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The Handwriting Is on the Wall

Researchers See a Downside as Keyboards Replace Pens in Schools

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Wednesday, October 11, 2006; A01

The computer keyboard helped kill shorthand, and now it's threatening to finish off longhand.

When handwritten essays were introduced on the SAT exams for the class of 2006, just 15 percent of the almost 1.5 million students wrote their answers in cursive. The rest? They printed. Block letters.

And those college hopefuls are just the first edge of a wave of U.S. students who no longer get much handwriting instruction in the primary grades, frequently 10 minutes a day or less. As a result, more and more students struggle to read and write cursive.

Many educators shrug. Stacked up against teaching technology, foreign languages and the material on standardized tests, penmanship instruction seems a relic, teachers across the region say. But academics who specialize in writing acquisition argue that it's important cognitively, pointing to research that shows children without proficient handwriting skills produce simpler, shorter compositions, from the earliest grades.

Scholars who study original documents say the demise of handwriting will diminish the power and accuracy of future historical research. And others simply lament the loss of handwritten communication for its beauty, individualism and intimacy.

"It's like so many other things in our society -- there's a sense of loss for what once was," said Laura B. Smolken, a professor of elementary education and early childhood development at the University of Virginia.

At Keene Mill Elementary in Springfield, Debbie Mattocks teaches cursive once a week to her gifted-and-talented group of third-graders -- mainly so they can read it. All their poems and stories are typed. Children in Fairfax County schools are taught keyboarding beginning in kindergarten.

"I can't think of any other place you need cursive as an adult other than to sign your name," she said. "Cursive -- that is so low on the priority list, we really could care less. We are much more concerned that these kids pass their SOLs [standardized tests], and that doesn't require a bit of cursive."

Older students who never mastered handwriting say it doesn't affect their grades. "A lot of kids have just awful handwriting. . . . Teachers don't take off points for poor handwriting," said Matt Paragamian, a 10th-grader at St. Albans School in Northwest Washington. Many of his classmates take notes in class on their

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Until the 1970s, penmanship was a separate daily lesson through sixth grade, said Dennis Williams, national product manager for Zaner-Bloser Handwriting, the most widely used penmanship curriculum. At its peak in the 1940s and '50s, most teachers insisted on as much as two hours a week, but a 2003 Vanderbilt University survey of primary-grade teachers found that most now spend 10 minutes a day or less on the subject. To adapt to this new reality, the Zaner-Bloser method has been changed to a 15-minute daily plan.

In Montgomery County, schools "don't have separate handwriting instruction for handwriting's sake," said spokesman Brian Edwards. Only a handful of schools in Prince George's County teach handwriting. Fairfax educators struggle to include penmanship.

"It is hard to fit it in," said Pat Fege, the county's language arts coordinator. The goal now is only to produce legible handwriting, Fege said. "It's just not the vehicle it once was."

There are those who say the culture is at a crossroads, turning permanently from the written word to the typed one. If handwriting becomes a lost form of communication, does it matter?

It was at U-Va. that researchers recently discovered a previously unknown poem by Robert Frost, written in his signature script. Handwritten documents are more valuable to researchers, historians say, because their authenticity can be confirmed. Students also find them more intriguing.

"They feel closer to that person as an actual human, that somebody actually wrote that just like me," said Jim Mohr, a professor of U.S. history at the University of Oregon at Eugene, who wrote a book on diaries from the Civil War. "There's a kind of personal authenticity to individual writing that's hard to capture any other way."

The loss of handwriting also may be a cognitive opportunity missed. The neurological process that directs thought, through fingers, into written symbols is a highly sophisticated one. Several academic studies have found that good handwriting skills at a young age can help children express their thoughts better -- a lifelong benefit. Children who don't learn correct technique find it harder to write by hand, so they avoid it. Schools that do teach handwriting often stop after third grade -- right after kids learn cursive. By the time computers are more widely used in classrooms for writing, perhaps in fourth or fifth grade, many children already have decided they don't like to write.

In one of the studies, Vanderbilt University professor Steve Graham, who studies the acquisition of writing, experimented with a group of first-graders in Prince George's County who could write only 10 to 12 letters per minute. The kids were given 15 minutes of handwriting instruction three times a week. After nine weeks, they had doubled their writing speed and their expressed thoughts were more complex. He also found corresponding increases in their sentence construction skills.

But Graham worries that students who remain printers, rather than writing in cursive, need more time to take notes or write essays for the SAT. Teachers may say they don't deduct for bad handwriting in class, but research tells another story, he said.

When adults are given the same composition written in good handwriting and poor handwriting, "they still give lower grades for ideation and quality of writing if the text is less legible," he said.

Indeed, the SAT essays written in cursive had slightly higher average scores than those written in print, according to the College Board.

It doesn't take much to teach better handwriting skills. At some schools in Prince George's County, elementary school students use a program called Handwriting Without Tears for 15 minutes a day. They learn the correct formation of manuscript letters through second grade, and cursive letters in third grade.

In a recent daily exercise, the second-graders at Yorktown Elementary School in Bowie carefully formed letters on individual chalkboards -- first with a wet sponge, then with a tissue, then in chalk and finally in pencil in a workbook. In the future, these kids will produce far more legible letters than kids without this kind of specialized instruction, said Lynne Maydag, the school's handwriting coordinator.

There are always going to be some kids who struggle with handwriting because of their particular neurological wiring, learning issues or poor fine motor skills, teachers said in interviews. For those kids in particular, the growing dominance of typing is liberating because they can write without stumbling over letter formation. Educators often point to this factor in support of keyboarding.

Paragamian, the St. Albans sophomore, was never great at handwriting, and says he can barely read or write cursive even now.

It doesn't bother him. "These days it doesn't matter," he said, "because any important thing you turn in is typed."

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