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SHOULD CURSIVE HANDWRITING STILL BE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS?

At a Glance

Elementary school students spend less time learning cursive handwriting than they did in years past. The declining emphasis on cursive writing has been attributed to the increasing use of technology, the growing proportion of class time spent preparing for standardized tests, and the perception that the time students spend learning to write in cursive could be better spent on more meaningful educational content. This Information Capsule summarizes the reasons some scholars want cursive handwriting instruction to remain in the elementary school curriculum, as well as the reasons others believe it should be eliminated. Research on cursive handwriting is reviewed, including the impact of transitioning students from block printing to cursive handwriting in the third grade. Finally, the results of surveys conducted to determine handwriting practices in elementary schools across the country are reported.

Cursive writing has been taught for over 300 years in U.S. schools and was once the principle way of communicating. It was used for all public documents, such as land deeds, legal paperwork, and business records, and for personal letters and even generals' orders in battle. The quality of cursive writing was an indicator of social status and educational level (Mehegan, 2009; Supon, 2009; Wolfe, 2009; Wallace & Schomer, 1994). For decades, American students spent 45 minutes every day learning and practicing cursive writing. Until the 1970s, penmanship was a separate daily lesson from first through sixth grade and a separate grade on report cards. Since that time, however, its importance in the elementary school curriculum has declined steadily (New American Cursive Penmanship Program, 2009; Carpenter, 2007; Pressler, 2006; Francis, 2000).

Today, American students spend less time learning cursive handwriting than they did years ago. The declining emphasis on cursive writing has been attributed to the increasing use of technology, the growing proportion of class time spent preparing for standardized tests, and the perception that the time students spend learning to write in cursive could be better spent on more meaningful educational content (Supon, 2009; Watling, 2009; Carpenter, 2007).

Since cursive handwriting is used less and less frequently in modern society, many scholars view its inclusion in the elementary school curriculum as a luxury, based on tradition rather than sound educational principles (Gordon, 2009; Wallace & Schomer, 1994; Koenke, 1986). Many school districts now teach basic computer literacy skills, such as keyboarding, at earlier grade levels. They claim these skills better prepare students for careers in a technologically competitive society (Gordon, 2009; Supon, 2009; Watling, 2009; Francis, 2000).

Teachers maintain that the demands of modern education make it almost impossible to fit cursive handwriting into the curriculum. Primary school teachers are now required to teach drug awareness, health, character education, and other subjects that once were not part of the curriculum (Amandolare, 2009; Downs, 2009; Kratzig, 2008). In addition, preparation for standardized tests tends to dominate class time, pushing other subjects to the side (Downs, 2009; Lausch, 2009; Suddath, 2009; Watling, 2009; Kratzig, 2008).

Fewer and fewer teachers know how to write cursive themselves. Only a limited number of teacher education programs in the U.S. address handwriting instruction. In addition to courses in the content major, teacher education programs offer courses on inclusion, technology, diversity, and special needs students, leaving little time for penmanship (Supon, 2009; Carpenter, 2007; Starr, 2005; Troyer, 2005). Graham and associates (2007) administered a survey to a random sample of elementary school teachers from across the U.S. and found that only 12 percent of the respondents reported that they had taken a course in how to teach cursive writing. The researchers concluded that this lack of knowledge leads to inadequate and inconsistent handwriting instruction.

The debate over the value of handwriting instruction didn't start with the introduction of the computer; it dates back to the debut of the Remington typewriter in 1873 and is revived with each new technological advance, including the Dictaphone, the Xerox machine, and finally, computers (Mehegan, 2009; Kelley, 2007; Mehta, 2006). The following sections of this report summarize the key points made by proponents and critics in the discussion of whether or not to include cursive handwriting instruction in the elementary school curriculum.

Reasons to Teach Cursive Handwriting

Advocates provide the following reasons for including cursive handwriting in the elementary school curriculum:

- **Learning cursive writing helps students develop reading, communication, and fine motor skills.** A number of reading specialists believe there is a direct link between the process of learning to write in cursive and the ability to read fluently (New American Cursive Penmanship Program, 2009; Owens, 2009; Troyer, 2005). Several studies also suggest that cursive writing improves the fluidity of thought in written communication (New American Cursive Penmanship Program, 2009; Pressler, 2006) and helps to develop students' fine motor skills, including hand-eye coordination (Gordon, 2009; Troyer, 2005; Veigle, 2000).

