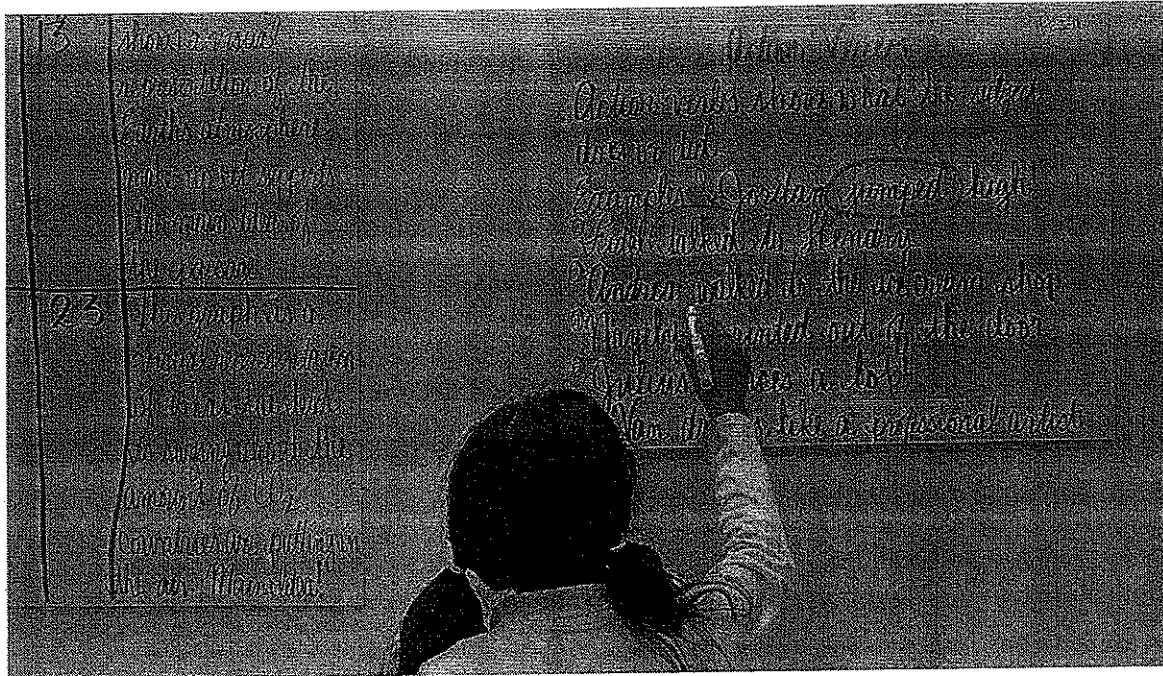


Despite legislative efforts to revive it, cursive handwriting is dying

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Fifth-grade student Andrea Boravong uses her cursive skill while working on action verbs at Highlandtown Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland, Nov. 23, 2011. Photo: Lloyd Fox/Baltimore Sun/MCT

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Suzi Allan heard from her son's teacher that his handwriting needed some work. She asked his teacher when the class would learn cursive writing. However, like many schools, her son's no longer teaches the flowing old-fashioned penmanship which features linked letters and whose purpose is to help people write faster.

Allan was offered an online packet to use if she wanted to teach her son at home.

No doubt about it, cursive is dying. School districts around the country have been dropping it. They mention increasing demands on teachers' time, a need to concentrate on the Common Core and other state standards, and the fact that we're in the digital age when students use keyboards more often.

Others argue, and not just out of nostalgia, that cursive is still necessary for some of the most important things. Providing a signature when opening a bank account requires knowing cursive. Reading historical documents like the Declaration of Independence requires it as well.

Pro-Cursive Bill Never Got A Vote

Around the nation many people have debated the benefits of teaching cursive. The discussion reached lawmakers at the Washington state Capitol building recently. The pro-cursive debate was unable to attract support.

State Senator Pam Roach sponsored a bill that would require the teaching of cursive in Washington schools. Right now, cursive is not required. The bill never got to a vote and no one even showed up to speak about the importance of teaching cursive.

"We're creating this chasm where the first generation can read our history, and the other cannot," Roach said.

Roach said she handed her grandson a grocery list written in cursive. She was shocked when he couldn't read the items on her list.

Researcher Says A Hybrid Model Is Best

Fifteen states require cursive to be taught in their schools. In some states, individual school districts decide whether to include cursive instruction. Sometimes individual teachers are left to make the call.

"Cursive is no longer required," said Sarah Gillispie, who works for the Sumner School District in Washington. Teachers can choose to teach it. However, the district has moved away from handwriting and become more digitally based as students use computers.

Virginia Berninger teaches educational psychology at the University of Washington. She was part of a team that for five years studied the way students develop in their learning. The team tested for relationships between types of writing and learning outcomes. They also explored whether those relationships differed by grade level.

So which writing form should be taught?

"We're arguing for a hybrid model," Berninger said. A hybrid is a combination, in this case, of printing, handwriting and typing.

A Lack Of Time

However, many teachers worry there already isn't enough time in the day to cover all the material they need to teach. How can they provide students with instruction on all three forms of writing?

Fortunately, the study found that ingraining a writing style doesn't take a lot of time. Students can master it just by working on any form of writing for five to 10 minutes a day, for maybe three times a week. This method is just as useful as dedicating 30 minutes to an hour.

Different Ways Of Writing All Help Students

Berninger finds handwritten print connects to better reading skills. Much of what we read is in printed-letter form, so it seems to be a natural connection. Studies show it is best if children learn handwritten printing from kindergarten to second grade.

Cursive specifically helps with spelling and forming sentences. Berninger said this is because cursive connects letters together. Cursive helps students recognize letters as whole-word units, she added. A study that focused on 99 third- through seventh-graders showed it's best to teach cursive in third and fourth grade.

The correct way to type is using both hands without looking at them. This method strengthens communication between the left and right side of the brain, according to the study.

There is a period when children are believed to be the best at communicating. This time is from middle childhood (ages 9-11) to early adolescence (ages 12-13). For that reason, children should learn how to type as early as fourth grade and continue through eighth grade.

"It's not about teaching handwriting in isolation, or keyboarding," Berninger said. "It's always about teaching it as a tool for the really important thing: idea expression and communication."