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**Easter
Memory
Makers**

**Having
a
Baby**

**The Case For
Cursive
Handwriting**

INSIDE: The Special Needs Child - Pull Out and Save!



The Handwriting WAS on the Wall: But is Cursive Making a Comeback after Disappearing from Curriculums?

In June 2010, the NGA (National Governors Association) and CCSO (Council of Chief State School Officers) released the final Common Core State Standards. According to Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Every state had its own definition of proficiency." This lack of standardization was one reason the Common Core State Standards were developed. Forty-two states (New York included) and the District of Columbia adopted the curriculum.

There was something glaringly missing from these standards — a requirement that students be taught cursive handwriting. The standards include learning to "print upper and lower case letters" in the primary grades, but there is no mention of cursive instruction. Instead, keyboarding and other technology skills were part of the standards. This caused a backlash from many parents and educators who wanted cursive to remain in curriculums. Proponents claim that students need to learn cursive to be able to read historical documents, develop fine motor skills, improve working memory and recognize diverse letter styles.

Those who agree with eliminating cursive from curriculums cite the overwhelming use of technology as a global communi-

26 WNY Family April 2017



cation tool as well as cursive being a drain on instructional time, when skills such as sentence structure and correct grammar usage should be honed instead.

After much speculation, several states who adopted the Common Core Curriculum have opted to bring cursive back as part of their state standards.

In New York, cursive handwriting is not a state-wide requirement, but local school districts can choose to include it. The newly released *NYC Department of Education Handbook* includes cursive handwriting as a recommended skill to be taught in the third grade.

Should we lament the eventual loss of individualized "signatures" or an ability to read Grandpa's letters to Grandma while stationed in Korea? Or should we celebrate technology's swift and sweeping influence on global communication and easy access to information? Perhaps there is compromise amidst the discord.

The Tech Takeover

Technology definitely has its advantages. Typed papers are easier to read. Students can retrieve instant word counts and send work electronically. Tablets and laptops are widely used in classrooms to take notes,

She says that students who learn all of these skills become better communicators.

Teaching Writing vs. Teaching Penmanship

Writing is a form of communication, and one can communicate ideas by writing something down by hand or typing it on a keyboard.

Jerry Maraia, assistant head of school and head of curriculum, instruction and assessment at Léman Manhattan Preparatory School, counsels, "Educators need to teach writing from the perspective of the communication of ideas. It doesn't mean we don't care about penmanship or cursive. It's just less important. Unfortunately, sometimes kids associate writing instruction with their penmanship. This undermines words and ideas." Maraia explains that a perceived "writer's block" issue could be as simple as a student being fearful of writing because he knows his handwriting is deemed messy, becoming averse to writing his ideas down. Educators should be mindful of this.

The Case for Cursive

I just bought a new car the other day. Guess what? I had to both print and sign my name on at least a half dozen forms. I thought, "If they don't eventually change these forms, how will millennials handle these?"

It seems that some rules are already changing. Students will be able to type responses on the ELA (English Language

Arts) exam. *The Educator Guide to the 2017 Grade 3 Common Core English Language Arts Test* states, “This school year, schools will have the option to administer the Grades 3–8 English Language Arts Tests on computer or paper.”

Even if students are able to use a keyboard for tests, and biometrics replace handwritten signature authentication, should curriculums still include cursive?

Frank Milner, president of Tutor Doctor, clarifies, “You can make the argument that students work primarily from computers in all facets of life, but [eliminating] cursive skills takes away from cognitive development, motor skills and, in a more linear sense, working with significant legal documents that require signatures. Computers are obviously a major part of standard education systems today, but learning to type specific keys does little for the brain; whereas handwriting uses many parts of the brain that involve memory, reasoning, and language.”

The Link Between Handwriting & Reading

Most experts agree that there is a link between handwriting and reading. Students use sensorimotor memory that they don’t use while typing. Children also develop phonemic awareness as they write by hand.

