



Achieve, Inc.

Measuring Up 2004

A Report on
Social Studies Standards for
NEW JERSEY

ACHIEVE'S
BENCHMARKING
INITIATIVE

Achieve, Inc.

Created by the nation's governors and business leaders, Achieve, Inc., is a bipartisan, non-profit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Achieve has helped nearly half the states benchmark their standards and tests against the best examples in this country and abroad and work in partnership to improve teaching and learning. Achieve serves as a significant national voice for quality in standards-based reform and regularly convenes governors, CEOs and other influential leaders at National Education Summits and other gatherings to sustain support for higher standards and achievement for all of America's schoolchildren.

Achieve helps states raise academic standards, measure performance against those standards, establish clear accountability for results and strengthen public confidence in our education system. To do this, we:

- help states **benchmark** their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- provide sustained **public leadership** and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- build **partnerships** that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- serve as a **national clearinghouse** on standards and school reform.

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REVIEW OF NEW JERSEY'S SOCIAL STUDIES CORE CURRICULUM STANDARDS JUNE 2004

In fall 2003, New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey and Commissioner of Education William L. Librera asked Achieve to review the new academic standards the state had developed in English, mathematics and social studies. They wished to learn how New Jersey's new standards compared with those of other states.

The 2003 review was conducted in two parts, and as a result, Achieve issued two separate reports: one on social studies standards and the other on English and mathematics standards and assessments. This summary report outlines the main findings from Achieve's review of the New Jersey social studies standards.

Achieve began its review of the New Jersey social studies standards in fall 2003. State officials had asked that Achieve review a September 2003 draft to be considered for adoption by the State Board of Education in early 2004. In January 2004, Achieve delivered preliminary findings to the state Department of Education and to the governor's office. In February 2004, officials at the Department of Education asked Achieve to review a new draft of the social studies standards that had been revised, partly in response to Achieve's January recommendations. Our second review was dated February 27, 2004, and has been under consideration by New Jersey officials since that time.

The summary review that follows focuses on New Jersey's revised draft of February but contains certain applicable elements of Achieve's two reviews of January and February.

THE ACHIEVE BENCHMARKING PROCESS

Achieve's benchmarking reviews involve a detailed and comparative analysis of a state's standards against the best standards available from other states and nations. To select these exemplary standards in history/social studies, Achieve evaluated standards development efforts across the country to see which standards were deservedly the most highly regarded. We then commissioned leading subject matter content experts to provide detailed reviews of those states' documents and to help us narrow the list down to the best. As a result, Achieve selected state standards from Alabama, California and Indiana to serve as examples for history/social studies benchmarks. We believe these state standards are the best in the nation. They are rigorous and well chosen; they provide sufficient detail to local educators and parents who need to understand and use them; and they do very well in combining the core disciplines of history, civics, geography and economics in a coherent set of expectations to guide K–12 education in their states.

To conduct the review of New Jersey's standards, Achieve engaged national experts with significant experience in teaching social studies and its core disciplines and in writing

and reviewing social studies standards from around the country. Achieve provided them with the three benchmark documents and a set of guiding questions to ensure that their analyses would focus on Achieve’s criteria for exemplary standards in social studies. Our synthesis of their findings presents consensus opinions, but final judgments and conclusions rest with Achieve. Brief biographies of expert consultants who participated in our reviews can be found in the Appendix.

ACHIEVE’S CRITERIA FOR HIGH-QUALITY STANDARDS

It may seem to some that the work involved in creating high-quality academic standards is more trouble than it is worth. But in any state that values equal opportunity to learn, all else — curriculum, assessment, professional development, school progress reports, and especially day-in and day-out instruction — depends on the quality and clarity of its standards. When standards are flawed, it is very difficult to achieve either quality or equality in the rest of the school system. When standards are strong and well implemented, teaching and learning are far more likely to improve.

