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**Teachers from North Rhine-Westphalia**

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**Combating increasing problems with handwriting: teachers from North Rhine-Westphalia want pupils to train their motor skills more effectively**

DUSSELDORF, 11 August 2015. The vast majority of teachers in North Rhine-Westphalia and in the whole of Germany see that pupils are having more and more problems with handwriting – and most teachers apparently have concrete ideas of what needs to be done to solve them. Most importantly: cultivate motor skills – if possible, as early as at preschool age. “Children’s motor skills are not only less developed when it comes to writing. The way they handle brushes, scissors, rulers or other tools has similarly deteriorated. For example, only around half of the children (or fewer) can tie a bow or a simple knot,” writes a primary teacher from North Rhine-Westphalia.

The quantitative results of the online survey, which was carried out by the German Union of Teachers (Deutscher Lehrerverband) together with the Schreibmotorik Institut in Heroldsberg and published in April, are now being confirmed and expanded upon by a qualitative analysis of answers to an open question. The majority of teachers that took part in the survey used this chance to add a comment. This also applies to the teachers that took part from North Rhine-Westphalia.

A second primary school teacher from North Rhine-Westphalia opined: “Writing by hand has got a lot to do with the whole body posture and body tension, not just with the hand. A holistic solution is absolutely necessary in preschools in the absence of experience of movement.” Another writes: “In my experience, children already have an established, incorrect pen hold when they enter their first year of school. From the very beginning, parents and kindergartens must pay attention to the correct hold when children are drawing. Of course, they also need to consider the child’s development.” A fourth teacher comments: “Twenty or thirty years ago – in my experience – most

children could hold a pen properly at the beginning of their first year at school. Nowadays many pupils cannot manage that even in later primary school years.”

What is particularly striking about the answers provided by the teachers in North Rhine-Westphalia is that many see particular types of scripts as the reasons for problems with handwriting. At the beginning of their school career, pupils in North Rhine-Westphalia first learn printed letters and then joined-up writing. The school decides which lettering should be used as a basis, for example standard lettering as laid out in the curriculum, or Latin script. Since 2003, a number of primary schools have taught basic script, which consists of printed letters that are yet to be joined.

This has caused a controversy amongst teachers in North Rhine-Westphalia, between the supporters and opponents of the basic script. “Compared to other school scripts, the basic script produces the worst handwriting by far,” comments one primary school teacher. Another disagrees: “I am currently testing the basic script in my first year class. I see it as a precursor to joined-up handwriting and it works well: it is writing from the very start, not ‘drawing letters’ using lines, circles and (bad) eggs. For strongly disadvantaged children I would avoid joining-up all together, they can then still develop good personal handwriting.” “A uniform script should be taught across primary schools. More attention should be dedicated to spelling much earlier. No printed letters at the beginning of primary school,” urges one secondary school teacher.

Graphomotor skills researcher Dr Christian Marquardt, the scientific advisor for the Schreibmotorik Institut in Heroldsberg says, “Unfortunately, as a result of the discussion about different scripts, battle lines have hardened between supporters and opposers of certain scripts. This conflict makes it more difficult to look objectively at how to address the problem of pupils’ increasing difficulties with handwriting. If children and young people are having difficulties because of insufficient motor skills, then we must first improve the cultivation of these skills – and from nursery school onwards, at that. We already have the first insights from our own assessments, which indicate that learning standard lettering and then increasing writing speed at a later stage is easier and more manageable if fluid movements are taught in a targeted way from the very first lesson. Of course, we must then ask ourselves the question: which is the best script to teach in primary school? It is therefore important to further advance research in this area, so that we can make a clear recommendation.”

Interested? We would be happy to provide media representatives with more statements.

### **Background:**

How bad actually are the problems with handwriting in schools? And what can be done about it? In order to answer these questions, the German Union of Teachers (Deutscher Lehrerverband, DL) and the Schreibmotorik Institut launched a survey. Between December 2014 and March 2015, more than 2000 teachers from all over Germany took part. Teachers from primary and secondary schools were given separate questionnaires, but they both ended with the same open question: “Would you like to add a comment concerning learning to write / handwriting?” Hundreds of participants took the opportunity to provide in-depth comments.

According to the quantitative survey, which was published in April, four fifths (79 per cent) of the secondary school teachers surveyed believe their pupils’ handwriting has

deteriorated on average. As many as 83 per cent of the primary school teachers surveyed stated that the skills pupils require for handwriting development had deteriorated in the last few years. The results of the survey are available from the Schreibmotorik Institut website (<http://www.schreibmotorik-institut.com/en/news/media-reports/295-federal-press-conference-the-german-union-of-teachers-and-the-schreibmotorik-institut-present-the-results-of-a-nationwide-survey-of-teachers>)

The Schreibmotorik Institut e.V. in Heroldsberg is unique in Germany. It carries out research in the field of graphomotor skills and writing ergonomics, links relevant institutions in the field of handwriting and brings together experts who have spent years examining the theory and practice of efficient writing. It has developed teaching materials for writing classes and offers seminars for teachers. The institute is supported by the writing instruments manufacturer Stabilo, but is independent and not-for-profit.