

WISCONSIN • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

F

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

0/10

Overview

Wisconsin’s U.S. history standards, for all practical purposes, do not exist. Their sole content is a list of ten eras in American and Wisconsin history, followed by a few brief and vague directives to understand vast swaths of history and broad historical concepts. Determining an actual course’s scope, sequence, and content rests entirely on the shoulders of local teachers and districts.

Goals and Organization

Wisconsin’s social studies standards are divided among five strands: geography, history, political science and citizenship, economics, and behavioral sciences. Each strand consists of a “content standard”—a one-sentence statement of the strand’s purpose—and a one-paragraph “rationale” justifying its importance. The history strand also includes short lists of ten chronological/thematic eras for Wisconsin, U.S. history, and world history. The ten listed eras of U.S. history are said to apply to grades 5–12, and those for Wisconsin history to grades 4–12.

Each strand is provided with “performance standards” for fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. The history performance standards consist of ten to eighteen single-sentence objectives, listed without chronological or substantive organization, laying out broad skills and directing comprehension of broad historical issues. Although some performance standards address specific regions or periods, the listed standards are not subdivided by time, place, or subject.

The scope and sequence of history content are nearly impossible to discern, since the state leaves all decisions on what content to cover, and in which grades to cover it, to local districts. A Social Studies Scope and Sequence guide accompanies the standards on the state Department of Public Instruction website, but provides few specifics.

From pre-Kindergarten through third grade, students are to explore “people” and “self” (with special reference to television and Internet). In fourth and fifth grades, U.S. and Wisconsin history “are usually taught,” but are apparently not required. Content in grades six through eight “varies,” but “often” focuses on “cultural perspectives” and “global connections,” which may include “the United States and citizenship.” Course scope in high school “can vary greatly among school districts.” A stated expectation that all five strands will be addressed seems to require that U.S. and Wisconsin history will be taught in high school, but apparently they need not be emphasized: “Often one strand is selected as the main focus with the other strands integrated where they best fit.”

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for Social Studies, U.S. history segments (1998)

Accessed from:

<http://dpi.state.wi.us/standards/ssstanb.html>

Evaluation

Wisconsin’s standards are thin to the point of vanishing. In terms of meaningful historical content to guide teachers or students, there is simply nothing there.

A short guide to “best practices” urges teachers, in classic social studies language, to focus on “indepth [*sic*] study,” avoiding the “cursory coverage of a lock step curriculum,” focusing instead on “content,” “concepts,” and “case studies,” which “students must know and apply to their lives outside of school.” Unfortunately, content is left as the poor relation among these broad conceptual aims. Students must surely *gain* specific knowledge before they can apply it—yet historical specifics are all but omitted by the Badger State.

Local districts must, we are told, have “the flexibility to determine” not only classroom sequence and organization but also the “content of their social studies curriculum.” For “if teachers are to understand fully the performance standards and the spiraling nature of the content and concepts, they must be actively involved in the process of selecting content and materials.” Yet the only result of such “spiraling” seems likely to be dizzy teachers. They are told to “select” content for their courses but are given no meaningful guidance in doing so. The state abdicates the responsibility of standards to define minimum and shared content expectations for all students. Teachers and districts are left on their own.

The history standard announces that students will learn about Wisconsin, United States, and world history, studying “change and continuity over time in order to develop historical perspective, explain historical relationships, and analyze issues that affect the present and the future.” The standard’s brief rationale explains that students must “understand their historical roots and how past events have shaped their world,” and “must know what life was like in the past and how things change and develop over time” in order to develop “these insights.”

The lists of eras, ten apiece for Wisconsin, United States, and world history, follow. Wisconsin history, assigned to grades four through twelve, is broken down into such units as “the prehistory and the early history of Wisconsin’s native people,” and “early explorers, traders, and settlers to 1812,” mentioning statehood, immigration, the Civil War, “mining, lumber, and agriculture,” LaFollette and Progressivism, the World Wars, the Great Depression, industrialization, urbanization, and “20th century change.” For U.S. history, assigned to grades five through twelve, the list commences with “the prehistory and early history of the Americas to 1607,” and “colonial history and settlement, 1607–1763.” It then continues, mentioning the American Revolution and early national period, “the paradox of nationalism and sectionalism in an expanding nation,” the Civil War and Reconstruction, industry and urbanization, World War

I and America as a world power, the Great Depression and the New Deal, “World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, and the Vietnamese conflict, 1941–1975,” and “the search for prosperity and equal rights in Cold War and post-Cold War America, 1945–present.”

In terms of substantive course guidance, that’s it. The performance standards offer brief sentences laying out concepts and skills that students are expected to demonstrate. Ten are provided in fourth grade, twelve for eighth grade, and eighteen for twelfth grade—and these cover U.S., Wisconsin, and world history *together*.

Fourth graders, for example, are told to study “the lives of ordinary and extraordinary people, place them in time and context, and explain their relationship to important historical events” using “biographies, stories, narratives, and folk tales.” But no people, events, or specific sources are actually mentioned. Students are likewise to “compare and contrast” past and present by examining the “social, economic, political, and cultural roles played by individuals and groups”—though again, no specific individuals or groups are named. Other items briefly refer to “important events and famous people in Wisconsin and United States history” (none are specified) and “examples of cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups, and nations” (none are specified). Native American history is mentioned in passing, as are democratic values, technologies, holidays, and symbols. But there is no historical content.

The eighth-grade performance standards are much the same; for instance, “employ cause-and-effect arguments to demonstrate how significant events have influenced the past and the present in United States and world history,” or “describe the relationships between and among significant events, such as the causes and consequences of wars in United States and world history.” The only specifics are brief references to the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights in relation to “political values.” By twelfth grade—where a few world religions are the only specifics mentioned—students are supposed to “recall, select, and analyze significant historical periods and the relationships among them,” “assess the validity of different interpretations of significant historical events,” and use “visual and quantitative data” to analyze history in general. They are also to explain war, slavery, religion, art, technology, intellectual life, and international relations. Hopefully, their teachers, left to their own devices, will have taught the students some of the content with which they might do so.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Apart from brief lists of eras, the Wisconsin standards, concerned solely with generalized social studies concepts

and skills, contain no history whatsoever. What students are actually to learn is left to their district officials and teachers, who are given no guidance on structuring courses or curricula. The inflated generalities in the twelfth-grade performance standards are even more all-encompassing, but this can hardly be called an increase in rigor. Wisconsin warrants a zero out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The state's social studies "scope and sequence" guide vaguely describes what is "usually" done or "may" be done—but hardly any *guidance* is offered at all. Course scope is undefined, detail is nonexistent, and even the nebulous performance standards are offered for just three grade levels. This is part and parcel of the entire document: Wisconsin leaves all decisions on substance and sequence to districts and teachers. Students require specific knowledge before they can analyze or understand history, but the Wisconsin standards are happy to leave such details to others. The state seems to deride the very idea of a shared, core education as mere rote memorization. It appears to be concerned only that students somehow enrich their understanding of, and relationship with, the world. Wisconsin's empty standards earn a zero out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)