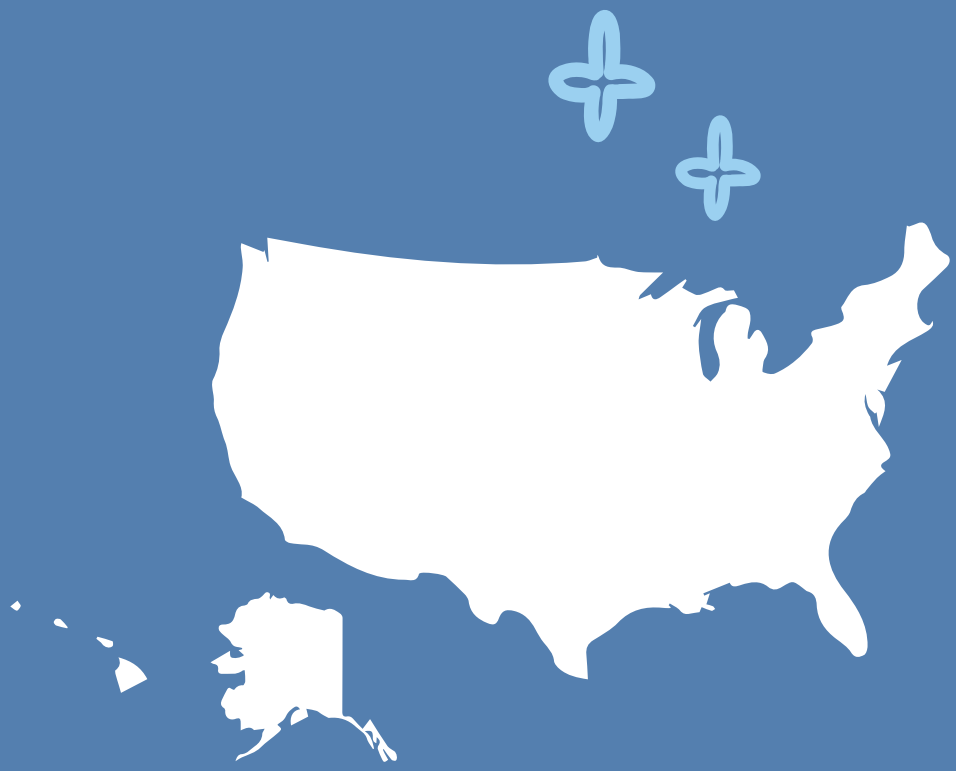
Investigating History



GRADE 5

United States History to the Civil War and the Modern Civil Rights Movement

COURSE OVERVIEW | JUNE 2026

dese MASSACHUSETTS Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Indigenous Curriculum Review
Native Education Council of Massachusetts

Est. 2019 by the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Education Department

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Pilot teachers, administrators, and students in the following districts and charter schools:
Ashland, Athol-Royalston Regional School District, Attleboro, Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter Public School, Billerica, Boston, Brookline, Central Berkshire Regional School District, Franklin, Gloucester, Lawrence, Leicester, Lexington, Lowell Community Charter Public School, Maynard, Medway, Mount Greylock Regional School District, Neighborhood House Charter School, Needham, Newton, North Andover, Pittsfield, Plymouth, Taunton, UP Academy Charter School of Dorchester, Wales

Additional Feedback
We are grateful to the following organizations for providing informal feedback and consultation during the development process:
African Studies Center at Boston University
Discovering Justice
Massachusetts Historical Society
Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center at the Boston Public Library

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Introduction to the Grade 5 Course

In the Investigating History course for Grade 5, students study North American history from the precolonial and colonial period through the Civil War and Reconstruction, and then study the 20th-century movements for civil rights for all people. This year's curriculum offers students their first opportunity to study a chronological history of the nation beyond the Revolutionary era. Grade 5 lessons build upon the Grade 3 study of the geography, history, government, and economics of Massachusetts and New England and the Grade 4 examination of the physical and political geography of North America.

