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W. F. Kumlien
Clifford Holm
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THE DECLINING ENROLLMENT PROBLEM
in the Elementary Schools
of Day County

W. F. Kumljen
Clifford Holm
C. Scandrette

In 1920, 39 Day county schools were operating with 20 or more pupils.

By 1940 only 12 Day county schools had 20 or more pupils.

Each symbol represents four schools.

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota
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The Declining Enrollment Problem in the Elementary Schools of Day County

For a number of years population experts have predicted that the falling birth rate would eventually result in rapidly declining elementary enrollments. Although elementary enrollment in Day county has gradually declined since 1912, a rather abrupt decline began in 1932. Between 1931 and 1940 elementary enrollment declined approximately one-fourth.

For Day county the decline in elementary enrollment has probably been chiefly due to the shrinking birth rate. Part of the decline, however, particularly in the rural schools, has doubtless been due to net loss from migration. Between 1920 and 1937 the birth rate in Day county declined over one-third;* During approximately the same period (1920-40) the population of Day county declined 10.7 percent.

The peak in rural elementary enrollment was reached in 1912. Between 1912 and 1921 a rather abrupt drop occurred. Between 1922 and 1933 rural enrollment declined only slightly. Since 1933, however, rural enrollment has dropped rapidly. At its peak, in 1912, the elementary enrollment of Day county rural schools was 2,715 pupils as compared with the 1940 figure of 1,134 pupils. In other words, rural elementary enrollment has declined over 58.2 percent since 1912. The peak in independent enrollment was reached in 1926 when 1,136 pupils were enrolled in the town schools. Since that time the independent enrollment has declined slightly.

During the 1939-40 term there was a total of 2,291 elementary pupils enrolled in Day county schools. Of this number 1,134 were enrolled in the rural schools; 240 were enrolled in parochial schools; 80 were enrolled in the Roslyn consolidated district; and 838 were enrolled in the independent districts.

During recent years declining elementary enrollments have caused a number of Day county schools to close. A number of other Day county schools are operating with 5 or less pupils. From a planning standpoint, therefore, the situation created by declining elementary enrollments appears to be Problem Number One.

* In 1920 there were 29.6 births per 1,000 of the population as compared with 18.5 in 1937.

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

*Prior to 1905 elementary enrollment figures were not available for the independent districts.
Source: Biennial Reports of the State Supt. of Public Instruction.
Figure 2. Elementary Enrollment in Day County Districts 1920, 1930 and 1940.

Legend:
- **District Number.**
- **Top figure** - 1920 enrollment.
- **Center figure** - 1930 enrollment.
- **Lower figure** - 1940 enrollment.
- **X** School closed.

Source: Records of Day County Supt. of Schools.
There are a total of 108 small one-school rural districts in Day county. Day is one of a group of counties in the eastern part of the state in which the one-school district system is the prevailing type of rural school organization. Since most of the early settlers of Day county came from states where the small district system prevailed it was only natural that they should establish a similar pattern here. At the time the common school districts were established it was not apparent that Day county would not be able to maintain enough population to make the small one-school district system feasible. Figure 2 shows that since 1920 the enrollment in most of the Day county rural districts has declined. Throughout the entire 20 year period, districts 217 and 218 have cooperatively supported only one school.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment in Day County Districts, 1940.

Legend:
- School Closed
- 6 - 10 pupils
- 11 - 15 pupils
- 16 or over
- Ind. and Cons. Schools
- Location of School
The figure on the preceding page shows the elementary enrollment of each of the common school districts in Day county during the 1939-40 term. Of the 107 rural schools in the county, 13 were not in operation and 8 had 5 or fewer pupils enrolled. In other words, approximately a fifth (19.6 percent) of the rural schools were either closed or operating with 5 or fewer pupils. Over half (50.5 percent) were either closed or operating with 10 or fewer pupils. Thirty-three schools were operating with 6 to 10 pupils; 29 had an enrollment of 11-15 pupils; and 25 had an enrollment of more than 16 pupils. Only 12 districts had an enrollment of more than 20 pupils, whereas in 1920 there were 39 schools with 20 or more pupils enrolled. Between 1920 and 1940 the average number of pupils per school dropped from 17.7 to 10.6.
Figure 4. Enrollment and Cost Per Pupil in Day County Rural Schools, 1939-40.

Legend: Top figure = District number,
Middle figure = Number of pupils enrolled,
Lower figure = Cost per pupil.
Closed schools, Source: Records of Day County Supt. of Schools.
The operation of schools for less than 10 pupils, particularly for 5 or fewer pupils, is excessively expensive on the cost per pupil basis. During the 1939-40 school term the per pupil cost varied from $290 in District 221 where three pupils were enrolled to a low of $37.14 in District 177 with an enrollment of 21. In other words, the per pupil cost in District 221 was 8 times as great as in District 177.

Table 1. Average Cost Per Pupil for Operating Rural Schools of Various Sizes in Day County During the School Year 1939-1940.*

<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>94</td>
<td>1134</td>
<td>$75,329.66</td>
<td>$66.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or less</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5,844.34</td>
<td>182.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>24,427.03</td>
<td>97.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>22,693.65</td>
<td>63.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and over</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>22,364.64</td>
<td>45.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total cost includes all expenses of the district except auxiliary costs.
Figure 5. Per Pupil District Cost Before and After Opening School, Day County District No. 193.

Legend:  
- School Open  
- School Closed

Source: Records of the Day County Superintendent of Schools.

That it is much more economical to close the school when the enrollment drops below five pupils is graphically shown by the figure above. During the 1938-39 term District 193 closed its school and sent its six remaining pupils to a neighboring district, paying transportation and tuition charges as provided by law. The total expense of the District during this term amounted to $603.65. The following year (1939-40), with the same number of pupils to educate, District 193 decided to operate its own school. The total expense to the District during the 1939-40 term amounted to $932.49, an increase of $328.84 over the previous year.

On a cost per pupil basis it cost District 193 only $100.61 to educate each child during the year the school was closed, as compared with $155.41 the following year when the school was reopened. In other words, it cost District 193 $54.80 less, per pupil, to send its elementary students to another district than it did to operate its own school.
The above map shows where farm children attend high school and 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, Day county high schools enrolled 360 Day county tuition pupils, distributed as follows: Andover, 23; Bristol, 37; Butler, 21; Grenville, 15; Lily, 15; Pierpont, 48; Roslyn, 31; Waubay, 44; and Webster, 126.

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 those 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.
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 1930, 67.4 percent of the farms in Dew 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 predetermined 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

A schoolboard confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study its local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have been tested either in South Dakota or in other states and have been found practical. The first alternative may be applied as a temporary measure until such time as further action is advisable, but the last three suggested plans call for more or less permanent reorganization of the prevailing district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

Keep the present rural district intact, but close the school, or schools, when enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils. Send the remaining pupils to the nearest rural school in which satisfactory arrangements can be made, with the district paying transportation costs when the distance exceeds four miles, and tuition when the school to which the pupils are transported is located outside the home district.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Close the rural school and send the remaining pupils as tuition students to the nearest independent school. This plan besides being less expensive than maintaining several small schools, has the further advantage of giving farm children greater educational opportunities than is possible in the small one-room school. It is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in handling the high school situation.

Consolidation

Incorporate several small districts into a consolidated district, being certain to include an area large enough to insure an adequate number of pupils and a sufficient base for support.

County-wide district plan

Reorganize the rural school system on a county-wide district basis, giving the county school board authority to discontinue small schools whenever it is advisable, and to determine the location of larger centralized schools within the county.