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More time for handwriting!

Survey of teachers illustrates problems with handwriting, their causes, and possible courses of action

The vast majority of teachers in Germany are seeing a worsening of the skills needed for the development of handwriting and of pupils' handwriting in general. These results are taken from a representative survey carried out by the VBE Verband Bildung und Erziehung together with the Schreibmotorik Institut from September 2018 to January 2019. The study, entitled STEP 2019, covers development, problems and interventions on the topic of handwriting. Over 2,000 teachers nationwide took part in the online survey.

"Writing by hand is just as important as reading and spelling," says **Dr. Mariana Diaz Meyer**, Managing Director of the non-profit Schreibmotorik Institut. "The focus here is not primarily on calligraphy or on a cultural technique, which can more or less be done without today. With handwriting it's about education – as numerous studies prove. Handwriting supports spelling, reading, text comprehension and ultimately academic performance as a whole." These positive effects are seen by over 90 per cent of the teachers asked.

However, the conditions for better promoting handwriting are lacking. Nearly three quarters of teachers indicate that there is (very) frequently not enough time for individual support in school, and 64 per cent note that there is (very) frequently not enough time for practice in school. Over half say that the curriculum does not place enough value on learning to write. There is also a lack of training opportunities and help for teachers. The National Chairman of the VBE Verband Bildung und Erziehung, **Udo Beckmann**, reviews the situation: "The basics are lacking. How can we teach children handwriting when teachers are simply lacking the time to support them individually? When children then exhibit motor deficits because they can't receive the necessary support at home either, there's not really much left we can do."

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Der VBE ist eine der beiden großen Lehrerorganisationen in Deutschland. Er vertritt ca. 140 000 Pädagoginnen und Pädagogen in allen Bundesländern.

VBE Landesverbände

VBE Baden-Württemberg
BLLV Bayerischer Lehrer- und Lehrerinnenverband
VBE Berlin
BPV Brandenburgischer Pädagogen-Verband
VBE Bremen
VBE Hamburg im DLH
VBE Hessen
VBE Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
VBE Niedersachsen
VBE Nordrhein-Westfalen
VBE Rheinland-Pfalz
SLLV Saarländischer Lehrerinnen- und Lehrerverband
SLV Sächsischer Lehrerverband im VBE
VBE Sachsen-Anhalt
VBE Schleswig-Holstein
tlv thüringer Lehrerverband

Key results of the study:

- **Evaluating handwriting:** Only four per cent of the secondary school teachers asked are satisfied with the handwriting of their pupils. Primary school teachers say that over a third of children (37 per cent) have problems developing legible, flowing handwriting. Secondary school teachers see difficulties in 43 per cent of their students on average.
- **Problems:** Boys are considerably more strongly affected: according to primary school teachers, 45 per cent of boys have problems with handwriting, compared to only 29 per cent of girls. Teachers report that in secondary school as many as 53 per cent of boys have problems compared to only 33 per cent of girls. Only two out of five young people in secondary school can write for 30 minutes or more without complaint. Moreover, teachers across all levels of schooling note that 93 per cent of pupils have illegible writing, and 91 per cent write too slowly. The effects are especially noticeable in secondary school.
- **Causes:** Over two thirds of teachers cite in particular a lack of routine, bad motor skills and coordination, and concentration problems as (very) frequent causes of problems. At least half of those surveyed found the increasing digitalisation of communication and excessive media consumption to be problematic too. Handwriting is also insufficiently integrated into the curriculum, and there is a lack of time put aside for it.
- **Possible courses of action:** Nearly all teachers come out in favour of more fine motor skills activities such as crafting, painting and cooking. Three quarters of those surveyed think that specific training in writing motor skills, more practice at home and at school, and exciting pupils' interest in handwriting could help. Parents are also needed as role models here. Nearly 70 per cent see that more individual support and targeted help is needed in older year groups too.

Dr Diaz Meyer also shares this view: “Increased support for handwriting should be guaranteed from kindergarten through secondary school, and at home. Interdisciplinary research on how handwriting can be promoted should be expanded too.” Dr. Diaz Meyer cites a study which proves that even one hour of writing motor skills training a week is sufficient for children to learn to write significantly better and more quickly. Beckmann emphasises: “We’re not talking about setting up a whole new subject! Rather, it’s that we want to make sure there is an appropriate level of focus. All of the demands that are placed on schools should not distract from the basics. It is essential that students learn to write, because they encounter different thought processes when writing than when typing. Politicians must find ways to facilitate this, for example by better integrating handwriting into the curriculum and at the same time having more support staff come into schools to offer individual support.”

The survey also addressed whether writing with digital devices is suitable for lessons. While over 90 per cent of teachers consider pen and paper to be a (very) suitable writing medium, only 22 per cent of primary school teachers and 61 per cent of secondary school teachers think the same of a keyboard and computer. Even so, nearly a fifth of primary school teachers and nearly half of secondary school teachers find the combination of tablet and stylus (very) well suited. Smartphones fall flat, however: three quarters of primary school teachers and 59 per cent of secondary school teachers consider them to be between (very) badly and hardly suited. The National Chairman of the VBE Verband Bildung und Erziehung comments: “Digitalisation will not come for free. The results show that the ‘bring your own device’ method, which is especially aimed at smartphones, is not productive. A tablet-sized screen is a minimum requirement for the use of digital devices in lessons. Politicians need to take care of this.”