



## Cursive slowly scribbled out of N.J. curriculums as computer skills gain value in schools

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By



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New Jersey used to name cursive in its academic standards: In 2004, third-graders were expected to "write legibly in manuscript or cursive to meet district standards." But while districts may still teach it, the state now does not mention cursive.

The bulletin board at the front of Melissa Balzano's classroom in West Orange is decorated with hand-written lists her students wrote in September, expressing their "Hopes and Dreams for Third Grade."

For at least half the children in Balzano's class at Mount Pleasant Elementary School, learning cursive topped the list.

"It's fancy writing," said Naomi Toms, 9. Cursive was once a mainstay of elementary schools, where children practiced the "tripod" pencil grip and the looping strokes of the letters. But these days little classroom time is spent teaching cursive writing, crowded out of the curriculum by the demands of an increasingly complex world.

Beyond that, some educators are asking whether the current generation of kids even needs to know how to write in longhand, given the reality of a world ruled by the keyboard.

The national Common Core State Standards, a set of academic standards adopted by New Jersey and most other states, do not specifically address cursive. Instead, they call for students to "develop and strengthen writing as needed." The standards do, however, expect grade-school children to learn to write on "a variety of digital tools" and to become proficient at keyboarding.

States can choose to teach cursive writing, but at least one — Indiana — formally de-emphasized it last year,

sparking an outcry from state legislators, some of whom considered trying to make teaching cursive mandatory.

New Jersey used to name cursive in its academic standards: In 2004, third-graders were expected to "write legibly in manuscript or cursive to meet district standards." But while districts may still teach it, the state now does not mention cursive.

"There is nothing in the code or the statutes that authorizes the DOE to require cursive handwriting," said Allison Kobus, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Education.

A Vanderbilt University study in 2007 found cursive still widely taught in grades one through three. Lead author Steve Graham said that in elementary classrooms — most of which don't have a computer for each child — most written work is still done by hand.

But Graham, now a professor at Arizona State University, said as kids use computers at home more, they write by hand less. Since handwriting improves through practice, he said, "you can see that will have an adverse effect."

Adding a twist to the battle between computers and cursive, there are now apps available that teach cursive on an iPad or smart phone. Graham said he's not seen them used in schools, and does not know if research has been done on whether they are effective.

Graham, who said he thinks all kids should be able to either print or write cursive fluently, also said standardized tests are moving onto computers — starting with the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. States will likely follow suit.

"I don't think it's going to disappear soon or quickly, but I do see emphasis on writing by hand is less than it was 10 years ago, and 10 years from now it will be less," he said.

Mia Zamora, an English professor at Kean University, rued cursive's decline as a "sign of our times."

"Teachers say it as a kind of horror story — 'guess what, we just heard that our elementary school is eliminating cursive,'" said Zamora, who is also director of the Kean University Writing Project.

Zamora said writing by hand helps understanding "in a more complex way" than cutting and pasting ideas. She also



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Teachers practiced cursive exercises their students will face during a learning session in how to teach fourth grade students in cursive writing, held at the Lincoln-Roosevelt School in Succasunna.

said if children can't write cursive, they won't be able to read it either — in everything from historic documents to a letter from Grandma.

"I think the stamp of our human uniqueness is in our cursive style, and to eliminate that is to move one step further away from what makes us humans," she said.

Even some young children seem to agree.

In Balzano's classroom at Mt. Pleasant Elementary School, students spent one recent morning practicing lower case "r's" and "s-s", kids gripping pencils and concentrating on their lined papers as the teacher carefully wrote letters on the smartboard.

"I like it because it looks better than normal writing," said Matthew Eng, 8.



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Tania Ferrandino, occupational therapist and national presenter, discusses the cursive letters during a learning session in how to teach fourth grade students in cursive writing, held at the Lincoln-Roosevelt School in Succasunna.

More than any other professionals, teachers have witnessed the decline of cursive up close.

When Eileen Lockburner began teaching in 1994, the internet was new, texting was unheard of, and not all students had computers at home. Written work was often done in cursive.

"I hate to think of cursive as a dying art, but I think that's kind of how it will be in the future," said Lockburner, now a fifth grade teacher in Roxbury.

Like West Orange, her district still teaches cursive. But Roxbury is using new curriculum that makes it quicker and easier, and standardizes instruction through its schools.

Teachers there recently attended a workshop to learn "Handwriting Without Tears," a program that teaches cursive with fewer loops and connectors, more vertical and easier to read. Cursive is taught in shorter bursts of time, too, just 10 to 15 minutes per day.

A dozen teachers spent two hours practicing on chalkboards and in workbooks, spelling out f-l-a-g and c-o-t in cursive.

"We really feel its part of the language experience. It's something children will have to do at some point," said Jenny

Wnuk, curriculum supervisor for K-6 humanities there. A former first grade teacher, Wnuk said she has seen an increase in the number of children who have difficulty picking up a pencil in the proper writing grip.

"We still feel it's important to teach," she said.

And grammar school pupils are by and large still enthusiastic to learn it, even if they don't see it being used much in the outside world.

Chris Mongelli, 9, in teacher Jennifer Schroeder's class at Mt. Pleasant, said he likes using cursive but added, "I hardly ever see my parents write letters. They just e-mail people."



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