

Maryland

(Source: *Maryland Social Studies Standards, May 19, 2000*, Maryland State Department 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, most of the specific history and civics items that form a core of common learning for democratic citizenship are clearly expressed. But on Criterion #2, the volume of topics overall and lists of demanding, time-consuming skills would bury the essentials and prevent teachers from exploring key topics in depth. Criterion #3 is partly met through Maryland standards and tests that are arranged by grade spans, from pre-kindergarten to grade three, four to five, six to eight, and nine to twelve. U.S. history to 1790 is to be taught by the end of grade five, from then to 1877 by end of grade eight, and since 1877 in grades nine to twelve. There is no world history in pre-kindergarten to grade five; grades six-eight take the subject only to the Middle Ages, with grades nine to twelve covering content up to the present. Criterion #4 is only partially met; although the document is unclear on course requirements, state tests imply they are required of all students statewide. On Criterion #5, content has six strands: U.S. history, world history, geography, economics, political systems, and peoples of the nations and world. These are not specifically linked, but are listed in columns headed “in the context” of U.S. and world history.

Particulars:

The Maryland standards have been highly rated in national surveys for their inclusiveness and specificity. A strong political education could be built from them, and leave room for other historical themes, if the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program allowed schools or teachers choice of topics to be done in depth and others more briefly. This does not seem to be the case. Topics in the “Social Studies Content Standards” that are eligible for state testing are set in regular type; and those not to be tested in italics. To the extent that schools are driven to teach to the test, many topics vital to a liberal education for citizens may be categorized as of secondary importance.

Notable differences appear between the middle and high school years. First, the number of topics for all subjects is oddly light in the grade six-eight span, in contrast to those for high school. Major topics marked for testing are only nine for U.S. history (usually taught in grade eight), with some 27 sub-items; eight in world history (grade six or seven), with 22 sub-items; and seven in political systems, with twelve sub-items. This is in contrast to one-year high school courses: U.S. history with 54 testable main topics containing some 120 sub-items, world history with 48 and 115, and political systems with 24 and 59.

Within these numbers, and as in most other states, the selection of topics for civics and U.S. history is decidedly stronger than for world history, especially in middle school. Grade eight items in U.S. history are fairly well centered on the effects of the Revolution, the debates of the Constitutional Convention, sectionalism, the causes and turning-points of the Civil War, and the goals and effects of Reconstruction. Listed, but not for state testing, are pre-Civil War industry, immigration, Jacksonian democracy, the several reform movements, and most surprising, the origins of American slavery and its institutions. In civics/political systems, grade eight is also light, but includes the basic principles of the Constitution.

cultural developments in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China, and Kush; the unification of China, Mali, and other African empires; and the Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs. In contrast, there is only one general item on the social and political institutions of Athens and Sparta and one on unification of the Mediterranean basin under Rome. Listed but in italics, thus presumably not to be tested, are Greek culture and philosophy, the Roman Republic, the causes for the decline and fall of Rome, Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, the medieval Christian church, the Crusades, centralized monarchies, and “developments in constitutional rights and representative institutions (e.g., the Magna Carta).” In other words, the omissions contain much that is essential for the preparation of educated citizens.

In high school, testable topics shift from too light to too heavy. A survey of world history from 1400 to the present cannot be engagingly taught. Most central matters for citizens’ education are included, but would be lost or hurried. They rightly include the English Civil War and “Glorious Revolution” (though the English Bill of Rights is in italics); the political ideas of the Enlightenment; a comparison of the causes, character, and consequences of the English, American, and French revolutions and their “enduring effects” on global expectations of self-government and liberty (missing in most state documents); all of the 19th century “isms” still debated in this country and across the world (rarely included by other states); the causes, outcomes, and costs of World War I; the Russian Revolution (singular, not plural, so the experiment of Russian political democracy in 1917 is absent); the causes and consequences of the Depression and a full analysis of World War II’s background, including Western appeasement; the effects of war and the Holocaust; and all major world events since 1945, including the global effects of liberal democracy.

Similarly, U.S. history’s main, test-eligible topics are full in their coverage, though at times lacking in critical specifics upon which main topics may be built, such as the conditions allowing our rapid post-Civil War industrialization, the 1890s debate over imperialism, the foreign and domestic successes of the Marshall Plan, the leaders and critical court cases in the civil rights movement.

Maryland teachers’ main problem will be lack of time, especially in high school, as in such states as Arizona, California, and Virginia, whose standards are also rich, but overloaded. The best choice for each state is to slim down the standards themselves by setting priorities. To list all and mark only some for testing is not a way out. It invites endless lobbying and changes forced by special interests. Another corrective may emerge as states move away from problem-filled grade-span testing to end-of-course assessments. If written by a state’s own scholars and teachers, test questions could be better aligned with standards and also allow schools and teachers more choice about which topics to emphasize. Overall, Maryland has substantially improved its standards with the 2000 version, but world history needs more curricular time and the selection of priorities is still incomplete.