

# Wisconsin

(Sources: *Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards for Social Studies*, 1998, and *Planning Curriculum in Social Studies*, May 2001, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction)

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## The five criteria: An overview

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| 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:

Wisconsin's standards do not fully meet any of the five criteria for the political education of citizens. On Criteria #1 and #2, there are few specific items and the broad headings would demand more specifics than there is time to cover during the instructional year. On Criterion #3, Wisconsin has no clear kindergarten to twelfth-grade sequence of courses, with materials that confuse the issue. Under "Historical Eras and Themes," vast topics range from human origins to the present both for U.S. and world history, with a note that they are to be learned by students from the fifth to twelfth grades, with no clue as to when. The history "Performance Standards" give no hint of differentiated courses; everything seems expected to be taught at all grade levels. Criterion #4 is classified as partly met, since Wisconsin tests social studies at grades four, eight, and ten, using commercial and state-developed tests. What these tests consist of is unclear, however, as no common body of learning can be derived from the standards. Criterion #5 is not met. Wisconsin has five unrelated strands: geography (people, places, and environments); history (time, continuity, and change); political science and citizenship (power, authority, governance, and responsibility); economics (production, distribution, exchange, consumption); and behavioral science (individuals, institutions, and society). The introduction to the standards tells local districts that "The organization of these standards allows the social studies curriculum to be developed as separate disciplines or in an integrated course."

### Particulars:

The introduction section says Wisconsin's standards were written after consulting the national standards in subject areas, by representative teams of educators, parents, board of education members, and business and industry representatives, with drafts reviewed by focus groups, forums, conferences, conventions, workshops, and 90 critiques by state and national organizations. Nevertheless, in its content and language (though not in its format), the Wisconsin document directly reflects the 1994 NCSS standards in *Expectations of Excellence*. The "Overview of Social Studies" has the familiar all-inclusive definition, "the study of the social sciences and humanities." Despite the document's lack of specifics, its introduction says state standards "form a sound basis on which to establish the content of a statewide assessment sys-

tem.” Two pages later, it says “Adopting the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards is voluntary, not mandatory.” The confusion is not alleviated by an added note that districts are to see state standards as “guides” for writing grade-by-grade curricula.

As examples of sweeping topics, one geography item is “Identify the world’s major ecosystems and analyze how different economic, social, political, religious, and cultural systems have adapted to them.” Political science and citizenship asks students to “Analyze different theories of how governmental powers might be used to help promote or hinder liberty, equality, and justice, and develop a reasoned conclusion.” Economics asks students to “Use basic economic concepts (such as supply and demand; production, distribution, and consumption; labor, wages, and capital; inflation and deflation; market economy and command economy) to compare and contrast local, regional, and national economies across time and at the present time.” The behavioral sciences ask them to “Analyze the means by which and the extent to which groups and institutions can influence people, events, and cultures in both historical and contemporary settings.” And history asks “Analyze examples of ongoing change within and across cultures, such as development of ancient civilizations, rise of nation-states, and social, economic, and political revolutions” and “Recall, select, and analyze significant historical periods and relationships among them.”

Most of the events, ideas, institutions, turning-points, thinkers, and leaders that are central to civic and political literacy, including the ability to understand references in a respectable newspaper, do not appear in these pages. There are a few exceptions to this general absence of specifics. Two individuals are named: Robert LaFollette (in “the Progressive Era,” but without particulars) and Martin Luther King, Jr. in regard to his holiday only. Of the 30 history performance standards for middle and high school, two have specifics. One lists the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights; the other, “Explain the origins, central ideas, and global influence of religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity.” Political science also names the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. It asks students to “Explain the United States’ relationships to other nations and its role in international organizations, such as the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and North American Free Trade Agreement;” it also cites the Holocaust as a form of persecution. Economics mentions the Federal Reserve System three times. Geography and the behavioral sciences have no specifics.

This last strand, behavioral sciences, like Hawaii’s “Cultural Anthropology,” amounts to a form of academic abstraction brought down to the schools. It contains nothing that could not be better and more memorably learned by studying history, biography, and civics. Like economics and geography, presented in their College 101 styles here and in other states, the social sciences lose their power to engage students when they isolate their main concepts and questions from the lives and adventures of real people. The second document cited above, *Planning Curriculum in the Social Studies*, issued by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction in May 2001, is a 273-page compilation of social studies methods, in effect an up-to-date textbook for courses in social studies education. Centered on pedagogical strategies, skills, and processes rather than subject matter, it is not designed to add to the clarity or substance of the 1998 *Model Academic Standards*. At most it offers a few lesson plans for random topics (e.g., Pompeii, the Great Depression), though without their larger context or relevance to significant historical/political questions.