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THE DECLINING ENROLLMENT PROBLEM
in
the Elementary Schools
of
Kingsbury County

W. F. Kumlien
Clifford Holm
C. Scandrette

In 1930 there was an average of 14 pupils per rural school.

but by 1940 the average enrollment had shrunk to 9 pupils.

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For a number of years population experts have predicted that the falling birth rate would eventually result in rapidly declining elementary enrollments. For Kingsbury county this prophecy was fulfilled in 1931. Between 1931 and 1940 elementary enrollment in Kingsbury county declined over one-fourth. Although the number of births per 1,000 of the population dropped over one-third between 1920 and 1940, it is evident that migration has also played an important part in the decline of elementary enrollment. As will be pointed out in a later section, schools in which the greatest drop in elementary enrollment occurred were those which are located in townships where it is known that outward migration has been heavy between 1930 and 1940. For Kingsbury county as a whole the population declined 15.6 percent between 1930 and 1940.

It will be noted that an earlier decline in enrollment occurred in 1911-12. Between 1912 and 1930 rural elementary enrollment declined; independent elementary enrollment increased; and total elementary enrollment remained relatively stable. In this connection it is interesting to note that the general population also remained relatively stable during this period. Since 1930 both the rural and the independent elementary enrollment has declined.

In 1930, 2886 elementary pupils were enrolled in Kingsbury county as compared with only 1,868 pupils in 1940. Of the 1,868 elementary pupils who were enrolled in Kingsbury county during the 1939-40 term; 888 were enrolled in rural schools; 109 were enrolled in consolidated schools; and 871 were enrolled in independent schools. The shrinkage in elementary enrollment has caused 24 schools to close. Seven other schools are operating with 5 or fewer pupils. From a planning standpoint, therefore, the situation created by declining elementary enrollments appears to be Problem Number One.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Kingsbury County, 1890-1940*

* Prior to 1905 elementary enrollment figures were not available for the independent districts.
Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction
In 1920 Esmond township had not been divided into small school districts. It was later divided into districts 59 - 66 inclusive.

Legend:
- District numbers
- X - Closed schools
- Indicates a decrease in enrollment since 1920
- Independent and consolidated districts

Source: Records of the Kingsbury County Superintendent of Schools

There are a total of 103 one-room rural schools in Kingsbury county. Over half of these schools (52) are located in the township districts of Bancroft (LoSuour), Manchester, Iroquois, De Smot, Baker, Whitewood and Spring Lake. The other rural schools are located in small school districts. Kingsbury is one of a group of counties in the eastern part of the state in which this type of school organization is found. Because the early settlers of these counties had come from states where the small district system was the prevailing type of school organization it was only natural that they should establish a similar pattern here. Between 1920 and 1940 there has been a rapid decline in elementary enrollment in most of the rural districts of the county. Figure 2 shows the decline in elementary enrollment by districts between 1920 and 1940. For the county as a whole elementary enrollment declined 29.7 percent during that period. It will be noted that the greatest decline seems to have occurred in the southwestern part of the county. Local residents attribute the unusual decline in these townships to migration. In the other townships of the county where migration has not been so pronounced the decline has probably been almost entirely due to the declining birth rate.

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

Legend:
- Closed
- 5 pupils or less
- 6 - 10 pupils
- 11 - 15 pupils
- 16 & more pupils

Source: Record of the Kingsbury county Superintendent of Schools.

The enrollment of each common school district for the school year ending June 1940, is shown in the figure above. It will be noted that 24 schools were not in session during the 1939-40 term and that 7 were operating with 5 or less pupils. Twenty-four had 6 to 10 pupils; 32 had 11 to 15 pupils; and 16 had more than 15 pupils. In other words, almost a third of the rural schools in Kingsbury county were either closed or operating with 5 or fewer pupils during the 1939-40 school year. Almost one-half (48.3) were either closed or operating with 10 or fewer pupils.

Between 1930 and 1940 the average number of rural pupils per school dropped from 14.5 to 8.6 pupils*. The total number of rural elementary pupils declined from 1495 to 888 during the same period.

