

2006 The State of State STANDARDS

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INCLUDING
It Takes a Vision:
How Three States Created Great
Academic Standards

By Joanne Jacobs

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NEVADA REPORT CARD

SUBJECT	2000	2006
English	B	B
History*	C	C
Geography**	C	D
Math	C	C
Science	C	D
OVERALL GRADE	C+	C-

*U.S. History for 2006 **World History for 2006

ENGLISH—B

- *Nevada English Language Arts: Content Standards, adopted March 2001 (Feb. 21, 2003 Edition)*
- *Performance Level Descriptors English/Language Arts, 2, 3, 5, 8, & 12*

Nevada's standards are quite good. The state divides its English document into grade-level expectations for K-8, with another standard for grade 12. The prose is fresh, clear, and intelligible; the standards are measurable and show increasing difficulty as the grades grow higher. Phonics and vocabulary is addressed in a comprehensive and appropriate way at each level. The literature standards, unfortunately, show definite weakness. For one, they lack any cultural or historical specifics. They fail to address the nature, dynamics, and history of the English language, too. These are problems which can be easily remedied and one can bet that Nevada, so close to producing first-tier English standards, won't let the opportunity pass it by.

*MATHEMATICS—C

- *Mathematics Standards, February 25, 2003*
- *Performance Level Descriptors: Mathematics*

Nevada's math standards are mediocre, generally solid in the lower grades only to degenerate in the upper grades. Elementary students are expected to memorize basic number facts, and whole number and decimal arithmetic are well developed through the fifth grade. Best of all, calculators play only a minor role throughout. But in the upper grades, coverage of algebra is poor, and the twelfth grade standards—which are the only standards at all for high school—are pitched at a low level. Many of

these standards really belong at the middle school level and amount to little more than, for example, converting between the customary and metric systems or calculating interest—tasks more appropriate to the seventh or even sixth grades. Additional standards for problem solving, mathematical communication, mathematical reasoning, or mathematical connections offer little guidance to teachers as to how to integrate these important topics into the context standards, or how to present them in a classroom.

SCIENCE—D

- *Nevada Science Standards, 2005*

Nevada's science standards are simply too thin and too scanty. The document is quite well structured, but quite poorly executed. Statements can be far too sweeping: "Students know the properties that make water an essential component of the Earth system," for example. Omissions are not infrequent. Most of the rock cycle is missing. Cosmology is less than basic. Chemistry coverage is, simply, insufficient. Mathematical problem solving is nowhere to be found. Nothing is quantitative. Ditto life sciences, handled through generalizations, and some of those generalizations are wrong. For example, the standards read, "Students know that multi-cellular organisms can consist of thousands to millions of cells working together." Try billions or trillions. There is too much of this, and not enough solid content—D.

U.S. HISTORY—C

- *Nevada Social Studies Standards: History, 2000*

Nevada presents some U.S. history to its youngest students, which is fine. But it isn't until eighth grade that the state begins to teach the subject in earnest. One expects, after such a wait, that the Silver State would put forth rigorous history standards. This is not the case. The authors of these documents do not understand cohesion. Instead of presenting information in a logical fashion, Nevada's standards jump all over the place. After eighth grade, students are asked to "describe the African slave trade," then they are flung directly into the origins of the American Revolution. What happened to the development of democratic institutions and values in the colonies, or the origins of slavery in seventeenth-century America? And while eighth graders receive a good background in social, economic, and intellectual history, political history falls off the map. Jacksonian

democracy and the evolving political crises over slavery, where art thou? In twelfth grade, the problems continue; there is no mention, between the election of Lincoln through the Cold War, of the Democratic or Republican Parties. We're still looking for FDR, too. Nevada roles the dice on its children's future.

WORLD HISTORY—D

■ *Nevada History Standards, 2000*

Nevada's history curriculum is a tangential historical examination at best. Although the state's standards do put forth introductory sentiments that note the importance of students learning to "develop an appreciation of the contributions made by all nations," the standards themselves do not address that goal. The primary grades receive very basic instruction, learning random facts without context. It is not until the eighth grade that any serious attempt at world history education is attempted. The eighth grade standards do a mediocre job at best. They place, for example, great importance on studying the origins, traditions, customs, and spread of major Western and Eastern world religions, but they fail to integrate that study with international political issues or historical analysis. And, while the twelfth grade standards are far more detailed, they still fail to achieve the depth and sophistication they should. Overall, Nevada offers up a marginal history examination that cannot possibly give students the preparation they need and deserve.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's first comprehensive look at the quality of state academic standards since 2000, before Congress enacted No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While 37 states have updated or revised their state standards in at least one subject during that period, on the whole they are just as mediocre as ever. The average grade for state standards across all subjects was a disappointing "C-minus" in 2000 and remains so today. Two-thirds of the nation's K-12 students attend schools in states with C-, D-, or F-rated standards.

Standards matter: Several analyses link strong state standards and gains on NAEP.

Over the past three years, expert reviewers for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation examined state standards in five subjects: U.S. history (2003), English/language arts (2005), mathematics (2005), science (2005), and world history (2006). The reviewers gave high marks to standards that are clear, rigorous, and right-headed about content. For example, excellent English standards expect students to read and understand important literary genres, worthy science standards place the teaching of evolution at the center of biology instruction, and strong U.S. and world history standards are organized around a chronology of key events with an ample supply of fascinating and important individuals.

