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INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

A pen, a pencil, and a sheet of blank paper still have clout at Plymouth Meeting Friends School.

But the decision wasn't easy.

The faculty at the 149-student school in Montgomery County has been discussing the role of handwriting instruction in an era when so much communication comes by way of taps on a keyboard.

"It's still relevant," said Maura Sutherland, language-arts specialist at the school, which covers prekindergarten to sixth grade. "Strong handwriting skills absolutely help [students] become better readers, writers, and thinkers."

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For now, the school has decided that handwriting instruction - printing *and* cursive - remains an important component of preparing a child for the outside world. Their longhand must be clear to read even if they don't use it as much as students did in the past.

Other schools are reexamining handwriting instruction as well, prompted by the popularity of texting, e-mail, and touchscreen computers even as a flush of research says putting pen to paper is good for the brain. Studies at the University of Washington have found that handwriting stimulates cognitive regions in the brain and that second, fourth, and sixth graders expressed themselves more quickly in handwriting and had more ideas than children who used a keyboard.

The Pottstown Area School District recently mandated that handwriting be taught through third grade. Before the change, instruction had been left up to the teacher, said Laurie Kolka, the district's supervisor of curriculum and instruction.

"There was a debate in our district," Kolka said. "Some people saw cursive as a dead art and that we shouldn't use our instructional time teaching it. Others felt that they do need keyboarding and also need cursive."

Most schools teach handwriting through only the third grade, said Steve Graham, professor of special education and literacy at Vanderbilt University. Schools are in a "hybrid period": Students are doing more writing than ever before because of digital communications, yet handwriting has not disappeared. Paper and pencil are still an economical and useful tool for teachers.

At Plymouth Meeting Friends, Leann Stover Nyce, who teaches fifth grade, said technology instruction must be an important part of preparing students to face a changing world.

"There needs to be a balance so that we give them the tools to make choices," she said.

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The Friends school is using a new curriculum called Handwriting Without Tears, and instruction continues through sixth grade.

In the region's Catholic schools, handwriting instruction continues through eighth grade. Some schools have handwriting clubs, and the skill is still graded on report cards.

"We do realize our children are using the technology, but we feel that handwriting instruction is still an necessity," said Sister Edward William Quinn, director of elementary curriculum and instruction for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.



Zaner-Bloser Handwriting, a division of Highlights for Children publications that produces a handwriting curriculum, reports an uptick in interest in its products.

"Right now the pendulum is swinging back with the brain research as the catalyst," said Brad Onken, a spokesman for Zaner-Bloser. "It's also an equity issue. Handwriting allows children to communicate in an equitable way. Not every child has access to a digital device."

During the last few years, teachers have noticed a decline in handwriting mastery, said Sutherland, of Plymouth Meeting. Similarly, the fine motor skills that youngsters need to write well have gone down, teacher Debbie Bakan said.

Students have less hand strength, said Bakan, who teaches a combined first and second grade. She attributed the decline to the conveniences provided by technology.

"They push a button instead of doing things," she said.

Bakan teaches knitting to her students to hone the skills they will need for good penmanship. Colleague Heidi Schifferli teaches her first and second graders origami. Teacher Martha Wolf's prekindergartners use chopsticks to eat their morning snack, an act that uses the same hand muscles that they will use in writing, Wolf said.

By the time students reach teacher Varley Paul's sixth-grade class, handwriting is taught only at the beginning of the year.

Student Marley Napier-Smith, 11, of Chestnut Hill, said writing on paper was among her favorite activities.

"If I become a writer someday, there won't always be a computer available, so I can just write," she said. "It's easier. And if it's neat, people can read it."

Sixth grader Liam O'Melvin, 12, of Springfield, lamented the day when handwriting would no longer be necessary.

"You'll just have to say what you want, and a computer will take it in. You won't even have to type," he said. "They have that now."

Until then, teacher Christopher Sperat of Lincoln Elementary School in Pottstown will lead his

prekindergartners on the path toward longhand.

"We're saying 'yes' in this age of texting, spell-check, and word processing," Sperat said. "You still need the basics because you're going to need to fill out forms and sign your name."

Plymouth Meeting Friends students sing about penmanship at www.philly.com/penmanship

Contact staff writer Kristin E. Holmes at 610-313-8211 or kholmes@phillynews.com.

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