

## Culture Wars or Pax Historica? Trends and Models in State World History Standards since 1994

During the three decades since publication of national standards in the academic core subjects for the US public education system, concern with teaching world history in K-12 schools has experienced several cycles of standards development and revision by the states. This article examines trends in state world history standards over time, attempts to categorize the various structural models that states have adopted, and examines their implications. It traces developments from the 1994 publication of the *National Standards for History*, through the nationwide development of state standards through 2000, and several revision cycles to 2022. Despite the appearance of broadly divergent standards documents in the various states, numerous common elements can be identified that reflect considerable consensus across the nation. This article argues that the state of world history education as viewed through adopted standards in the states has been adversely affected by the lack of attention to crucial structural differences in the various models adopted by the states in the years (and revision cycles) since the late 1990s. Analysis shows that standards committees have tinkered with content mandates and adopted shifts from one model to another without attention to the capacity of these models to incorporate current historical scholarship and pedagogy. Most significantly, the current state of standards represents a failure to appreciate the importance of the global paradigm for teaching world history that the *National Standards for World History* represented.

Publication of national standards was commissioned through federal grants stemming from the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, signed into law in March 1994.<sup>1</sup> The initiative began in the late 1980s under President George H.W. Bush, looking toward the turn of the millennium with anxiety over the state of U.S. educational achievement. Commissioning development of national standards in the school subjects through competitive grants, the standards movement represented a

major overhaul of the curriculum for the new century. The initiative was based in the hope that the states would accept national guidance. States were provided with funding over a five-year period to support improvement initiatives and award grants to local school districts to implement education improvement plans. The National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to create national standards in United States and World History for grades 5-12 and preparatory standards for Kindergarten-grade 4. The institutional framework for this effort was the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), a group of governors and education leaders assembled following a meeting of the National Governors' Association in 1989, which culminated in development of National Education Goals. This initially bipartisan movement set in motion a collaboration between scholars in the various fields, education professionals, and teachers in classrooms across the nation to participate in an unprecedented revamping of curriculum across the core disciplines.

In addition to the commissioned national history, geography, civics and economics standards, other organizations contributed documents that influenced state standards in the social studies. The National Council for History Education advocated for world history standards based on *The Bradley Commission Report* of 1988, which was produced by a panel of seventeen historians and educators.<sup>2</sup> The report and its curriculum development model *Building a History Curriculum* made significant contributions that have been influential in shaping state standards. The primary emphasis in *Building a World History Curriculum* was that it advocated only selective inclusion of non-Western societies. This focus made it an alternative model in states that later rejected the *National Standards for History's* global approach but favored a history-dominant approach based on a strong chronological framework.

A second organization that produced a document as an alternative model for social studies standards was the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). In 1994, it published *Expectations of Excellence*, which outlined how history, geography, economics, civics, and social sciences could be implemented across K-12 grade levels as ten strands.<sup>3</sup> These strands consist of ten statements offering a vision of content and purpose that *Expectations for Excellence* lays out in the form of performance expectations or benchmarks. These demonstrate students' acquisition of research and analytical skills and civic awareness. The performance indicators for each strand are identified by grade-level clusters (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12), with examples of activities and classroom scenarios for each strand. An appendix identifies the essential skills for social studies to be attained through instruction. A number of states deployed this model as a framework for its social studies standards. Some relied exclusively on the model's rubrics, while others embedded rubrics and other elements from the national standards documents into the ten strands.

The national standards documents in the various disciplines, while much criticized, represented a successful effort to close the gap between advancements in the state of knowledge in the disciplines and school curriculum. It also restructured the teaching of these subjects to encourage meaningful instruction, emphasizing inquiry rather than mere absorption of facts. Each of the commissioned subject area efforts produced substantial pedagogical and content guidance upon which educators in the states could draw. Among the hallmarks of all the national standards was that they identified skills necessary for learning in each discipline, paired with performance standards designed to demonstrate mastery. These skills mandates have been incorporated in some form into all of the state standards, and form a bulwark against recurring efforts from some quarters to suppress critical thinking. Many standards documents emphasize skill acquisition as the main justification for teaching history and social sciences at all.<sup>4</sup>

Other structural issues relate to the sequence of history topics in the K-12 social studies curriculum, including the number of years devoted to studying world and national history and other topics. Such issues are more significant than the lists of historical details to be covered in individual years' courses. Issues of sequencing and distribution of topics in secondary school world history courses are important factors in creating understanding with which students and future citizens embark upon their lives and careers. These issues have been significantly shaped by the standards movement, and demonstrate areas of agreement across the nation.

During the decades since 1994, every state has produced versions of academic standards and have revised them up to four times. The uproar over the *National Standards for History* was a setback for the concept of national curriculum, and while criticism hit the standards for United States history hardest, world history standards were also attacked. Study of state standards documents over the past three decades demonstrates, however, that the state bodies did in fact rely upon several national models to shape their social studies standards. During these development and revision cycles, states have come to reflect the several different models in structure, content, and pedagogical approach by assimilating, combining, or rejecting these models, and adapting them to previous iterations of standards in each state. This analysis of world history standards for middle and high school world history attempts to classify them according to apparent adherence to the models enumerated in this study.

State standards documents are often quite schematic, and in order to know what is likely to be taught in actual classrooms, it would be necessary to study curriculum at the district level—an impossible task given the approximately 13,800 school districts in the US.<sup>5</sup> In some states, standardized tests guarantee a high degree of alignment, but testing regimes vary widely or are absent altogether. Districts may also take a baseline approach or develop curriculum that exceeds the state standards.

The introductions to state documents differ in tone, some indicating that they offer mere guidelines and options for district curriculum design, while some others mandate highly specific history content reinforced by high-stakes testing.

### **The Value of Analyzing State Standards for World History**

A useful turning point in the discourse from which to date a “year zero” is November 1994, the publication date of the *National Standards for History*. This event produced both a political tempest and a wave of creative excitement. Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn, three historians associated with the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), wrote *History on Trial* as a response, documenting the process behind the standards’ development and its historical context.<sup>6</sup> Since 1994, and in tandem with the growth of the internet, national and state standards have resulted from a broadly representative and publicly accessible process. The states legislatively mandate academic standards, appoint commissions, and adopt the documents in a political process involving professional and public comment, with draft documents posted online and covered by the media in each revision cycle. Media attention flagged for a period after the states’ first forays into creating new standards documents, so that by the early 2000s, state revision processes had become routine exercises. States established more or less rigorous assessment regimes or opted out of state-level testing, as departments of education, schools and teachers adjusted to them or caused them to be revised, often in response to the political circumstances of governorships and legislatures.

