and fourth grade focuses on Washington state history.

The main U.S. history sequence is presented as a single course over grades five, eight, and eleven. Fifth grade is to cover from pre-settlement to 1791, eighth grade from 1776 to 1900, and eleventh grade from 1890 to the present.

Evaluation

Like many frameworks built on social studies theory, Washington's standards emphasize concepts and thinking skills over specific knowledge. "Facts," we are told, "are critically important—but facts should be the building blocks for understanding trends, ideas, and

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Washington State K–12 Social Studies Learning Standards, U.S. history segments (2008)

Accessed from:

<http://www.k12.wa.us/SocialStudies/pubdocs/SocialStudiesStandards.pdf>

Suggested Unit Outlines for Social Studies GLEs, K–12, U.S. history segments (2008)

Accessed from:

<http://www.k12.wa.us/SocialStudies/EALRs-GLEs.aspx>

principles, not stand-alone bits of memorized data.” This is all well and good, so long as students *have* factual knowledge on which to build. But sadly, the Washington standards outline no such content. The state defers instead to local control, allowing local districts “considerable latitude” in selecting content, so as to better “tailor” their courses “to their students’ and community’s particular interests and needs.”

The standards’ fragmentary and optional historical examples are offered merely as tools for addressing “social studies concepts.” As a result, they may turn up under any strand. Historical context is plainly not a top priority. For example, the last component in the history strand directs students to use “history to understand the present and plan for the future”—a blatant invitation to judge history based on present-day values and evaluate it in terms of personal relevance.

Early grades offer little other than vague generalizations about community and chronology, along with a pointed emphasis on Native Americans and minority groups. The state thereupon adopts the unfortunate model, favored in many states, of a single, once-through U.S. history sequence. As a result, the entire colonial period is relegated solely to fifth grade, where students’ sophistication is limited. But then, any given course scope remains just the “recommended context” in which students may explore their own “understanding of social studies concepts.”

Fifth grade begins the main U.S. history sequence. Unfortunately, the scattered historical examples provided are split among all the strands. For instance, “the reasons why colonists chose to dump tea into the Boston Harbor on December 16, 1773” turns up under an economics heading on comparing wants and needs. The actual history strand is barely more focused. Under the “historical chronology” heading, students are to understand that there were basic eras in early America. Two of these three eras are defined principally in terms of Native Americans, whose presence is said to date from “time immemorial,” as if they sprouted from the earth at the beginning of time—ignoring the actual, datable, historical arrival of early Asiatic peoples across the Bering land bridge. Suggested examples include the early Anasazi, and how Puritan-Wampanoag interaction defines the entire period from 1492 to 1763 “as a time of encounter.” Students are also treated to the profound observation that the founding of various colonies defines “the history of the Americas between 1492 and 1763 as a time of settlement and colonization.” They are likewise to understand how diseases among indigenous peoples “define this era as a time of devastation,” and “how Revolution and Constitution help to define U.S. history from 1763 to 1791.”

Under the history strand’s “causal factors” heading, students might consider the impact of Crispus Attucks (about whom very little is actually known), how George Washington led American forces to victory (the *only* reference in the standards to the man for whom the state is named), the impact of “various cultural groups,” or of technology and ideas. Or they might prefer to analyze how “the idea of democracy” “—tossed in without further elaboration or historical context—“led the colonists to seek change by fighting Great Britain in the Revolutionary War.” Under the “multiple perspectives” heading, students may contrast the “colonists’ perspective of settlement and indigenous people’s perspective of genocide,” a term and concept that did not exist until after World War II. While using history “to understand the present and plan for the future,” they are invited to consider how ““no taxation without representation”” influences modern state “initiative processes,” or the how the Constitution’s “principles and ideals...affect current government and citizen decisions.”

The supplemental *Suggested Unit Outlines* offer little help. Here the grade-level expectations and examples are re-organized by broad and sometimes vaguely defined eras (e.g., “US—Encounter, Colonization, and Devastation” or “US—Independence”), rather than under the thematic component headings as in the main standards. But no additional content or clarification is added. The same broadly thematic grade-level expectations are repeated from the standards, along with the same examples. Worse, the expectations *within* each broad era are still grouped by strand. Thus, even with the *Unit Outlines’* supposedly chronological arrangement, each era’s content is still arbitrarily broken up.

In the eighth-grade *Standards*, nothing changes; the examples are slightly more specific but still fragmentary. An assortment of laws and court cases appear under civics; business, commerce, and tariffs appear under economics. Extremely broad eras are mentioned under history, backed up with disconnected examples organized by theme. Even in the supposedly chronological arrangement of the *Unit Outlines*, the thematic and strand-based expectations continue to wreak havoc with chronology. For instance, one segment goes from Andrew Jackson’s tariffs, to industrialization, to the plantation system, *back* to the structure of the Constitution and the Louisiana Purchase, then on to the Cherokee removal, the Mexican War, *Marbury v. Madison*, the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, checks and balances under Andrew Jackson, then *back* to Johnson’s impeachment, and finally to Native American removal.

In eleventh grade, the standards assert that “students have the intellectual and social capacity to develop serious historical knowledge and perspective, geographic literacy, economic understanding, and civic wisdom and commitment.” A new

course, “U.S history and government, 1890 to the present,” is offered as “the recommended context” in which students may “tap this capacity.” But the situation is in fact identical to fifth and eighth grades: The organization remains purely conceptual, and the historical examples remain as random, disconnected, and useless as in the earlier grades. The only difference is that the examples refer to a later period.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

There are slivers of historical content in Washington’s “suggested examples,” but they are presented without context, connection, or explanation. It is a sadly revealing irony that the state named for George Washington says nothing about his unique and decisive role in establishing American constitutional democracy. Historical examples are *mentioned* as they apply to overarching themes, but nothing is outlined or explicated. The business of choosing and imparting specific knowledge is left to local teachers and districts. What content there is often seeks to inculcate politicized viewpoints, particularly regarding Native Americans. With a repetitive emphasis on personal relevance, history becomes merely a tool to aid students’ own growth, not a foundational subject worthy of understanding in its own right. The chaotic and overly general historical content barely earns a two out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Washington’s standards are undermined from the start by their fixation on concept over content. The maze of learning requirements and grade-level expectations lays out arbitrarily divided abstract ideas; historical detail, offered only as “examples,” is fragmented and incoherent. Even the *Suggested Unit Outlines*, meant to organize the various thematic blocks by time period, only create bundles of disconnected examples, still organized thematically *within* each period. Course scope is explicitly left to local teachers and districts; sequence is outlined, but may be modified locally. The sequence itself is flawed, relegating all earlier periods to early grades, where students’ sophistication is inevitably less developed—though it is, of course, up to teachers and districts to provide meaningful detail at *any* level. Washington’s confused and disorganized standards earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)