

Maine Social Studies Standards Review

The American Historical Association has reviewed the existing Maine Learning Results for Social Studies (revised 2019) and encourages the Department of Education (DOE) to provide more robust guidance to districts and teachers about themes, topics, ideas, and developments with which students should ideally be familiar by the completion of their K–12 education. In each strand, the performance expectations clearly articulate a set of skills and learning outcomes that align with broadly recognized pedagogical principles. We congratulate the DOE for that strong pedagogical guidance; we are concerned about content.

The AHA is the largest professional organization for historians in the United States. Operating under a congressional charter “for the promotion of historical studies,” our association has long offered guidance on local, state, and federal education policy. In conjunction with the National Council for the Social Studies, the AHA helped develop and publish the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards in 2013. The AHA’s History Discipline Core (2016) offered further clarification on the specific competencies and learning outcomes that characterize effective history education. Our official criteria for state standards (1997, rev. 2019) espouse robust support for the kind of democratic and inclusive process of revision now underway in Maine.

Over the past two years, historians at the AHA have reviewed and appraised standards frameworks in all 50 states as part of a larger research project on the US history curriculum nationwide. Combining analysis of state policy with deep dives into district- and classroom-level curricular materials, our researchers have interviewed over 200 public school teachers and administrators, collected curriculum from over 200 different jurisdictions, and fielded a survey answered by over 3,000 teachers across nine states. Our sources hail from small towns, sprawling suburbs, and big cities, from elite magnets to single-school rural districts to inner-city charters.

The AHA’s research highlights some of the benefits of academic standards that provide clear guidance on content. Nationwide, 60 percent of the teachers we surveyed report using state standards directly in their teaching. This varies markedly from state to state, ranging from less than half to more than three-quarters. Our survey results reveal that teachers find standards most useful when they sketch out the scope and sequence of course content covered in actual classrooms. New teachers are especially appreciative of standards that clarify the order and emphasis of what they should teach.

Effective standards can also call attention to aspects of state and local history that illustrate significant themes in both US and world history, and resonate especially well with students because of the immediacy of place. Many Maine residents—including some classroom teachers—remain unaware of the state’s history of slavery, which ended in 1783. Foregrounding elements of this history in the standards would help ensure that all of Maine’s students learn about how slavery and enslaved people shaped the history of your region.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to state standards. But there are distinct disadvantages to suggesting that critical thinking can be divorced entirely from the disciplinary knowledge that shapes it. State policymakers need not choose between skills and content, nor should they want to. **History education entails asking students to engage with people, events, developments, and ideas in the past through a complex set of investigative and interpretive habits that we call “historical thinking.”** This historical inquiry (about cause and consequence, structure and agency, context and complexity, contingency and continuity, etc.) must build from a base of knowledge about when certain events happened in relation to others. For students to achieve the learning outcomes at the core of Maine’s social studies standards, they must also be able to think about history in terms of periodization and change over time.

Historical thinking applies critical analysis to content, identifying key factors that allow us to make meaning from past events. Few would argue that history instruction should ignore concepts that help make sense of culture, such as religion and science. It would be futile (and deeply wrong-headed) to try to avoid social factors, such as race, class, and gender, or to eschew analytical concepts like primary and secondary sources, chronology, and change over time.

These and other historical concepts are content. To grasp these ideas, students must also learn to ask historical questions, evaluate evidence, think analytically, and draw connections across individual examples.

Maine’s 2019 social studies standards miss an array of opportunities to guide teachers as they try to figure out how to connect the complex patchwork of human experiences documented in most history textbooks to the inquiry-based learning outcomes so thoughtfully cataloged in this framework. Local and state history, for example, is a potent vehicle for engaging students in the past. What examples from Maine can help illustrate the importance of civic engagement? Or how such factors as race, class, gender, and religion have shaped different eras in the history of the United States?

We suggest revising the standards document to accomplish all of the following:

- Provide for or require **instructional time** devoted to history
- Build a curriculum **sequence** in history from the early grades through the high school
- Provide clear emphasis on **chronology** and **periodization**
- Introduce students to the focused questions that drive historical analysis and give them the opportunity to develop such questions themselves
- Create opportunities for students to learn about **how historical understanding can be applied** to contemporary issues. Everything has a history. Knowledge of history and the fruits of historical thinking anchor discussions of civic engagement—both locally, nationally, and globally. When framed in this way, outcomes of history courses include the development of active citizenship and an informed populace
- Highlight aspects of **state and local history** that can illustrate themes and developments across the state’s course sequence in social studies.

- Emphasize **global perspectives** and a broader analytical framework that represents diverse (including but not confined to Europe and the United States) points of view.

The existing standards could be improved with more detailed attention to the structure and content of history courses. Doing so would better enable teachers to realize the laudably ambitious learning goals that structure this framework.

The American Historical Association's commitment to high-quality history education in public schools across the country includes a readiness to be a resource for state education agencies in the revision of standards. Professional historians on our staff and in our governing Council can provide any additional comments or feedback that the Department of Education might find useful. We also can recommend historians in the state who might be willing to advise and consult with the standards review committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.