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Have keys replaced pencils and pens?

By Olivia Goldberg



Jason Rearick / The Citizen

Joey Delaney writes the letter "F" as Kian Russell and Corey Smith watch during Morgan Boney's kindergarten class at Cayuga Elementary School in the Union Springs Central School District.

Michael Anthony, an attentive Union Springs fifth-grader, took time after a keyboarding class one recent drizzly morning to carefully pen his name.

A confident 10-year-old, he affirmed the frequent compliments he gets from teachers at A.J. Smith Elementary on his penmanship.

Yet even Michael couldn't master a trick Elsie Hoag learned when she was in fifth-grade back in 1936: 70 years later, Hoag can still balance a penny on the back of her wrist while she writes.

Back in her day at Homer Elementary School, it paid to have good penmanship. Classroom competitions called for students to start with pennies on their wrists.

With increased proficiency, the teacher would increase the coins' value to nickels, then dimes.

Hoag, now 79, recalled having won that dime on occasion.

To this day the Auburn resident writes her name in wonderful, broad loops and tapering spires that illustrate her delight in taking pen to paper, proving the value of her

lessons stayed with her long after she'd spent the coins.

"If people can write well, then they can use their imagination and ... express themselves in the written way," she said.

Yet people living in today's world tend to express their thoughts differently: via e-mails and text messages. Whole glossaries are devoted to deciphering cyber-speak and younger generations are getting away from handwriting and growing more accustomed to texting. An article in Britain's Guardian nearly five years ago reported that, thanks to hand-held technology like GameBoys and mobile phones, "the thumbs of the younger generation have overtaken their fingers as the hand's most muscled and dexterous digit. In Japan, the technology trend recently gave rise to a new moniker for the under 25 set: oya yubi sedai, or the thumb tribe."

Meanwhile, in area schools, murmurs in the break room are amplifying on the topic of children who arrive to kindergarten unable to hold a crayon or a pair of scissors. School occupational therapists are noticing a remarkable number of referrals around handwriting problems. These two phenomena - combined with the increased use of handheld games and computers among today's young, technology-enriched consumers - have quietly highlighted an increasingly controversial subject in the education world: how to teach handwriting in school.

Some experts say developmental shortcomings, coupled with inadequacies in today's handwriting curricula, may contribute to deficits in student literacy. Increasingly, they're betting on the latest generation of handwriting programs to help raise achievement.

Recent generations have felt the tug between technology and the demands of school, which insist handwriting is just as important to their future. The state Department of Education has incorporated handwriting competencies into its overall standards for English Language Arts (ELA) curricula (which fall increasingly under state scrutiny, along with math scores).

The myriad literacy skills educators want students to develop throughout their school lives - the ability to process information and analyze texts, write well-thought-out reports, back up an opinion with evidence from a text, and develop a personal writing voice - can only progress when a child has learned to literally grasp the tools he needs to write his own name.

The occupational therapists

“A lot of kids come to school not knowing how to hold a pencil,” said Kirsta Malone, an occupational therapist who works with schoolchildren in Union Springs. She's seen the good majority of her caseload referred for handwriting problems.

According to developmental progress charts, children ought to have mastered a “mature grasp” for handwriting - with the hand resting firmly on a piece of paper - by age 5.

Malone's observations of children's weak grasps prompted her to articulate what some teachers are afraid to say publicly: that the nature of play time at home - namely the electronic hand-held games favored by children - contributes not just to poor handwriting skills, but to concurrent problems with coordination and weak muscle tone.

“So many toys are just push-a-button-get-a-response,” Malone said, adding that many children who attend day care might also be missing out on structured play time with manipulative tools like crayons, blocks or clay. Malone advocates using any toy that requires assembly (and not in the commercial sense): Leggos, “pop” beads, blocks ... “anything they can put together.”

The fine motor skills those toys encourage in children - the use of smaller muscles in the hand - equip them for an introduction to handwriting.

Malone's professional peers echoed her observations.

Joan Meyers is an occupational therapist who works with preschoolers at the Gavras Center in Auburn.

Some children she and her colleague, Jennifer McNabb, see with weak internal palm muscles often also lack muscle tone in their upper bodies or “trunks.” To prepare children developmentally as well as ready them for the demands of school, McNabb and Meyers try getting little ones to develop stability in their trunks and shoulders by putting them on scooter boards or getting them to “wheelbarrow walk.”

“If we didn't address it now, we'd probably be helping children catch up to their peers (later),” McNabb said.

McNabb, Meyers and Malone deferred to Jan Z. Olsen, an authority on the subject of handwriting.

Olsen, an occupational therapist in Maryland, designed a handwriting curriculum 10 years ago called Handwriting Without Tears. The lesson plan has garnered praise nationally, and in Cayuga County, is progressively winning teachers over. Cato-Meridian Elementary School is implementing the program schoolwide, and other school districts have begun piloting the program in their lower grades.

It effectively nips in the bud tendencies of small children to write their letters backward or start them at the bottom of a line: one of its earliest lessons involves encouraging uniform habits in children to start their letters at the top left hand side of a page or a line.

Olsen identified the fighting words so often used by parents and teachers who frequently find themselves on opposite sides of the same coin: “Teachers are saying, 'Kids aren't coming to us prepared.' Parents are saying, 'When we send them to school you don't teach them.’”

She described cultural and educational problems “across the board” that stemmed from a lack of modeling on both ends.

“Parents need to teach children how to hold a pencil like they'd teach a child how to hold a knife and fork and spoon,” she said. “And teachers are using worksheets, as opposed to writing on the board. Seeing somebody do something is the best way to learn to do it.”

Yet educators, Olsen noted, haven't emerged from school with handwriting curriculums under their belts since about 1975.