Underpinning the approach to the Grade 5 curriculum is the view that the United States has been shaped by the experiences, contributions, perspectives, and interactions of diverse peoples. The beliefs and values of Indigenous peoples, European colonists, and Africans—enslaved and free—are all part of the origin story of the United States. The promise and potential of the nation's founding values and democratic government are the central message of the year as a whole, and the lessons provide a path to critically examine the nation's founding, expansion, and efforts to become "a more perfect Union" throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The goals are that students will be inspired by the individuals that took action to secure and protect their human and constitutional rights and that students feel invested in the project of democracy as they investigate the people and events that have shaped this nation since its beginning.

Learning about the history of the United States from diverse perspectives presents opportunities for students to understand a more complete and nuanced version of events, which necessitates grappling with some of the more difficult chapters of our nation's past. For this reason, the teaching of "hard history" is supported throughout the curriculum with several strategies, including centering voices of oppressed peoples and bringing attention to their agency, activity, and resistance. Similarly, the curriculum's demands on teachers' contextual knowledge are significant. Gaining confidence and fluency in the experiences and contributions of the diverse groups who participated in the nation's development will require professional learning over time. The curriculum offers recommendations for high-quality educational resources to begin or continue this process.

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Preparing to Teach Grade 5 Investigating History

Investigating History strives to model the approach of inquiry-based, student-centered learning through the regular application of the Practice Standards and Literacy Standards outlined in the Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework. The curriculum aims to have students "do" history and geography for themselves, experiencing the joy of discovery and the satisfaction of critical thinking. This orientation places a premium on teacher facilitation skills as students are prompted to take risks with ideas and to voice their authentic questions and curiosity—even if these sometimes lead in unexpected directions. The routines and suggestions described in the **Curriculum Guidebook** will help facilitate this type of instruction, and we encourage teachers to begin the Investigating History journey by reviewing the guidebook. In addition, the **Investigating History Instructional Videos** provide rich examples of how teachers have brought these lessons to life in their classrooms.

As a social studies educator, you have likely already adopted many practices that are valuable and will fit well into this curriculum. Some of these might include routines around media literacy and current events, strategies for using literature to help students learn about the past and the experiences of diverse people, techniques for explaining timelines or developing map skills, methods for incorporating technologies or resources to which your district subscribes, or protocols for using models to introduce and reinforce vocabulary. As you get to know the lessons, consider bringing these pedagogical strengths into your work with Investigating History to enhance the lessons and make them your own.

The curriculum offers recommendations for high-quality educational resources for you to begin or continue this process. In particular, we encourage you to prepare to teach each unit by exploring the **Grade 5 Background Briefs**, which were designed to help you build content knowledge through a variety of resources. Each brief also highlights current perspectives and research—along with potential misconceptions and any debates you should know about—so you can present every unit with confidence.

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Year at a Glance

The Grade 5 curriculum, **United States History to the Civil War and the Modern Civil Rights Movement**, includes 97, 30-minute lessons spread across four units, with the flexibility to adapt the pacing of lessons as needed. In general, lessons will take the longest the first time you teach them.

Unit 1: Before and Beyond the Colonies	23 lessons
Unit 2: The American Revolution and U.S. Government	25 lessons
Unit 3: Growth and Struggle in the Early Republic	26 lessons
Unit 4: The Civil War and the Ongoing Fight for Civil Rights	27 lessons
Total	**101 lessons**

Please note that, due to revisions, lesson counts may differ from the pilot version of the Grade 3 curriculum.

Launching the School Year

The beginning of the year is the time for building classroom community and introducing key concepts and routines. Students may benefit from focused attention on the following:

Identity, Community, and Classroom Culture

Building a strong classroom culture is critical for the type of collaborative, discussion-rich environment in which Investigating History will thrive. Open the year by building a sense of classroom community, getting to know your students as they get to know each other.

- Incorporate materials from Children Discovering Justice's **priming module on civic skills and dispositions**. These materials include lessons, slide decks, handouts, and tutorials on identity and democratic classroom skills.
- Many educators find it valuable to establish shared norms for respectful, inclusive, or **democratic classroom** discourse and behavior in a curriculum that emphasizes civic learning, cultural affirmation, and the value of diverse perspectives. Numerous organizations offer guidelines and supports for developing classroom norms or models that can be adapted, including **these strategies** from Learning for Justice.
- Ensure students are prepared to engage with inquiry-based instruction by helping them build the appropriate skills while they learn how to work together productively. Learn why C3 Teachers suggest **starting small**, and review **inquiry task suggestions** from Edutopia; alternatively, practice elements of the instructional routines (such as generating questions) with students in a low-stakes setting or in a familiar context.

