



Required Curriculum and Instruction in K-12 Public Schools

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While a school board has broad authority to determine its district's course of study, state law requires that course of study to account for and include several specific topics. Generally, each school board is required to provide an instructional program designed to enable students to meet statutorily specified educational goals related to academic skills and knowledge, vocational skills, citizenship, and personal development.¹ This issue brief outlines the various other requirements related to curriculum and instruction in public schools in Wisconsin.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Each school board must adopt academic standards in math, science, reading and writing, geography, history, and financial literacy. Annually, the school board must provide notice of the district's academic standards to the parents and guardians of all students enrolled in the district.²

COURSE OF STUDY AND HOURS OF INSTRUCTION

State law requires that each school board annually schedule at least 437 hours of direct instruction in kindergarten, at least 1,050 hours of direct instruction in grades 1 to 6, and at least 1,137 hours of direct instruction in grades 7 to 12.³ Each school board is responsible for setting the course of study and school hours for the school district it serves.⁴

CURRICULUM

State law requires that each school board maintain a written, sequential curriculum plan that specifies objectives, course content, resources, and a program evaluation method in each of the following subjects: reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, health, computer literacy, environmental education, vocational education, physical education, art, and music.⁵ Each school board must adopt a list of textbooks that will be used in each school in the district and file the list with the school district clerk.⁶

The required course offerings and curriculum change as students progress through each grade. Specifically, in K-8, each school board must provide students with regular instruction in reading, language arts, social studies, math, science, health, physical education, art, and music. School boards must additionally provide regular instruction in foreign language in grades 7 and 8. Each school board must also provide an introduction to career exploration and planning to students in grades 5 through 8.⁷ In grades 9 to 12, each school board must offer an educational program that allows students to study English, social studies, mathematics, science, vocational education, foreign language, physical education, art, and music.⁸

State law generally does not dictate course curriculum or course contents, except to require instruction in four specific areas:

- *American Indian studies.* Twice in grades K-8 and once in grades 9 to 12, school boards are required to include in the social studies curriculum instruction in the history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized American Indian tribes and bands located in Wisconsin.⁹
- *Shaken baby syndrome.* Once in grades 5 to 8 and once in grades 10 to 12, school boards must provide age-appropriate instruction relating to shaken baby syndrome and impacted babies.¹⁰

- *Financial literacy*. School boards must incorporate instruction in financial literacy into the K-12 curriculum.¹¹
- *Holocaust and other genocides*. Once in grades 5 to 8 and once in grades 9 to 12, school boards are required to include in the social studies curriculum instruction in the Holocaust and other genocides.¹²

Additionally, while state law does not require that school districts offer instruction in human growth and development, if a school district does offer such instruction, state law recommends that the curriculum include certain topics and requires that the curriculum cover other topics.¹³

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

A school board may not grant a student a high school diploma unless that student has satisfied certain curricular requirements. Specifically, the student must have completed at least 0.5 credit of health education during grades 7 to 12, and at least all of the following during grades 9 to 12:

- 4 credits of English, including writing composition.
- 3 credits of social studies, including state and local government.
- 3 credits of math.¹⁴
- 3 credits of science.¹⁵
- 1.5 credits of physical education.
- A civics test comprised of 100 questions that are identical to the 100 questions that may be asked of an individual during the process of applying for U.S. citizenship. In order to pass, the student must correctly answer at least 65 questions.

School boards may set additional requirements for graduation, including participation in community service activities, and are encouraged by statute to require students to complete an additional 8.5 credits selected from a combination of vocational education, foreign languages, fine arts, and other courses.¹⁶

¹ s. [118.01\(2\)](#), Stats.

² ss. [118.30\(1g\)\(a\)1.](#), [120.12\(13\)](#), and [121.02\(1\)\(L\)7.](#), Stats. The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) develops model academic standards, which school districts may choose to adopt.

³ s. [121.02\(1\)\(f\)](#), Stats.

⁴ s. [120.12\(14\)](#) and [\(15\)](#), Stats.

⁵ s. [121.02\(1\)\(k\)](#), Stats.

⁶ s. [118.03](#), Stats.

⁷ s. [121.02\(1\)\(L\)1.](#) and [2.](#), Stats.

⁸ s. [121.02\(1\)\(L\)3.](#), Stats.

⁹ s. [121.02\(1\)\(L\)4.](#), Stats.

¹⁰ ss. [121.02\(1\)\(L\)6.](#) and [253.15\(5\)](#), Stats.

¹¹ s. [121.02\(1\)\(L\)7.](#), Stats.

¹² s. [121.02\(1\)\(L\)8.](#), Stats.

¹³ s. [118.019\(2\)](#) and [\(2m\)](#), Stats. If a school district offers instruction in human growth and development, additional requirements related to notice, curriculum development, and student exemption apply. [Sees. [118.019\(3\)](#) to [\(5\)](#), Stats.]

¹⁴ State law requires that a school board award a student up to one mathematics credit for completion of a course in computer sciences that satisfies certain DPI-determined criteria. Additionally, school boards must award up to one mathematics credit for completion of a career and technical education course that the school board determines satisfies a mathematics requirement. [s. [118.33\(1\)\(a\)1.c.](#), Stats.]

¹⁵ State law requires that a school board award a student one science credit for completion of a course in agriculture that satisfies certain DPI-determined criteria. Additionally, school boards must award up to one science credit for completion of a career and technical education course that the school board determines satisfies a science requirement. [s. [118.33\(1\)\(a\)1.d.](#), Stats.]

¹⁶ s. [118.33\(1\)](#) and [\(1m\)\(a\)](#), Stats. The amount of coursework that constitutes a credit is determined by each school board. [s. [PI 18.02\(3\)](#), Wis. Adm. Code.]