Achieve judges the quality of standards according to the following criteria:

- **RIGOR: What is the level of intellectual demand in the standards?**

Expectations for student learning should be intellectually challenging enough to equip students with the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed at the next grade level. Rigor is a measure of how well the standards represent and build on the essential core content of a discipline — its key concepts and how they relate to each other. Rigor is the most complex of the criteria because it depends on the interplay of content chosen for emphases, how thoughtfully knowledge and skills are sequenced from grade to grade, and the precision with which expectations for learners are expressed — as compared with other state and international standards.

- **CLARITY: Are the standards clearly written and presented in a logical, easy-to-use format?**

Clarity requires more than just plain and jargon-free prose. Each grade level’s expectations must be communicated in language that is widely understood and accepted by teachers, parents, school boards and others who have a stake in the quality of schooling — including university faculties that will prepare teachers to convey the standards and later receive those teachers’ students.

- **SPECIFICITY: Are the standards specific enough to convey the level of performance expected of students?**

High-quality standards offer enough detail to help teachers design their courses, but they are not overly detailed, prescriptive or unmanageable, given teachers’ time for instruction. Vague and general standards leave too much open to interpretation and make

it likely that students will be held to different, unequal expectations. Standards that are too detailed may encourage a “checklist” approach to teaching that undermines students’ interest and overall grasp of the discipline. It is important that standards have a fairly consistent level of precision (or “grain size”) that makes them easier to understand and teach in sufficient depth.

- **FOCUS: Have tough choices been made about what content is the most important for students to learn?**

High-quality standards establish priorities of facts, concepts and skills that should be emphasized at each grade level. Selection needs to be based on what knowledge will be expected of students at the next grade level. Also, to ensure that the amount of content at each level is teachable in the limited time teachers have, standards need to distinguish between knowledge and skills that are essential and those that are not.

- **PROGRESSION: Do knowledge and skills build clearly and sensibly on previous learning and increase in intellectual demand from year to year?**

Coherent understanding in a subject area requires an evolution of knowledge and skills, moving from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract. Good standards set a progression of knowledge and skills across the K–12 grades, and they prevent needless repetition from grade to grade, while revisiting earlier learning when needed.

RESULTS FOR NEW JERSEY

In our January and February reports, Achieve provided officials at the New Jersey Department of Education with detailed comparisons of the New Jersey social studies standards with exemplary standards from other states. We limit ourselves in this report to providing our most significant findings and recommendations from those reports.

STRENGTHS OF THE STANDARDS

Overall Improvement

The September 2003 draft of the New Jersey social studies standards improved on the 1996 version in its chronology, course order, coverage of eras and clarity of topic wording. It set a foundation on which it would be possible to build a superior set of standards. In this sense, it resembles early versions of documents that were gradually refined and became exemplars, such as those of Alabama, California and Indiana. With some exceptions, the same is true of the New Jersey February draft, which Achieve also reviewed.

Chronological Order

Main headings for U.S. and world history are in chronological order, as in all the better state standards. New Jersey tries to avoid the futile attempts made by other states to teach all U.S. or world history in a one-year survey, in which coverage has to be hurried and superficial, leaving no time for in-depth studies related to the main chronological narrative. Without alternating linked studies of depth and breadth, students will not understand the nature of history. Rushing through surveys also leaves no time for the discussion, analyses, research and writing that most state standards, including New Jersey's, insist on.

Segmentation of Content

With exceptions noted below, the present draft improves on other state documents — especially in the civic/political education of citizens — by allowing districts to teach in middle school world history up to 1750. If done, it lets high school teachers focus on events, ideas and turning points of the past 250 years, knowledge which is indispensable to the political sophistication of citizens. Many states begin high school world history at 1400 or so, forcing rushed coverage and making it impossible to reach recent decades.

