

New York

(Source: *Social Studies Resource Guide with Core Curriculum*, June 1999, New York State Education Department)

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:

This 139-page document is among the most encyclopedic in the country. As such, it technically meets Criterion #1. Its topics and subtopics are specific, and from them teachers could draw a common core of learning critical for citizens' education, but only with great effort and some risk, given New York's statewide assessment system. "Test Specifications Guides" are sent out with numbers of multiple-choice items for each era and "themes" on which essay questions will be based. But neither can much reduce teachers' guesswork, and both, if more specific, would merely promote teaching to the test. The document is far from satisfying Criterion #2. At no secondary grade level could the number of topics be taught in the time teachers have. Criteria #3 and #4 are met and partially met, respectively. New York sets a clear grade-by-grade kindergarten to twelfth-grade scope and sequence of courses. Content and state tests given to all students on that material imply that it is required. The document generally satisfies Criterion #5, on the integration of civics, economics, geography, and history.

Particulars:

In regard to the political education of citizens, the main weakness of the New York document is, of course, its overwhelming number of ostensibly required topics. It is difficult to see how teachers could prepare students for statewide assessments, whose results carry high stakes for students, teachers, schools, and districts. More serious are the obstacles to school and teacher choice of topics to stress, whether it is to present a coherent political education or other chosen lines of emphasis. Among the obstacles are the state's published "Test Sampler Drafts" for grades five and eight and for high school courses in global history and geography and U.S. history and government. Sample questions—multiple choice, essay, and document-based—wander in all directions and may spur frantic attempts to "cover" all things and discourage even a few studies in depth. Common to many states, whether their standards are overloaded or amorphous, test items appear more often to reward students' general knowledge and ability to read and memorize than their grasp of subject matter.

The overload of topics and absence of priorities is evident at all levels. In the grade four course on local, state, and U.S. history from origins onward are 55 broad topics (e.g., "Causes for revolution: social, political, and economic" and "Transportation, inventions, communica-

tions and technology [1800's to present]"). The eleven units of grades seven and eight on New York and U.S. history, origins to the present, have over 500 topics, few of them mere examples and many quite sweeping. The content for a two-year, grades nine and ten global history and geography course includes some 470 topics. The one-year grade eleven U.S. history course (origins to the present) has some 500 topics, too heavy even for a two-year course. Segmenting U.S. history by eras would help, but paring down is also needed for student comprehension in general and especially for a meaningful education in democratic history, civics, and politics.

Ideally, the New York document, which can not truly be called a "core" curriculum, could be treated as a penultimate draft, from which a team of experienced teachers and scholars could select a real core of essential learning, capable of being engagingly taught and fairly tested in the requisite amount of time.