

Memorandum

To: Carol Costello, Superintendent of Schools
From: John Campbell, Elementary Curriculum Coordinator
Date: October 3, 2023
Re: Report on Cursive Handwriting



Information on Cursive Handwriting

After some discussion at a previous School Committee Meeting, you asked me to gather some information on cursive handwriting. I have gathered this information from a variety of resources, including Wikipedia.

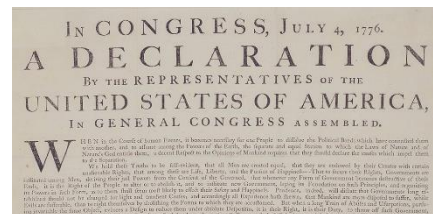
Cursive writing has been described as, “any style of penmanship in which characters are written joined in a flowing manner”. It has been in use since ancient times across the globe. It’s rise (and subsequent fall from favor) is in many ways “technology driven”. Early writing relied on the use of quill pens, which were easily broken and spattered ink when lifted and replaced on the writing surface. The subsequent development of the steel dip quill made the implement more durable, but still made cursive writing preferable to block printing.

Interestingly, it is a technological development – the invention of the ball point pen - that began the decline of cursive writing. This new invention guaranteed that the ink would not smudge and it did not require such careful penmanship. After World War II, the ballpoint pen was mass-produced and sold for a cheap price, changing the way people wrote. Obviously, subsequent technologies further impacted the focus on cursive writing.

Cursive writing has not been formally taught in the Berlin-Boylston Schools for at least the last eleven years. In fact, it is only in the last two years that we have adopted a district-wide handwriting curriculum, called “*Handwriting Without Tears*”. This was implemented with the strong endorsement of our Occupational Therapist, Betsy Trudeau. The Massachusetts ELA Frameworks from 2017 are agnostic on this matter – the standard, which starts in Grade Three – simply states that students be able to, “Write legibly and fluently by hand, using either printing or cursive handwriting.”

Arguments that come up in a discussion of Cursive Writing

- *Students won’t be able to read historical documents*
 - As has been noted, cursive handwriting has been in use for generations. Many of our own uniquely American documents were first drafted in cursive writing. While there is some truth to this, experts point out two things.



The mission of Berlin Memorial School is to empower each student to achieve personal excellence by fostering respect, responsibility, and resourcefulness with the support of the entire community.

First, documents like the Declaration of Independence were written in a mix of cursive and block printing (this was Jefferson's typical writing style) and only converted to the elaborate cursive documents that we see on display by professional calligraphers. Second, when those documents were distributed to the broader community they were printed on a press, which only offered block printing. As a result, these documents are easily accessed by non-cursive writers.

- *Cursive writing is faster than block printing*
 - This has been a long-held belief. In fact, the word *cursive* comes from the ancient Latin ***curre*** which means *to run or hasten*. While there are some studies that question this idea, the predominant thought is that - of the two writing styles – well-practiced cursive is more efficient.
- *Cursive helps students with dyslexia*
 - There is also some anecdotal evidence that this is true, especially when compared to keyboarding. It is, however, much more difficult for students with dysgraphia.
- *Cursive promotes deeper learning when used in classroom note taking*
 - This is one of the more interesting findings. Skilled keyboardists (those who can “touch-type”) can record classroom lectures almost verbatim. However, because of the automaticity of typing, those individuals do not meaningfully interact with the ideas they are recording. Students who take notes by hand – whether in cursive or block print – are forced, because the process is slower, to *summarize* the information being presented.
- *Students must be able to sign their names in cursive*
 - This is just not true. The requirement is to “make one’s mark”. Even if electronic signing were not becoming commonplace, most adults do not use formal cursive writing to sign their names. I would refer you to the most recent teacher’s contract for several examples of distinctly ***non-cursive*** signatures.

Where do we go from here?

There are some relative benefits to using cursive handwriting, that is clear. However, I would suggest to you that cursive handwriting is a “nice to have” rather than a “need to have”. Any perceived benefit must be weighed against the lost time on essential learning. We can not tell ourselves that we are going to improve student performance in math and literacy, that we value above all else that reading is an essential skill that all students can learn, and then accept that we are going to devote classroom time to the development of cursive handwriting. There is already so much that students must know and be able to do, so much ground that our teachers are expected to cover - that is where we should be focusing our time and energy.

There are other alternatives to classroom instruction on this topic. Last year, Missy Tucker held a cursive writing club during recess for interested students. It’s also been suggested as an afterschool program. Interested families could pursue this interest at home (it’s how I learned to use a slide rule). I would simply suggest, however, that we not allow this optional activity to crowd out more essential parts of our elementary school curriculum.