

TEXAS • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

D

SCORES

Content and Rigor 2/7
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

3/10

Overview

Texas combines a rigidly thematic and theory-based social studies structure with a politicized distortion of history. The result is both unwieldy and troubling, avoiding clear historical explanation while offering misrepresentations at every turn.

Goals and Organization

The *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills* (TEKS) provides grade-specific outlines for social studies for grades K–8. At the high school level, subject-specific course outlines replace the grade-specific outlines. Courses include U.S. History, World History, U.S. Government, and “Economics with Emphasis on the Free Enterprise System and Its Benefits.”

Each grade or course outline includes an introduction, laying out the aims for the year/course, and a “knowledge and skills” section that sets forth the content expectations. The latter section is split among eight strands: history; geography; economics; government; citizenship; culture; science, technology, and society; and social studies skills. For each strand, a numbered series of thematic or chronological headings is given, each in turn provided with more specific “statements” which provide examples for students to “describe,” “explain,” or “analyze.” Some examples are marked as required, others as suggested.

Kindergarten through third grade focus on concepts of self, family, community, citizenship, and chronology. Fourth grade introduces Texas history, which is reprised in seventh grade.

The U.S. history sequence begins in fifth grade with a full overview of American history. A second U.S. history course begins in eighth grade and covers pre-settlement to 1877; the course concludes in high school, running from 1877 to the present.

Evaluation

Texas’s heavily politicized 2010 revisions to its social studies curriculum have attracted massive national attention. Indeed, both in public hearings and press interviews, the leaders of the State Board of Education made no secret of their evangelical Christian-right agenda, promising to inculcate biblical principles, patriotic values, and American exceptionalism. And politics do figure heavily in the resulting TEKS.

But the problems begin with the very structure of the document, an unwieldy tangle of social studies categories and arbitrary thematic subdivisions. Even the outlines for the subject-specific high school courses are divided among *all* the various strands. In other words, the history course includes government, geography, and economics sections—yet those subjects also receive their own separate courses, which then include their *own*

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills: Social Studies, U.S. history segments (2010)

Accessed from:

<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/index.html>

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills: Economics with Emphasis on the Free Enterprise System and its Benefits, U.S. history segments (2010)

Accessed from:

<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter118/index.html>

history, government, and economics strands. Unfortunately, while the state directs teachers to “integrate” the content from all strands “for instructional purposes,” it gives no guidance on *how* to reassemble this jigsaw puzzle for effective classroom use.

While such social studies doctrine is usually associated with the relativist and diversity-obsessed educational left, the right-dominated Texas Board of Education made no effort to replace traditional social studies dogma with substantive historical content. Instead, it seems to have grafted on its own conservative talking points. The lists of “historically significant” names, for example, incorporate all the familiar politically correct group categories (women and minorities are systematically included in all such lists, regardless of their relative historical significance). At the same time, however, the document distorts or suppresses less triumphal or more nuanced aspects of our past that the Board found politically unacceptable (slavery and segregation are all but ignored, while religious influences are grossly exaggerated). The resulting fusion is a confusing, unteachable hodgepodge, blending the worst of two educational dogmas.

Complex historical issues are obscured with blatant politicizing throughout the document. Biblical influences on America’s founding are exaggerated, if not invented. The complicated but undeniable history of separation between church and state is flatly dismissed. From the earliest grades, students are pressed to uncritically celebrate the “free enterprise system and its benefits.” “Minimal government intrusion” is hailed as key to the early nineteenth-century commercial boom—ignoring the critical role of the state and federal governments in internal improvements and economic expansion. Native peoples are missing until brief references to nineteenth-century events. Slavery, too, is largely missing. Sectionalism and states’ rights are listed *before* slavery as causes of the Civil War, while the issue of slavery in the territories—the actual trigger for the sectional crisis—is never mentioned at all. During and after Reconstruction, there is no mention of the Black Codes, the Ku Klux Klan, or sharecropping; the term “Jim Crow” never appears. Incredibly, racial segregation is only mentioned in a passing reference to the 1948 integration of the armed forces.

In the modern era, the standards list “the internment of German, Italian and Japanese Americans and Executive Order 9066”—exaggerating the comparatively trivial internment of German and Italian Americans, and thereby obscuring the incontrovertible racial dimension of the larger and more systematic Japanese American internment. It is disingenuously suggested that the House Un-American Activities Committee—and, by extension, McCarthyism—have been vindicated by the Venona decrypts of Soviet espionage activities (which had, in reality, no link to McCarthy’s targets). Opposition to

the civil rights movement is falsely identified only with “the congressional bloc of Southern Democrats”—whose later metamorphosis into Southern Republicans is never mentioned. Specific right-wing policy positions are inculcated as well. For example, students are explicitly urged to condemn federal entitlement programs, including Texas-born Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society,” and to mistrust international treaties (considered threats to American sovereignty).

