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Tossing the Script: The End of the Line for Cursive?



The State of Education

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by BRIAN BRAIKER

Jan. 24, 2011

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The handwriting may be on the wall for cursive.

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At least that's what some people fear as schools across the country continue to drop cursive handwriting from their curricula.

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Forty-one states have so far adopted the new [Common Core State Standards for English](#), which does not require cursive. Set by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA), the standards provide a general framework for what students are expected to learn before college.

States are allowed the option of re-including cursive if they so choose, which is what Massachusetts and California have done.

But the latest to contemplate abandoning the script is Georgia, where teachers and administrators will meet in March to discuss erasing the longhand style from its lesson plans, says [Georgia Department of Education](#) spokesman Matt Cardoza.

The argument is that cursive is time-consuming and not as useful as the keyboard skills students will need as they move on to junior high and high school, he says.

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As it happens, cursive is also not on the tests that rate schools under the [No Child Left Behind](#) law, and increasingly schools gear their curricula to excel at those tests, says Kathleen Wright, a national project manager for Zaner-Bloser, a publisher of education writing materials.

"It's just not being assessed. That's the biggie," she says. "If it's not assessed, it tends to fall by a little because people are teaching to the test."

So what's the big deal if your little [John Hancock](#) doesn't have a big loopy cursive signature of his own?



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Antiquated or no, cursive is viewed by some parents and educators as essential to an education -- especially as text-happy teens become ever more thumb-centric.

"I've been disappointed in general with the public school system here," says Lisa Faircloth, a stay-at-home mother of two in Atlanta. She says she is pleased that her 7 year-old son Joe learned cursive.

"I feel like it has helped him with his fine motor skills and made him more graceful," she says. "He shows more of an interest in art because he is able to form things he hadn't before and has new muscle movements that he didn't know before."

The Neuroscience of Learning

Science backs her up. Increasingly the argument that students should be spending more time learning keyboard skills than cursive -- because that's the future! -- is beginning to look like a straw man.

"Of course it's important to know how to typewrite," says associate professor Anne Mangen at the University of Stavanger's Reading Centre. "But handwriting seems, based on empirical evidence from neuroscience, to play a larger role in the visual recognition and learning of letters.

"This is something one should be aware of in an educational context," she stresses.

In other words, those who learn to write by hand learn better.

Mangen points to an experiment involving two groups of adults in which participants were taught a new, foreign alphabet. One group learned the characters by hand, the other learned only to recognize them on a screen and with a keyboard.

Weeks after the experiment, the group that learned the letters by hand consistently scored better on recognition tests than those who learned with a keyboard. Brain scans of the hands-on group also showed greater activity in the [part of the brain](#) that controls language comprehension, motor-related processes and speech-associated gestures.

"Now we have studies that show for some important aspects of reading, digital technology may not be as important as handwriting," she says.

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For this and other reasons, Kathleen Wright of [Zaner-Bloser](#) isn't quite prepared to type out cursive's obituary. Technology has been the bogey man before, after all.

"I personally don't see it going away," she says. "When the typewriter first came in, people asked "is anyone going to write by hand any more?"

"And if you don't teach kids," she adds, "they won't have access to a lot of historical documents and primary source documents because they won't have learned cursive."

To which John Hancock might have texted "OMG."

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