

California

(Source: *History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten through Grade Twelve*, California Department of Education, 2000)

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?
★	☆	★	☆	★

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:

California's document meets (or partially meets) all but one of the five criteria for political education. On Criterion #1, it presents a common core of learning, with specific topics in history and civics, in clear English with few abstractions. Criterion #3 is met by a grade-by-grade sequence of instruction. It is not mandated, but supported by state programs to help teachers convey the standards. Under Criterion #4, standards-based state tests imply that the content is to be required of all, resulting in a "partially met" rating on this criterion. As a history/geography-centered program, it satisfies Criterion #5, with the social sciences taught in the context of people, times, and places, not separately. As with other detailed documents, Criterion #2 is not satisfied. Most grades contain too many substantial topics to be teachable in the usual school year.

Particulars:

The California document has earned top ratings from national surveys of state standards. But as noted above, and like other states lauded for their specifics, California's standards are overloaded. Key political matters could be overlooked among great numbers of other topics. And perhaps to save space, some key topics are treated too briefly. In this regard, the 2000 document is less useful to teachers for citizen education than the History-Social Science Framework of 1988, updated in 1997, upon which the current standards are largely built.

United States history, grades eight and eleven

For grade eight, from the framing of the Constitution to c. 1900, there are twelve major headings and 69 standards embodying some 110 topics, many of these important and complex enough to need a week of study. Grade eight begins well on the Anglo-American heritage of political ideas, the Magna Carta, the English Bill of Rights, the Mayflower Compact, the major debates and resolutions of the Constitutional Convention, and the Federalist papers. The rise of abolitionism and the steps to Civil War are complete, and all of Lincoln's great addresses are included. The "connection" between Reconstruction and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments is sought, but nothing on the forces behind Reconstruction's collapse or the fact that it rendered the amendments toothless. Thus a vital political lesson is lost. The labor movement, collective bargaining, and strikes are included, but not the opposing forces of state and federal government, courts, police, and press, with

the resulting violence and failure of most strikes. The term “Populism” is present, but nothing on farmers’ grievances or the Populist platform, both relevant to current economic, social, and political questions.

Grade eleven U.S. history has eleven main headings, 73 standards and 130 topics, approaching the total number of yearly class periods (of 40-50 minutes apiece). A key political topic, Progressivism, has but one topic of the 130, without the muckrakers, income tax, conservation, debates over imperialism, new attitudes toward labor and trusts, and the reform steps taken by the Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson administrations, all of which are cited in the earlier framework documents.

Nearing the present, standards grow more general and less related to people, events, and ideas that could stir student interest in politics. Jazz Age prosperity is here, but not the farm depression noted in the framework. The Great Depression’s causes remain general. Also left out are the framework’s specifics on its depths and political dangers and on American demagogues on left and right. By adding many nonpolitical topics and avoiding others, writers of the new California standards made them weaker for citizen education.

World history, grades six, seven, and ten

All three grades are heavy on non-Western societies and light on political history and the struggles for limited government and democracy. As in U.S. history, the standards grow more abstract with each grade. Grade seven includes, “Understand [the] influence of new scientific rationalism on the growth of democratic ideas,” but the plain term “laws of nature” is left out, as are examples to help students grasp the Enlightenment’s far less scientific search for “laws of society,” seen again in the descent from Darwin to Social Darwinism.

In grade ten’s topics on the Industrial Revolution, the only “isms” listed are utopianism, social democracy, socialism, and communism,” when conservatism and liberalism were in fact the main contenders in the nineteenth century and (with reversed meanings) still are in the United States. The omission would have been more obvious had standards included political and social reforms peacefully won by parliamentary governments in England and Western Europe up to the Great War of 1914. These reforms, plus advances in medicine, health, longevity, living standards, public schooling, and labor-saving inventions explain European optimism at the century’s turn in 1901 (so unlike ours in 2001) and disillusion after WWI.

Causes of that war are left general, although one terrorist’s act in Sarajevo and the failure of diplomats in July 1914 not only offer scenes of high tragedy but also show long-range forces tying the hands of individuals in moments of crisis. Like other states, California omits the political moderates in Russia and Germany falling to Bolsheviks and Nazis. Again, nothing is so critical to students’ political sense as instances in which promising forms of government fail to survive. In the main, world history standards are strong on the two wars, their causes and consequences. The post-WWII era is adequate, but missing is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, featured in the framework.

Overall, California standards earn high grades. They are history/geography-centered and avoid both social science jargon and the untethered organizing “concepts” found in many states’ standards. Three brief, thoughtful sections on “Historical and Social Science Analysis Skills” precede the topics for grades kindergarten to five, six to eight, and nine to twelve, in welcome contrast to state documents repeating endless lists of “skills” for each grade without regard to student age or the time available for teaching.

But like Alabama and Arizona, with standards that also list specifics, California’s document leaves two questions hanging: Why should each teacher be forced to pick and choose among a long lists of topics to decide on what constitutes a civic core for themselves? And how can overloaded standards serve as the basis for a fair statewide assessment?