

# Is Handwriting On the Wall for Cursive?

by Cindy Hoedel (Kansas City Star, November 18, 2012)

Whenever the Kansas Board of Education meets to discuss curricular standards, the whole country grabs a tub of popcorn and sits up to watch the show.

Thankfully the topic this week is not creationism but cursive. Hopefully the board, which remains in the hands of moderates after the election, will make national headlines with a ringing endorsement of penmanship this time around.

It's a question many states are facing after the Common Core State Standards, a set of curriculum guidelines adopted by 45 states including Kansas, left out cursive handwriting instruction in favor of teaching keyboard skills.

Now states have to decide whether to require cursive instruction or leave it up to individual school districts.

The argument against teaching cursive goes like this: In the modern digital world, handwriting has become unnecessary. Students can sail all the way through the highest levels of a university education without ever having to set pen to paper. College applications, essays, note taking and tests can all be completed with a laptop, tablet or phone.

The problem is, that kind of reasoning leads to devolution (or de-creation, if you like). Being able to form letters with our hands is one thing that separates us from primates, who can be easily trained to use a keyboard. Why would we want to lose that ability?

In January, the American Association of School Administrators convened a summit called "Handwriting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" Research presented at the summit showed that handwriting is important to cognitive development and development of motor skills. Students with good handwriting show better results in critical thinking, reading, writing, language use and short-term memory than students with poor handwriting.

One study, by Virginia Berninger, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Washington, found that when students wrote compositions, those who used handwriting wrote more words, wrote words faster and expressed more ideas than those who used keyboarding.

"Cursive helps you connect things," Berninger said.

Another study showed that college kids who took notes by hand retained more and followed what the teacher was saying better than those who typed notes into a computer.

There are practical reasons for teaching cursive as well. Even if the next generation eschews handwritten missives for texting, wouldn't it be nice if they could read handwritten family journals, love letters, recipes and notations of the backs of photographs?

It's sad to imagine future Americans viewing the Declaration of Independence at the National Archives and Records Building in Washington, D.C., and finding it as inscrutable as hieroglyphics.

And presumably, in the near to medium future, there will still be documents to sign. What will signatures look like if kids don't learn what the Brits call joined-up writing?

In an emergency, writing by hand becomes a basic survival skill. In situations where your handheld device is dead or lost and you need to write down directions or instructions, cursive is faster and easier than block letter printing.

But I don't want to overemphasize pragmatic reasons. Lots of things that have little practical value have an essential place in education: art, dancing, Latin, spelling out loud and memorizing poems leap to mind. All those things make people more human and increase mental agility.

If I were a teacher, I would teach cursive using old-fashioned fountain pens and inkwells, or at least fountain pens with ink cartridges. There is a beauty to the varying thicknesses of the resulting script that you don't get with a ballpoint pen or a cursive font in word processing software.

I would also use the special lined paper with the dotted lines showing where the humps on the "m" and "n" go, and with extra space below the baseline for the loops of the "p" and "g." There is a certain joy that comes from mastering a fine-motor skill, especially one so closely linked to language and thought. When words literally flow from one letter into the next, so do thoughts.

So here's hoping the school board members put their John Hancocks on a recommendation to lift the curse on cursive and give the next generation of Kansans the gift of script.

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