

Arkansas

(Source: *Social Studies Curriculum Frameworks*, Arkansas Department of Education, Revised, July 2000)

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:

The Arkansas frameworks document does not fully meet any of the five criteria for adequate civic or political education. On Criterion #1, it does not set out a common core of learning about democracy. It has a total of only six specific items in history, politics, and civics. Criterion #2 cannot be applied, since it is impossible to tell what substance may or may not be studied in teachers' limited instructional time under such indefinite items as "Demonstrate an understanding of continuity and change in the state, nation, and world." Under Criterion #3, Arkansas neither mandates nor suggests a sequence of civics-history instruction across the school years. It does, however, arrange topics into grade clusters, putting it the "partially met" category for this criterion. Since there is no "essential content" to be required of students, Criterion #4 also cannot be applied, nor can Criterion #5, on the integration of subject matter.

Particulars:

The framework's introduction admits that teachers may find it "less useful than detailed subject-matter-based standards," and "these were made more general than specific so that teachers could easily fit their respective content into the overall strands and concepts" and that "districts, schools, and teachers have greater flexibility in addressing the rich and varied disciplines within this area of the curriculum." Despite claims to honor local control, Arkansas nonetheless plans state tests for social studies based on the vague generalities in its five "strands," which reflect national social studies themes and language.

One kindergarten to grade four standard is "Use a variety of processes, such as thinking, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, to demonstrate continuity and change." Geography applies the same "processes" to analyze interdependence. Civics adds "role playing, to promote responsible citizenship." Economic adds "graphing, charting, estimating, predicting, and using mental math." No grade, kindergarten to fourth, has specifics or examples. Nor do standards for grades five to eight, except for a civics question listing the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

Many items for grades nine through twelve are overwritten (e.g., "Analyze and evaluate diverse contemporary, historical, and geographical perspectives as they relate to important

events, recurring dilemmas, persistent issues.”) Alone, civics offers six specifics: “synthesize the principles of United States political heritage” in the Declaration of Independence, Common Sense, the Constitution, Bill of Rights, Civil Disobedience, and Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

Arkansas standards do little for the political education of citizens. They are largely unteachable, overloaded as they are with more than 50 sweeping, complex but abstract “processes” for each grade span. In addition, like those of the National Council of Social Studies (and contrary to the aim of civic competence they both declare), these standards only offer the above six hints in regard to a common core of ideas, writings, personalities, events, and turning-points that might enable citizens from all walks of life to understand and talk with each other coherently about public affairs. As it stands, there is little guidance to prevent Arkansas schools from providing political substance to an elite few and little to the rest.