

## **Review of Minnesota Academic Standards Final Draft History and Social Studies by Jerry Martin**

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The draft Minnesota K-12 social studies standards are easily the best I have ever seen. They are rigorous, coherent, developmental, and pedagogically sound. If adopted, Minnesota will be a model for the nation.

1. The standards are conceptually coherent. The strands are clear, meaningful, and essential. They identify essential areas of understanding in broad categories. The sub-strands are thoughtful, well-selected specific applications of the strands. For example, for Grades 9-12, the strand, "Government and Citizenship," focuses several substrands, one of which is "The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship," and one standard under that substrand is "The student will understand the American political system and be willing to participate." That topic in turn is further specified as understanding political parties, elections, the impact of technology, and the role of interest groups. The kind of precise, logical, pedagogically sound follow-through is typical of the draft standards.

2. From year to year, the standards also lay out an ordered, developmental, pedagogically sound sequence of study, in which each topic is appropriate to its age level and lays the groundwork for the following year's topics. For example, in kindergarten, a focus on "famous people" is an age-appropriate preparation for the later study of American and world history. Similarly, "Character Traits of Good Citizens" such as "honesty, courage, patriotism, and individual responsibility," as seen in stories and real life examples, prepares the way to later study of the responsibilities of citizenship.

3. In Minnesota and most states, there is much in state standards that is inessential, trivial, empty, or inappropriate. That is not the case here. Everything included is substantive, important, and appropriate.

4. Standards documents are extremely brief, compared to what is actually covered in the classroom in the course of a year. Therefore, they are subject to "cheap shots," where the critic pounces on some supposed omission. For example, Grade 5 includes the study of "significant figures" of the Civil War, "including Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Harriet Beecher Stowe, [and] Harriet Tubman ..." The list is obviously not meant to be complete, much less exclusive, but the critic can pounce on the list and denounce the fact that his or her favorite statesman or general or writer is not mentioned. In fact, the standards obviously intend to be inclusive. They include the contributions of diverse Americans from all periods of our history, and not only Americans, but of diverse peoples around the globe from all periods of history. There is nothing here to exclude the study of any individual's or group's contributions to the human story.

5. The standards are very strong in every area, but particularly noteworthy are two areas that are often rather neglected – geography and economics. The standards are correctly based on the premise that the first context for human interactions is spatial. Individuals are situated in space and the particular traits of that space – rivers, climates, cities, etc. – shape history, government, and social structure. Therefore, right in Grade 1, “Concepts of Location” are emphasized, along with the fact that spatial relationships can be represented in maps and globes. By the time students reach high school, they are prepared for the rich study of world civilization, which is shaped so much by geographical factors. And they are prepared to undertake more sophisticated study, such as understanding and analyzing “proposals to change the human use of environmental resources” and “the push and pull factors to explain the general patterns of human movement in the modern era, including international migration.”

6. Economics is a void in most K-12 standards. In most states, students can graduate without ever studying things as elementary as diminishing marginal utility and the law of supply and demand. And yet they are supposed to be able to compete in a global, technology-driven economy! The most basic concepts of quite simple and the standards rightly begin teaching them at the elementary level. Students in Grade 1 will identify the difference between “needs (food, shelter, clothing) and wants (things people would like to have)” – laying an age-appropriate groundwork for key topics, such as policies about resource use, that are covered later. Students taught according to these standards will be in a much better position to participate successfully in today’s rapidly-changing economy.

In short, while I understand that a public review process is healthy and may make a contribution to the final version, I would be extremely happy if my own state adopted the draft standards exactly as they are. Any changes to please a particular group or point of view are as likely to make them worse as better – to make them less coherent, or less rigorous, or to bog them down in additional detail. I hope that those in charge of this process will fight to retain the essential structure and content of the outstanding draft standards.

Sincerely,

Jerry L. Martin  
Chairman