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Geography

The Investigating History curriculum assumes students have been introduced to the geographic concepts in the Kindergarten through Grade 5 content standards. Lessons do present myriad opportunities for "just in time" remediation; but for students who are less familiar with these concepts, it may be helpful to spend several days in the first weeks of the year orienting them to major geographic features, such as continents and oceans.

- Programs online, such as **Seterra** or **WorldMap.io**, offer useful online map quizzes.
- Having students create hard-copy maps provides beneficial hands-on learning. Features of maps will be introduced in the lessons, but students might find it helpful to engage in a more concentrated map study early in the year.
- Demonstrate the use of and to allow students to practice with online geography tools such as **Google My Maps**, **Google Earth**, **National Geographic MapMaker**, or **ArcGIS StoryMaps**. This curriculum does not assume students are proficient in using these tools, but, as they are excellent resources, some of them are modeled at various points in both geography and history lessons. *Please note that some districts limit access to Google My Maps or Google Earth.*

Timelines

Investigating History provides a variety of timeline tools, embedded in the curriculum in the relevant lessons. However, it leaves the teacher to decide whether and how to create and leverage timelines across the entire school year. Such holistic class timelines, whether visual wall representations or digital tools produced with a timeline-creation program, may be helpful for developing fifth-grade students' understanding of how historical and geographic developments are sequenced, connected, and spaced over time.

Getting Organized

Throughout this course, students will need to refer back to their work from prior lessons when they are moving through a multiday inquiry or when Summative Assessments are open-note. Set the stage for their success by establishing a method to help them keep track of their materials, whether with binders or folders, a preprinted student workbook, or a digital platform like Google Classroom. Decide whether to create the Inquiry Charts on chart paper or to maintain them digitally using a template provided in the slide deck—choose a method of implementation that will best support engagement, anchor student questions, and track learning. Each unit also comes with vocabulary words formatted on cards; routines are included in the lessons for using the cards to build a Word Wall. Plan ahead to leave space for the Word Wall in the classroom.

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Building Conceptual Understanding: Grade 5

In Grade 5, Investigating History takes an inquiry-based approach to the history of the colonies, the early Republic, the expansion of the United States, the growing sectional conflicts of the 19th century, and the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century. Content and practices are in alignment with the standards of the **History and Social Science Framework**.

Woven through the lessons are themes that appear in many of the Grade 5 Essential and Supporting Questions. They are:

1. **How beliefs and values shape people's actions when communities interact:** Students examine the interactions within and among the communities of North American Indigenous peoples, colonists, enslaved people in the United States, the Union and Confederate States, and civil rights activists to learn how beliefs and values motivated their actions.

2. **How societal change involves a struggle over whose rights matter, who has a voice, and how power is shared:** Students explore this theme as it relates to the formation of the colonies, the enslavement of Africans, the development of a new government, the expansion of the United States onto Indigenous lands, and the rights of freedom and equality for diverse groups of people.

3. **How the contradictions between the United States' declared values and economic interests benefit some while harming others:** Students probe the links and contradictions among ideas about liberty, justice, and equality. They investigate how economic interests have been powerful drivers of many actions taken by the United States. Themes of activism and agency appear throughout the year as students learn about acts of resilience and resistance taken by oppressed groups.

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Investigating History and the Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework

Standards for History/Social Science Practice

Two or three key practice standards are explicitly taught in each Investigating History unit. Students receive multiple opportunities to apply the standards through activities and Formative Assessments before demonstrating their skills on the Summative Assessment. Practice standards that are not key to the unit are applied in lessons as opportunity allows.

