

The Handwriting Debate

Learning how to form letters and words on paper has been a feature of American schools since the days of inkwells. But with the proliferation of personal computers in the 1990s and smartphones and tablets in the 21st century, many educators and policy-makers have been questioning the usefulness of spending ever-more-valuable class time teaching handwriting to students who have been born into—and will live and work in—a digital world. At the same time, new research has been emerging that points to the educational value of handwriting in ways that go well beyond being able to read cursive or take notes without benefit of a handheld device.

Today, after the English Language Arts (ELA) section of the Common Core State Standards arrived without standards for cursive writing, the debate has come to state boards of education, who must decide whether to include handwriting standards in the extra 15 percent allowed them under the Common Core agreement or leave the issue to the discretion of districts. This *Policy Update* 1) looks at handwriting in schools today; 2) examines the pros and cons of the debate, particularly in light of research; 3) reviews some key policy considerations around handwriting; 4) provides examples of state actions in this area; and 5) includes resources for more information.

Handwriting in Schools Today

Handwriting encompasses two distinct forms: manuscript or printed writing using block letters that are not connected when forming words, and cursive writing, where successive letters are joined and angles are rounded. In the United States, printed writing is generally taught beginning in preschool or kindergarten and continuing through 2nd grade, while cursive is taught beginning in the 3rd grade and continuing through 5th grade (in many European countries, students begin cursive rather than manuscript instruction on first entering school). Through most of the 20th century, students in the early grades typically received 30 to 45 minutes of handwriting instruction every day. Today the average is

closer to 15 minutes, which is actually the amount of instructional time recommended by experts. A 2007 national survey of first through 3rd grade teachers reported that 90 percent of the teachers said their schools required instruction in handwriting.¹

Arguments and Research For and Against Handwriting Instruction

The arguments against requiring handwriting instruction—cursive, in particular—are based on what might be called “common sense logic” rather than on research. The heart of the argument is simply that with the ubiquity of digital communications, cursive is “old” technology that students no longer need when it comes to being college and career ready—the vast majority of business communications are through digital media, college instructors expect papers and reports to be typed, and more and more tests are going online. If quick notes need to be taken in the absence of a smartphone or laptop, printing is always available. Those arguing against teaching handwriting also point out that given today’s already overcrowded elementary school curriculum and the importance being placed on reading and math instruction, there are simply more important subjects that need to be taught—including keyboarding. Realists note that since handwriting is not a tested subject, it is little wonder that it gets less emphasis in the classroom.

Those who favor handwriting instruction also have “common sense” points: there are and will likely always be times when handwriting notes or lists will be necessary or more convenient—and cursive is faster than printing; handwritten correspondence to individuals has a greater impact on the receiver than emails or digitally printed communications; students, especially in elementary school, still turn in handwritten assignments; there is still a need to be able to read cursive, especially in the case of primary-source documents; and cursive is a powerful cultural and historical link to human development, since the drive and ability to draw symbols with our hands is one of the defining characteristics of our species.