* The average in each case has been computed on the basis of 103 schools.
Figure 4. Enrollment and Cost Per Pupil in Kingsbury County Districts, 1940.

Legend: $47 - Per Pupil Cost

- Closed
- 6 - 10 pupils
- 5 pupils or less
- 16 & more pupils
- 11 - 15 pupils

Source: Records of the Kingsbury 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. Since it was difficult to determine the maintenance costs for individual schools in township districts, instructional cost has been used as a basis of comparison. During the 1939-40 term per pupil instructional costs in Kingsbury county varied from $31 in district 64 where 17 pupils were enrolled to $135 in district 5 where only 4 pupils were enrolled.

Average Per Pupil Instructional Cost* In Kingsbury County Rural Schools During the School Year, 1939-40.

<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>103</td>
<td>963</td>
<td>$44,760</td>
<td>$46.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 &amp; under</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>116.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>13,117</td>
<td>66.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>17,758</td>
<td>41.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 &amp; over</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>9,385</td>
<td>30.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on teacher's salary only. Does not include textbooks and supplies.
In township districts it is possible to keep the central school open and to close the other schools when the enrollment drops below a predetermined figure. During the 1938-39 term there were 6 schools operating in Manchester township with a combined enrollment of 48 pupils. The following year (1939-40) the school board decided to close 4 of the schools and send the remaining 34 pupils to the 2 schools which were left open.

On the basis of instructional and transportation cost Manchester township saved $1600 by closing the 4 schools. During the 1938-39 term elementary instructional and transportation cost in Manchester township amounted to $3220 as compared with $1620.50 during the 1939-40 term. Of this amount $495.50 was spent for transportation. No money was spent for tuition since all elementary pupils attended Manchester township schools. In other words, instructional and transportation cost during the 1939-40 term amounted to approximately one-third of the 1938-39 figure. On a cost per pupil basis the instructional and transportation expense of operating the Manchester township elementary school system during the 1939-40 term amounted to only $47.66 as compared with $67.08 during the 1938-39 term.
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 is usually prohibitive, all of the common school districts in the county except Manchester and Bancroft 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 could not only save the districts money, 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 the township districts to maintain one school in the center of the township and close other schools within the township when the enrollment drops below a specified minimum. Pupils who remain in the area formerly served by a closed school can be sent to the centralized school, the board paying transportation as provided by law. In the case of the small districts the first step will probably be for these districts to close their schools when the enrollment drops below a predetermined figure, sending the remaining students as tuition pupils to the nearest school which is still in operation.
A glance at the above map indicates that good roads are found in every town-
ship of the county. No matter where he may live, practically every farmer in the
county has good roads to his nearest trade center. In 1930 almost 62 percent of
the farms in Kingsbury 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 the elementary enrollments continue to
drop it is likely that before long rural districts will also be sending their re-
main ing elementary pupils to the town schools as tuition students.

As previously mentioned, however, the first step in adjusting to declining
elementary enrollment will probably be for township district boards to keep one
school open in the center of the township and to close all other schools when the
enrollment drops below a predetermined figure. Pupils who remain in the area form-
erly served by a closed school will then be sent to the centralized school, the
board-paying transportation costs as provided by law. In the case of the small
school districts the first step will be to close the school when the enrollment
drops below a specified minimum, sending the remaining pupils as tuition pupils to
the nearest school which is still in operation.
Suggestions for Solving the Elementary School Problem

An as immediate, but temporary measure, one of these alternatives might be tried.

1. The township district board might keep one school open in the center of the township and close all other schools when the enrollment drops below a predetermined minimum. Children who remain in the area formerly served by the closed school could be sent to the center school, the board paying transportation cost as provided by law.

2. In the case of the small districts, the school district can be kept intact but the school itself can be closed when the enrollment drops below five pupils or some other predetermined figure. Children who live within the district could then be sent to the nearest rural school that will agree to take them, the districts paying tuition and transportation costs as provided by law.

3. Where the school involved lies adjacent to an independent district it may be more satisfactory to send children as tuition pupils to the town school rather than to a neighboring rural district.

If the present trend of 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 nine or ten 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.