Integration of New Jersey and U.S. History

The current draft brings U.S. and New Jersey studies together as a way to stimulate the interest of students in both and to help them understand the workings of federalism and the balance of powers written into the U.S. Constitution. It also helps to illuminate today's economic, social and political forces affecting state and national relations.

Balance of U.S. and World History

In its general headings and broadly worded topics — although not always in its detail — the draft devotes a fair balance of time between U.S. history and world history. With some exceptions noted in earlier reports, it also has reasonable balance among the major eras of human history and between Western civilization and the other major world civilizations.

The Civic Education of Citizens

In its broad headings and outlines for civics, world history and U.S. history, the document suggests a “civic core” of learning that touches on, not always detailing, vital topics and questions to achieve the often-stated, primary aim of social studies: to prepare citizens of mature political judgment. Headings and outlines also could allow links to standards in geography and economics to broaden such judgment.

Clear and Accessible Language

The content of the current New Jersey social studies document is set forth in mostly clear and jargon-free language that is accessible to school administrators and teachers, parents, the public, policymakers, and the media. Certain technical or specialized terms may easily be presented in a glossary when needed.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Manageability and Focus

High on Achieve’s list of needed improvements is a reduction in the number and scope of topics in the standards. Our concern is that the standards may outline more material than teachers can effectively teach during the school year. Rather than providing clear guidance to schools and teachers about what is most important for them to focus their curriculum and instruction on, the current standards may leave them with a difficult decision: try to cover everything in the standards at a more superficial level or teach a subset of the standards in greater depth.

We encourage the state to sharpen the focus of the standards so that they define a manageable core. This will require making tough choices about what is *most* important for students — and by extension New Jersey’s citizens — to know. It will involve distinguishing between *essential* knowledge and skills, those things that should remain in the standards, and those that may be desirable for students to learn but are not essential. This is not an easy step to take. To date, most states have had difficulty making the hard choices necessary to define a manageable core because this task inevitably involves cutting topics or events that some group of people feels is important. Nevertheless, we feel it is the right thing for New Jersey to do.

An expectation for students at the end of grade 8 in economics is that they “discuss how societies have been affected by industrialization and by different political and economic

philosophies” (B.4). A grade 12 geography standard would have students “analyze how cooperation and conflict influence the control of economic, political, and social entities on Earth” (D.3). These are very broad standards that could be interpreted in very different ways. The following world history standard from grade 12 is another example of an overly broad standard that may unfairly burden teachers and students in its expansiveness:

Grade 12, E.1: *Analyze and evaluate how the following major developments transformed European society and impacted on Asia, Africa, and the Americas including:*

- *The Renaissance and Reformation*
- *The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment*
- *European exploration, colonial empires, and the trans-Atlantic [slave trade]*
- *Decline of absolutism and the rise of constitutional monarchies in Europe*
- *The spread of Buddhism through trade and travel*

The first four of these bullets would take no less than two weeks each — if students were truly expected to “analyze and evaluate” how these major developments “transformed” Europe and “impacted” the rest of the world. Given that there are 174 standards that comprise the entirety of New Jersey’s high school social studies standards and given that even if they are divided equally among the four years of high school, at least 43 standards would need to be covered each year, a standard such as this one will either take too much time or not be covered in sufficient depth. Also, none of the bullets includes specifics — required or as examples — to further focus the expectations.

Manageability is a problem throughout the standards, but it is a particular problem at the high school level. The segmentation of eras between middle and high school, cited earlier as a strength of the standards, is contradicted by the mandated high school review of all previous periods in both U.S. history and world history. By framing the high school standards this way, it is possible that schools may feel compelled to add an additional full-year history survey course to review previous material.

Specificity and Prioritization

A second critical area for improvement is increasing the level of precision in the standards.

One of the purposes of setting standards in social studies (and other subjects) is to ensure that all students across the state are exposed to a rigorous common core of knowledge and skills. New Jersey and other states pursuing standards have decided that it is no longer acceptable for some students to be offered a challenging curriculum while others are not afforded that same opportunity. It is particularly problematic if students in urban or other high-poverty areas are held to lower expectations than students in more affluent communities.