  Some researchers recommend teaching cursive handwriting prior to block printing. They maintain that students have the capability to learn cursive writing at a young age, pointing to the fact that prior to the 1970s, U.S. students were taught cursive in the first grade. Advocates contend that learning cursive first allows students to write letters fluidly from memory, leading to increased writing speed and the ability to better focus on content (New American Cursive Penmanship Program, 2009; Blumenfeld, 1994). Blumenfeld (1994) also noted that it takes time and supervision to help students develop good cursive handwriting and teachers have that time in first grade, not in third grade.

- **Students must be able to read cursive handwriting.** Wolfe (2009) stated: "The first edge of a gigantic wave of U.S. students graduating from high school who no longer get much handwriting instruction in the primary grades is just hitting the workplace. Not only will these students struggle with writing cursive - they can't read it either." Graham (2009) noted that studying for a test is difficult when students can't read their own notes. Scholars point out that without instruction in cursive handwriting, students won't be able to read historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence. They claim this will compromise the accuracy of future historical research (Gordon, 2009; Suddath, 2009; Pressler, 2006).

- **Cursive writing receives higher marks.** While multiple studies have found that neatly written papers receive higher marks than papers with messy handwriting (Gordon, 2009; Graham, 2009), some researchers also suggest that papers written in cursive receive higher marks than those written in block, or manuscript, style. College Board data on the writing section of the SAT revealed that students who wrote their 2006 essays in cursive scored slightly higher than those who used other types of handwriting (Carpenter, 2007).

- **Students can write in cursive faster than they can print.** It may actually take students longer to print than to write in cursive, which is a disadvantage for students when they are taking notes or writing essays for a test (Graham, cited in Pressler, 2006).

- **Illegible writing creates problems for society.** Gladstone (cited in Starr, 2005) noted that illegible handwriting creates many problems, including undeliverable tax refunds, letters and packages sent to wrong addresses, and employee mistakes in the various professional fields. A report released by the National Academies of Science's Institute of Medicine stated that doctors' poor handwriting is responsible for the deaths of over 7,000 people each year. The deaths are attributed to illegible handwriting and unclear abbreviations and dosage indications on some of the 3.2 billion prescriptions written in the U.S. every year (Caplan, 2007).

Reasons to Eliminate the Teaching of Cursive Handwriting

Many experts believe cursive writing should no longer be included in the elementary school curriculum. They cite the following reasons:

- **Cursive writing is becoming irrelevant and obsolete.** Scholars maintain that block printing has become an accepted form of handwriting and that most written communication is now typed (Amandolare, 2009; Amos, 2009; Lausch, 2009; Koenke, 1986). Many individuals, especially young people, don't see any reason to spend their time and effort writing a message out by hand when it can be sent electronically in seconds (Breen, 2009). When handwritten essays were introduced on the SAT in 2006, only 15 percent of the almost 1.5 million students who took the test wrote their answers in cursive. The rest printed in block letters (Wolfe, 2009). The New American Cursive Penmanship Program (2009) reported on a 2007 national survey that found only 16 percent of high school seniors indicated that they wrote in cursive. Even the Emily Post Institute, in its recommendation that thank-you notes be handwritten, says it doesn't matter whether the note is in cursive or print, as long as it is neat (Suddath, 2009). Gladstone (cited in Carpenter, 2007) suggested that traditional cursive writing be offered to students as an elective in middle or senior high school.

- **Standardized tests don't require cursive writing.** On standardized tests, students can write their answers in any form of handwriting they choose. In fact, the National Assessment of Educational Progress' 2011 writing test will require eighth and eleventh graders to compose on computers, with fourth graders following in 2019 (Breen, 2009; Supon, 2009; Pressler, 2006). In addition, textbooks and other materials students read are written in block print (Graham, 2009; Suddath, 2009).

- **Typing is more efficient.** Graham (cited in Carpenter, 2007) stated that typing uses a slightly easier set of motor skills than writing. He maintained that if young students spend less time thinking about their handwriting and more time writing they will have longer compositions and better grammar and planning. Graham (cited in Breen, 2009) also emphasized that it is more important for students to focus on their ideas and the composition of their writing instead of how they form letters.

