

Handwriting and the Common Core State Standards

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Since the launch of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, there has been plenty of talk about a noticeable exclusion: handwriting. The CCSS include standards for legible manuscript writing in kindergarten and grade 1, but that's where their attention to this essential skill ends. What does this mean for the future of handwriting instruction?

According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative, the CCSS "do not describe all that can or should be taught."¹ States are encouraged to view the CCSS as a basic framework and to expand on them as they deem necessary. This gives states the option to include handwriting in their curriculums, which several states have already decided to do. For example, California has amended the CCSS to include manuscript in grade 2 and cursive in grades 3 and 4. Massachusetts also includes cursive in their standards; they require legible handwriting (either manuscript or cursive) in fourth grade. Other states, such as Ohio and Indiana, allow local school districts to decide whether to include handwriting beyond what the CCSS require.

In recent years, handwriting has gradually become less of a priority, while more and more emphasis is placed on technology instruction and anything that appears on standardized tests. However, current research shows an important connection between writing by hand and learning. One study involving brain scans, training sessions, and behavioral testing determined that participants who wrote out new letterforms instead of typing them had increased brain activity. An active brain was proven to respond better to the act of learning new letterforms, indicating that information written by hand stimulates the brain and provides an increase in awareness to then retain the written information.²

Dr. Judy Willis, a neurologist-turned-teacher, also advocates writing to learn. In her blog, she states, "The practice of writing can enhance the brain's intake, processing, retaining, and retrieving of information. Through writing, students can increase their comfort with and success in understanding complex material, unfamiliar concepts, and subject-specific vocabulary."³ Research shows that the cognitive process of writing by hand improves both retention and comprehension of information in a way that simply does not occur when typing. While the importance of keyboarding instruction cannot be denied, it appears that handwriting instruction is equally important (or perhaps even more so, as this skill enhances learning across the curriculum).

Despite a noticeable gap in the Common Core State Standards for handwriting, recent research supports keeping it in the curriculum. As studies have shown, denying young learners instruction in this most basic of skills may actually hinder their learning in other areas. Perhaps this new information will encourage states to amend the Common Core State Standards and include handwriting in their curriculums.

REFERENCES

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