Achieve’s reviewers concluded that the current version of the New Jersey social studies standards is not yet clear and specific enough to ensure that all students will be exposed to a rigorous, common core. In addition to causing manageability problems, many of the standards are too broad to provide clear guidance to teachers, students and parents, and we are concerned that this could lead to a situation in which the standards are interpreted very differently across the state.

Developing standards that are precise enough to provide clear guidance without becoming too detailed is a challenge, particularly in a state such as New Jersey where control of the curriculum is in the hands of local districts. The states whose history/social studies standards Achieve has chosen as benchmarks have tried to achieve this delicate balance and have been largely successful. We encourage New Jersey to use these states’ standards as helpful examples to consider while pursuing a clearer and more straightforward set of expectations.

Achieve’s reviewers found the specificity of the New Jersey standards to be well below that of the benchmark standards of other states. The following civics standard is a good example of the tendency of certain standards to be too far-reaching in breadth to be effective as guides for teachers and students:

Grade 8, E.5: *Analyze how the life, culture, economics, and politics of the United States impact the rest of the world.*

A grade 12 economics standard asks students to “evaluate international trade principles and policies” (B.2), but it gives no indication of what these may be. At grade 4 in U.S. history, students are asked to “evaluate information about historical events or current issues” and in geography to “compare the patterns of past and present human migration.” No direction in the form of examples such as specific historic events and developments is given to anchor these broad tasks and ideas.

Another illustration of lack of specificity diminishing the strength and usefulness of a standard is the treatment of the Enlightenment in New Jersey’s world history standards as compared with its treatment in California’s and Indiana’s standards. Essentially, New Jersey asks students to “analyze and evaluate” how the Enlightenment (as well as the other bulleted “major developments”) “transformed European society and impacted on Asia, Africa, and the Americas” (grade 12, E.1). The scope of this task is enormous, and with this lack of definition and direction it could be interpreted in vastly different ways across the state. In California’s and Indiana’s standards, however, the student is asked to consider the Enlightenment — among other historical developments covered — in a few specific contexts: how democratic thought was influenced by it, its impact on the founding of the United States, its influence on European political thought and its relationship to emerging opposition to the slave trade. These specifics give teachers necessary guidance and also ensure that students’ understanding of historical developments and events is not left at a superficial level.

In some cases, the lack of specificity and precision in the New Jersey standards leads to key content getting underemphasized or omitted altogether. For example, neither the American nor French Revolutions are addressed adequately in the standards. They are referred to as examples under broader standards, but they are not identified as priority areas that all students must study, nor are they supported with any specifics to indicate what about those periods was most important.

In the area of U.S. history, there are a number of standards whose lack of specificity may end up ensuring that they do not receive adequate attention in the classroom. Despite the fact that these standards introduce important topics in U.S. history, their most important aspects may never be taught because specifics and context are missing. Some examples of important specifics that go unmentioned are the compromise over slavery at the Constitutional Convention, slavery's contribution to 19th-century national wealth, the Northwest Ordinance, Jacksonian democracy, political and social conditions at the root of Populism and Progressivism, and particular New Deal actions such as Social Security.

There are other important historical periods, developments, movements and figures in world history that are not mentioned at all in the New Jersey standards. Among these significant omissions are Humanism, the causes and ideas of the Protestant Revolution, Martin Luther, John Locke, the Magna Carta, the 17th-century English Revolution and Bill of Rights, the idea of Natural Law in the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, and the causes and social effects of the 18th- and early 19th-century Industrial Revolution in England and Western Europe.

The New Jersey standards should make clear which themes, topics and events are most important; they should establish the priorities for student learning. We encourage the state to adjust the emphases as necessary to achieve a more appropriate set of priorities.

