



# Social Studies Curriculum

## Executive Summary

Social studies learning standards in Missouri, which are the basis of course curriculums, are developed by working groups and approved by the State Board of Education. Social studies is a broad term for curriculums related to human society including history, geography, government, economics, sociology. [House Bill 2872](#) would require certain social studies classes to be taught in Missouri high schools and includes curriculum requirements. Additionally, state assessments in certain social studies classes would be required to consist of questions related to primary source documents (i.e., document-based questions).

## Highlights

- In Missouri, a 17 member workgroup develops learning standards recommendations for high school social studies that need to be approved by the State Board of Education. The workgroup consists of parents, political appointees, and education professionals recommended by various education-related groups.
- A study assessing document-based curriculums found positive effects on student historical knowledge, their abilities to relate this knowledge to contemporary issues, and their general reading comprehension from document-based lessons.
- Most states tend to have specific curriculum requirements in state learning standards (Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, etc.) as opposed to in statute.

## Limitations

- Creating statewide assessments for specific subjects like U.S. History can be difficult if the tests are given at different grade levels because the cognitive abilities of students vary significantly between grade levels.
- It is unclear if requiring document-based questions on statewide assessments would have positive effects for students without associated educator training on implementing document-based lesson plans.

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## Research Background

### Social Studies Curriculum in Missouri

Missouri requires students to have a minimum of 3 credits of social studies classes in order to graduate from high school. Social studies [learning standards](#) were last updated in 2016 and are listed on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website.<sup>1</sup> American History, World History, and Government are the three categories of high school learning standards set by the State Board of Education ([RSMo 160.514](#)) and include specific competence

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benchmarks for end-of-course (EOC) assessments sorted into five general themes: 1) History: Continuity and Change, 2) Government Systems and Principles, 3) Geographic Study, 4) Economic Concepts, and 5) Peoples, Groups, and Cultures).

Statute-mandated subject area workgroups convene whenever updates to learning standards are to be made. The current regulations related to workgroups were established in 2014 by [HB 1490](#). The workgroup for history and government (grades 6–12) is required to contain 17 members. The members consist of a mixture of parents and politically appointed education professionals selected by various state leaders. Also included are education professionals recommended by several different education professional societies.

Local education authorities set curriculums based on these standards which are then approved by local school boards. Because of this, the curriculums and classes taught in different districts vary substantially across Missouri. In some states, such as [Alabama](#) and [New York](#), learning standards are more detailed, with specific requirements for what classes are taught at each grade level.<sup>2,3</sup> There are several disadvantages of not having a set sequence of classes that are grade-specific. For example, it can make it difficult for students to transfer between school districts. Additionally, creating statewide assessments for specific subjects like U.S. History can be difficult if the tests are given at different grade levels because the cognitive abilities of students vary significantly between grade levels.<sup>4</sup>

### **Social Studies Requirements for University & College Applicants**

Social studies credits from high school courses are typically required for those applying to study at institutions of higher education. The University of Missouri, for example, requires three years of social studies courses that can be made up of various types of social studies classes including: World History, American History, American Government, Principles of Democracy, Psychology, Sociology, and Economics.<sup>5</sup> These types of requirements are typical for college admissions.<sup>6</sup>

### **Document-Based Questions**

Document-based questions (questions about primary source documents) for history assessments were first used for Advanced Placement (AP) tests in the 1970s and the questions on AP tests have changed the ways high school curriculums are developed.<sup>7</sup> Reviewing primary source documents is a common practice of historians. Current social studies learning standards in Missouri include instruction on the Magna Carta and “other influential documents” related to the development of American law.<sup>1</sup> One experiment found positive effects on student historical knowledge, their abilities to relate this knowledge to contemporary issues, and their general reading comprehension from document-based lessons.<sup>8</sup> However, this study used specially designed lesson plans and it is unclear if requiring document-based questions on statewide assessments would have similar positive effects without associated training for educators on implementing related lesson plans.

## Proposed Legislation

[House Bill 2872](#) would add requirements for instruction and assessments of high school social studies classes in Missouri. The legislation would require two semesters of instruction in each of the following subjects 1) Development of Western Civilization, 2) Development of American History and Institutions from the Age of Discovery through the 19th Century, 3) American History in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, and 4) American Civics and Government. The bill does not require that specific courses be taught in any order and the courses could potentially be taken concurrently. Specific curriculum requirements for the history of Western civilization include the teaching of several Greek and Roman pieces of literature and also works written by early church fathers that were referenced by framers of the U.S. Constitution. The bill would require that statewide assessments related to American history have document-based questions with a provided definition, and require that the documents be primary source documents with questions about the “document's author, audience, origin, contextual matters, and subsequent effects.”

Most states tend to have specific curriculum requirements in state learning standards (Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, etc.) while statutes about curricular requirements tend to be more general.<sup>1,9,10</sup> Some states do have specific curriculum requirements in statute on particular topics; for example, Missouri, Iowa, and South Carolina require instruction about the U.S. Constitution.

## References

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