Today, the spotlight on history teaching has returned with a vengeance in the wake of renewed culture war battles over diversity, equity, and the teaching of critical thinking. The focus of attention, however, has largely been at the level of content details and has ignored the structural issues that shape teaching history beyond inclusion or exclusion of people, battles, political entities, or distribution of regional coverage. These issues are important for the quality of instruction, for the focus of teacher professional development, and for the documents’ capacity to incorporate sound and innovative world history scholarship.

The political firestorm that greeted publication of the *National Standards for History* nearly defeated the original governors’ desire to forge a national curriculum. It made the issue so controversial that some states rejected the NCHS standards as a model for teaching middle and high school history, whether of the United States or the world. The outcome was that history standards became anything but standard across the fifty United States. Because assessment of mandated learning outcomes for purposes of school accountability was seen as a crucial aspect of the school improvement project in the 1990s, some states developed their own customized

standardized test items—an expensive undertaking. Just as the 1989 governors’ meeting had set the national standards movement in motion toward Goals 2000, governors in the early 2000s made yet another attempt at a voluntary national curriculum to save on testing costs. The Common Core movement was the outcome. It was also a response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which placed federal funds at risk for states that failed to show improvement in reading and mathematics. This program was overlaid onto the state standards development and testing regimes that were still ongoing. The Common Core initiative thus resulted in a set of standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics to ameliorate the uncertainties of No Child Left Behind assessment.<sup>7</sup> In 2008, the Barack Obama administration’s Department of Education under Arne Duncan began to encourage the Common Core effort in the states. This seemingly benign move to offer states federal support with an ongoing initiative resulted in some states backing away from the Common Core, arguing that it represented federal overreach.

These twists and turns in national policy and states’ responses are important to analyze because they have resulted in shifts in the models upon which various states base their world history standards. The state documents demonstrate broad areas of consensus about teaching world history in U.S. schools, even while differences in structure, approach and content remain significant for identifying issues that impact the quality of scholarship reflected in these documents.

### **Common elements in state standards for teaching about the world**

An overview of the fifty-one (including the District of Columbia) state standards documents for world history reveals significant consensus on teaching world history, trends that have held fast since the mid-1990s standards movement began:

1. Placement of world history courses in the K-12 sequence is roughly uniform across the states, usually appearing in 6th or 7th grade and in high school. Few states mandate a 1-year secondary survey course, while most divide the course chronologically between middle and high school.
2. The practice of replacing repeated one-year surveys with “draped,” meaning chronologically sequential multi-year history courses, has become widespread in state standards documents, based on national models and the advice of historians since the 1980s.
3. A significant and similar number of years is devoted to the study of history in the states. Courses on U.S. history, state history, and world history have a firm place across the K-12 curriculum. Most states suggest or mandate four years of the 5-12 sequence for history studies, and a few, such as California, have three-year, sequential courses in both world and U.S. history. Most allot two or three years

for world history, although some such sequences tilt toward a “world studies” or “world geography” model for part of the sequence. This trend is evidence that history has become established as the dominant discipline in the social studies curriculum. It reflects a consensus in the United States that students need knowledge about the world alongside national history.

4. All state social studies standards documents reflect unquestioned dominance of the four core disciplines—history, geography, civics, and economics. Relatively few states provide detailed guidance on teaching other social science disciplines, although the C-3 Framework’s appendices made up for this absence.
5. Nearly every state calls for integrating history, geography, economics, civics, and government across the curriculum, integrating the disciplines for improved understanding and deeper grasp of concepts, including fine arts, literature and even science and mathematics. While this guidance is perhaps more aspirational than practical, it demonstrates an area of consensus that opens the way to constant improvement.
6. The states are unanimous in recognizing that students must acquire process skills as a means to achieving knowledge goals. In enumerating these skills, most states cite the skill sets based on historical thinking skills or habits of mind, in addition to media literacy. Skills standards across the humanities and other school subjects share many common elements. This provides a vital tool for resisting domination of “factual” content and offers a firm line of defense for analytical/critical thinking pedagogies.

State social studies standards differ most in the models utilized for organizing the content of the world history survey course. Each of these models is built upon a different unit of organization. The *National Standards for History* restructured the teaching of world history by introducing the world era as the unit of organization for world history survey courses. In contrast, most world history courses had been organized around discrete civilizations. Stand-alone geography courses are built around world regions, in which students learn about a sequence of cultures or groups of countries, with history playing a minor and poorly integrated role. The social science model offered yet another unit of organization for curriculum development, a strand or theme representing the various disciplines grouped as the social studies.<sup>8</sup> This model was represented by the 1994 National Council for the Social Studies standards document, *Expectations of Excellence*, which featured ten social science strands to be included at all K-12 levels.<sup>9</sup> A new version of this model was published in 2013—*The College, Career and Civic Life (C-3) Framework*,<sup>10</sup> which adapted the Common Core standards for English Language Arts to the social sciences. The C-3 Framework is organized around a 4-step inquiry arc, a process of (1) developing

questions; (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) evaluating sources and evidence; and (4) communicating conclusions and taking informed action. State standards documents that employ the NCSS models of 1994 and 2013, however, overwhelmingly emphasize the four core disciplines (history, geography, economics, and civics) giving the other social science disciplines far less emphasis.

The fact that state standards commissions for history and social science subjects chose to base their document development on national models published in the mid-1990s shows that despite insistence on state autonomy, educators were willing to benefit from the ongoing dialogue among scholars and educators who had contributed to the commissioned national standards efforts. The resulting state standards documents reflect adherence to these different models, which have shifted over several revision cycles since 1995.