Solid standards matter because they are the foundation of standards-based reform, the dominant education policy strategy in America today. They have become even more important in the NCLB era, when weighty consequences befall schools that do not rise to meet the standards (at least in reading and math). While the pros and cons of testing and accountability get most of the ink in newspaper debates, the standards themselves exert enormous influence over what actually happens inside classrooms.

While the states as a whole have not improved their academic standards, several jurisdictions have shown marked

progress, especially Indiana, New York, Georgia, and New Mexico. Unfortunately, others made their standards worse, including Utah, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin.

Three states stand out with perfect scores: California, Indiana, and Massachusetts. They are the focus of a separate essay by journalist and author Joanne Jacobs, "It Takes a Vision: How Three States Created Great Academic Standards." She tells the fascinating story of how these three jurisdictions managed to develop clear and rigorous standards while most others fell short. Some common themes appear in each: if you want great standards, you can't leave the process to committees. It takes strong visionary leadership and a willingness to fight (and win) the curricular battles. At the same time, bipartisanship is essential.

Do Good Standards Raise Student Achievement?

Several new analyses show a link between strong state standards and gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP):

- Ten states made statistically significant progress in the percentage of their students (or the percentage of their poor and minority students) reaching proficiency in fourth-grade reading on NAEP from 1998 to 2005. Nine of these ten states received at least a C from Fordham for their English/language arts standards.
- Five states made statistically significant gains on the science NAEP between 2000 and 2005 at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels, and three of these have among the best sets of science standards in the nation, according to Fordham's reviewers.
- The relationship is less clear in mathematics, though four of the six states that received "honors" grades from Fordham also posted statistically significant gains on the eighth-grade NAEP from 2000 to 2005, either for the state as a whole or for their poor or minority students. (Many other states made progress, too, however.)

State Grades in 2006 vs. 2000

STATE	CUM GPA 2006	CUM GPA 2000	2006 GRADE	2000 GRADE	2006 RANK	2000 RANK
California*	4.00	3.60	A	A-	1	1
Indiana*	4.00	2.40	A	C+	1	10
Massachusetts*	4.00	2.60	A	B-	1	8
New York*	3.40	1.80	B+	C-	4	21
Georgia*	3.20	1.80	B+	C-	5	21
Virginia	3.20	2.40	B+	C+	5	10
Arizona*	3.00	3.40	B	B+	7	2
South Carolina*	2.80	3.00	B-	B	8	3
Alabama*	2.60	2.80	B-	B-	9	5
Louisiana	2.00	2.20	C	C+	10	14
Maryland*	2.00	2.40	C	C+	10	10
Oklahoma	2.00	1.80	C	C-	10	21
Illinois	1.80	1.60	C-	C-	13	26
Nevada*	1.80	2.20	C-	C+	13	14
New Jersey*	1.80	1.40	C-	D+	13	29
New Mexico	1.80	0.20	C-	F	13	47
Texas*	1.80	3.00	C-	B	13	3
West Virginia*	1.80	2.20	C-	C+	13	14
Colorado*	1.60	1.40	C-	D+	19	29
Delaware*	1.60	2.20	C-	C+	19	14
Kansas*	1.60	2.20	C-	C+	19	N/A
North Carolina*	1.60	2.80	C-	B-	19	5
South Dakota*	1.60	2.60	C-	B-	19	8
Tennessee*	1.60	0.20	C-	F	19	47
Minnesota*	1.40	0.80	D+	D-	25	39
Ohio	1.40	2.00	D+	C	25	20
Utah*	1.40	2.40	D+	C+	25	10
District of Columbia*	1.20	2.75	D+	B-	28	7
Mississippi*	1.20	1.80	D+	C-	28	21
Nebraska	1.20	2.20	D+	C+	28	14
Idaho*	1.00	0.00	D	-	31	N/A
Kentucky	1.00	1.00	D	D	31	38
Michigan	1.00	0.80	D	D-	31	39
North Dakota*	1.00	0.20	D	F	31	47
Oregon	1.00	1.40	D	D+	31	29
Pennsylvania*	1.00	1.33	D	D+	31	34
Vermont	1.00	1.20	D	D+	31	36
Arkansas*	0.80	0.40	D-	F	38	45
Connecticut*	0.80	1.40	D-	D+	38	29
Maine*	0.80	1.20	D-	D+	38	36
Missouri*	0.80	1.40	D-	D+	38	29
New Hampshire*	0.80	1.60	D-	C-	38	26
Rhode Island*	0.80	1.33	D-	D+	38	34
Florida	0.60	1.80	D-	C-	44	21
Washington*	0.60	0.80	D-	D-	44	39
Wisconsin	0.60	1.60	D-	C-	44	26
Alaska*	0.40	0.75	F	D-	47	42
Hawaii*	0.40	0.60	F	D-	47	44
Montana*	0.20	0.66	F	D-	49	43
Wyoming*	0.00	0.40	F	F	50	45
*At least one set of subject standards has been revised or is currently under revision since review						