

Illinois

(Sources: *Illinois Learning Standards for Social Studies, 2000* and *Social Science Performance Descriptors, Grades 6-12, 2002*, Illinois State Board of Education)

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?
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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:

On Criterion #1, the Learning Standards have almost no specifics and the few that appear are lost in 256 broad “Benchmarks” and 582 “Sample Benchmark Indicators,” most of which are very general. The “Social Science Performance Descriptors” for middle and high school include a fair number of specific examples, but these are buried in 54 pages of demanding general “understandings,” drawn from six separate subject areas—political science, economics, history, economic history, social history, environmental history, and culture/social systems. Criterion #2 is not met. Indeed, the content needed to meet the benchmarks in the standards and the performance descriptors could not be covered, even superficially, in the limited instructional time available to schools. Criterion #3 also unmet, as neither document suggests a K-12 sequence of courses. The existence of statewide tests implies that some subject matter may be required of all students, resulting in Criterion #4 being partly met. On Criterion #5, neither document integrates the several social studies subjects.

Particulars:

The Learning Standards document fails in its introductory promise to clarify the learning expected, and “take the guesswork out of decisions” on programs and materials. Most of the “Sample Benchmark Indicators” repeat the benchmark itself, phrased in other words. For example, a grade eleven-twelve benchmark: “Analyze the impact of economic growth” is given the indicator: “Analyze the benefits and costs of economic growth.” Many indicators do not relate to benchmarks at all. Teachers are offered little in the way of engaging specifics by which they might open their lessons on the benchmarks. This weakness is underscored by the constant repetition of benchmarks and indicators across grade levels, with the result that many are too demanding for the early grades and too easy for the upper grades.

Political history is thin. Of the 256 benchmarks, it has 25. Economic history has 28, added to 64 benchmarks in the economics strand. Environmental history has 20, added to 40 items in the geography strand. As in many states, economic and geography items amount to introductory college courses. Of 582 indicators, economics has 125 (plus 63 in the history strand) to political history’s 58. Civics items are even fewer. For example, a grade four or five benchmark on the Constitution and Bill of Rights is one of 50 for the grade level, with a companion indicator that is one of 115. Though more useful than most, civics items are still

weak on specifics.

The Illinois standards are overstuffed, not with particulars but with vast headings. Month-long benchmarks abound (e.g., a middle school benchmark: “Explain relationships among the American economy and slavery, immigration, industrialization, labor, and urbanization, 1700 to the present”). Items are repeated across grades, as though all eras of history are to be taught at all grade levels in equal depth and breadth—exactly the opposite of a well-articulated, teachable kindergarten through twelfth-grade progression of instruction.

The Learning Standards are unteachable and untestable in predictable ways because of their broad generalizations. No common core of events, ideas, personalities, or turning-points can be found here—despite the introduction’s promise to “set the same standards for all students,” to avoid “different expectations for different groups of students,” and “to provide fair and equitable educational opportunities for all students.”

The performance descriptors do not help, offering only what appear to be randomly chosen specifics as examples for the 718 expected performances (of which only 85 are on general, political history). Under each learning standard are six “stages” of understanding, from E up to J (A to B are for elementary). Descriptors are said to help districts “develop curriculum to meet standards,” but they actually serve to make that task harder, including many vast topics that would far overflow available instructional time available. For example, just one of 164 political items asks students to “Relate historical trends within the United States and the world that have influenced international relations.” One of 85 general history topics is “Describe major events in the evolution of non-Western political systems throughout world history.” One of 55 topics in economic history is “Analyze how trends in the economic history of the United States have affected the country’s political, social, and environmental history.” And one of 48 topics in social history asks students to “Evaluate the social consequences resulting from the expanding zone of human interaction over time.” The economics and geography items are similarly broad and overloaded. All historical eras and detailed examples are jumbled in this document, its subject areas apparently written by separate teams of specialists. As a result, teachers get little help—not in building a coherent narrative or depicting meaningful interplay among the several spheres of human life, nor in allocating learning efficiently across the grades. Much work remains to be done in producing teachable standards for a civic core.