### **World History Standards From 2000**

By the year 2000, nearly all of the states had developed standards with varied levels of content specificity and pedagogical guidance. As a caveat, classifying state standards documents' adherence to these models for world history, geography and world cultures courses is an inexact science. Some documents announce the models on which they rely, or cite one or more of them as references. In order to classify model adherence, it is sometimes necessary to consult multiple, layered documents from the same state. The model used is detectable in the use of rubrics, keywords, and categories that are prominent in the source documents. For example, states that incorporate world eras as an organizing principle sometimes use the National Standards titles or various re-wordings. These can usually be differentiated from documents that mandate a sequence of civilizations without grouping them according to any global or hemispheric periodization. In others, periodization leans toward the more traditional Bradley Commission Report/*Building a World History Curriculum* sequence. Some documents represent a puzzling combination, while others are quite rudimentary.

The initial survey of state standards in 2000 showed the following results:<sup>11</sup> 1) The traditional model for the survey course based on the study of civilizations, which is in turn modeled on the venerable Western civilizations survey course with addition of non-Western societies, was followed exclusively in only about 15% of the states. 2) The geographic/area studies model built around geographic/cultural regions, divided into two years' study of the Western and Eastern hemispheres in middle school, was utilized by 11% of the states in 2000. A one-year high school world history course was also taught in most of those states, using the traditional model. 3) The chronological sequence of world eras, based either upon the *Bradley Commission Report's Building a World History Curriculum* or the *National*

*Standards for History*, was in evidence in 39% of the state standards documents. These states utilized varied periodization for dividing the content among world eras. 4) The model of ten disciplinary social studies “strands” was combined in some states with one of the above models, but only three state documents (6% of the states) relied upon it as their dominant or exclusive model. All others, making up 21% of the states, incorporated the model but “plugged in” the national standards or other models to expand upon each of the four core disciplinary strands. 5) An additional 13% of the states either evinced no content-specific standards for world history by 2000, or had an indeterminate structure. Iowa, for example, chose not to write standards at that time. These statistics are expressed in the following figure.

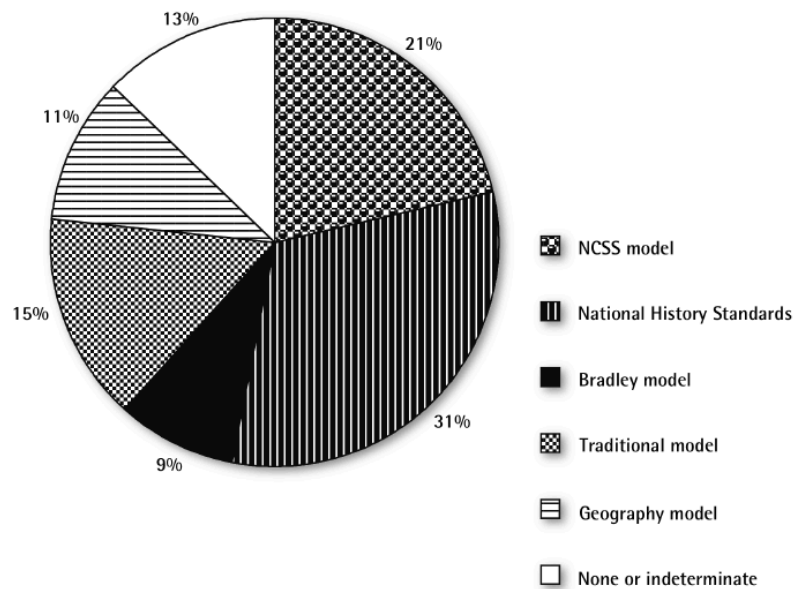


Figure 1: State Model Adherence in 2000, created by the author, used with permission from the publisher of *Teaching About Religion in National and Social Studies State Standards*.<sup>12</sup>

By 2005, all of the states had gone through at least one revision cycle. Adherence to the models showed that the points of consensus listed above had held: a history-dominant secondary curriculum, emphasis on the four core disciplines, and the prominence of skills mandates alongside content mandates. In addition, the model adherence percentages changed to reflect that 61% of the states adhered to some form of eras, generally the National Standards or Bradley model.<sup>13</sup> The traditional civilizations model was in evidence in 13% of the states. 13% of the states followed the NCCS ten-strands model, and 8% adhered to a Geography-based model,



with 5% (2 states) having no or indeterminate standards (Alaska and Iowa). Statistics expressed in the following two figures.

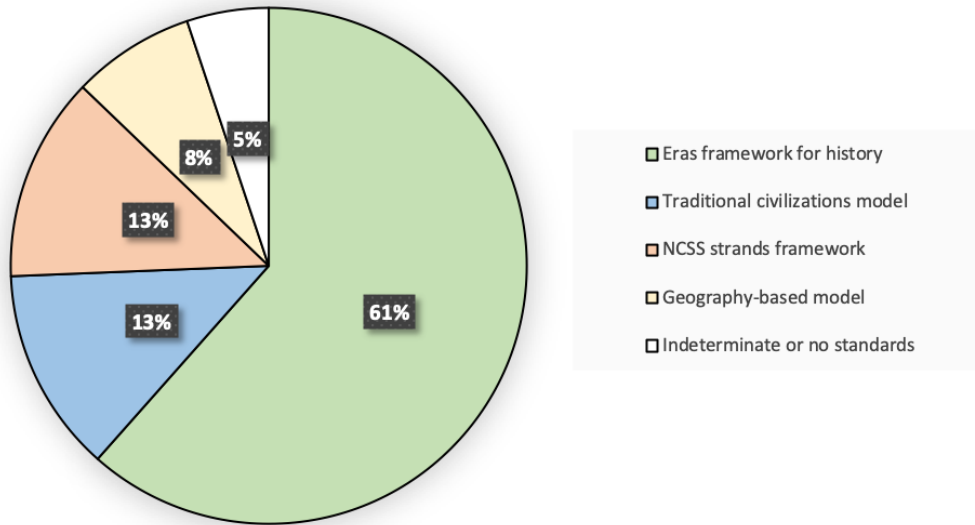


Figure 2: Chart of State Models Adherence in 2005, created by the author.

