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THE DECLINING ENROLLMENT PROBLEM
in
the Elementary Schools
of
Brookings County

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ALMOST A FIFTH
Of the Rural Schools in Brookings County
Were Either Closed or Operating With Five
or Fewer Pupils During the Year 1939-40

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For a number of years population experts have forecast that the falling birth rate would eventually result in declining elementary enrollments. For Brookings county this prophecy was fulfilled in 1933. Since 1920 the number of births per 1000 of the population has decreased almost half. In 1921 there were 29.7 births per 1000 of the population as compared with 15.1 in 1938. Since 1933 the falling birth rate has been reflected in a rapidly declining elementary enrollment. Between 1933 and 1940 the elementary school enrollment of Brookings county declined approximately 25 percent. During the 1939-40 term there were a total of 2,578 elementary pupils enrolled in Brookings county, 1,370 of which were enrolled in common school districts and 1,248 of which were enrolled in independent districts. This shrinkage in the number of elementary pupils has caused some Brookings county taxpayers to question the advisability of continuing to operate 112 separate rural schools. Not only is the per pupil cost excessively high but the educational benefit derived from schools where there are only five or less pupils is probably small. From a planning standpoint, therefore, the situation created by declining elementary enrollments appears to be Problem Number One.

Fig. 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Brookings County by Years, 1890 - 1940.*

* Prior to 1935 total includes both town and country schools.

Source: Biennial Reports, State Superintendont of Public Instructions.
Fig. 2. Elementary Enrollment in Brookings County Districts, 1920 and 1940.

There are a total of 112 one-room rural schools in Brookings county. With the exception of the four schools in Bangor township each of these schools is operated by a separate district board. Brookings is one of a group of counties in the northeastern part of the state in which the small, one-room district is the prevailing type of school organization. As Brookings county was settled some years before the territorial legislature prescribed township district organization the settlers had already transplanted the small district pattern of school organization from the more humid eastern states from which they had come. These 112 small one-room rural schools present one of the most acute as well as one of the most widespread educational problems in the county. Between 1920 and 1940 there has been a rapid decline in elementary enrollment in both the rural and independent districts. Figure 2 shows the decline in elementary enrollment by districts between 1920 and 1940. It will be noted that in many districts the decline amounted to as much as 50 percent. As outward migration has not occurred to any great extent in Brookings county (between 1930 and 1940 the total population declined only 2.3 percent) the decline in elementary enrollment is evidently largely due to the declining birth rate.

* In 1883 the territorial legislature provided for township district organization but did not force the small districts which were already in existence to disband.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment in Brookings County Districts, 1940.

Legend: 
- Closed
- 6-10 pupils
- 15-25 pupils
- 5 pupils or less
- 11-14 pupils

Source: Records of the Brookings County Superintendent of Schools

The present enrollment of each of the common schools in Brookings county is shown in Figure 3. It will be noted that in February, 1940, six schools were not in session and 13 had five or fewer pupils. Thirty had 6-10 pupils and 37 had between 15 and 25 pupils. No school had over 25 pupils. Even schools which now have 15-25 pupils have suffered a sharp decline in enrollment during recent years. Twenty years ago some of these districts had as many as 40 pupils.

Between 1920 and 1940 the average attendance per school dropped from 19.7 to 13.0 pupils. The total number of pupils declined from 2184 to 1398 during the same period. The greatest decrease has occurred since 1930, however, as in that year there was an average attendance of 18.7 pupils per school and a total enrollment of 2058.
Figure 4. Enrollment and Cost Per Pupil in Brookings County Districts, 1939.

Legend: $47 - Per pupil cost (I) 5 pupils or less (II) 11 - 15 pupils
$51 - Closed School (III) 6 - 10 pupils (IV) 15 - 25 pupils

Source: Records of the Brookings County Superintendent of Schools

The operation of schools for less than 10 pupils, particularly for five pupils or less is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. For example, during the 1938-39 term the per pupil cost in District 86, a school having only three pupils, was $233.19 as compared with $38.48 in District 48, a school having an enrollment of 26 pupils. In other words, the per pupil cost for the small school was seven times as great as for the larger school.

Table 1. Average Cost Per Pupil for Operating Rural Schools of Various Sizes in Brookings County During the School Year, 1938-39

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of School</th>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Number of Pupils</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
<th>Average Cost Per Pupil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>1408</td>
<td>$92,406.49</td>
<td>$65.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 &amp; under</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5,623.60</td>
<td>160.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>28,463.86</td>
<td>100.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>19,085.91</td>
<td>69.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 &amp; over</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>39,232.92</td>
<td>48.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A high per pupil cost means a heavy tax burden in Brookings county where the area of support is small. In this county the average school district is only 6.63 square miles in area and contains 17 families.
Figure 5. Per Pupil Costs Before and After Closing School in Two Brookings County Districts, 1938 and 1939*.

Legend:  □ Open □ Closed

* In 1938 there were five pupils in District No. 84 as compared with three in 1939; in District No. 101 there were 11 pupils in 1938 and three in 1939.