Age-Appropriateness

A fourth area of concern for Achieve reviewers is the age-appropriateness of some of the topics in the standards. Certain topics and ideas were judged to be too sophisticated and/or time consuming for learners in the elementary, middle and even high school grades at which they were pegged. For example, in New Jersey's U.S. history standards for grades 1 and 2, students are asked to "identify the beginning, middle and end of historical stories, myths and narratives about local, state and national history." This is a skill that would be appropriately challenging for a 3rd or 4th grader. Additionally, if this standard contained some specifics about the task, its appropriate grade level would be much easier to determine.

New Jersey's civics standards in particular place content at earlier grades that would better be addressed in a later grade. The level of abstraction, as well as the complexity of ideas, in some of the civic standards for end of grade 4 reach beyond what is appropriate at this age, especially considering that the end-of-grade-4 strand includes grade 3. Standards A.1, "Differentiate between power and authority," and E.2, "Describe ways in

which the United States interacts with other nations through trade, diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and wars,” are examples of standards that are more appropriate for middle school and even high school. End-of-grade-8 civics standards also include some abstract concepts that would be more appropriate to teach at the high school level, such as B.1, “Discuss the major historical and contemporary conflicts over United States constitutional principles,” and A.3, “Compare and contrast democratic and authoritarian or totalitarian systems of government.”

Geography standards that New Jersey expects 3rd and 4th graders to study also involve concepts that are more appropriate for older students, such as D.3, “Compare the patterns and processes of past and present human migration,” and D.4, “Explain and identify examples of global interdependence.” At the grade 8 level, a standard asks students to “describe and explain the significance of patterns of cultural diffusion in the creation of varied cultural mosaics” (D.3). Students in the later high school grades are better equipped to study the concepts implicit in this standard.

Not only do these standards present a problem for students by inappropriately challenging their cognitive ability, but students at the different grade levels also simply have not yet been exposed to enough preliminary subject matter to be prepared for these sophisticated concepts. Moving some of these standards to later grades, or at least clarifying the level of depth that a 4th or 8th grader would reasonably be expected to handle by including some specifics under them, would help to make New Jersey’s social studies standards appropriately challenging and rigorous for all students.

* * *

The new draft social studies standards are a considerable improvement over New Jersey’s previous standards. They are well organized; they are balanced in their treatment of state, national and world history; and they have the potential to provide the foundation for a rigorous core curriculum for all students. That potential, however, may not be realized unless additional steps are taken to focus the standards on the most critical topics and events — a manageable core — and to clarify what about those topics and events is most important for students to learn. Only then will the standards provide sufficient guidance to educators, curriculum designers and others who will rely on the standards to guide their daily work.

Achieve encourages New Jersey to take steps to refine the standards. We believe this can be accomplished by a small team of teachers and scholars who are well versed in all five social studies fields, who are focused on what is most important for citizen education and who possess a shared regard for the limited instruction time that schools have. It will require some tough choices, but a clearer, more manageable set of standards will greatly benefit New Jersey educators and students for years to come.

APPENDIX: BIOGRAPHIES

EXPERT REVIEWERS

ROGER M. DOWNS

Roger M. Downs chairs the department of geography at The Pennsylvania State University. He also has held positions at Johns Hopkins University, Colgate University and the University of Washington. From 1995 to 1996, Downs was geographer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society. Prior to that, in 1994, he was the writing coordinator for the Geography Education Standards Project, which produced *Geography for Life: The National Geography Standards*. Downs has served as an expert consultant to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), federal and state agencies, educational publishers, the Council for Basic Education, and the National Geographic Society.