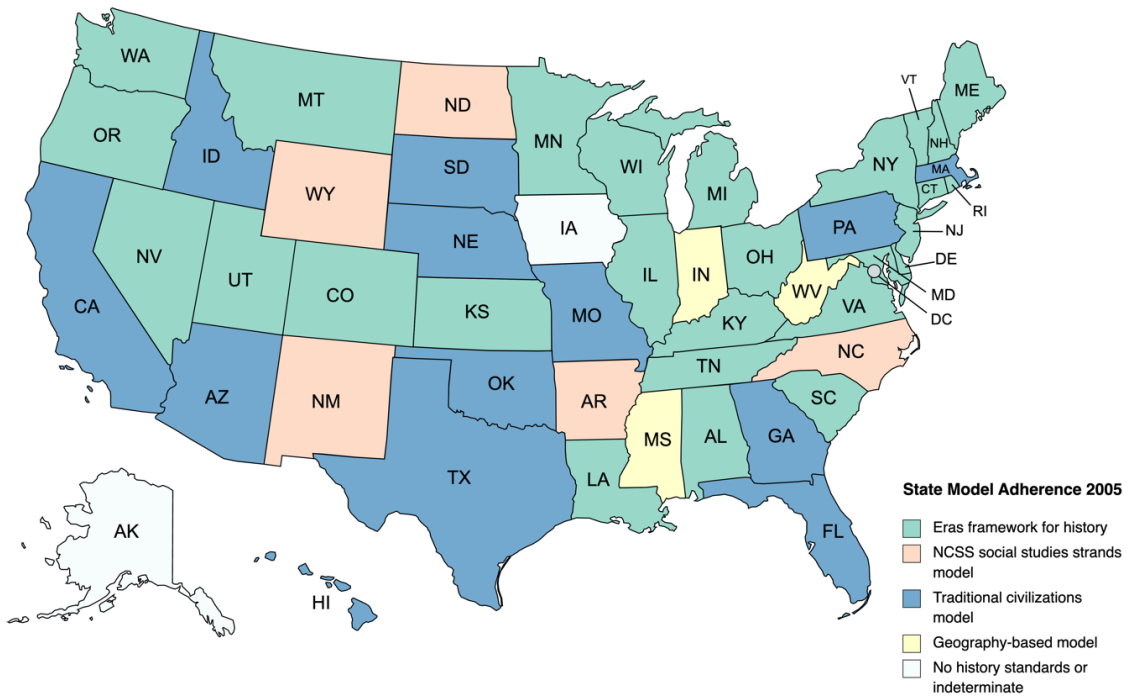


Figure 3: Map of State Model Adherence in 2005, created by the author.

## The State of Play in 2022

The most significant current trend is that the NCSS Strands model has nearly faded out as a stand-alone but has been replaced in a number of states by the *C-3 Framework* with its inquiry arc and skills model. In 2022, 28% of the states followed the C-3 model, although some of those still embedded a secondary model—either traditional or eras-based models for world history. The traditional civilizations model is adhered to by 30% of the states, mainly as a result of revisions, or simply because they dropped the eras rubrics from their content outlines. The eras model is now reflected in 32% of the states.

As an example of the difficulty of categorizing, California’s History Social Science Framework of 2016 for 6<sup>th</sup> grade uses global headings such as “Beginnings to 4000 BCE,” “4000-1000 BCE: Kingdoms and Innovation,” and “1000 BCE to 300 CE: an Age of Empires and Interchange.”<sup>14</sup> The seventh grade division of content begins with a unit on “The World in 300 CE,” followed by seven units on regional civilizations from 300 to about 1450 CE, including a unit on hemispheric interactions. The course ends with a unit on Global Convergence, 1450-1750.”<sup>15</sup> Other states group world history mandates under a variety of chronological rubrics, some quoting from the National History Standards, others using labels with terms such as “classical,” “medieval,” or “early modern.” Texas standards use a framework of world eras as follows: “The following periodization should serve as the framework for the organization of this course: 8000 BC-500 BC (Development of River Valley Civilizations); 500 BC-AD 600 (Classical Era); 600-1450 (Post-classical Era); 1450-1750 (Connecting Hemispheres); 1750-1914; and 1914-present (20th Century to the Present).”<sup>16</sup> The detailed outline of mandated content is quite traditional and Western-centered.

The remainder of the states, or 10%, reflect a rather indeterminate skills & themes model with scant specific content mandates. As for the geography-based model, while 16% of the states feature two-year middle school world studies courses organized around the Western and Eastern hemispheres, they are nearly all accompanied by world history courses in high school, which is why those states are not shown in the charts below. The remainder of the states with traditional or eras-model world history divide them chronologically across middle and high school. For example, Arkansas’ *Social Studies Framework* (2014 revision) melds the *C-3 Framework* model with its Inquiry Arc (Questions, Sources and Evidence, and Communicating Ideas) with a global eras model designated as a “strand,” each era followed by schematic content standards, and a chart with more detailed content

mandates.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the model is not shown on the following map or chart. The corresponding map of the status of state standards is shown below:

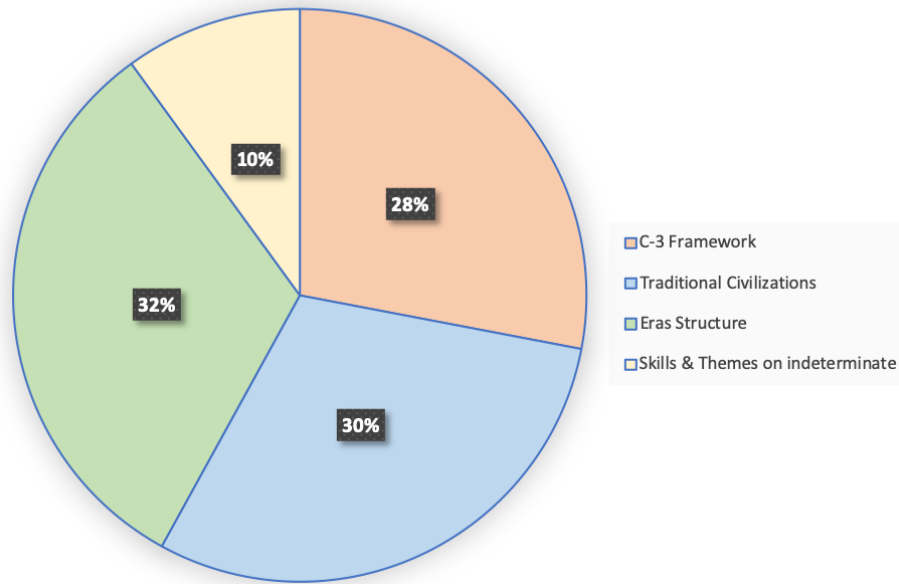


Figure 4: State World History Standards Models in 2022, created by the author.