“It’s important to note that each student is different,” Milner cautions. “Because reading and writing in cursive involve more complex characters, the potential to acquire new styles and recognize language becomes beneficial. However, learning cursive can also make it more difficult for some students because books simply aren’t printed in cursive and alternating between the two can be confusing.”

“There is some value in students physically moving left to right as they write. When we read, the eyes also follow left to right. There is a physical connection as the eyes and hand move across the page,” Maraia explains.

Being Able to Read Historical Documents

“This is a good point from the perspective of learning how to ‘read’ handwriting. However, historical documents have been transcribed in print,” Maraia points out.

Although students do have access to transcribed versions of the Constitution and other important documents, there are a multitude of writings that are discovered every day in family homes and historic buildings — diaries of former slaves, great-grandma’s notations in the margins of photos from WWII, and other personal and priceless finds.

Writing it Down to Remember

Olsen describes how the physical act of writing leads to increased comprehension. “Learning to write in cursive is shown to improve brain development in the areas of thinking, language, and working memory. Cursive handwriting stimulates brain synapses and synchronicity between the left and right hemispheres — something absent from printing and typing.”

“A recent UCLA/Princeton study found that college students remember lectures better when they’ve taken handwritten notes rather than typed ones,” Olsen reports. Other studies have shown that stu-

continued on page 74

ISSUES FAMILIES FACE *continued...*

dents who practiced writing spelling words scored higher on tests than those who typed them.

Maraia describes, “If you write it down, you remember better. With computers, kids attempt to write everything down as they take notes. With handwriting, they need to determine what’s most important.”

Cursive is Faster & Teaches Diverse Letter Recognition

“Cursive is a more efficient form of handwriting,” Olsen asserts. “Cursive today is different than it was in the past.” She says the focus is on legibility, not teaching fancy swirls. “Children need handwriting practice beyond second grade in order to build cognitive automaticity — the ability to free your mind from the mechanics of handwriting and focus on content. Through cursive instruction, children will eventually develop their personal style and increase speed and fluency.”

Some studies show that cursive activates different brain patterns than print, so students are able to understand letters regardless of their design. Other studies have shown that cursive may be beneficial for students with dysgraphia because it eliminates the necessity of picking up a pencil after each letter and reduces problems with spacing.

Motor Skills

Although cursive develops fine motor skills, this may be a weaker argument. “Development of fine motor skills is not really a strong argument because students can ac-

quire hand-eye coordination in a plethora of ways,” Maraia points out.

Is there compromise?

“It’s all about flow,” says Maraia. “The mechanics of cursive may help some students with the flow of ideas from their brain to the paper. The important thing here is that students need to reflect on their learning style and be encouraged to find what best represents their thinking. Some might find they do their best writing while on the computer and others while printing. It’s more about the child becoming self-aware — understanding the method that works best to express their ideas efficiently.” However, Maraia also points out that screens can be a distraction for some students with all the bells and whistles. Pen and paper alone could serve a student who requires fewer distractions.

“I do see cursive eventually going away with the rise of tech devices; but I don’t think it will ever fully go away. I believe that, as time goes on, it will be studied as an art.” Maraia continues, “You do learn a lot about people from their handwriting. It’s a piece of one’s individual identity.”

So the curriculum battle continues as educators weigh the pros and cons of teaching cursive handwriting. Parents should attend meetings at their child’s school or make inquiries with administrators if they have concerns about the curriculum or they want to understand the school’s philosophy.

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Myrna Beth Haskell is an award-winning author, columnist and feature writer. Her work has appeared in national and regional publications across the U.S. as well as internationally (www.myrnahaskell.com).

More Information for Parents:

New York State Education Dept. (Curriculum and Instruction):

ELA frequently asked questions:

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/cia/ela/elaqa.html>

K12 Reader: Connection Between Reading and Writing:

<http://www.k12reader.com/the-relationship-between-reading-and-writing/>

Engage NY: Common Core Curriculum:

<https://www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum>

More on Teaching Writing vs. Teaching Penmanship:

<https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/writingacrossthecurriculum/2016/11/23/writing-vs-penmanship/>