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W. F. Kumlien

C. Scandrette

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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT

in the Elementary Schools

of Turner County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch

Shaded areas represent rural school districts with enrollments of 20 or more pupils. There were 45 such districts in 1920 and only 7 in 1940. Cross-hatched areas identify independent and consolidated districts.

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

Population exports for some years have been calling attention to the sharply reduced birth rate, and predicting that serious declines in elementary enrollments must naturally follow.

It is shown in Figure 1 that elementary enrollments in Turner county reached their peak as long ago as 1903. Since that date enrollments have declined at a somewhat constant rate, and in 1940 were only 52 percent as large as in 1903*. The sharpest decline is noted for the decade 1930-40. During the entire period the rural enrollments have fallen much more rapidly than have the enrollments for independent and consolidated schools.

Between 1920 and 1940 the number of births in Turner county dropped from 22.2 to 16.0 per thousand of the population. This represents a 28 percent reduction in birth rate over the twenty-year period. Since population losses through migration and other factors have not been large enough** to account for the heavy enrollment declines, it becomes apparent that the lowered birth rate is the most important single factor. The birth rate trend will likely continue in a downward direction; hence further enrollment declines will probably occur. This means that additional schools will be closed and that a greater number of districts than at present will find themselves with five or fewer pupils. Thus, from a planning standpoint, the situation created by declining enrollments appears to be Problem Number One.

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* The total elementary enrollments in 1903 were 4,033; in 1940 they were 2,096.
** In 1920 the Turner county population was 14,871; in 1930, 14,891; in 1940, 13,259. The decrease between 1920 and 1940 was 11 percent.
Figure 2. Elementary Enrollment in Turner County Districts 1920, 1930, 1940.

Legend:
Top figure 1920 enrollment
Middle figure 1930 enrollment
Lower figure 1940 enrollment

Source: Turner County Superintendent of Schools.
In 1940, 92 elementary schools were operating in 90 common districts of Turner county. One additional district (No. 94) had no school in operation during that year. There were eight independent and two consolidated districts located within and adjacent to villages of the county. Turner is one of the counties in the eastern part of the state which early adopted the small one-school type of district organization. It did not occur to the early settlers that the time might come when there would not be a sufficient number of children within the district to maintain the district school.

Figure 2 shows the elementary enrollments in each of the districts for 1920, 1930 and 1940. A general downward movement can be readily observed, although the decline is more marked in some districts than in others*. Common school districts have not been alone in experiencing enrollment losses. All of the independent and consolidated districts with one exception (Marion Independent) have shared in the general decline.

* It will be noted that in a few scattered districts enrollments were increased or maintained at the same level between 1920 and 1940.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollments in Turner County Schools, 1940.

Legend:
- Closed school.
- 5 or fewer pupils.
- 6 - 10 pupils.
- 11 - 15 pupils.
- 16 or more pupils.

Source: Records of Turner County Superintendent of Schools.
The location of each of the schools in Turner county is shown in Figure 3. It will be noted that only two schools had been closed by 1940. Finley No. 4 ceased operations in 1938, to be followed the next year by Rose Valley, District 94.

However, it should also be noted that in five districts the schools were operating with only five or fewer pupils. Twenty-eight schools enrolled 6 to 10 pupils, 37 had 11 to 15 pupils, and 20 had enrollments totalling 16 or more. In 1920, with over 70 percent of the schools enrolling 16 or more pupils, the average enrollment was 20.6. In 1940 only 22 percent of the schools had as many as 16 pupils, and the average enrollment had fallen to 12.5.

In the light of these figures it would appear that a number of districts will soon be faced with the prospect of closing their schools because of insufficient enrollments.

* Those schools which closed in making way for consolidated districts are not included in these figures.
Figure 4. Enrollment and Total Cost Per Pupil in Turner County School Districts, 1940.

Location of school.
Encircled figure—1940 enrollment.
Lower figure—cost per pupil.

Source: Records of Turner County Superintendent of Schools.
The costs for operating common schools of Turner county ranged from $31 per pupil in District 27 to $199 per pupil in District 1. The school in the former district enrolled 18 pupils, while that in the latter enrolled but three.

Table I shows the per pupil costs for schools grouped according to the number of pupils enrolled. It is conclusively shown that the smaller the school the greater is the per pupil cost. It cost the districts $62,22 to educate each of the 22 pupils who attended the five smallest schools. When this figure is compared with the figure for the county as a whole ($62.22), it becomes evident that the per pupil costs in the small districts are prohibitive. The costs for schools enrolling 6 to 10 pupils are also high - $91.24 per pupil - while the figure of $60.61 for schools of 11 to 15 pupils corresponds most closely to the per pupil costs for all schools. It appears that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis.

<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>90</td>
<td>1128</td>
<td>$70,184.01</td>
<td>$62.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3,271.26</td>
<td>148.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 pupils</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>20,254.19</td>
<td>91.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 pupils</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>28,787.96</td>
<td>60.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>17,870.60</td>
<td>43.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Finley District there were four schools in operation during the 1937-38 term. These schools enrolled a total of 50 pupils. School #4, which had only four pupils in 1937-38, was closed before the beginning of the following year. Its remaining pupils were sent to the neighboring schools within the district. With only three schools serving the 48 pupils during 1938-39, the instructional cost per pupil was cut from $43.65 to $37.03. The total savings to the district for that one year amounted to $495.

In general it seems advisable to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.
The above figure, showing the areas from which high schools draw their tuition students, suggests a possible ultimate solution to the problem of elementary enrollments. Since 1921 it has been compulsory for school districts without high schools of their own to pay the tuition costs for pupils living within their boundaries who attend high school in nearby towns and villages. Since the costs of maintaining their own high schools are obviously prohibitive, common districts of Turner county send more than 350 students to 13 independent and consolidated high schools in and adjacent to Turner county.

Does it not seem logical that the common districts might solve their elementary problem in the same manner as they have handled the high school situation? The per pupil cost of operating the elementary school in certain Turner county districts has already become prohibitive. When the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils, it will prove advantageous to the district to close its school and to send its remaining pupils to a nearby village school, paying transportation and tuition costs. In addition to the monetary savings involved, this plan has the further advantage of offering a higher level of educational facilities to farm children.

In those districts somewhat removed from village centers, the school may be closed when the enrollment drops below a minimum with the remaining pupils sent as tuition students to the nearest open country school still in operation.
Figure 7 shows that Turner county has a network of improved roads which extends to all parts of the county. The automobile and good roads have made trade centers of the county readily accessible to farmers no matter where they might live. This feature has tended to revolutionize the patterns of rural neighborhood and community organization.

Many functions formerly performed by open country institutions have been shifted to the village centers. The farmer now goes to the village to buy groceries, clothing, and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to participate in social and recreational activities. It has been noted that he is also sending his sons and daughters to the village high school. If the trend toward centralization of functions in the village centers continues, it may not be long before the farmer's younger children will be attending elementary school in these same villages.
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.