

Some States Preserve Penmanship despite Technology Gains

Christina Hoag, The Associated Press

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/24/california-cursive-penmanship-technology/1724263/>

November 24, 2012

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The pen may not be as mighty as the keyboard these days, but California and a handful of states are not giving up on handwriting entirely.

Bucking a growing trend of eliminating cursive from elementary school curriculums or making it optional, California is among the states keeping longhand as a third-grade staple.

The state's posture on penmanship is not likely to undercut its place at the leading edge of technology, but it has teachers and students divided over the value of learning flowing script and looping signatures in an age of touchpads and mobile devices.

Some see it as a waste of time, an anachronism in a digitized society where even signatures are electronic, but others see it as necessary so kids can hone fine motor skills, reinforce literacy and develop their own unique stamp of identity.

The debate comes as 45 states move toward adopting national curriculum guidelines in 2014 for English and math that don't include cursive handwriting, but require proficiency in computer keyboarding by the time pupils exit elementary school.

Several states, including California, Georgia and Massachusetts, have added a cursive requirement to the national standards, while most others, such as Indiana, Illinois and Hawaii have left it as optional for school districts. Some states, like Utah, are still studying the issue.

Whether it's required or not, cursive is fast becoming a lost art as schools increasingly replace pen and paper with classroom computers and instruction is increasingly geared to academic subjects that are tested on standardized exams. Even the standardized tests are on track to be administered via computer within three years.

Experts say manuscript, or printing, may be sufficient when it comes to handwriting in the future.

"Do you really need to learn two different scripts?" said Steve Graham, education professor at Arizona State University who has studied handwriting instruction. "There will be plenty of kids who don't learn cursive. The more important skill now is typing."

Cursive still has many proponents who say it benefits youngsters' brains, coordination and motor skills, as well as connects them to the past, whether to handwritten historical documents like the Constitution or to their parents' and grandparents' letters.

Longhand is also a symbol of personality, even more so in an era of uniform emails and texting, they say.

"I think it's part of your identity and part of your self-esteem," said Eldra Avery, who teaches language and composition at San Luis Obispo High School. "There's something really special and personal about a cursive letter."

Avery also has a practical reason for pushing cursive — speed. She makes her 11th grade students relearn longhand simply so they'll be able to complete their advancement placement exams. Most students print.

"They have to write three essays in two hours. They need that speed," she said. "Most of them learned cursive in second grade and forgot about it. Their penmanship is deplorable."

For many elementary school teachers, having children spend hours copying flowing letters just isn't practical in an era of high-stakes standardized testing.

Third-graders may get 15 minutes of cursive practice a couple times a week, and after the fourth grade, it often falls off completely because teachers don't require assignments to be written in cursive. When children write by hand, many choose to print because they've practiced it more.

Dustin Ellis, fourth-grade teacher at Big Springs Elementary School in Simi Valley, said he assigns a cursive practice packet as homework, but if he had his druthers, he'd limit cursive instruction to learning to read it, instead of writing it. Out of his 32 students, just three write in cursive, he noted.

"Students can be just as successful with printing," he said. "When a kid can text 60 words a minute, that means we're heading in a different direction. Cursive is becoming less and less important."

It also depends on the teacher. Many younger teachers aren't prepared to teach cursive or manuscript, said Kathleen S. Wright, national handwriting product manager for Zaner-Bloser Publishing, which develops instructional tools.

To remedy that, the company has developed a computer program that shows kids how to form letters.

Students say virtually nobody writes in cursive except teachers and parents. School assignments are required to be typed, and any personal note, such as thank yous and birthday cards, are emails, said Monica Baerg, a 16-year-old junior at Arcadia High School.

Baerg said she learned cursive in third grade, but has never used it and has difficulty deciphering her parents' handwriting. When she has to write by hand, she prints and never has a problem with speed.

"It was kind of a waste. No one ever forced us to use cursive so it was a hassle to remember the letters," she said. "It's not necessary to write in cursive. Whatever you write in, you say the same thing."

At St. Mark's Lutheran School in Hacienda Heights, cursive remains a core subject. Students are required to write in cursive through middle school so they become fluent at it, as well as work on computers, but increasingly transfer students arrive without longhand skills, said Linda Merchant, director of curriculum and instruction. They're given a book to study and practice at home.

"We're pretty committed to keeping it," Merchant said. "There's always going to be situations when you're going to have to present your own writing."

Graham, the professor, noted that the case for cursive is becoming harder to make, due to the benefits word processing offers such as spellcheck and cutting and pasting text, but he noted there are benefits to ensuring good handwriting. "People form judgments about the quality of your ideas based on the neatness of your text," he said.

For kids, the only practical purpose for learning cursive is to sign their names.

"They should teach it just for that purpose," said student Baerg. "Everybody wants a cool signature with all the fancy loops."