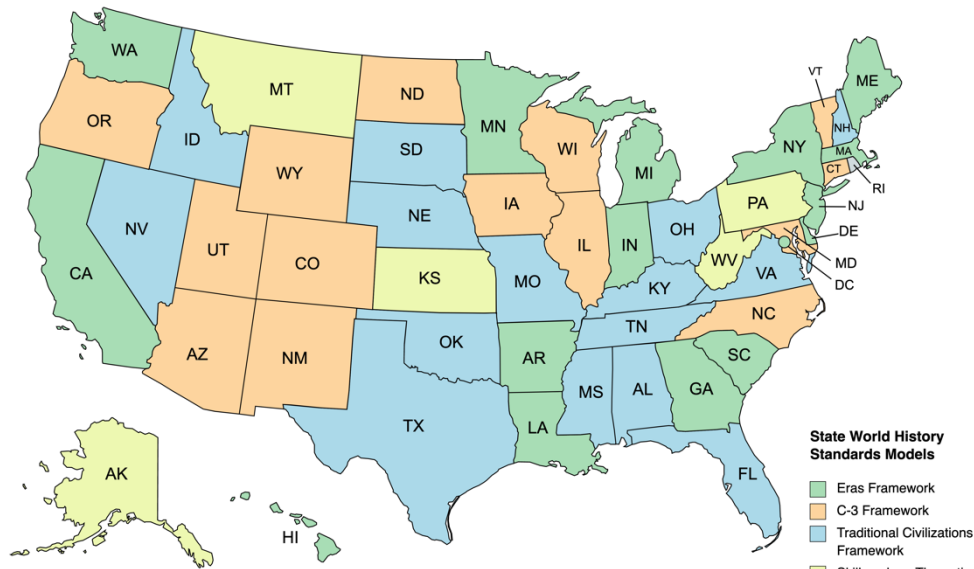


Figure 5: Map of State Standards Adherence 2022, created by the author.

## Impact of the Models for World History

What are the implications of these structural differences in world history courses shown in revision cycles since 2000? The structural issues weigh heavier than the differences in specific content mandate details because they shape the approach to the entire subject. Content mandates are often mere laundry lists, especially in states with high stakes testing regimes. During the past 10 years, some states' revision cycles show that tinkering with wording and rearranging rubrics and outlines seems to have missed considering the structural models. Instead, they focused on the lists of content mandates, probably in response to complaints about details of the assessments, or the problem of “teaching to the tests.” Numerous states had followed the eras model simply by copying the *National History Standards* Eras or those of the Bradley model to use as headings on sections of their content outlines, but in the course of revisions removed them or subsumed them under a model of themes and strands.

This may be attributed to the fact that unlike historians and scholars concerned with pedagogy, public commentators and journalists have ignored the structural differences altogether. Instead, they have taken a “scorecard” approach to standards' coverage of individuals, turning points, civilizations, or cultures, and to the relative weight given to the Western heritage. The following analysis underlines the differences, while offering evidence that the state standards provide significant common ground from which to work toward progress in teaching and learning history.

## Assessing World History Models Employed by the States

Classification of state documents according to the models used in state standards is difficult because of the combinations of models, layered documents, and starkly different models for middle and high school courses. This state of inconsistency alone shows the lack of attention to the importance of structural issues in teaching world history, and especially lack of appreciation for the ground-breaking change that the eras-based model represented as an innovation over the model of discrete civilizations. To achieve further improvement, it is essential to assess the effectiveness of these models in providing guidance for teachers, curriculum writers, and test developers; in short, for giving students the best chance at global understanding—a broadly acknowledged goal.

### C-3 Framework & Skills-based, Thematic models

The *C-3 Framework* organizes standards under a process called the Inquiry Arc (1) developing questions; (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) evaluating sources and evidence; and (4) communicating conclusions and taking informed

action. Under # 2 of the arc, the ten social science strands are incorporated. Most states, however, only detail the four core disciplines of history, geography, economics, and civics. The state standards documents using the *C-3 Framework* are recognizable as a layout of grids like one used in Connecticut’s 2015 standards, which categorize mandates by area of inquiry, grade level or grade cluster, and numbered state benchmark.<sup>18</sup> Content and themes are found under the rubric of Inquiry Arc #2, with numbered performance indicators for each grade cluster. Some states’ indicators detail content in the four core disciplines, but others offer only a few exemplars rather than lists of content for world history courses. As an example of a state with rudimentary standards, Alaska’s might be labeled themes and skills, but it is closest to the previous NCSS model described above. Alaska’s standards for history comprise only two pages for all of K-12, under the following rubrics:

- A. A student should understand that history is a record of human experiences that links the past to the present and the future.
- B. A student should understand historical themes through factual knowledge of time, places, ideas, institutions, cultures, people, and events.
- C. A student should develop the skills and processes of historical inquiry.
- D. A student should be able to integrate historical knowledge with historical skill to effectively participate as a citizen and as a lifelong learner.<sup>19</sup>

The *C-3 Framework* rightly foregrounds the inquiry process and provides teachers and curriculum developers with a clear process for envisioning lessons and assessments. State standards documents based on the NCSS/*C-3* model tend to offer vague if any guidance on the shape of world history. They tend to offer scattered examples of inquiry-based lessons to show how districts might meet the standard. Some, in contrast, embed more detailed lists of subject area content and leave teachers to shape the content according to the inquiry process.

It is worth noting here that teacher training programs that certify teachers in each state do not regularly include required coursework in world history. Many new teachers are assigned these courses without much guidance. It is common in professional development workshops to encounter teachers who suffer anxiety over “covering” the list of content mandates from the state, and adhering closely to it as best they can. This anxiety might hinder a teacher from including topics beyond the mandated list, under the notion that if it isn’t in the state’s outline, it isn’t important history. While the *C-3 Framework* emphasizes the means for inquiry-based lessons, and it may be refreshing to be relieved of the detailed mandates of some of the traditional world history outlines, these state documents provide neither guidance

nor inspiration. Experienced world history teachers, such as those motivated to teach Advanced Placement World History, are responsible for creating syllabi that go through the College Board's approval process, but beginning teachers of standards courses often lack the foundation of knowledge needed for confident extension beyond the minimum, and receive scant resources to enhance it. The absence of a global and chronological framework in the standards risks creating a disjointed, fragmented view of history, or it results in teachers turning for coherence in coverage to textbooks that have not kept pace with historical scholarship, and are themselves mired in the outdated civilizations model. Here, the absence of attention to the structural organization of world history is illustrated in the way coverage of skills and content in these documents is accomplished by checking off blocks on an inclusion chart. If the additive model of traditional world history is overcrowded, the themes, skills, and indicators model results in fragmentation rather than supporting the goal of integrating new content across the disciplines.

