

# Cursive No Longer A Focus In Many Schools

Education Focused  
On Teaching Kids  
To Use Technology

BY LISA BLACK  
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CHICAGO — Vicki Zurkowski wonders if today's cursive handwriting will be tomorrow's hieroglyphics — an ancient form of writing decipherable by only a few experts in a specialized field.

The Elmhurst, Ill., mother was disturbed to learn that her children's school district will spend less time teaching the flowing loops of cursive in order to squeeze more 21st-century lessons, such as keyboarding, into the classroom day.

"We are losing an art," said Zurkowski, who wonders how her two youngest children will develop a unique signature or read notes written on greeting cards. "Maybe it's something I will have to teach my kids myself."

Others were also shocked when Elmhurst School District 205 announced in a recent newsletter that cursive will be scaled back in the third-grade curriculum to "prepare students to function in a technologically advanced society."

Elsewhere in Illinois, school districts have also begun to downplay cursive to conform to a new set of "common core standards" adopted last year. At least 44 other states have signed on to the new standards, which dictate the skills students should learn at each grade level. The program sets the stage for a national standardized exam to measure how students compare state to state, beginning in 2014.

The national standards do not include cursive. They do include writing with digital tools — such as keyboards or tablet computers. That has provoked some angst in places such as Indiana, which dropped its cursive requirements when adopting the national program.

Illinois has never required cursive as a learning standard, leaving control to local school districts, said Mary Fergus, spokeswoman for the Illinois State Board of Education.

The national trend concerns some parents who remember spending hours painstakingly perfecting their loops and curls for legibility and speed. Yet many recognize that their teenage children rarely use this graceful style of writing, which some say is no longer relevant now that even historical documents such as the



A student types on a laptop after finishing a cursive lesson in Gen Bentley's third-grade class at Bannockburn Elementary School, September 23, 2011. The students learn both cursive handwriting and typing.

Declaration of Independence can be quickly downloaded as printed text.

"I do think there will be this tug on people's hearts, that we are losing something," said Linda Karlen Elliott, an Elmhurst parent who also teaches writing at Oakton Community College. "But we are losing it anyway. ... I don't see the kids being very upset about it."

With the prevalence of computers, fewer students are assigned projects that require handwritten prose. By high school, most are required to compose papers electronically.

Some teens say they have had so little practice that they can't read or write cursive.

"The only cursive I ever use is just my signature now," said Danny Blitstein, 18, a senior at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, who believes the last time he wrote in cursive was in fifth grade. "When it stopped being mandatory, I stopped using it."

At issue for educators is whether cursive is an essential part of a child's early grade-school years, and how much time should be devoted to it. No one has suggested eliminating the teaching of manuscript, or

print, handwriting.

Studies have shown that writing by hand in any form increases memory, helps students learn to pronounce words when learning to read, and sharpens fine motor skills.

"Handwriting, be it manuscript or cursive, offers kinesthetic practice that strengthens reading and writing skills," said Gen Bentley, a third-grade teacher at Bannockburn Elementary School. "In my experience, some children are more successful with cursive than they are with manuscript."

In Elmhurst, students will

learn to write in manuscript in kindergarten and first grade and will focus on electronic keyboarding skills in third through fifth grades, according to the newsletter sent to parents. Students will get a template of the alphabet written in cursive and will have cursive nameplates on their desks to help them recognize and write their name, it states.

"We just need to be sure people know that we are not eliminating cursive," said Melea Smith, District 205 spokeswoman.

But when asked how many

minutes a day would be spent on cursive, and how that compares with past years, an administrator declined to be specific.

"Since the de-emphasis is so new, it is going to be hard to determine in advance how long it takes for students to acquire letter recognition capabilities," Charles Johns, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, wrote in an emailed response to questions. "We will collect feedback over time and make whatever adjustments that we can make."

He said few parents had complained to principals.

Steve Graham, professor of education at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., fears that elementary students are spending less time on writing in general, whether it is manuscript or cursive.

"There is not a whole lot of writing instruction after third grade," said Graham, who conducted a national survey of primary school teachers in 2007.

Handwriting remains important because it influences both the reader and writer, Graham said. Children who don't master handwriting may avoid writing altogether.

"On the reader end, it is about legibility," Graham said. "If your handwriting is so illegible you can't read it ... there's a much more insidious effect. People form judgments about the quality of your ideas based on your legibility of handwriting. It influences your grades."

That doesn't surprise Jeanette Jordan, writing coordinator for Glenbrook North High School, who insists that her seventh-grade daughter use cursive when writing letters to relatives.

"It looks more, I don't know, polite," she said.

Yet some educators are puzzled by the reluctance to drop cursive.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals has not taken a position on it, saying the decision is best left to local leaders. But Rob Monson, president of the association, said he sees no need for his own first-grade son to learn cursive.

"Basically, you sign a contract or a check," said Monson, a principal in Parkston, S.D. "That is the extent that most people use cursive."

He said cursive is the most difficult skill taught in elementary grades "because cursive is actually an art form."

"There are some people who are good in art and some who aren't."

## Wis. School Unions To Try To Recertify

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — More than 200 school unions in Wisconsin have met the deadline to seek recertification, but it's unclear how many let it pass and gave up the little bargaining powers they had left under a contentious new law.

The law backed by Republican Gov. Scott Walker strips public unions of their ability to negotiate anything except wage increases, which are limited to the

cost of living.

Unions without existing contracts must hold recertification elections to determine if they can formally represent members in those negotiations.

Friday was the deadline for school employee unions to tell the state they wanted an election. About 212 met the deadline. But Wisconsin has 425 school districts and each could potentially have multiple union chapters.



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