

Why some Ohio kids are still mastering the lost art of cursive

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Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio -As children increasingly are exposed to screens from an early age, some Ohio students still learn to write with a flourish – and maybe getting added literacy benefits.

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce recently updated its [five-year-old guidance](#) for school districts that want to teach handwriting and cursive. Some districts in Northeast Ohio are following it. In fact, some schools never stopped teaching penmanship, although its importance has ebbed and flowed in the past 25 years.

Recent research has shown that, while schools must also teach keyboard typing, handwriting is essential to literacy. It forces students to slow down, think about word spelling and sentence structure – especially important when artificial intelligence in text messaging apps and word processors suggests words and spellings – and question whether the word they’re about to write precisely conveys what they’re trying to communicate.

Once children master handwriting, they don’t have to worry about letter formation and spacing, which frees them up for higher-level thinking and communication skills, [according to a summary of the research DEW provides in the handwriting guidance](#).

“The more easily you are able to write, the more time and energy that you have to actually focus on the generation of the text that you’re putting down on paper,” said Liesl Huenemann, DEW’s assistant administrator for English language arts, in a January interview.

Whether penmanship is on the rise in Ohio is unclear. DEW hasn’t surveyed districts to determine which use it. The state’s guidance outline why and how to teach handwriting, but it doesn’t require it.

Districts that use it, however, said it helps students become stronger readers and writers. Handwriting is especially helpful since Gov. Mike DeWine and the

legislature mandated schools use the instructional approach known as the science of reading, which emphasizes phonics, letter sounds and vocabulary, in hopes of boosting students' testing scores.

Handwriting is also championed in professional materials DEW gives to teachers on dyslexia, said Kristin Clark, Lakewood City School District's elementary coordinator of teaching and learning.

"There's such a link and close correlation between handwriting and learning to read," she said. "The Ohio Department of Education, they require districts to complete the dyslexia modules and science of reading modules. In both of those sets of modules – it's like an extensive professional learning experience in both of those sets – they talk about the role of handwriting and how students writing individual letters and spelling words has been shown to reinforce those skills of letter naming, phonemic (sound) awareness and word reading."

Cursive in the books

In 2019, state Sen. Andrew Brenner, a Delaware County Republican who was then serving in the Ohio House, [sponsored a bill that became law](#) with then-Rep. Marilyn Slaby, a Summit County Republican, to require state education officials create handwriting guidance.

Brenner said he wishes the bill would have mandated cursive in all schools. But to get the bill passed, the legislation made handwriting instruction optional because opponents called it an unfunded mandate, he said.

"The science behind it is that the kids are connecting the action of putting letters down, whether it's cursive or anything," said Brenner, who has a master's degree in education and now chairs the Ohio Senate Education Committee. "But they're connecting the letters to the sounds and the words. It's getting them to pull it all together so they're actually able to learn how to read and learn how to write."

After the bill became law, state education officials created handwriting guidance. The guidance puts handwriting under English language arts.

The most recent update, which occurred in November, aligns the research to the science of reading.

Another update is soon expected, in which DEW will provide districts a list of textbook publishers that have supplemental materials for handwriting, said Huenemann, of DEW.

The state has an approved list of textbooks that districts must choose for the science of reading. Some offer cursive instruction, while others don't.

Unlike math and English, cursive is not a learning standard in Ohio. Learning standards outline what students need to learn by grade.

However, there is a standard that students write legibly, said Melissa Weber-Mayrer, DEW's chief of literacy.

How it's working in schools

Districts, such as Lakewood and Westlake, begin teaching cursive in third grade and continue on into fourth grade. Solon City School District teaches it in second grade and continues to practice it through third grade.

Most districts do not grade penmanship, because it's not a state learning standard. However, students get feedback on their work.

Westlake City School District never stopped teaching cursive, although the level of focus it receives has risen and receded over the years, said Amanda Musselman, the district's associate superintendent.

"It's giving them such a valuable life skill, in addition to just your basic motor skills," she said. "Behind a screen, we're used to typing. We're used to texting and using our thumbs. We still have to teach fine motor and life skills, both of which are embedded in cursive handwriting."

Fine motor skills develop when a student learns to grip a pencil or pen, write within the lines of a paper, or trace letters. Students move their arms when writing, practice good posture and hold the paper as they write, she said.

These physical practices may be taken for granted by adults, but they all must be learned to prepare students for other physical activities they need as they get older, she said.

Reading cursive

Students who can't read cursive will struggle to read important historical documents, such as the Declaration of Independence.

"Beyond its practical applications, the ability to both write and read cursive is essential for studying foundational documents and historical writings, connecting our students with our shared heritage," said Tamara Strom, Solon City School District's spokeswoman.

Shaker Heights City School District never abandoned cursive, and John Moore, the director of curriculum and instruction, said in hindsight that was a good decision.

"Mainly because of the things we're finding with the science of reading, the science of writing, brain research about processing when writing. I feel pretty good about those developments.

"I think in another way our district has had a long-standing commitment to, I don't want to say to the classics... but we have a commitment to tradition, excellence in every form. Cursive is a part of this commitment of being able to access all kinds of reading, all kinds of writing, and a real commitment to primary research," he said.

For students who struggle

Anne Trubek, an author who founded Cleveland-based Belt Publishing, wrote in her [2016 book](#), "The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting," that cursive will inevitably be phased out.

For students who struggle to properly form the letters, Trubek wrote that would be good news.

Trubek wrote that her own son had to stay inside during many recesses as a child to work on handwriting. Homework and writing assignments provoked anxiety, and he came to believe he was a bad writer because he struggled with handwriting.

"I feel for any student assessed on his intelligence based on the quality of his penmanship," she wrote.