Two types of skills are cultivated through the practice standards:

- **Work with sources, both primary and secondary:** The curriculum features a wealth of historical sources of many types, adapted, when necessary, to a fifth-grade reading level. Many of the practice standards focus on how to interact with sources by asking questions, gathering information, and analyzing and interpreting sources in their historical context.
- **Civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions:** Practice Standards 1 and 7 center civic thinking and action. In the Grade 5 curriculum these are addressed at various points when different aspects of community and government are introduced. In Unit 2, students explain the origin, functions, and responsibilities of the United States' democratic system of government. In Unit 4, they analyze the causes and effects of a civic issue. Also in Unit 4, they evaluate different strategies and actions people can take to address community issues.

The chart on the next page maps the progression of students' mastery of practice standards over the course of the fifth-grade year; this growth fits into students' broader trajectory of learning across each grade of Investigating History. Each practice standard has one to two more detailed, grade-specific descriptors that illustrate what mastery of the standard might look like in Grade 5; these descriptors have been written to intentionally align with grade-level descriptors across the rest of the Grade 3 through Grade 7 Investigating History curriculum. Educators are encouraged to use those descriptors as they set expectations for student mastery over the course of the year.

Other practice standards do appear in units where they are not defined as the priority standard but may not be the focus of deliberate practice and feedback.

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Priority Practice Standards

PS 1: Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Grade 5 Descriptor	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
Explain the origins, functions, structure, and responsibilities of the United States' democratic system of government and describe the avenues it offers individuals for participation and influence.		✔		
Analyze a civic issue or concern by explaining its causes and effects, individuals and institutions involved, and the values or interests at stake.				✔

PS 2: Develop focused questions or problem statements and conduct inquiries.

Grade 5 Descriptor	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
Consider multiple aspects of a topic and develop a range of relevant questions (factual, analytical, etc.) to explore a topic fully.	✔			
Use a given purpose for inquiry to prioritize questions about individuals, groups, and the developments they shaped.			✔	

PS 3: Organize information and data from multiple primary and secondary sources.

Grade 5 Descriptor	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
In response to an inquiry question, integrate information from multiple sources on the same topic.	✔			✔

PS 4: Analyze the purpose and point of view of each source; distinguish opinion from fact.

Grade 5 Descriptor	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
Use knowledge of relevant topics or events to identify individuals and/or groups whose voices are represented and not represented in a given source or sources.		✔		
Compare and contrast points of view represented in two or more sources on a related topic and explain how this affects the way that each source represents the topic.			✔	

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PS 5: Evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and relevance of each source.

Grade 5 Descriptor	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
Within a given source, identify information that is relevant or irrelevant to a topic or question. When utilizing multiple sources, compare and contrast sources' relevance to an inquiry question.	✔			

PS 6: Argue or explain conclusions using valid reasoning and evidence.

Grade 5 Descriptor	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
In support of a claim, provide logically ordered reasons that are supported by facts and details.		✔		
Identify multiple pieces of relevant evidence from sources in response to an inquiry question.			✔	

PS 7: Determine next steps and take informed action, as appropriate.

Grade 5 Descriptor	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
Evaluate different strategies students and others could use in working alone and together to address specific local, regional, and/or national issues, and predict possible results of these actions.				✔

Content Standards

The curriculum covers the entirety of the content standards for Grade 5. Due to the abundance of content standards, some are prioritized and developed in greater depth, while others receive a lighter treatment. Enduring Understandings provide teachers with a synopsis of the content in each unit so that they can identify the key understandings students should take away from the unit. Students are supported in deepening their knowledge of significant historical concepts through both the topical focus of lessons and the Unit Synthesis provided before each Summative Assessment. An understanding of these ideas, more than detailed mastery and recall of specific historical facts, is crucial for applying knowledge accurately in the Assessment Tasks.

Many of the topics introduced in Grade 5 will be revisited in United States History I and II with added nuance and complexity. The goal of the Grade 5 curriculum is to engage curiosity and build a strong foundation for further study of United States history in later years. Lessons are necessarily introductory and designed to be accessible to this age group.

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Literacy Standards for History/Social Science

Investigating History heavily emphasizes literacy, especially with regard to nonfiction texts and student-led discourse, with certain literacy standards selected for emphasis in each unit. By design, there is a great deal of reading, writing, and speaking and listening. The literacy focus of each lesson is highlighted in the lesson's language objective.