The strange fusion of conventional left-wing education theory and right-wing politics undermines content from the start. Early grades focus on conventional social studies categories: community and citizenship, chronology, and geography, gradually introducing local and national symbols along with carefully diverse lists of notable historical figures. Yet discussion of government services pointedly celebrates the “U.S. free enterprise system.”

Beginning in fifth grade, the fragmented content outline seems mainly focused on *telling* students which broad swaths of U.S. history they should know, rather than *explaining* anything, or even listing key people, issues, and events in detail. Instead, teachers and students are given an arbitrary and frequently tendentious laundry list of required and recommended examples, with little cohesion or coherence.

Under the history strand, fifth graders are first told to understand “the causes and effects of European colonization.” (Native peoples, surely relevant here, are skipped.) “The accomplishments of significant individuals” are mentioned—but those listed are William Bradford, Anne Hutchinson, William Penn, John Smith, John Wise, and Roger Williams, an extremely limited and arbitrary selection. Students are told to understand the reasons for independence; however, the sole examples given are the French and Indian War and Boston Tea Party, along with a few names and vague reference to their “motivations and contributions.”

Similar items briefly mention the Articles of Confederation and Constitution, the “political, economic, and social changes that occurred in the United States during the 19th century” (a sub-heading mentions the Civil War and Reconstruction), and “important issues, events, and individuals” in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Here, a short list of examples bizarrely gives “the oil and gas industries” equal prominence with industrialization, urbanization, the Great Depression, the two world wars, and the civil rights movement. A truncated, historically incoherent, and diversity-driven list of key individuals includes Jane Addams, Eisenhower, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Franklin Roosevelt, Reagan, Colin Powell, and the Tuskegee Airmen.

Related items are also split off into the various other strands. Under economics, there is mention of colonial industries, without examples, and an anachronistic reference to the rise of the “free enterprise system.” Under government, the Mayflower Compact and Virginia House of Burgesses abruptly appear without context, along with the Declaration of Independence and a few specifics about the Constitution.

The main two-year U.S. history course begins in eighth grade. Though the headings are better focused and more examples are given, the flaws evident in fifth grade still dominate; students are directed to understand broad periods or themes, aided only by decontextualized and random examples. This time, for example, “the growth of representative government” in the colonies is mentioned, followed by a short list of unexplained documents and institutions—and a strikingly tendentious directive to “describe how religion and virtue” underpinned representative government. Similar lists address the causes and leaders of the American Revolution and its aftermath, followed by extremely general points on the 1790s and the early nineteenth century (almost wholly devoid of specifics). These hopscotch to the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, and Jackson and the Cherokee removal, before jumping *back* to the Northwest Ordinance, then on to Manifest Destiny, the Mexican War, sectionalism, tariffs, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Slavery, so central to the history of Texas, is mentioned only in passing. And then, of course, the other seven strands “cover” the same period yet again.

In the high school U.S. history course, the pattern is the same. Scattered examples and lists of names quickly move through late nineteenth-century politics, the emergence of the United States as a world power, Progressivism, and the 1920s; on to the civil rights movement, the Reagan era, 9/11 and beyond. Once again, the other strands revisit the same ground from different perspectives, adding more isolated factoids and ill-matched lists of names. Then, the government and economics courses (themselves subdivided into the usual strands) “cover” the subject yet again, each strand and course offering further fragments of material in a historically incomprehensible jumble.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Texas has constructed a bizarre amalgam of traditionally ahistorical social studies—combining the usual inclusive, diversity-driven checklists with a string of politically and religiously motivated historical distortions. It is particularly ironic that the aggressively right-tilting Texas Board of Education embraced the mindset and methodology of social studies, traditionally the tool of a left-leaning educational establishment. The result is the worst of both worlds. Rigor

is difficult to assess, for coherent content outlines are not provided; teachers only get bald references to events and lists of names, split among confusing strands and courses. The only real difference at higher grade levels is that there are somewhat more examples, specific events, and time spans. Most disturbingly, history is distorted throughout the document in the interest of political talking points. Texas’s patchy and distorted content receives a two out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The TEKS sequence is quite clear: U.S. history is introduced in fifth grade, and a two-year course is offered in eighth grade and high school. But scope is another matter entirely. Teachers are merely directed to include listed items without context or explanation. The TEKS create no usable framework for teachers: How can such selective, fragmentary, and historically vapid checklists help instructors to design a course? A popular Lone Star State slogan proclaims “Texas: It’s like a whole other country”—but Texas’s standards are a disservice both to its own teachers and students and to the larger national history of which it remains a part. The state deserves only a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)