

Virginia

(Source: *History and Social Science Standards of Learning, 2001*, Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia)

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:

This document largely meets Criterion #1 for central political specifics. On Criterion #2, its yearly items are unteachable in the limited instructional time at teachers' disposal. Criterion #3 is partly met, representing a retreat from the 1995 edition of state standards. In the name of local control, its preface says it does "not prescribe the grade level at which the standards must be taught" and abandons the 1995 edition's listing of grades in which standards could "best be achieved." It even omits the sensible 1995 advice to teach history and social science in "close coordination with the English curriculum." But like most straddling states it says "the SOL [Standards of Learning] assessment program, however, requires that all Virginia school divisions prepare students to demonstrate achievement of the standards for elementary and middle school history and social science by the grade levels tested." These are assigned to grades three, five, and eight. The state also will give high school end-of-course tests in "locally-determined sequence." Technically, the content is required of everyone, but since it is not teachable and lacks priorities, Virginia is classified as only partially meeting Criterion #4. On Criterion #5, there is a modest amount of integration.

Particulars:

In its content for political education, Virginia's 2001 standards document is a step backward. Its task force was to have improved age-appropriateness, but once past kindergarten to third grade, the language of topics grows more abstract and impenetrable. In 1995, fifth-graders were asked for the "economic and philosophic differences between North and South," with Webster and Calhoun as examples. The popular, but very imprecise term "cultural" now replaces economics and ideas, and the examples are gone, as though the issue of state-federal balance were beyond eleven-year-olds but not meaningful analysis of "cultural" issues. Sixth-graders are to know the American "leadership role" after World War I, an abstract, misleading term. In grade eleven, students are to analyze "cultural interactions" among European colonists, Africans, and Indians. In current affairs, they are to explain media influence on American "culture" but not, as in 1995, "conservative and liberal economic strategies" or "current patterns of Supreme Court decisions" or "the positions of political parties and interest groups on major issues," a major change that results in the omission of many important political issues.

The standards suffer from a dubious kindergarten to twelfth-grade sequence of courses, now as in 1995. Two years, presumably seven and ten, are given to separate courses in civics,

economics, and geography, whose topics and concepts would be better taught in history's context, reinforcing all of them at once. This would also allow a better order of U.S. and world history courses, shorter eras to be covered in each grade, and more chances for study in depth and interdisciplinary links. Instead, civics topics in grade seven repeat what is already in U.S. history courses or should be; economics topics are abstract, unlinked to people and events. And grade ten regional world geography is partly isolated from, and partly repeats, world history, when the two could enliven each other in a two-year course over grades nine and ten.

Virginia's 1995 standards were overloaded. They still are, despite the task force charge to focus on "quantity of content that can be taught and learned effectively." Only grade five U.S. history to 1877 is a bit lighter on topics. Grade six U.S. history to the present is changed in format; it cuts main topics from 52 to 28, but the items needed to teach them stay the same. Grade eleven's survey of Virginia and U.S. history cuts topics from 188 to 145, but many are so broad that the number of items to be taught is ever higher.

In world history, the new grade eight course, from human origins to 1500, adds 500 years to the 1995 version (which ended in 1000 A.D.), raising the number of required topics from some 165 to 220. But, as ever with surveys from 1500 to the present, it leaves grade nine world history to cover some 200 separate topics. New formats suggest brevity, but fewer headings are followed by broader subheads. For regional civilizations after 1500, one of five is "describing East Asia, including China and the Japanese shogunate," and another is "the growth of European nations." As for world history content, the following are cited, but without events, ideas, or people: the Scientific Revolution, the Age of Absolutism, the Glorious Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution. Under the Industrial Revolution, the document cites capitalism, socialism, and communism, but not conservatism, liberalism, social democracy, egalitarian republicanism, the expansion of political democracy, British reform laws, or the union movement (the last three did appear in 1995), all of them relevant to current debates.

In U.S. history, grades five and eleven have no Old World backgrounds to colonial thought, except for John Locke, cited with the Declaration of Independence. The Anglo-American political heritage of the Magna Carta, the Mayflower Compact, and the English Bill of Rights is left to senior year Virginia and U.S. government, as are Hobbes and Montesquieu. The drama of constitution-making is missing, with the balance of power behind compromise at Philadelphia. As in grade five, the topics in grade six (1877 to the present) are general, without stories or personalities to engage students. The preface's promise that the new standards will include names and events "crucial to understanding the concepts identified" is not kept, especially for political concepts. Populism and its grievances do not appear. The Gilded Age alliance of politicians and business, without which Progressive ideas are a puzzle, is not here nor in the hurried grade eleven survey. Missing in both grades are reforms linked to Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, as is World War I's effect on domestic and foreign policies.

Virginia's standards, then, are both too full and incomplete, lacking clear focus on what is more or less important for American citizens to know. In an apparent attempt to allay teachers' concerns, Virginia also issued a Curriculum Framework, listing "Essential Understandings, Essential Questions, Essential Knowledge, and Essential Skills," which numbers 258 pages for kindergarten to eighth grade alone. It is far more over stuffed than the standards themselves and can only add to teachers' frustration with the whole enterprise. As in many states, the raw material is here and spilling over, but has yet to be limited and clarified in such a way as to be truly useful. More work by a team of experienced teachers and scholars, knowledgeable about the time constraints of real classrooms, is called for.