- **Cursive writing is very difficult for some students.** Certain students, such as those with learning difficulties or poor motor skills, struggle with cursive handwriting (Pressler, 2006). Left handed students, in particular, appear to have extra challenges learning cursive writing (Supon, 2009). Dysgraphia is

the term for an official learning disability in which a student has a neurological disorder that causes a deficiency in the ability to write, unrelated to intellectual ability (Steinbach, 2008; MedicineNet.com, 1999).

- **The transition from manuscript to cursive writing interferes with the development of students' handwriting skills.** Students typically learn print in kindergarten, with instruction in cursive handwriting beginning in the third grade. Studies suggest that the process of transitioning from print to cursive handwriting interferes with children's ability to compose and diminishes the number of words they write and the number of ideas they generate (Wallace & Schomer, 1994). Gladstone (cited in Carpenter, 2007) stated: "You don't teach someone English by first teaching them Chinese." She also compared transitioning from manuscript to cursive handwriting to teaching math entirely in Roman numerals up until third grade, then switching to Arabic numerals.

Research on Teaching Cursive Handwriting

Research justifying the inclusion of cursive writing in the elementary school curriculum is limited. In general, studies have concluded that instruction in cursive handwriting helps to develop students' reading, communication, and fine motor skills and that students who complete tests and assignments in cursive may receive higher scores or grades than those who print their responses (Gordon, 2009; Graham, 2009; Carpenter, 2007; Troyer, 2005; Veigle, 2000). On the other hand, studies have found that typing, which uses an easier set of motor skills, allows students to spend more time focusing on the planning, grammar, and composition of their writing and less time thinking about how to form their letters (Graham, cited in Breen, 2009; Graham, cited in Carpenter, 2007).

Some researchers contend that teaching two forms of handwriting (manuscript and cursive) interferes with students' ability to generate ideas. Teaching one handwriting style is believed to better promote mastery of the handwriting process by increasing speed, improving legibility, and fostering automatic letter formation (Graham, 2009; Veigle, 2000; Wallace & Schomer, 1994). The New American Cursive Penmanship Program (2009), which advocates beginning penmanship instruction in the first grade, reported that studies have found that waiting to change from printing to cursive writing in the third grade slows students down to a first grade writing speed level for at least one year.

Steve Graham (2009), one of the nation's foremost researchers of handwriting, believes that students' fluency in handwriting is more important than the style of handwriting that is taught. He recommends, however, that instruction start with traditional manuscript, or block, letters for the following reasons:

- Before starting kindergarten and first grade, most children have already learned to write some letters from their parents or preschool teachers. Instruction in cursive writing means that children have to relearn many of the letters they can already write.

- Some research suggests that once manuscript writing is mastered, it can be written as fast as cursive, and usually more legibly.

- The teaching of traditional manuscript writing may facilitate reading development, since the material students read in the early grades is written in manuscript, not cursive.

- There is some evidence, though dated, that traditional manuscript is easier to learn than cursive writing.

Researchers have found that most students don't receive enough instruction to master either manuscript or cursive writing entirely and instead develop a writing style that is a hybrid of the two forms (Graff, 2010; Suddath, 2009; Veigle, 2000). In fact, Graham (cited in Tierney, 2007) reported that the fastest

hand writers actually use a mix of printed and cursive letters and that they gain speed without sacrificing legibility. His research found that half of students report using this hybrid approach.

Graham (cited in Carpenter, 2007) also stated that the most efficient way for anyone, including children, to record their thoughts is on the keyboard. He noted that especially with younger children, their hands aren't fast enough to keep up with their minds. A meta-analysis conducted by Graham and associates (cited in Tierney, 2007) found that in most studies, word processing had a positive impact on writing quality, compared to composing by hand. The average effect size of word processing on writing quality was moderate for students in general (0.51), but larger (0.70) for low-achieving writers. The researchers concluded that word processing was especially effective at enhancing the quality of compositions produced by low-achieving writers.

How Much Instruction in Cursive Handwriting are U.S. Students Receiving?

Researchers agree that schools place less emphasis on cursive writing than in years past. Graham and associates (2007) concluded that "writing is just not part of the national agenda anymore." Similarly, Wolfe (2009) wrote that "cursive writing has been reduced to an independent study, an 'as-we-have-time' course in second or third grade."

