

Minnesota

(Source: *High Standards*, Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning, August 30, 1999. This alters only the format of Minnesota’s 1998 Profile of Learning)

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:

Minnesota is reportedly preparing curriculum frameworks to guide local selection of subject matter to meet these standards, which with few exceptions are wholly abstract—a loose brand of “outcomes-based-education” dressed up in “standards” language. High Standards does not fully meet any of the criteria for judging strong standards for democratic education. It arranges topics into grade clusters, gaining a “partially met” for scope and sequence, Criterion #3. But it avoids naming any of the disciplines. Its ten “Learning Areas” are (1) read, view, and listen; (2) write and speak; (3) arts and literature; (4) math applications; (5) inquiry; (6) scientific applications; (7) people and cultures; (8) decision making; (9) resource management; (10) world languages (optional). History falls under #5, inquiry, and #7, peoples and cultures. Civics appears only under the latter, as though unsuited to inquiry. Curiously, it is not included in decision making, which lists only personal health, physical fitness, and career preparation. Needless to say, Criteria #4 and #5 are not met.

Particulars:

At the primary (kindergarten to grade three), intermediate (grades four to five), and middle school (grades six to eight) levels, history and civics have no specifics at all. For high school, the inquiry area gives history four of twelve standards, along with math research, issue analysis, research process, social science processes, research and create a business plan, market research, case study, and new product development. History choices, none required, are called history of science (e.g., “gathering information on one scientific breakthrough”); history through culture (e.g., “interpreting ideas from artistic expressions to compare representations of a historical period to selected philosophies, events or conflicts, and people and their contributions”); records of history (e.g., “analyzing two or more accounts of the same historical event recorded in different time periods”); and, closest to specifics, world history and culture, in which students are to understand “the significance of key people, events, places, concepts, and themes in the historical development of one or more world cultures by: a survey of world history including early civilizations, classical traditions, major empires, institutions; expansions of exchange and encounter; intensified hemisphere interactions, and the first global age; the age of revolutions; and the twentieth; or a comprehensive, in-depth focus on a single culture,

nation, movement, or time period.”

Under learning area #7, peoples and cultures, high school students are required to pick any four “themes related to key events, concepts, and people in the historical development of the United States, including the convergence of people, colonization, settlement, and the American Revolution; expansion, the Civil War and Reconstruction; tribal sovereignty and the relationship between American Indian tribal governments and federal and state government; industrialization, emergence of modern America, and the Great Depression; World War II; and postwar United States to the present.” Under the required standard called “United States Citizenship,” the only specifics are the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Bill of Rights. The others are general (e.g., “observing, analyzing, and interacting with an actual or simulated governmental process”).

Minnesota’s standards were studied in 2000 by Achieve, Inc. and the Council for Basic Education in *Aiming Higher: A Report on Education Standards and Policy for Minnesota*. The report was highly critical of the state’s standards in general and of its social studies standards in particular. It saw no possibility for a common core of learning, vital for equal opportunity to learn in a state whose national test scores are high but whose disadvantaged students lag far behind. The standards do nothing, the study said, to further comparability and equity. It found processes over-emphasized, unanchored even in the minimal content provided, and in language too vague to guide teachers as they write courses embracing topics all students should learn in common. Missing from high school civics, the study noted, are the roots of American political principles and institutions, from ancient Greece to John Locke, the Federalist papers, the evolution of the Constitution itself, federalism and even the three branches of government, and no references to politics outside the United States or to our relations with other countries. Missing in the high school history “themes”, it pointed out, are Populism and the Progressive movement [in Minnesota!], World War I, the labor movement, immigration and nativism, African-Americans, women, conservation, and wars in Korea and Vietnam.

The Achieve/CBE study offered polite commendation to the standards writers’ emphasis on “hands-on” education, on student research, and for specific “mention” of the need to learn proper grammar—yet refrained from pointing out that “constructivism,” “applied learning” and “interdisciplinary” studies all require a solid base of knowledge, grounded in the disciplines, if they are to be taught well. This is not offered by these standards, which provide no particular episodes, people, or ideas to engage students by giving some life and import to the extensive list of skills, processes, and attitudes. The Minnesota documents contain nothing that would prevent massive omissions of basic civic/political topics or deadening repetitions of the same “inquiries,” grade after grade. As they stand, Minnesota’s standards offer little help to the state’s schools and teachers who have been charged with the education of young citizens.

Hopefully, the state’s new subject-matter frameworks will be crafted by teams of writers made up of practical and seasoned scholars and teachers of civics, economics, geography, and history who have the authority to define an essential core. With a historic reputation for progressive politics, state leaders should want to ensure that all young citizens, regardless of background, have an equal opportunity to learn about and participate in the political system they will inherit—from its distant origins to the clash of ideas, goals, and interests that animate political debate to the present day.