

# Alaska

(Source: *Social Studies Framework Chapter Three: Content*, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, July 2000)

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## The five criteria: An overview

Are the essentials of a civic core specified clearly?	Are the topics teachable within the allotted timeframe?	Do the documents provide a scope and sequence?	Is the essential content required of all students?	Are the important facts and ideas presented coherently across subjects?
☆	☆	☆	☆	☆

Standards that largely meet the criteria are designated with a full star [★]; standards that partially meet the criteria are designated with a half star [☆]; and standards that do not meet the criteria are designated with an empty star [☆].

### Summary:

Alaska's standards/framework document satisfies none of the five criteria for identifying strong civic education programs. On Criterion #1, its three clusters of standards, seven on government and citizenship, six on geography, and four on history, together with "key elements" under them, cite almost no specific topics. On Criterion #2, teachers needing to respond to the all-encompassing demands of these standards and elements could not fit them into the teaching time available. On Criterion #3, course order, levels of learning are set not by grade but by age groups: Primary, ages five to seven; Level 1 eight to ten; Level 2, twelve to fourteen; Level 3, sixteen to eighteen. Standards and key elements are the same for all levels. Only the suggested activities differ, but not always appropriately for the age. On Criterion #4, requirement for all students, Alaska is a local-control state. It does not test social studies and presents its documents only as advice to local districts and schools in designing their own curricula. On Criterion #5, the three standards clusters are wholly unrelated, as are their mainly abstract subordinate topics called key elements.

### Particulars:

All seventeen main standards are general. One in government/citizenship brushes the specific: "A student should understand the constitutional foundations of the American political system and the democratic ideals of this nation." Of 49 topics ("key elements"), one simply lists the Declaration of Independence, the Alaska and U.S. Constitutions, and the Bill of Rights, with no further comment. Another Government standard is "a student should understand the role of the United States in international affairs." Under it, a key element is "be able to evaluate circumstances in which the United States has politically influenced other nations and how other nations have politically influenced the politics and society of the United States." All geography standards are abstract; the one specific among its 34 key elements is the Statue of Liberty, as an example of "cultural symbols." None of the four history standards has specifics, though one speaks kindly of them: "A student should understand historical themes through factual knowledge of time, places, ideas, institutions, cultures, people, and events." None of its 25 key elements cites an example under these categories. Typical elements are "understand that history is dynamic and composed of key turning points" and "understand that history

relies on the interpretation of evidence.”

The activities suggested for each key element give no hint of historical eras or settings assigned to any particular grade. Writers of the activities seem to have assumed that all of civics, geography, and history would be taught at all levels. The items seem to be chosen at random, varying from over-ambitious (e.g. Level 3, “Research the impact of the Renaissance on the development of modern art, science/technology, politics, and ideas”) to impossible (e.g. Level 3, “Using different sources, discuss the inevitability of the 100 Years War”).

Alaska’s check-off list is so abstract as to be of little help to teachers. Worse, it enables school districts to provide a very unequal quality of curriculum to different students.