The Declining Enrollment Problem in the Elementary Schools of Moody County

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Recommended Citation
Kumlien, W. F.; Holm, Clifford; and Scandrette, C., "The Declining Enrollment Problem in the Elementary Schools of Moody County" (1940). Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets. 7.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_rural-socio/7
THE DECLINING ENROLLMENT PROBLEM
in
the Elementary Schools
of
Moody County

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In 1920 there was an average of 22 pupils per rural school teacher

but by 1940 the average enrollment had shrunk to 11 pupils

Each symbol represents 2 pupils

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:** This study was made possible by the State and Federal Work Projects Administration cooperating with the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W.P.A. Project No. 465-74-3-235. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Lillian Gullickson, Moody County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study were secured.
For a number of years population experts have predicted that the falling birth rate would bring about a decline in elementary school enrollments. In Moody county this prophecy was fulfilled much sooner than in most counties of the state. Immediately after the 1920 peak enrollment of 2,436 pupils, rural elementary enrollment began to decline rapidly. By 1940 total elementary enrollment had declined to 1,217 pupils, a drop of 50 percent from the 1920 high.

During approximately the same period the birth rate in Moody county has dropped over 50 percent*. As net loss from migration has been slight** it is probable that the shrinking birth rate has been chiefly responsible for the declining number of elementary pupils.

Although the elementary enrollment has declined in both independent and common districts, the decline has been much more abrupt in the common districts. Of the 1,217 elementary pupils who were enrolled in Moody county schools during the 1939-40 term 696 were enrolled in common schools; 120 were enrolled in consolidated schools; and 401 were enrolled in independent schools.

In 1921, 5 districts, confronted with the prospect of declining enrollments, combined, forming the Egan consolidated district. Since that time the shrinkage in elementary enrollment has caused 6 schools to close. Exactly one-half of the schools, (32) are now operating with less than 10 pupils. Five of these 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.

*In 1920 the number of births per 1,000 of the population was 27.0 as compared with 12.1 in 1938.

**Between 1920 and 1940 the population of Moody county declined only 4.4 percent.

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

* Prior to 1905 elementary enrollment figures were not available for the independent districts. Total includes consolidated enrollment which is not otherwise shown.

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
Figure 2. Elementary Enrollment in Moody County Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940.

Legend: Top figure - 1920 enrollment  Lower figure - 1940 enrollment
Center figure - 1930 enrollment  -- Closed school

Source: Moody County Superintendent of Schools Records.

There are a total of 64 small one school rural districts in Moody county. Moody is one of a group of counties in the eastern part of the state in which this type of school organization is found. Since most of the early settlers of Moody county came from states where the small district system prevailed it was natural that they should establish a similar pattern here. At that time it was not apparent that Moody county would never become densely enough populated to make the small one school district system feasible. Figure 2 shows that since 1920 there has been a steady decline in the enrollment of most small districts, with some districts in the south and western part of the county showing a drop of more than 50 percent. In 1920, 36 districts had more than 20 pupils, whereas by 1940 only 2 districts had as many as 20 pupils.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment In Moody County Districts, 1940.

The above figure shows the elementary enrollment of each of the common school districts in Moody county during the 1939-40 school term. Of the 64 rural school districts in the county, six were not in operation and five had five or fewer pupils enrolled. In other words, over a sixth (17.2 percent) of the rural schools in Moody county were either closed or operating with 5 or fewer pupils. Exactly half of the schools were either closed or operating with 10 or fewer pupils. Twenty-one were operating with from six to ten pupils; eighteen had an enrollment of 11 to 15; and 14 had more than 16 pupils. Only two districts had an enrollment of more than 20, whereas in 1920 there were 36 schools with twenty or more pupils enrolled. Between 1920 and 1940 the average number of pupils per school dropped from 38 to 10.9*. The low enrollment of districts 4, 8, 10, 11 and 25 may be partially explained by the fact that many of the Catholic families in this predominantly Catholic area send their children to the parochial school in Dell Rapids.

* Averages were computed on the basis of 64 schools.
The operation of schools for less than ten pupils, particularly for five or fewer pupils, is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. During the 1939-40 school term the per pupil cost varied from $264.00 in district 25, with an enrollment of 4, to a low of $40.56 in district 26 where 23 pupils were enrolled. In other words, the per pupil cost in district 25 was 6\frac{1}{2} times as great as in district 26.

Table 1. Average Cost Per Pupil For Operating Rural Schools of Various Sizes In Moody County 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>58</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>$53502.24</td>
<td>$76.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or less</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>$4484.14</td>
<td>213.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>$17386.68</td>
<td>93.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>$16972.98</td>
<td>73.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>$14658.44</td>
<td>56.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
That it is more economical to close the school when the enrollment drops below five pupils is graphically shown in the figure above. During the 1938-39 term, with 6 pupils enrolled, the expense of maintaining school in District 40 amounted to $1062.53. The following year (1939-40) the board closed the school, sending the remaining 4 children as tuition pupils to a neighboring district. During the 1939-40 term the total expense of the district including tuition and transportation charges, amounted to only $780.53, a saving of $282.00 over the previous year. Assuming that it would cost approximately the same to operate the school for 4 as for 6 pupils, the per pupil cost of operating the school during the 1939-40 term would have amounted to $265.63 as compared with the actual per pupil cost of $195.13.
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 send their high school pupils to nearby independent districts, paying tuition costs. During the 1939-40 term, Moody county high schools enrolled 216 tuition pupils, distributed as follows: Egan 73; Colman 42; Trent 28; and Flandreau 73.

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. Eventually the common school districts may solve this problem in the same way in which they have already solved the high school problem. The first step, however, 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.
Figure 7. Federal, State and County Highway System In Moody County, 1940.

Legend: Hard surface roads - Earth surface - county
Graveled - county

Source: Official Map of the State Highway Commission

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. 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 corner 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 remaining elementary pupils to the town schools as tuition students.

As previously mentioned, however, the first step will be to close the school when the enrollment drops below a specified minimum, sending the remaining children as tuition pupils to the nearest school which is still in operation.