In June of 2011, the Indiana Department of Education joined the ranks of school systems that no longer required the teaching of cursive writing. In a memo sent to school leaders, the department stated that in accordance with the Common Core standards, students will be “expected to become proficient in keyboarding skills,” rather than handwriting.

In February of 2013, the Indiana Senate voted to advance a “cursive bill” requiring schools to teach cursive writing, reversing the 2011 decision.

This, in a nutshell, sums up the handwriting debate erupting across the country in the 21st century.

Should schools continue to teach handwriting in the digital age? When I asked the question in a segment for BAM Radio, I was surprised that none of the three panelists felt as strongly as I did about maintaining the tradition.

Steve Graham, professor of special education and literacy at Vanderbilt University, whose research interests include writing instruction and development, said that we’re using a 20th-century tool in a 21st-century world and that we really need to step up to the current century. Lisa Guernsey, director of the Early Education Initiative at the New America Foundation, pointed out that children
want to keyboard, to write more fluently and get ideas out of their heads as fast as possible. And Anne Trubek, an associate professor of rhetoric and composition at Oberlin College, was outspoken in her view that we do away with handwriting instruction. She stated the following:

We have these larger cultural connections to handwriting as a sense of identity and self-expression. It has to be put into the context of nostalgia and history and separated from educational goals.

After the segment went live on the BAM website, I started an online forum discussion on the topic and was stunned, not only by the number of comments but also by the passion with which educators approached the topic—on both sides. I was gratified to find some support here.

On the “con” side, it was argued that handwriting will soon be as obsolete as hunting for food with a bow and arrow and that those concerned with a small child’s inability to reach all of the keys on a keyboard should think about “moving forward”—by making “baby keyboards.” Do we really want children spending even more time in front of screens?

One respondent countered:

Make all the esoteric arguments you like. This is something that affects students NOW. I tutor many children who still have to get by in a pencil and paper world—and many of them are functionally crippled by the act of handwriting. They must hand write responses in their testing booklets and without proper handwriting skills, they write incomplete thoughts—sketchy frameworks and wisps of ideas—rather than fight the muscle fatigue. Unless it’s possible (or even desirable) for students to use only keyboards or touch screens at all times, proper handwriting must remain a valued skill.

As for me, I firmly believe that we must keep handwriting instruction in the curriculum.

It’s true that I’ve been accused on several occasions of being old-fashioned, particularly when it comes to the use of technology (especially in early education). But having spent 35 years specializing in the education of the whole child, I know it’s necessary for children to have as many fine- and gross-motor experiences as possible! And I’m not going to apologize for it.

Indeed, Christy Isbell, a pediatric occupational therapist, confirmed for me that handwriting promotes manipulation and finger isolation skills that are useful for other fine-motor activities, including
self-care and use of technology. And I know from my own work that learning to write by hand has a positive impact on emergent literacy, as it gives children an important opportunity to physically experience the spatial orientation and directionality of letters in a way that keyboarding simply can’t.

A policy update on the handwriting debate from the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) in September of 2012 pointed out several educational benefits of learning to write by hand. They included cognitive development, motor skills development, literacy development, written expression, memory, and brain development.

Regarding the latter, Virginia Berninger, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, has written that cursive writing in particular is linked to self-regulation and mental organization.

And neurophysiologist Carla Hannaford told me in an e-mail that the research around the area of the brain dedicated to the hand (both sensory and motor) shows that the hand is essential to both verbalization and increased creative thought. Also, we know that cursive writing activates both hemispheres of the brain—and that carpal bone development in the hand is very slow. Printing and typing take much more carpal bone development than does cursive writing.

It is research such as this that’s prompting states to reconsider—and reverse—decisions to remove handwriting instruction from the curriculum.

With all due respect to Anne Trubek, this is about more than nostalgia.

I’ll admit that recently, as I crafted a handwritten thank you note to a conference organizer who’d invited me to deliver a keynote, I pondered how sad it would be if in the future, no one ever received a note written by hand. So, yes, nostalgia plays a part in my thinking. But, beyond that, I worry that we can be too quick to embrace the latest technologies without considering the long-term consequences (it is so easy to succumb to the lure of the newest gadgets), and it is my hope that schools will not look at cursive and keyboarding as an either/or proposition.

Yes, keyboarding is quicker—and we are a nation in a hurry. But faster isn’t always better. And are there not some things that nature intended that technology can’t replace? I mean, if we all had access to Segways, would we simply stop walking?
If handwriting instruction is frowned upon by your school or district, use the information below (I recently conducted a second radio program in order to serve the cause) to advocate for it. Take the research to your administrators and school board. Write letters to the newspaper or blog about it online. Garner support via social media, which is a powerful way to create change in this day and age.

- Present the research to parents. They want the best for their children and may be your greatest allies.
- Teach it anyway. And if that’s truly not possible, provide parents with information on how they can offer the instruction at home.

Where to Learn More

- “Why Handwriting Still Matters in the Digital Age”
- “The Handwriting Debate”—a policy update from the NASBE
  www.hw21summit.com/media/zb/hw21/H2989_NASBE_PolicyUpdate_TheHandwritingDebate.pdf
- “Can You Imagine the World Without Handwriting?”
  www.hw21summit.com/
- “Why Learning to Write by Hand Matters”
  www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/03/12/24vachon.h33.html
- “What’s Lost As Handwriting Fades”
  www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/science/whats-lost-as-handwriting-fades.html?_r=0