### **Geography-based Middle School Courses**

Several states employ a geography-based model for study of the world in middle school instead of pre-1500 CE history. Many of these states provide for a world history course—either a 1-year world history survey in high school, or a modern world history course starting at 1450 or 1500 CE. Some offer a one-year world studies or world geography course in high school. These middle school courses feature the Western Hemisphere in the first year, and the Eastern Hemisphere in the second year—usually in grades 6 and 7. The current list of states with these courses includes Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, New York (grades 5 & 6), North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Oregon.

The problem with the geography-based model is not the efficacy of geography study itself. Among the various National Standards publications, *Geography for Life* proved to be uncontroversial. It was so widely accepted in its rubrics and disciplinary framework that its place in the state standards has remained much more stable than history standards have. It creates meaning through asking questions about humans' interaction within the environment rather than geographic descriptive content. Interestingly, *Geography for Life* does not itself recommend stand-alone geography courses; rather, it insists upon the need to integrate geographic skills and knowledge throughout the K-12 curriculum. It points the way to integration of geography with history. Some states implementing these courses in the current revision cycle have inserted them at the expense of Paleolithic-1500 (or 1250 CE or 1450 CE) history.

Western/Eastern Hemisphere courses do not provide an optimal introductory survey at the global level. First, all of these courses follow K-3 surveys on various topics, capped by state history in Grade 4, and U.S. History in Grade 5, meaning that they offer students' first view of the world as a whole. Second, *Geography for Life*

defines the building block of these courses in Standard 5: “That people create regions to interpret Earth's complexity.” The W/E Hemisphere is a narrow, unnatural division by region, especially of the contemporary world. Beyond this bifurcation of West and East, its regional divisions follow the post-colonial model of developed industrial and less-developed countries. The regional sub-divisions tend to follow post-WWII strategic divisions, with echoes of Cold War divisions. In addition to contemporary surveys, these courses insert what little historical background they offer on region-by-region basis. Each region is studied in isolation, and not in a manner that would help students to understand divisions in the world today, such as differentials in wealth and development among nations. These modern divisions are clearly detrimental to understanding interactions on a hemispheric or global scale in pre-modern history. The scant, compressed historical information in geography textbooks can reinforce stereotypes about cultures and about the ranking of countries according to their development, economic indicators, and power differential.

Integrating geography standards into a history course is easier than the opposite. One reason is that standards like those under the essential and widely quoted themes “the world in spatial terms,” “places and regions,” “human systems,” and “environment and society” should be subjects of inquiry about each era of history, and the answers provide a story of continuity and change over time. The hemispheric and area studies division wreaks havoc with development of a sense of chronology because the physical divisions of regions that are important to the modern world were often very different in the past. Any state’s mandate to teach about pre-1500 CE historical interactions among societies will be impossible to achieve, because coverage of the interacting regions is chapters apart (i.e., weeks or months in the classroom). The pattern of lessons is conventionally a three-part exercise: description of the physical geography, historical background, and a survey of contemporary culture, economy, and government. For regions other than Western Europe, however, the historical background provided tends to be abbreviated and discontinuous. In summary, the stand-alone geography course model does not provide a sound foundation for later studies of world history in high school and beyond. From the standpoint of pedagogy, even *Geography for Life* recommended integration of geographic learning across the K-12 curriculum rather than in a stand-alone survey course.

### **“Traditional” World History Survey Courses**

Change in the structure and content of world history survey courses is the single most important development in world history pedagogy. In the ongoing public discussion about world history teaching, however, course structure and organization has been largely ignored. Gilbert Allardyce’s article “The Rise and Fall of the Western

Civilization Course” showed how general education requirements put into place at the undergraduate level migrated into the high school curriculum, along with the problems of scale and focus that he describes.<sup>20</sup> This course model, based on a linear sequence of civilizations, heavy on political history and high culture, still forms the backbone of traditional world history surveys and textbooks, though its grip has been loosened by the entry of other course models. For the use of non-Advanced Placement students, middle and high school world history textbooks are still at their core scaled-down versions of Western Civilization undergraduate survey textbooks with the addition of Asian, African, and American civilizations. They evolved from the 1920s through the 1980s into compendia of world cultures and civilizations, but the books’ chronology is still ruled by traditional Western Civilizations periodization, and non-Western cultures have merely been spliced into that narrative at various points before 1500 CE, and re-inserted as part of colonized lands and post-colonial nations in the second half of the course. This gradual broadening of the world history course in response to pressure from the history and education professions and the larger society cannot be reversed. The problem of multiplying world history content has been a major bone of contention since the 1980s at least. One side argues that it is still too narrow and needs to cover more so-called non-Western civilizations, and the other side argues to limit the survey to offering only “selected” non-Western civilizations. Worse yet, reliance on the civilization as the unit of organization requires that societies of importance be pressed into the civilizational mold as the admission criteria for new content in world history.

The consensus that emerged around the need to extend the historical survey to a global model was overshadowed by the fact that teaching was organized around this linear sequence of civilizations studied and assessed one after the other, with little coverage of their connections, and often out of chronological order. Multiculturalism offered an important argument for inclusion but was an insufficient academic rationale or model for global education. Meanwhile, research in area studies, in the sub-disciplines of history, in the sciences, and in fields such as archaeology and anthropology have added tremendously to the knowledge base. The civilizations-based structure, however, has hindered the pace of including new historical scholarship at the K-12 level. Splicing self-contained descriptions of additional cultures into the old topical outline of the Western civilization survey course was an unsatisfactory solution. The resulting additive model is still in use today, later identified by Ross Dunn as an “awkward, unstable blending of Different Cultures and Western Heritage history.”<sup>21</sup> By the 1980s, world survey courses and textbooks had normalized the expanded range of topics beyond Western civilization. Critics such as Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn ridiculed the diversity of topics, warning of multiculturalism’s negative effects on social cohesion. Without disagreeing that some coverage of the non-West was justified, critics such as Arthur