Studies indicate that students receive cursive handwriting instruction for an average of 10-15 minutes per day in most U.S. schools, with instruction usually provided either in the latter part of second grade or in third grade. By grade 4, most schools have discontinued cursive instruction. As long as students write legibly, either printing or cursive is accepted in most classrooms (Graff, 2010; Suddath, 2009; Supon, 2009; Carpenter, 2007; Francis, 2000).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Zaner-Bloser Company, which has been publishing a penmanship curriculum since 1904, recommended 40 minutes of handwriting instruction per day. By the 1980s, it suggested just 15 minutes. Zaner-Bloser offers course work through eighth grade but admits that schools rarely purchase materials beyond the third grade. In Zaner-Bloser's 2005 national survey, a majority of elementary school teachers reported spending one hour or less on handwriting per week (Suddath, 2009; Kelley, 2007).

According to a 2007 nationwide survey on handwriting instruction by researchers at Vanderbilt University (Graham et al., 2007), cursive handwriting is still widely taught in U.S. public and private schools. The researchers surveyed a random sample of approximately 200 teachers in grades 1-3 in all 50 states. Ninety percent of the responding teachers stated that their schools required instruction in handwriting. In schools that taught handwriting, 50 percent of second grade teachers and 90 percent of third grade teachers offered instruction in cursive handwriting. Teachers reported that they spent about 60 minutes per week, or 12-15 minutes per day, teaching cursive. Graham and colleagues (2007) cautioned that survey results were based on self-reported numbers and that a separate study with direct observation of 22 teachers in one school district found that far less time was devoted to cursive handwriting.

Graham and colleagues (2007) also reported that school districts varied significantly in the amount of handwriting instruction they provided to students. For example, the researchers visited second and third grade classrooms that offered virtually no instruction in cursive handwriting. In general, their observations of U.S. classrooms found that the emphasis in U.S. schools has shifted from the formation of letters to the ability to write legibly and efficiently. Other researchers have noted that cursive writing's declining importance in the curriculum is reflected by a lessening of the standards used to evaluate it. Over the years, the goal of teaching penmanship has shifted from "high quality" to "legibility" (Pressler, 2006; Wallace & Schomer, 1994).

Some states mandate penmanship instruction, while in other states emphasis on penmanship is a local decision and the amount of instruction varies by district, school, and even by classroom (Watling, 2009;

Kratzig, 2008; Nix, 2008). Handwriting was reinstated into Florida's state standards in 2006, after educators became concerned that instruction in penmanship was disappearing from classrooms (Downs, 2009). According to Florida's Sunshine State Standards, third grade students must demonstrate beginning cursive writing skills, fourth grade students must demonstrate legible cursive writing skills, and fifth graders must demonstrate fluent and legible cursive writing skills (Florida Department of Education, 2010).

Although schools typically begin teaching cursive handwriting in the third grade, keyboarding often begins as early as first grade. In Texas, for example, the state's technology standards require kindergartners to be introduced to the keyboard; by the end of second grade, students should be able to produce documents at the keyboard, proofread, and correct errors. In Texas schools, keyboarding used to be taught in the seventh grade (Kratzig, 2008; Carpenter, 2007).

Summary

Cursive writing has been taught for over 300 years in U.S. schools and was once the principle way of communicating. Since the 1970s, however, its importance in the elementary school curriculum has diminished. The declining emphasis on cursive writing has been attributed to the increasing use of technology, the growing proportion of class time spent preparing for standardized tests, and the perception that the time students spend learning to write in cursive could be better spent on more meaningful educational content. Those advocating the inclusion of cursive handwriting in the elementary school curriculum maintain that tests completed in cursive writing receive higher scores than those completed in block lettering and that learning cursive handwriting helps develop students' reading, communication, and fine motor skills. They also note that without instruction in cursive writing, students won't be able to read documents such as the Declaration of Independence, thereby compromising the accuracy of future historical research.

Those espousing the elimination of cursive writing from the elementary school curriculum contend that it is irrelevant and obsolete and that the transition from manuscript to cursive writing interferes with the development of students' handwriting skills. Research findings on the potentially detrimental effects of transitioning from print to cursive have led some researchers to question the current system of learning two forms of writing and advocate instruction in only one handwriting style. Most experts agree that students' skill and fluency in handwriting is more important than the style of handwriting taught.

Surveys conducted to determine instructional practices in handwriting in elementary schools across the U.S. have found that most schools teach cursive handwriting in the latter part of second grade or in third grade. The majority of teachers report spending 12-15 minutes per day teaching cursive handwriting. However, school districts vary significantly in the amount of handwriting instruction they provide to students.

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