

Alabama

(Source: *Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies*, Alabama State Department of Education Bulletin 1998, No. 18)

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 do not meet the criteria are designated with an empty star [☆].

Summary:

The Alabama standards/framework document rates highly on four of the five criteria for identifying strong standards. On Criterion #1, its topics are specific and clearly expressed, with very few sweeping or overly academic headings. From its topics, knowledgeable teachers can easily derive the civic core of learning citizens need. On Criteria #3 and #4, essential for equal opportunity to learn, it mandates a sequence of courses from grades five through twelve, the content of which is to be offered to all students. Under Criterion #5 on integration, the document sets geography and narrative history as central disciplines into which ideas and “core information” from economics, law, and American government are interwoven, helping teachers to design topics, when appropriate, out of several subjects at once, to enliven all. Only on Criterion #2 does Alabama waver. As in most state documents built on specific topics, teachers could not thoughtfully present the numerous items for world and U.S. history in the school time available.

Particulars:

Alabama leaves no doubt that methods and implementation remain in local hands, but unlike most states it also leaves no doubt that course order and required content are state matters. The document’s preface is clear: “Content standards in this document are minimum and required.” And the standards cleanly distinguish between required items and examples that are not required. It says local districts may add standards “to reflect local philosophies and add implementation guidelines, resources, and/or activities, which, by design, are not contained in this document.” This candor is refreshing, in contrast to states imposing statewide testing, but still pretending to honor local control of curricular content.

Alabama requires U.S. history/geography to 1900 in grades five and ten, and from 1900 to the present in grades six and eleven; citizenship and world geography in grade seven, and world history to 1500 in grade eight, followed by world history to the present in grade nine. World history suffers in two ways. First, dividing it at 1500 leaves too little time for the ideas and events of the early modern and modern eras that Americans must study to understand their place in the world and their legacy from Western civilization. Second, too many required topics cut chances to treat engaging political ideas and turning-points in depth. Grade eight

items could have been copied from world history textbooks, with 23 main headings and 139 separate topics, many of the latter quite broad (e.g., analyze the intellectual life of classical Greece). In some cases, details proliferate. Other eighth-grade topics important to civic education appear only as a single word (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Feudalism), when a detail or two could help teachers decide how to begin topics and where to take them. But at least the basics are present, and a good many eighth-grade topics are superior to most. As examples, students are asked to learn the key tenets of major world religions and philosophies and a wide array of causes for Rome's decline and fall.

The standards for ninth-grade world history have 27 main headings/themes and 179 topics, the latter including such items as effects of the Scientific Revolution on the Enlightenment and the long-term and immediate causes of World War I. Although they need to be pared down, the standards for this course have outstanding political strengths: the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau; the ideas of capitalism, liberalism, and socialism; the economic views of Smith, Malthus, and Marx; a section on European advances in political democracy and social reform in the nineteenth century (particularly valuable for Americans' political sophistication, but rare in state standards); the effects of World War I on the rise of the Bolsheviks in Russia and the global political, social, and economic consequences of that war; the many causes and effects of the Great Depression; the actual steps of "unanswered aggression" in the 1930s; the multiple causes of the Soviet Union's collapse; and specifics on current "world prospects for political democracy and social justice."

On the history, geography, civics, and economics of the United States, the tenth- and eleventh-grade courses obviously need to review and elaborate upon significant content from grades five and six, but active collaboration between middle and high school teachers could do much to cut needless repetition, provide more efficient reviews, and allow time for chosen studies in depth in all four courses. Overall, Alabama's U.S. history courses include almost every central political topic recommended under Part One's "vital topics" for a civic core. One could ask only for a bit more on the ancient and medieval origins of American political thought, the Magna Carta's critical clause on taxation, the complexity of causes for World War II, and recent effects of economic globalization.

In sum, Alabama's standards and course structure suffer only from the common problem of over-stuffing, but less so than in other states. Most of the essential content for citizens' education—ideas, events, turning-points, and the works of individuals—are present or implied. One quick improvement would be to pare down the state's list of required items. A closer focus on political education would allow Alabama's twelfth-grade courses in American government and economics to be taught at markedly higher levels. As is evident from the following descriptions of other states' standards, Alabama's are among the best in the nation.