PAUL A. GAGNON (LEAD REVIEWER)

Paul A. Gagnon is professor emeritus of history and former dean of faculty at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Gagnon is now senior research associate at Boston University's Center for School Improvement. He has served as a consultant, working with classroom teachers on K–12 history and social studies standards. Gagnon also has been a consultant to the Council for Basic Education; American Federation of Teachers; the New Standards Project; Achieve, Inc.; the National Council for History Education; and several state departments of education, including Arizona, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas and Vermont. His 50-state review of state civics standards, *Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core*, was sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute of the American Federation of Teachers (2003). During his long career, Gagnon served as chief of staff for the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, was the executive director of the National Council for History Education and was resident scholar at UCLA's Center for History in the Schools.

JESUS GARCIA

Jesus Garcia is professor of education and director of the University of Kentucky's Initial Certification in Secondary Education Program. As a specialist in curriculum and instruction and a social studies educator, Garcia has focused his work on the middle and high school years. In 2003, he was elected president of the National Council for the Social Studies. He is also the co-author of the middle school U.S. history textbook *America's Past and Promise*; a teacher education textbook, *Field Experiences: Strategies for Exploring Diversity in Schools*; and a K–8 social studies methods textbook, *Social Studies for Children: A Guild to Basic Instruction*. In addition, Garcia has been a consultant to Riverside Publishing Company and Advanced Systems in New Hampshire. Prior to joining the staff at the University of Kentucky, Garcia served as professor of social studies education at the University of Illinois.

JOHN J. PATRICK

John J. Patrick is director of the Social Studies Development Center and director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education at Indiana University. Patrick has served on the planning committees for the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in U.S. history, as well as in civics (1998). Patrick was the lead content consultant for the development of Indiana's highly regarded social studies standards in 2001. In addition, Patrick is a noted author of many books on civic education, history and political thought, and he has traveled extensively in the former Soviet Union as a consultant and lecturer. Since 1995, he has directed a Civitas International Civic Education Exchange Project in that region. Patrick has been visiting professor at the University of Sarajevo and has won the John W. Ryan award for distinguished achievement in international programs.

SHELDON M. STERN

Sheldon M. Stern was historian at the John F. Kennedy Library at Harvard University from 1976 to 1999. Prior to that, Stern was assistant professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Boston. While at the J.F.K. Library, Stern directed the American History Project for High School Students, the Library Summer Institute for Teachers, Elderhostel on the American Presidency and the Oral History Program. During that time, he also directed a summer institute for the Massachusetts Department of Education on implementing the state's history and social science curriculum framework. He also served the Bay State as a member of the Massachusetts Joint Commission on Educator Preparation and helped develop the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System for history and social science. Stern's national work includes assisting in the development of the national history standards for the National Council for History Education. In addition, Stern is a prolific author. Among his most recent publications, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A 2003 Report Card* was written for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

W. CHRIS STEWART

W. Chris Stewart is president and chief executive officer of Educational Dimensions, Inc., a minority-owned organization providing leadership training and support for school districts. During Stewart's 20-year career with District of Columbia Public Schools, she was director of D.C.'s English Language Arts and History Curriculum Framework Project. She also presided over the D.C. Council for the Social Studies, representing the District at the Middle States Council for Social Studies, and she co-chaired the Exemplary Programs for the National Council for the Social Studies. She also has served as adviser to the National Council for the Social Studies, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Council for Basic Education, the National Center on Education and the Economy, and the Council for Chief State School Officers.

T. JASON WEEDON

T. Jason Weedon joined the Washington, D.C. office in September 1999. He currently directs several of Achieve's trademark activities, including its National Education Summits and policy institutes held throughout the year. In addition, he oversees the organization's strategic operations and communications activity.

Previously, Weedon managed Achieve's Public Leadership Initiative and staffed Achieve's Benchmarking Initiative, assisting in the development of its standards and assessment alignment studies. He also provided ongoing research and analysis of key issues in standards-based educational reform.

Prior to joining Achieve, he taught academic writing, public speaking and English as a second language at the high school and college levels in Budapest, Hungary.

Weedon holds a master's degree in educational leadership from the George Washington University and a bachelor's degree in history and English literature from the College of William and Mary.

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