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Recommended Citation
Kumlien, W. F. and Scandrette, C., "The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Lake County" (1941).
Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets. 9.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_rural-socio/9

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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in the Elementary Schools
of Lake County

W. F. Kumlien
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1929

Rural

Consolidated

Independent

1940

Each symbol represents 100 elementary 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. 465-74-3-325. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mrs. Jennie Adkins, Lake County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study were secured.
The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Lake County

For a number of years population experts have been predicting that the declining birth rate would result in lower elementary school enrollments. That this prophecy has been fulfilled for Lake county is indicated by the steady decline since 1929. In that year a peak elementary enrollment of 2,761 pupils was reached. In 1940 the total enrollment was 2,064, or 25 per cent lower than in 1929.

During the period 1920 to 1937 the birth rate in Lake county dropped more than 23 per cent. Since the net loss from migration has been negligible, it would appear that the falling birth rate has been chiefly responsible for the decline in elementary enrollments.

Rural, independent and consolidated schools of Lake county have all felt the effects of decreased elementary enrollment, although the losses for consolidated schools have been proportionately smallest. The rural schools reached their peak enrollment as long ago as 1901, with a sharp downward trend in evidence during the years following 1918. Both independent and consolidated schools attained their maximum elementary enrollments in 1925. Of the 2,064 elementary pupils attending Lake county schools during the 1939-40 term, 781 were enrolled in rural schools; 817 were enrolled in independent schools; 365 were enrolled in consolidated schools; and 101 were enrolled in a single parochial school.

During the school year 1917-18, 86 rural schools were in operation - 34 more than during 1939-40. Since 1918, four consolidated districts have been formed and still other rural schools have been closed, chiefly as a result of the decline in enrollments. Almost one-half (25) of the schools which were operating during 1939-40 had ten or fewer pupils. In the light of these facts as considered from a planning standpoint it would appear that the situation caused by the decline in elementary enrollments is Problem Number One.

1. In 1920 the number of births per 1000 population in Lake county was 25.5. In 1937 it was 19.6 (computed from estimated population figures).
2. The population of Lake county increased 1 per cent between 1920 to 1930 and decreased 1 per cent between 1930 and 1940.

Figure 1. Elementary Enrollment in Lake County, 1890-1940.

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
During the school year 1939-40, 52 rural schools were operating in Lake county. Of this number all except 9 were located in districts having two or more schools. As can be seen in Figure 2, certain of the districts include entire townships, or even larger areas. District No. 8 comprises eight rural schools. In District No. 5 all students are transported by bus to Campus School in Madison, which school has connections with Eastern Normal. Although somewhat similar in structure to the consolidated schools, it is nevertheless classified as a common rural school. The Junius school in District No. 4 is similarly classified, since no independent district exists.

Figure 2 shows that elementary enrollments in practically every district of the county suffered declines between 1930 and 1940.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment in Lake County Schools, 1940

Figure 3 shows the elementary enrollment for each of the rural schools of Lake county.

It will be noted that six schools are marked closed for the 1939-40 term. Only one school had an enrollment of five pupils or less, although 24 schools had only 6 to 10 pupils. Eighteen others enrolled 11 to 15 pupils, while 9 (including Campus School) had enrollments of over 16.
Figure 4. Enrollment and Instructional Cost Per Pupil for Each of the Lake County Schools, 1940.

Legend: Top figure - Elementary enrollments, 1940
Lower figure - Institutional cost per pupil
Source: Records of Lake County Superintendent of Schools.

During the 1939-40 term the instructional cost per pupil in rural schools of Lake county ranged from $25 in District 9, which enrolled 22 pupils, to $146 in Hart School, District 12, which had an enrollment of only 4 pupils.

Table I shows the per pupil cost for schools grouped according to number of pupils enrolled. It becomes evident in the light of these figures that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on the cost per pupil basis.

Table I. Per Pupil Instructional Cost for Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Lake County for 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>Total</td>
<td>51**</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>$30,567.50</td>
<td>$48.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 and under</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>585.00</td>
<td>146.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>13,688.50</td>
<td>64.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>10,768.00</td>
<td>44.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and over</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>5,526.00</td>
<td>33.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on teachers' salaries only. Does not include textbooks and other supplies.
** Campus School is not included in these figures.
Figure 5. Instructional Cost Per Pupil in Two Lake County Districts Before and After the Closing of One School in Each.

That it is possible to effect savings by closing schools whose enrollments reach too low a figure is graphically shown in the above figure.

In District 1, two schools were in operation during the 1935-36 term. The combined enrollment was 18. The following year one of the schools was closed, and all the pupils, then 19 in number, enrolled in one school. The resultant savings amounted to $375, with the instructional cost reduced from $55 to $35.52 per pupil.

Six schools were operating in District 17 in 1936-37. The following year, after the closing of one of the schools, the instructional cost for the school district had dropped from $41.58 to $35.06 per pupil. The total savings amounted to $585. The savings in both instances represented only the differences in the amounts paid out in teachers' salaries, and did not include the decreased maintenance costs resulting from the fact that one fewer school was operated in each district.

Speaking generally, it seems advisable to close a school when the enrollment drops to 5 or fewer pupils.
Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Enrolled Most of Their Lake County Pupils, 1939-1940.

Legend:  
× Tuition students enrolled in Home Economics courses.  
▪ Tuition students enrolled in Vocational Agriculture courses.  
○ Tuition students enrolled in neither.
(No distinction is made between the areas served by Eastern High and Madison Central since they are almost identical.)

Source: Information from Superintendent of Schools.

A glance at the above map, which shows where farm children in Lake county attend high school, suggests a possible ultimate solution to the problem of 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 living within their borders who attend high school in nearby towns. With the exception of the four consolidated districts, all of the school districts in the county send high school pupils
to independent districts, paying tuition costs. During the 1939-40 term, high schools of Lake county enrolled 182 tuition pupils, as follows: Eastern High (Madison), 55; Rutland Consolidated, 47; Ramona, 46; Madison Central, 29; and Wentworth, 5.

As we have observed, the elementary enrollment in certain of the schools has declined to the point where the cost per pupil is becoming prohibitive. Eventually the common school districts may close their schools and send the remaining pupils to town schools, paying tuition and transportation charges. This would result in considerable savings to the school districts.

Most of the districts in Lake county, however, are large enough to support at least one school. The immediate line of action, then, would call for the closing of only those schools in which enrollments drop below a specified minimum. The remaining pupils would be sent to centralized schools within the district, with the board paying transportation costs as provided by law. The trend toward consolidation and the apparent tendency to close smaller schools indicate that Lake county has begun to work out a solution to its problems along these lines.
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 farmer 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; to visit; and to engage in various forms of recreation. In addition, the farmer sends his sons and daughters to the village high school. It is possible, as we have noted, that in the future rural districts may send their elementary pupils to village schools for instruction.
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 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.