The Teachers

With advanced degrees in elementary and special education from Daemen College and Walden University, Morgan Boney couldn't remember a time during her combined seven-year course of study when her teaching instructors touched on handwriting.

“There was nothing we talked about, nothing we learned, which is so shocking now that I'm here,” she said.

“Here” for Boney is Cayuga Elementary School in Union Springs, where she spent four years teaching kindergarten and first-grade students receiving special education services. Last year, she began teaching kindergarten students in the general education curriculum.

She recalled needier students who'd crumple their worksheets at the mere start of a lesson or worse and then dissolve into “full-out tantrums.” “They hated everything to do with handwriting,” Boney said.

The same went for kindergartners in the general education population whose reluctance - however more mild - Boney attributed to anxiety and uncertainty.

“They would be crying, 'I don't want to,' and there were a lot of 'I can't's.’”

This year, Boney, with two other kindergarten classes at Cayuga Elementary, are piloting Handwriting Without Tears. Prior to implementing that lesson plan, the school had not used a uniform tool to teach handwriting, favoring - like other schools - the Open Court method: a collection of established literacy teaching resources available for grades K-6 and now available online.

“I pulled materials from every which way,” Boney said, noting that had she learned more in school about administering handwriting (curriculums), “I would have been more knowledgeable and had a bag of tricks to pull from instead of coming with my bag empty.”

Boney's colleague, Mary Cuthbert, hasn't encountered exactly the same issues with handwriting curriculums in her classroom. That's partly because Cuthbert teaches third-graders - children who've already gone through the rigors of learning to print out their names, and are ready to move on to lessons in cursive handwriting.

“For some children it's easier (to write) in cursive,” she said, adding the task of connecting letters to one another discourages children from forming their letters backward.

“You find its difficult to reverse a b or a d,” she said.

Boney and Cuthbert's colleague, Michelene Lavey, sort of shrugged off the laborious task of teaching handwriting. Lavey is a 20-year veteran teacher at A.J. Smith Elementary in Union Springs, which goes from grades four to six. She's spent the last seven years guiding students through lessons in keyboarding - -a subject she recalled entering the public school system at least 10 years ago.

Though handwriting does not fall in her purview these days, Lavey shook her head at the idea schools are still made to place such weight on such an antiquated subject. Echoing Joan Meyers, Lavey said that were it not for state mandates, she'd not have much use for the notion of teaching what she viewed as a superfluous skill - especially in today's increasingly techno-savvy climate.

“It's a nice thing to have, but not necessary,” she said.

Teaching the Teachers

Cathy Leogrande, an associate professor of education at LeMoyne College, summed up the arguments against implementing handwriting curriculums in public schools like this: “It's not a big deal if people can't or can write. We're a computer-driven world and it's much more important to teach keyboarding to little kids.”

Leogrande said that at LeMoyne, students spend some time practicing on the paper and on the blackboard - long enough to call their attention to problems if they do in fact exist. But that's about all.

“My personal opinion is it's gone away because of the time crunch - there are so many other things put into (teachers' responsibilities) today,” she said.

Efficiency is certainly the goal at Cayuga Elementary, where classes go from kindergarten to third-grade

“There are so many other things we want kids to be able to do, so it becomes not a matter of teaching them how to write, but helping them write to learn,” said Jill Zerillo, the principal.

“In the old days, actually learning cursive (handwriting) was the point,” she said. “In today's world, kids have to know how to type or use e-mail. We can't spend a half hour on cursive and a half hour on typing. It's too time-consuming.”

Zerillo's is a sentiment expressed by a number of professionals and members of the public at large. As Joan Meyers described 4-year-olds in her class of 20 who either use their entire arm or work from the elbow to the wrist to write or draw, she also expressed ambivalence about the emphasis placed on teaching handwriting today. Observation tells her the practice may be falling increasingly by the wayside in the face of technological advances.

As she put it, “What's important is determined by what you need to do to be a functioning citizen.”

Yet some say the drive toward efficacy is misguided. The emphasis, they say, should be on taking as much time in the classroom as possible to make sure handwriting comes to students automatically, and that they're able to write fluently. Skimping on that time can exacerbate existing blocks in cognitive energy and impede students from mastering automatically in penmanship.

In her previous life as a school psychologist in the Southern Cayuga Central School District, Kris Munger was “besieged” with referrals to her office for younger and older students who presented with problems in handwriting.

“Kids wouldn't write. They were frustrated. They would shut down and not do it,” she said.

By the time those students hit seventh-grade, the struggle for penmanship and legibility was all but over. Students with long-established poor grips, already accustomed to using e-mail and instant-messaging, were more inclined to use computers to turn out their work.

Today, Munger is pursuing her Ph.D. in reading education at Syracuse University. She also spends time training educators at the Teachers' Center in Auburn who are starting to clamor for more tutoring in early handwriting curriculums. Considering whether the onus of responsibility for handwriting instruction should fall on teachers or families, Munger didn't miss a beat.

"It falls more on teachers, definitely," she said, reasoning that handwriting is not learned intuitively.

Munger decried public biases that dismiss the practice of handwriting as little more than an ornamental art and favor technology instead. She pointed to wide bodies of research that report the process of forming letters and learning their sounds helps younger children understand how letters connect to one another. Technology, though, becomes more relevant as students get older.

"It's not either-or," Munger said. "Why not have both?"

She and Olsen also agreed that while handwriting deficits may not necessarily affect children who come from wealthier families (who can supply their households with computers and other kinds of technology), the same weaknesses would be devastating for poor children.

Pointing to the devastation of GED students overwhelmed at the task of writing and subsequently unable to complete an exam, Munger has advocated for kids with handwriting deficits to be given the choice of working with technology.

As she put it, "To not have the flexibility to have a choice, what a bummer."

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