

WEST VIRGINIA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

D

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

4/10

Overview

West Virginia's standards contain some rudimentary U.S. history content. Unfortunately, it is fragmentary and shallow, lacking specifics, explanation, and context. A confusing thematic organization splinters this already limited content and modern political bias further undermines context and comprehension.

Goals and Organization

West Virginia's social studies standards provide grade-specific outlines for each grade, K–12. Each is first divided into six strands, or “content standards”: citizenship, civics/ government, economics, geography, history, and reading. Each strand begins with several bullet points, identical for each grade, laying out broad conceptual aims. The five bullet points for the history strand direct students to: compare historical events, distinguish cause-effect relationships, theorize alternative actions and outcomes, and anticipate future application; gather and analyze historical data; develop historical knowledge of major events, individuals, cultures, and the humanities; analyze broad-scale interdependence; and examine development and change in political institutions and theories. These five points are classified, respectively, as “chronology,” “skills and application,” “culture and humanities,” “interpretation and evaluation,” and “political institutions.”

Performance descriptors for each strand then give short statements of skills or knowledge that students should demonstrate at distinguished, above mastery, mastery, partial mastery, and novice levels. Finally, “objectives,” which largely echo the performance descriptors, provide grade-level expectations for the strand.

Kindergarten through third grade focus on basic concepts of citizenship, diversity, heroes, and symbols.

The U.S. history sequence consists of two two-year courses. Fourth grade covers from pre-settlement to the American Revolution; fifth grade continues from the Revolution to present. Tenth grade again covers pre-settlement to 1900, while eleventh grade continues from 1900 to present.

Evaluation

West Virginia's requirement of two full two-year U.S. courses would seem promising if its standards did not heavily emphasize concepts rather than substance. The performance descriptors and objectives do invoke some history. However, they supply a partial and rudimentary content outline at best. Worse still, the intellectually and visually confusing division of related material among the six strands, and among the overlapping descriptors

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

21st Century Social Studies Content Standards and Objectives for West Virginia Schools, U.S. history segments (2009)

Accessed from:

<http://wvde.state.wv.us/policies/p2520.4.pdf>

and objectives, sacrifices chronological logic and coherence. Arbitrary thematic organization robs the standards' limited content of clarity.

The state's education officials term this confusing structure a comprehensive guide and "powerful resource" for achieving "high quality standards"—particularly when used in conjunction "with the creativity and instructional expertise of West Virginia teachers" to create "a rigorous, relevant and challenging social studies curriculum." In reality, however, far too much discretion for defining content is left to the "instructional expertise" of teachers. The state has set standards in name only, abdicating its responsibility to establish solid minimum content expectations for all students and a shared core of content for all public schools.

West Virginia seems principally concerned with evaluating abstract student skills rather than specifying what students should actually *know*. An inordinate amount of space is devoted to the performance descriptors and their various levels of achievement. Yet these descriptors themselves fail to make meaningful distinctions even between the highest performance (distinguished) and the lowest (novice). Distinguished fifth graders, for instance, are to "summarize the events and...relevant historic figures that led the U.S. to become a world power." Lower achievement levels are *identical*, save that students are, in descending order, to "evaluate," "analyze," "identify," and "list." "Summarize" and "list," the top and bottom ratings, are essentially the same, and both are surely *less* demanding than the median ratings, "evaluate" and "analyze."

Early grades focus on basic and general concepts and remain extraordinarily non-specific. In third grade, we find a few rather random people and groups mentioned: "Pilgrims, George Washington, American Revolution, Abe Lincoln, Civil War, Columbus, Native Americans, Rosa Parks, [and] Martin Luther King, Jr." These are the sole specific historical references before the fourth grade.