Schlesinger Jr. argued that representation of formerly ignored groups was legitimate. Nevertheless, excesses in multiculturalism had resulted in competing “centrisms” that threatened to leave American students without a body of common understandings and to splinter the nation into competing tribes.<sup>22</sup> Another common complaint was that efforts to make learning “relevant” to students’ present lives had crowded out the basic requirements of a “teacher-supplied curriculum.”<sup>23</sup>

*The Bradley Commission Report* of 1988 and its curriculum development model *Building a History Curriculum* made some significant contributions:<sup>24</sup> (1) it showed how history-dominant social studies programs might be implemented across the K-12 curriculum; (2) it recommended chronologically sequenced history courses “draped” across two or more grade levels instead of repetitive one-year survey courses; (3) its model called for incorporating historical “habits of mind” or thinking skills into the curriculum; (4) it introduced an organizational scheme based on world-historical eras. *Building a World History Curriculum* fell short as world history, however, since it was heavily weighted toward Western civilizations. *Building a World History Curriculum* specifically calls for limitations on the number of non-Western societies covered, and proposes criteria for selecting them. Its model is linear (a sequence of societies) and additive (each is covered as a discrete unit) rather than integrative (incorporating trans-regional processes and chronological continuity). The traditional model reflects huge geographic gaps. It excludes regions that did not host a major civilization and were therefore omitted altogether. Central Asia is a prime example. This region of intense activity has been ignored except for the Silk Road and the Mongol invasions. Of course, oceanic zones of interaction find no pedagogically effective place in this model.

These structural flaws make it unlikely that students will meet the high expectations of the very historical habits of mind upon which the model insists. Sharp chronological switchbacks make it difficult for students to gain a sense of chronological sequence, flow, and meaning-making. The regional gaps inhibit thorough integration of geography. Migrations and trade routes are seldom seen in their full geographic context, cut off at the borders of regional maps. Descriptions of physical geography are more backdrop than stage. Periodization is subservient to the Western civilization narrative, hindering students’ ability to grasp multiple timeframes, another identified historical thinking skill. Integration of humanities and science is not well served in the traditional model since it covers mainly “contributions,” ignoring the actual pathways of exchange among societies. Thus, the model excludes recent world historical scholarship, or makes it challenging to incorporate. Because of these shortcomings, the model is not a good vessel for integrating multi-disciplinary approaches. It lacks the capacity to carry the skills mandates it advocates, because so much evidence in world history falls outside the boundaries of traditionally understood civilizations.

### World History Era by Era

The most significant paradigm shift in teaching K-12 world history was embodied in the *National Standards for World History*, with its introduction of the world era as its basic unit of organization. The implications of this structural change have not been sufficiently absorbed among practitioners at the K-12 level, leaving the main focus on discrete items of historical content. To put it simplistically, courses based on study of a linear series of civilizations are like taking students to visit a portrait gallery. In contrast, using historical eras across the globe is like taking students into a landscape where regions, societies, zones of interaction and other historical features appear in relationship to one another, changing from era to era.

The possibilities for teaching global eras are profound. The world history model considers societies, including civilizations, in the context of the time in which they emerged and traces them through subsequent eras rather than cutting them off at the end of a dynasty or an empire. Many educators find meaning in covering history thematically, but themes are an awkward substitute for a chronological framework. Under the era model, however, themes such as technology, trade, and religions work well within its global framework, rather than as “contributions” attributed to discrete civilizations or cultures. The actual movement of ideas, technologies, and collective learning can be explored in all its potential for inquiry.

Despite warnings that world history surveys cover such a broad scale that individuals, societies, and civilizations become unrecognizable, the model provides a platform for teaching students to move among scales ranging from local, regional, and global. This world history model overcomes the geographic limitations of the civilizations model by including the spaces between empires and major regional societies, such as zones of exchange. It overcomes the “porthole effect” by illustrating phenomena that affected more than one society during a given era. For example, students often learn about the Black Death only in Europe, and learn little or nothing about its origins and paths of transmission through regions where trade and travel were widespread. Instead of the traditional curriculum’s focus on the rise of towns and trade in Europe, world history views trade and urbanization at differing scales of focus from products and marketplaces to the land and sea routes that joined them.

The crux of the difference is to recognize the world eras model as an integrative rather than an additive model. The world eras model is best suited for meaningful integration of the humanities and geography, and it facilitates incorporation of historical thinking skills. Equally, science can be integrated as historical evidence and in relation to the history of science and technology. Such interdisciplinary teaching offers opportunities to include prized skills such as information gathering, analyzing evidence, and comparing historical perspectives.

## Conclusions

No world history course will ever be comprehensive, but the goal is to find a model that sets up frameworks of meaning and integrates process skills to enable lifelong learning. Standards commissions have tried to set up teachable frameworks within which many topics might be covered, and states that mandate high-stakes testing include topics that fulfill a baseline set of information they decide students should know. This has spawned battles in public among different stakeholders focused not on the structure of the curriculum model and its pedagogical capacity, but on what makes it into the list of mandated content detail. Published standards must be viewed as a floor, not a ceiling. Teaching is de-professionalized when standards effectively set limits on learning rather than opening doors to enhancing learning beyond the baseline. Publishers of general education textbooks would depart from any pretense to scholarship if they were to restrict their content to a lowest common denominator of topics based on their reading of the state standards that drive their adoption.

Excellent world history teachers are invested in the subject, the profession, and their students. They are excited by the growing synthesis in world history scholarship of the past few decades. They are obligated to their students and districts to ensure that students meet the threshold, but they teach the standards as a platform upon which to build, not as the top of the ladder. Historians owe it to them to advocate for a framework that opens these vistas instead of constraining them. If districts wish to see more scholar-teachers who build inquiry and skill development into their practice, then state standards in world history must provide a viable framework rather than a straitjacket of fixed historical interpretations. If we are not to end up with tattered hopes for accountability through academic standards, we need to view them from a suitably expansive vantage point.

Study of the structure and organization of state standards demonstrates that the documents neither represent the old default standard before the national standards efforts, nor are they fifty re-inventions of the wheel. They reflect adherence to the handful of models developed during that seminal effort in the 1990s and adaptations during their revision cycles.<sup>25</sup> They also demonstrate areas of consensus across many states upon which to base continued improvement in world history education if sufficient attention is given to the differences among the several models in use in current state standards.