Source: Records of the Brookings county Superintendent of Schools.

That it is much cheaper to close the school when the enrollment drops to five or less pupils is graphically portrayed in the figure above. During the 1937-38 term, with five pupils enrolled, District 84 operated at a per pupil cost of $125.66. The following year (1938-39) the board closed the school, sending the three remaining pupils to a neighboring district as tuition students at a per pupil cost of only $62.86. Assuming that it would cost practically the same to operate the school for five as for three pupils, the per pupil cost of operating the school during the 1938-39 term would have been $208. In other words, $146.57 per pupil, or a total of $439.71 was saved by closing the school.

During the 1937-38 term the per pupil cost of operating the District 101 school, with 11 pupils enrolled, was $90.85. The following year (1938-39) the school was closed and the per pupil cost of sending the three remaining pupils to a neighboring school district amounted to only $49.27. Assuming that it would cost practically the same to operate the school for three as for 11 pupils (if the teacher's salary remained unchanged) the per pupil cost of operating the school during the 1938-39 term would have amounted to approximately $333. In other words, a saving of $283.85 per pupil, or a total of $851.55 was saved by closing the school.
Figure 6. Areas From Which Each High School Enrolled Most of Its Brookings County Tuition Pupils During the 1938-39 Term

Source: Adapted from records of the High School Superintendents.

A glance at the above map which shows where farm children attend high school, suggests a possible ultimate solution to the problem caused by declining elementary enrollments. Since 1921 it has been compulsory for school districts which do not have high schools of their own, to pay the tuition costs of pupils residing within their borders who attend high school in nearby towns. Because the expense of operating their own high schools would be prohibitive, all of the common school districts in the county have sent their high school pupils to nearby independent districts, paying tuition costs.

Elementary enrollment in the common school districts has now declined to the point where the cost per pupil of operating the smaller elementary schools is also becoming prohibitive. (See Table 1, page 4) Eventually the common school districts may solve this problem in the same way in which they have already solved the high school problem. Instead of maintaining their own schools at a heavy per pupil cost, districts may close their schools and send the few remaining pupils to the town school, paying tuition and transportation charges. This would not only save the districts money, (see Fig. 5) but it would also offer greater educational advantages to the pupils. Since elementary enrollment is declining in the town schools as well as in the rural schools, it is probable that within the next five years the present independent district facilities will be large enough to accommodate both the town and country pupils.

The first step, however, will probably be for rural districts to close their schools when the enrollment drops below a specified minimum, sending the remaining children as tuition pupils to the nearest district school which is still in operation. If the closed school lies adjacent to an independent district it will probably be more satisfactory to send the remaining pupils as tuition students to the town school rather than to a neighboring rural district.
Figure 7. Federal, State and County Highway System in Brookings County, 1940.

Legend:
- Hard surface roads
- Gravelled - county
- Gravelled - state and federal
- Earth surface - county

Source: State Highway Commission.

A glance at the above map indicates that good roads are found in every township of the county. No matter where he may live, practically every farmer in the county has good roads to his nearest trade center. In 1935, over 75 percent of the farms in Brookings County were located on improved roads. Good roads and the automobile have caused many functions of former open-country institutions to be shifted to the towns. Cases in point are the crossroads general store and the open-country church. The farmer now goes to the village center to buy groceries, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to visit and engage in other forms of recreation. The farmer also sends his sons and daughters to the village high school.

If elementary enrollments continue to drop it is likely that before long rural districts will also be sending their few remaining elementary pupils to the town schools as tuition students.

As previously mentioned, however, the first step in adjusting to declining elementary enrollments will probably be for districts to close their home school when the enrollment drops below a predeterminated figure, sending the few remaining children as tuition pupils to a neighboring district which still has enough pupils to operate economically.
Suggestions for Solving the Elementary School Problem

As an immediate, but temporary measure, one of these two alternatives might be tried:

1. The present rural school district can be kept intact, but the school itself can be closed when the enrollment drops below a specified minimum of five pupils. Children who live within the district could then be sent as tuition pupils to the nearest rural school that will agree to take them, the district paying the transportation when the distance is greater than four miles.

2. Where the district involved lies close to an independent district it may be more satisfactory to send children as tuition pupils to that school, paying transportation as provided by law.

If the present trend of rapidly declining enrollments continues it may be in the interest of both economy and efficiency to reorganize the county's entire rural school system. Several alternatives are available for permanent reorganization.

1. Farm children can be transported to independent districts as tuition students, the same as is now done with high school tuition students. This plan would undoubtedly be much less expensive than maintaining a large number of small schools. It would have the further advantage of giving farm children more educational opportunities than is possible in a one-room country school of four or five pupils. This plan would result in seven or eight centralized school systems, combining town and country on a natural community basis.

2. Another alternative would be to reorganize the rural school system on a county-wide district basis. Under this plan the county school board would have authority to discontinue small schools and establish larger schools at strategic points.

3. A third alternative would be for several school districts to consolidate. If this is done, however, great care should be taken to include a large enough area to insure a sufficient number of students and to provide a large enough unit of support.