

Review of Minnesota Academic Standards Final Draft History and Social Studies by Warren Solomon

I have typed my comments in the draft on the following pages. Although some comments are of a style nature, other ones are more substantive. My substantive comments are summarized on this page and the next. To see all comments, see pages following that follow page 3.

1. At the K-3 level, it is unrealistic to make the statement found in the standards: “The expectation is that these standards will be incorporated into the language arts and math curricula as appropriate, as well as into discussions of classroom management and behavior.” Perhaps, that statement might be true at the kindergarten level, but at the levels of Grades 1-3 there is much content in the standards that would not likely be taught in language arts or mathematics or in discussions of classroom management and behavior. Hence, Minnesota should either advocate that the standards and benchmarks be addressed in social studies units or make a substantial reduction in the standards. My preference is that Minnesota advocate addressing the standards in social studies programs.
2. Although some critics of social studies recommend the teaching of history at the earliest grade levels and to get away from the old “expanding communities” type of social studies program, I think it is a mistake at the primary levels to ignore the study of the local communities in which students live. Such studies offer a rich, concrete arena in which many geographic, government, and economics concepts may be taught, as well as an arena in which students can learn some of the basic concepts and skills used in historical studies.
3. There is much repetition in the history standards and benchmarks with the result that the high school history courses devote much time to reteaching much of the content taught in earlier grades. This approach requires high school teachers to cover a large breadth of content in their courses, preventing the study of any topic in depth and preventing students from learning much in the way of recent history. As a result, if the current draft standards are implemented, Minnesota students will likely lack the historical perspective to understand many of the important current problems our nation is facing. Students will also likely come to regard history as subject where established knowledge is passed on, to be memorized, returned in tests, and later forgotten. Minnesota should consider encouraging districts to divide their entire history curricula chronologically, where early history is emphasized in early grades, comparing past to present, middle history is emphasized middle grades, building on earlier history and comparing past to present, and recent history—perhaps 20-21st century history—is emphasized in high school, building on the earlier history with some specific reviews as needed.
4. The standards and benchmarks will involve students in learning lots of content; yet in all the content listed big ideas and important questions are not given emphasis. When the National History Standards were developed for each historical era, the historians on the National Council for History Standards identified the major developments of the era and why is it important to teach

about the era.¹ I would like for the Minnesota standards to have given more evidence for such thinking. It would be helpful for reviewers of the standards to be informed about what is Minnesota's rationale for the content being taught. That is, why does Minnesota believe this content is important for students to learn? I see the content as amenable to traditional testing, but do not see how the content has much relationship to students' lives or to their roles as people living in their communities as citizens. It would be useful to know what Minnesota regards as the major purposes of historical studies, of geographic studies, of economic studies, and of government studies. Why doesn't Minnesota use the label social studies? There seem to be some assumptions behind the standards and benchmarks, but it is not clear just what they are. Perhaps the authors of the standards and benchmarks do not have a clear idea what they are. In any case, it is important to make such thinking explicit and public in order for people to discuss and judge whether the state is on the right track and in order to determine whether the standards and benchmarks are functional for the state's basic notions about what it wants students to know and be able to do as a result of its instructional program.

- 5. The standards and benchmarks are greatly improved over the first draft so far as emphasizing a greater variety of thinking skills in the various history and other social studies domains.** At the same time, two domains of thinking are left out: These pertain to problem solving² and to decision making in the domain of public policy.³ I hope Minnesota would consider building those domains of thinking into their standards because they are important skills for citizens to have. That is, for the good of Minnesota and the nation, it would be good if the citizenry would possess those skills.

In addition to the general comments above, more substantive comments may be found in the pages that follow.

¹ National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History: Basic Edition*. Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996.

² Such thinking involves defining problems, identifying alternative solutions for the problems, identifying criteria for evaluating the alternative solutions, evaluating the alternative solutions based on the criteria, and making and defending the decision

³ Such thinking involves students in analyzing issues from history or current events and making rational decisions considering the facts and democratic values, which might be in conflict in specific cases. (Democratic values are found in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.)