While the discourse has often seemed combative and polarized, the state documents reflect considerable agreement on teaching social studies. Evidence of these areas of agreement can be gleaned from careful study of the actual documents. First, the contention that social studies is an amorphous subject is belied by the fact that the vast majority of states mandate teaching the four core disciplines (history,

geography, civics, and economics). They adhere in this to widespread adoption of national standards in economics, civics/government, and geography. The state standards diverge most in the subject of history. Second, it has been established that states allocate space in the K-12 curriculum for world history within the multi-year US and world course sequence. Third, nearly every state requires districts to integrate geography, humanities, economics, and civics/government into the world history curriculum. Fourth, every state mandates process skills—built on the foundation of the *National Standards for History* “Historical Thinking Skills” and the Bradley document *Building a World History Curriculum’s* “Habits of Mind.” Fifth, the state standards organize the teaching of world history and geography around just a few models or structural patterns.

In the past ten years, however, the plurality of states that tended toward the eras model has eroded somewhat, and recent revision cycles reflect efforts to streamline and pressure to tinker with the mandated content lists. This substantial agreement on method and content provides common ground from which to work toward improving history education. It remains for historians and educators to support the shift toward a global, integrative model such as the world eras model provides. Looking forward, historians need to support teacher preparation based on the world eras model so that it is for everyone, not just for advanced students.

Of all the politically motivated arguments about history education in the schools, only one demand did not win the day. State standards documents do not reflect exclusive dominance of Western civilization in the world history curriculum. Neither the states nor the textbook industry can deny the realities of a diverse nation and increasingly diverse classrooms. The need for students to acquire knowledge of the globe and the history of its diverse peoples is obvious on so many levels. World history is not a zero-sum game, and a truly global model makes room for integrating and contextualizing regional and national histories in a way that enhances rather than marginalizes them and prepares students to help solve the great challenges faced by humankind.

The new generation of teachers may be unaware of the advances made in past decades, and may not know that national standards were even developed thirty years ago. Many would certainly not appreciate the remarkable collaboration between scholars in the field and teachers in the classroom that created them. American education tends to embrace new initiatives and abandon them before they have had a chance to take effect, or to make new political interventions without assessing what is already in motion. It would be wise to stop propagating the notion that the process of improving history education is stymied by national polarization, a hopelessly ignorant teacher force, or an intellectually backward-looking or out-of-touch professoriate. The culture wars and the history wars should not be allowed to stymie

our ability to move forward. It will move forward anyway, but the journey could be more pleasant, productive, and unifying.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Schwartz, Marian A. Robinson, Michael W. Kirst, and David L. Kirp, "Goals 2000 and the Standards Movement." *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, no. 3 (2000): 173–214. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067222>.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, *Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Educational Excellence Network, 1988), <https://doi.org/10.2307/494598>. The commission members were Kenneth T. Jackson, John M. Arevalo, Marjorie Wall Bingham, Louise Cox Byron, Charlotte Crabtree, Gordon A. Craig, Robert H. Ferrell, Hazel W. Hertzberg, Claudia J. Hoone, Nathan I. Huggins, Michael Kammen, Wm. E. Leuchtenburg, Leon F. Litwack, William H. McNeill, Diane Ravitch, Charles Shotland, and C. Van Woodward.

<sup>3</sup> *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (National Council for Social Studies, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> The Texas standards include statements such as this one in the high school section for each grade level: “The eight strands of the essential knowledge and skills for social studies are intended to be integrated for instructional purposes. Skills listed in the social studies skills strand in subsection (c) of this section should be incorporated into the teaching of all essential knowledge and skills for social studies.” Chapter 113, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies Subchapter C. High School Texas Department of Education, updated 2022 at <https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/laws-and-rules/texas-administrative-code/19-tac-chapter-113>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ballotpedia*, “Public School District (United States),” [https://ballotpedia.org/Public\\_school\\_district\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Public_school_district_(United_States)).

<sup>6</sup> Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Gewertz, “The Common Core Explained.” *Education Week*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-common-core-explained/2015/09>.

<sup>8</sup> The ten strands are Culture; Time, Continuity and Change; People, Places and Environments; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority and Governance; Production, Distribution and Consumption; Science, Technology and Society; Global Connections; Civic Ideals and Practices; Civic Ideals and Practices in the NCSS *Expectations of Excellence* document.

<sup>9</sup> *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (National Council for Social Studies, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, n.d., 114, <https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/2022/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.2.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Susan L. Douglass, *Teaching about Religion in National and Social Studies State Standards* (Nashville, Tenn.: Council on Islamic Education and the First Amendment Center, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, *Building a World History Curriculum*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/494598>.

<sup>14</sup> *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2017), Chapter 10, 137, 139, 142.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 11, 183-224.

<sup>16</sup> Texas State Department of Education, “Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies Subchapter C. High School” (Austin: Texas State Department of Education, 2022), <https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/laws-and-rules/texas-administrative-code/19-tac-chapter-113>.

<sup>17</sup>Arkansas Department of Education, *Social Studies Curriculum Framework: The World Since 1450* (Little Rock: Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014), <https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/learning-services/curriculum-support/social-studies-standards-and-courses>, 1-7.

<sup>18</sup> *Connecticut Elementary and Secondary Social Studies Standards* (Hartford, Connecticut: Connecticut Department of Education, 2015), 102.

<sup>19</sup> Alaska Department of Education, *Content and Performance Standards for Alaska Students*, Fifth edition, revised March 2016), 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Allardyce, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course,” *American Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (Fall 1982), 695-725.

<sup>21</sup> Ross E. Dunn, “Introduction: Contending Definitions of World History: Which One Should We Choose for the Classroom?” *Issues in Global Education: Newsletter of the American Forum for Global Education*, Issue No. 151 (1999), 3.

<sup>22</sup> See, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Clair W. Keller, “Improving High School History Teaching,” and Gilbert Sewall, “The Diminished Past,” Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, and Robert T. Fancher, eds., *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America’s High Schools* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984): 79-94, 115-132.

<sup>24</sup> Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, *Building a History Curriculum*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/494598>.

<sup>25</sup> Douglass, *Teaching About Religion*, 53-58.