Many readings have been adapted to be appropriate for grade level. Due to the prevalence of proper nouns in historical sources, an automated Lexile analysis of some sources may erroneously suggest that these sources are written above grade level; know that these proper nouns are explicitly addressed in the lessons.

Some modifications for multilingual learners and others in need of additional language support are provided through the "Plan for English Learner Success" callout at the beginning of each lesson, the "Support All Students" sidebar boxes throughout the lesson, and the inclusion of scaffolded student handouts for key lesson tasks. Additional modifications may be necessary for some student populations. Wherever possible, multilingual learners and students with disabilities will be working toward the same unit and lesson objectives, even if they take different paths to accessing the content and demonstrating their learning.

Each lesson's language objective includes suggested modifications for English learners with WIDA proficiency levels of 1–2, 3–4, or 5–6. The **Curriculum Guidebook** provides specific suggestions on how best to leverage the curriculum's supports for multilingual learners.

Assessing Standards Mastery

Over the course of the Investigating History curriculum, students are assessed on both their knowledge and their authentic application of skills and knowledge. In addition to informal assessments such as discussion prompts, students engage with Formative Assessments at the end of each cluster. These tasks provide teachers with an opportunity to monitor students' mastery of key content learning goals.

Each unit closes with a performance-based Summative Assessment that assesses practice standards and priority content standards. Each unit also has an optional Content Assessment that teachers can use to gain additional insight into students' mastery of the content standards addressed in the unit.

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Instructional Principles

Investigating History's instructional approach is grounded in scholarly research and pedagogical best practices and is fully described with accompanying citations in the **Design Specifications** that accompany the curriculum. Teachers' skillful pedagogy is critical to help bring these principles to life in the classroom; see the **Curriculum Guidebook** for more. What follows is a brief overview of the four key principles that anchor the curriculum as a whole and a description of how these principles show up in students' day-to-day learning.

Historical Inquiry and Investigation

Historical inquiry and investigation are achieved through an inquiry arc—the backbone for each unit and cluster—administered through the use of inquiry routines. With these experiences, students gain practice with generating questions, gathering information from sources, and communicating responses to Essential and Supporting Questions. Many lessons utilize primary and secondary sources of various types as texts and materials to be investigated. Throughout, the emphasis is on students constructing meaning in order to do the fundamental work of historians and social scientists.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Instructional approaches in Investigating History show a commitment to centering the experiences and agency of non-dominant groups. Sources by and about Indigenous peoples, enslaved peoples, women, and other marginalized groups have been selected to provide access to the views and expressions of these groups.

The course further develops students' sociopolitical awareness by examining issues of power, equity, and justice, past and present. Essential Questions, sources, and activities dive into these topics, with guidance provided to teachers on how to teach the harder aspects of history. Among other goals, Investigating History aims to develop students' conceptual vocabulary to engage in discussions of and careful analysis of such issues.

Finally, Investigating History treats the cultural knowledge students bring with them as a valuable asset. Lessons encourage students to make connections between class and outside learning and allow them some choice regarding the process, content, and products of their learning in order to accommodate different interests and modes of sensemaking.

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Districts and teachers should know that this curriculum has been extensively reviewed by DESE, scholars, and grade-level teachers in Massachusetts. Guidance on difficult and culturally sensitive topics is offered throughout lessons and in "Cultural Competence" boxes. The Commonwealth remains committed to an accurate, authentic, and inclusive approach to history and appreciates the work that teachers do in helping students to investigate history for themselves. For additional information, please see DESE's "**Race, Racism, and Culturally Responsive Teaching in History and Social Science in Massachusetts: Frequently Asked Questions**."

Historical Empathy and Human Connections

Students are motivated to learn history when they care about people and events. Investigating History engages students through sources that capture their sense of wonder, create an emotional connection, and spur their imagination. At the same time, the curriculum cultivates social and emotional learning by asking students to do the hard work of engaging in dialogue and collaboration with diverse peers across lines of difference.

Civic Engagement and Current World Relevance

Investigating History offers guidance to show the connections between the past and present. This includes the "Connections to Current Events and Issues" section in each Unit Overview as well as "Make Connections" boxes throughout the lessons. Teachers will notice other potential connections to current events or to the school community and can and should add these to keep the curriculum timely and relevant.

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