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## Indiana

Education, From The Capitol To The Classroom

# Q&A: Should Schools Keep Teaching Both Cursive And Manuscript Handwriting?

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BY **KYLE STOKES**

Cursive handwriting today is so easy that schools might consider teaching it to kindergarteners instead of manuscript. This could be a way to save time for more keyboarding and word processing instruction.

That's one suggestion Vanderbilt University education professor and literacy expert Steve Graham offers in an interview with *StateImpact*. He talks about why many arguments about continuing to teach cursive are more "romantic" than practical.

We start off with Graham's reactions to research [we discussed in our last post](#):

**What can we take away from the [experiment out of Indiana University](#) suggesting an important link between handwriting instruction and the reading network of the brain?**

*Steve Graham:* It's very interesting, it needs to be done, this is a very good study, but this kind of finding is a long way from the classroom.

It's really correlational. I'm not sure what it means that more parts of the brain light up when you do handwriting versus when you find with any other activity. It's not necessarily surprising that particular parts of the brain light up when you do certain kinds of activities. With something like typing, that's a simpler motor skill, so I'd expect less of the brain to light up.

**So you say this isn't necessarily proof that we need to keep teaching handwriting in the classroom?**

I wouldn't take it that way. I think you can make a stronger behavioral case for why we need to teach handwriting, based on what the effect is on writing itself.

If your handwriting isn't very legible people form pretty strong ideas about the quality of the composition. That effect is so strong



VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY  
Vanderbilt University education professor Steve Graham, an expert in literacy, special education, and reading.

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that if you were to take an average piece of writing that was somewhat difficult to read and made it legible, you could move that piece of writing almost all the way to the top of the pack. If you were to take that piece of writing and make it very difficult to read, you could move all the way to the bottom of the pack without changing one word in the paper. These are really strong effects. Also, if your hand can't move fast enough with your mind, you lose ideas.



**Indiana's the latest state to drop its requirement that school teach cursive (because national curriculum standards adopted under the Common Core barely mention handwriting at all). But you've called arguments for continuing to teach cursive "romantic." What do you mean by that?**

You didn't hear me say 'cursive handwriting has a strong effect.' You heard me say 'handwriting has a strong effect.' About 90 percent of what kids do in school, in the average school, is done by hand. Given what I said earlier about how legibility can affect your grades, your fluency with this skill is important. The issue is, does it need to be cursive, or does it need to be handwriting?

The reason I say sometimes we have these romanticized views about cursive is right now cursive is getting pushed out of the way, in a sense, in some states. Some of the arguments are not as strong as you might like, they're more romantic about, 'It's nice to get a nice, hand-written card from somebody,' absolutely it's nice to get that. The other argument is, 'We won't be able to read the Constitution.' It's going to be harder to read, but that can be looked at in a printed copy. From a practical point of view, you know, it's not absolutely critical.

**So handwriting is important, but cursive isn't necessarily important?**

It could be that it's cursive that we teach, some countries start with cursive and that's all they teach. We've made the decision in this country to teach both. It's partially related to how it looked in the past when cursive script was much more elaborate. But the cursive script's very simple now, and we could be starting with cursive script and doing that in first grade or kindergarten.

I would make the case that we want kids to either be really fluent and legible in either manuscript and cursive or both, but also in keyboarding, and the issue is that's three versus teaching two, you know, there's a real push on time in schools.

**If there's such a time crunch, where does typing instruction come in?**

We should definitely be teaching kids keyboarding and we should definitely be bringing 21st century tools into the classroom. In addition, because handwriting's not going to go away, and the transition is not going to occur quickly, we have to make sure kids are legible and fluent in terms of handwriting. That could be cursive, it could be manuscript. That's a decision for individual states and individual schools to make, but, it would be a travesty for kids if we don't make sure they're not legible and fluent handwriters as well as fluent typists.

All this hoopla over Indiana's saying we shouldn't teach cursive beyond in third grade, is, in some ways a tempest in a teapot, because it's not happening now. There's very little handwriting instruction beyond third grade.

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## Did we screw up in crafting the Common Core standards?

Any kind of standards, something like the Common Core, aren't going to be perfect. They're the best estimate.

The Common Core actually represents a jump up in writing in general. Moving off the block of handwriting and looking at writing in general, there's an awful lot of kids who don't compose or write well. You have to chuckle a little bit at that, when you actually look above the third grade, kids are doing very little writing, and what writing they are doing is often things like filling in the blank or short answer.

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