

New Jersey

(Sources: *Core Curriculum Content Standards: Social Studies*, May 1996, and *Social Studies Curriculum Framework*, March 1999, New Jersey 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:

New Jersey standards are now being revised. Existing documents, named above, do not meet our education for democracy criteria. On Criterion #1, the standards mention just six specifics: the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. and New Jersey Constitutions, the Bill of Rights, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the Holocaust. On Criterion #2, the content implied in 125 main “indicators,” plus required “themes,” would be unteachable. On Criteria #3 and #4, New Jersey suggests no course sequence and, lacking a common core, there is no way essential content could be required of all students. The state has not decided what will be tested in social studies. On Criterion #5, content integration, the three strands of civics, history, and geography are entirely separate. The 1999 Framework’s 500-plus pages are of little help to teachers, offering endless activities, many of them peripheral to vital topics, unaligned to grade level, and requiring far too much time.

Particulars:

The 1996 document has nine social studies standards, of which two are civic, five are called history, and four are geography. Under each are “progress indicators” for the end of grades four, eight, and twelve. Each standard begins “All students will learn” or “acquire,” as though all are teachable. The second civics standard is “students will learn democratic citizenship through the humanities, by studying literature, art, history and philosophy, and related fields.” A typical indicator is “Compare and contrast examples of artistic and literary expression from different historical and social settings.” The four “history” standards are on political history, societal ideas, varying cultures, and economics. All are said to be studied “throughout the history of New Jersey, the United States, and the world.” None of the indicators is specific. The history section begins by listing main eras of U.S. and world history, all of which are to be studied by graduation, but districts are to “define the balance among materials for Western, Asian, African, and other world cultures.”

An indicator from political history is “Assess positions of proponents and opponents at turning points throughout history” (grade eight). Under “societal ideas” is “Evaluate how individuals, groups, and institutions influence solutions to society’s problems” (grade twelve). For varying cultures, we find “Analyze the mutual influences among different cultures throughout

time” (grade twelve). Economics indicators have no historical items. Below each history standard, writers have added “specific themes” from which “a designated number” are to be studied. A few of these are the history of political leadership, social classes and relations, agriculture, religion, literature, the arts, education, popular culture, philosophy, political and social thought, travel and communications, and corporations.

For all its flaws, the 1996 document opened the way to more historical study than did earlier, wholly vague social studies programs. Its frame can now be directly built upon by experienced subject matter teachers and scholars, setting a common kindergarten to twelfth-grade course order and core content, leaving methods and some choices for topic emphases to the localities.