Fourth grade introduces the first two-year U.S. history sequence, but it is superficial and disorganized. Beliefs and rights are mentioned in the citizenship standard. Abstract discussion of limited government, coupled with Washington's Farewell Address, appears under civics. (Note that even civics and citizenship are separated in this social studies categorization.) Economics merely mentions the economic roots of the Revolution, while geography touches upon regional settlement patterns. Content under the history standard remains brief and vague: for instance, distinguished students are to "summarize major historical periods and events in sequence in North America through the Revolutionary Period, including the stories of various groups and research to prove

how specific events influenced choices made by different groups." Similar items mention the "relative importance of various influences" on the colonies—with unfortunate tunnel vision, only slavery is named—and the "relative importance" of unnamed explorers. In the objectives, students are to "list" fifteenth- and sixteenth-century explorers, "chronologically organize and categorize the major events" of the American Revolution, describe how Africans came to America, discuss European-Native American contact, and compare English, French, and Spanish settlements—all without any details. Note, too, that students are to "chronologically organize" the events of the Revolution, yet this directive appears before references to cultural contact and early settlements.

Fifth grade continues in much the same vein, asking students to explain the "significance" of "historical figures," the "events" and "historic figures" that made America a world power, and the "influence" of westward migration and transportation. The Constitution and Bill of Rights are lumped together with the Emancipation Proclamation. Immigrant groups and industry are merely mentioned. "Patriotism, abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, labor movements, [and the] Civil Rights Movement" are bewilderingly tossed together as examples of "freedom of expressions [*sic*]." A few "important figures" appear, such as "George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, Jr.," along with a few frontier pioneers, Native American leaders, and civil rights figures. The Great Depression and World War II are mentioned in passing. A few items are at least historically meaningful. For instance, students should "explain the issues faced by Washington when he became the first United States President," or "explain why various reconstruction plans succeeded or failed." But these are offered without any required substantive content.

In tenth grade, content crops up randomly among the various standards. Under history, the descriptors remain hopelessly broad. The objectives offer a fitful semblance of an outline with meager detail: European-Native American contact; issues of sovereignty and taxation in the Revolution; "challenges faced by the new United States government"; how the Constitution dealt with problems in the Articles of Confederation; early national policy ("e.g., Monroe Doctrine, Manifest Destiny, Washington's Farewell Address, [and the] War of 1812"), and on through the nineteenth century. But a vast amount of the most basic historical content is omitted completely: Jacksonian democracy, for example, or any of the antebellum crises. The Hamilton-Jefferson schism does merit a mention, but under economics. What is offered frequently defies chronology and common sense: What does "justify how the effects of European empire building led to the American Revolution" even mean? Students are also urged to make ahistorical judgments through

a present-day lens; for instance, they should “critique reasons for” westward expansion, and “recommend alternative actions” in place of nineteenth-century Native American policy.

Eleventh grade presents a similar hodgepodge. The outlines provide brief lists of social issues and events from World War I to the two Gulf Wars, before jumping to hazy items on the causes and impact of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, with sudden segues into “universal human rights,” “the world labor movement,” and so forth—again with no chronological coherence and erratic historical coverage.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

There are fragments of content in West Virginia’s standards, but it is generally vague and decontextualized, with little sense of chronology or development. Only occasional items raise issues of any sophistication, and even these lack context or specifics. Too many directives encourage students to judge history based on the present, rather than to comprehend it in its context. The inclusion of two full two-year U.S. history courses would be commendable, if meaningful core *content* were outlined for those courses. There is some improvement in rigor and detail at the high school level, but even here, content is fragmented and rushed. Teachers should be able to look to state standards for guidance in designing their courses. Yet West Virginia seems mainly interested in abstract standards for evaluating student progress; teachers are expected to construct a curriculum by themselves. The state’s patchy and disordered specifics earn a three out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The structure of West Virginia’s standards is unwieldy and confusing, both visually and intellectually. Sequence is clear and sensible, with grades four and five, then ten and eleven devoted to two U.S. history surveys. But actual course *scope* is barely defined. Within each grade, content is divided among overlapping and arbitrary categories. Furthermore, the vague performance descriptors offer little help in defining expectations or measuring achievement. There is little or no meaningful difference between “distinguished” and “novice,” with intermediate levels of skill barely distinguishable from each other. The objectives are scattershot and disorganized; detail ranges from inadequate to absent. West Virginia has only supplied the rudiments of historical content. There is a considerable distance to go before its *Standards* can be considered a “comprehensive” or “powerful resource.” At best, they earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)