

A Case for Cursive

It's pretty, but in a digital age, does longhand still get likes?

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

My mother, now in her 70s, has beautiful handwriting. As a young girl, I admired and emulated her expressive script, ultimately winning a couple of penmanship awards for my efforts. My mom was proud, and so was I.

But with cursive writing instruction in decline since the 1970s in many elementary schools, widespread pride in the almost artistic form of penmanship seems to be waning.

Some say it's another casualty of technology and an outmoded form of communication. The increased pressure on public school educators to adopt the Common Core State Standards — which don't require handwriting instruction — is another reason it's been dropped from curriculums across the country.

Its very survival may depend on the educators, legislators and parents

who believe in the ongoing value of cursive writing in a digital age.

THE BENEFITS OF PEN AND PAPER

Beyond signing birthday cards, endorsing checks and addressing wedding invitations, does cursive writing still have any practical use?

"We feel cursive is essential instruction," says David S. Lourie, head of St. Anne's-Belfield School, a preschool-12 private school in Charlottesville, Va., which introduces preschoolers to cursive and continues its practice through fourth grade. "Penmanship is a step along a continuum, from kids playing with blocks and clay. Keyboarding doesn't replace handwriting."

Lourie's belief is bolstered by studies that show early childhood learners benefit from the fine motor skills and cognitive development handwriting encourages.

Virginia Berninger, professor of educational psychology at the University of Washington, is a vocal champion of cursive. Her research shows that printing, cursive and keyboarding are each associated with distinct brain patterns.

In her research, Berninger followed children in grades two through five. She found a connection between

Dear Gran

cursive writing and increased neural activity associated with creativity, particularly idea generation.

Believing that cursive builds fine motor skills, The Walker School, a private school in Marietta, Ga., introduced "Fine Motor Fridays" after receiving teacher feedback that kids in kindergarten through fifth grade were struggling to open water bottles and snacks. Activities include cursive writing, working with magnets and beading.

"With the rise of swiping and touch-screening, kids' muscles are undeveloped and their hands are more easily fatigued," says Megan Nellen, Walker's Lower School principal. "The more children write, draw and apply pressure to paper with crayons or colored pencils, the more they strengthen their fine motor muscles."

Nellen says kids must be able to sustain their writing muscle through the school day, comparing it to the ability to run distances.

Not all students are getting that type of exercise, however.

Suzi Figueroa, a teacher for 36 years, most recently as a third-grade teacher at Monte Vista Elementary in Phoenix, says her students only receive cursive instruction during the last week of school, once »

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24-58% of the school day is spent writing on paper in elementary school.

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25-33% of elementary students struggle to achieve competency in handwriting.

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33% of adults have difficulty reading their own handwriting.

SOURCE: HANDWRITING IN THE 21ST CENTURY? SAPERSTEIN ASSOCIATES, 2012; HANDWRITING WITHOUT TEARS, 2013 SURVEY; DOCMAIL, 2012



TIPS FOR LEFTIES

There was a time when lefties — who comprise about 10 percent of the population — were asked to write like right-handers. Thankfully, that's largely an outdated practice.

"Left-handed children sometimes hold their wrist around in a semi-circle in an attempt to compensate or mimic their right-handed peers," says Sharon Fier, associate professor of graduate education at Touro College in New York City. "It's often the result of poor initial modeling or right-handed adults attempting to do hand-over-hand practice with a young left-handed child."

Fier offers these tips to support left-handed elementary students:

- **When facing front**, seat a left-handed child on the left side or center of the room (teacher's right) to allow the student to pivot toward the chalkboard when taking notes. Sitting on the right side of the room requires students to reach across their bodies toward the right while turning their necks to the left to read or follow the speaker, causing a "pretzel effect" that inhibits handwriting.

- **Left-handed students** should be seated on the left side of a double or shared desk with a right-handed student so that they avoid bumping arms or violating each others' personal space. This arrangement allows for maximum open desk space and near-point copying from texts. Cramped spaces cause sloppier letter formation.

- **Left-side spiral notebooks** are an impediment because the spiral is always under the student's arm — a top spiral notebook suits lefties better.

- **Lefties tend to smear ink** on their lower palm and sleeves since their hand is constantly sliding across the fresh ink. To remedy this, paper should be placed slightly higher on the desk so that the lines are just above the "strike zone" for writing. The left hand slides along the clean area of the paper below the targeted line.

- **Paper should be tipped** with the lower right corner aimed toward the student. This prevents an overly slanted letter formation, keeping the letters more upright.

— Suzanne Wright



MOTOR SKILLS Students at The Walker School in Marietta, Ga., receive cursive writing instruction during "Fine Motor Fridays," created after teachers found that kids in kindergarten through fifth grade were struggling to open water bottles and snacks.

state and district testing has been completed. There's just enough time to teach kids to sign their names, Figueroa said.

"Back in the day, cursive was an actual course with the expectation that you would achieve a certain level of finesse," she says. "It was well-valued and the skill was regarded as important. It was fun to teach — almost like an arts class — and the kids couldn't wait to start. Now the notion is that with word processing, kids don't need to do it."

SIGNING UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

In mid-April, Ohio legislators introduced a bill with bipartisan support to require that cursive writing be taught in all elementary schools. It would join at least five other states with similar laws to protect the practice, including Arkansas, Idaho, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee.

"I don't think the importance of handwriting is up for debate as much as where it fits into prioritization when there's an increased emphasis on high-stakes testing," says Chester Goad, director of disability services for Tennessee Technological University.

Eight-year-old Max Podowitz of Dunwoody, Ga., attends a charter K-5 public elementary school where there's no classroom time for cursive, so his teacher suggested the online training program

Handwriting Without Tears (hwtears.com) for home study.

Parents Anne Eisenhower and Matt Podowitz have seen improvements in Max's confidence. Says Max: "My lines may not all be as straight as the ones in the book, but I'm getting there."

Candace Heroy Massey homeschools her two sons, sixth-grader Luke and second-grader Eli, in Blue Ridge, Ga., and requires them to turn in some of their work in cursive.

"My kids are super-fast typists, but I think cursive trains the brain and disciplines them," she says. "It makes them slow down and make connections as they dip and loop, hook and repeat. They are more aware of the margins and they turn in neater, more organized work as a result."

Massey's sons recently discovered another plus: a link to history. "When they stood in front of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution at the National Archives, they were able to read the documents. They can also read a recipe card written by their grandma." ●



Second-graders Mary Lin Beaver, left, and Allie Clara Tudor practice their cursive-writing skills at The Walker School in Marietta, Ga.