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W. F. Kumlien

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THE DECLINING ENROLLMENT PROBLEM
in
the Elementary Schools
of
McCook County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch

In 1920 there was an average of 18 pupils per rural school

but the average enrollment in 1940 had shrunk to 11 pupils
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 Miss Orena W. Cooper, the McCook 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 McCook County

For some years past population experts have been calling attention to the rapidly falling birth rate and have advanced the prediction that declines in elementary enrollment will naturally follow.

A glance at Figure 1 discloses the fact that the peak enrollment, 2,597, was reached as long ago as 1896. Since 1929, when 2,264 pupils were enrolled, a definite downward trend has been in evidence. The 1940 enrollment of 1,703 represents a drop of almost 25 percent since 1929. It will be noted that rural enrollments have fallen at a steady rate since 1905 while independent and consolidated enrollments have remained at almost a constant level since 1922.

Between 1920 and 1940 the birth rate in McCook county dropped nearly 50 percent.* During the same period the county population declined from 9,990 to 9,777.** It seems probable that population losses through migration may have been responsible for a small part of the elementary enrollment decline, but in seeking a more adequate answer one must look to the falling birth rate. Its effects on the rural school system give promise of being serious and far-reaching. Already eight common schools have been closed (see Figure 3) and enrollments in most of the others are dwindling. From a planning standpoint, it appears that the situation created by declining elementary enrollments is Problem Number One.

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

![Graph showing enrollment trends from 1890 to 1940.]

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

* In 1920 there were 31.9 births per thousand of the population; in 1940, only 16.8.
** The 1930 population of McCook county was 10,316.
Between 1930 and 1940, the population of McCook county declined by 5.7 percent. This figure was somewhat lower than the 7.5 percent loss suffered by the state as a whole. Figure 2 shows the extent of population changes in McCook county townships during the decade 1930-40. It is readily seen that the decline in numbers was felt throughout the county. Only two townships showed gains during the period, and in both instances the increases were slight. Two other townships, Spring Valley and Jefferson, lost nearly one-fourth of their numbers. Migration to points outside the county and to villages within the county* accounted for the general decline in numbers.

A relationship is seen to exist between population losses and declining elementary enrollments. Combined enrollments for the five townships which experienced the greatest percentage losses in population dropped 33.4 percent between 1930 and 1940, while enrollments for the five townships which either increased in numbers or suffered the smallest losses declined only 10.9 percent. It should be noted that enrollments have declined more rapidly than has the population, thus indicating the presence of other factors—principally the falling birth rate.

* Township figures do not include village population.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment in McCook County School Districts 1920, 1930, 1940.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pearl (4)</th>
<th>Sun Prairie (3)</th>
<th>Brookfield (2)</th>
<th>Ramsey (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>126</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>85</td>
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<td></td>
<td>79</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>Cons.</td>
<td>Salem (6)</td>
<td>Richland (7)</td>
<td>Montrose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>189</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>Emery (11)</td>
<td>Canistota (16)</td>
<td>Greenland (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>144</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgewater</td>
<td>Union (14)</td>
<td>Grant (13)</td>
<td>Spring Valley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>84</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Records of McCook County Superintendent of Schools.

In 1940, 67 elementary schools were operating in 14 common districts of McCook county. In addition there were 4 independent and 2 consolidated districts comprising villages of the county and their surrounding areas. The large township type of school district organization is found in McCook county—a situation unlike that in many eastern South Dakota counties where the small one-school district prevails.

Figure 3 shows the total elementary enrollment in each district for 1920, 1930 and 1940. A general downward trend is clearly in evidence. Eight schools had been closed by 1940 (see Figure 4), and well over half of the schools were operating with 10 or fewed pupils.* A further indication of the extent of enrollment declines may be gained by comparing the average enrollments per school in 1920 and 1940. At the former date, McCook county schools enrolled an average of 18 pupils; by 1940 the average had dropped to 11. Since there is no indication that the existing trend will be halted, further enrollment declines appear to be inevitable.

* 36 of the 67 common schools in 1940 enrolled 10 or fewer pupils.
The instructional costs for operating common schools of McCook County ranged from $24 in School 3, District 4, with an enrollment of 25 pupils, to $116 in School 4, District 3, which school enrolled but five pupils. The smaller the school, the greater is the per pupil cost. The per pupil costs of operating the 36 schools enrolling 10 or fewer pupils was 235 percent greater than that for the 11 schools having 16 or more pupils.

In the light of these figures it appears that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis.

Table I. Per Pupil Costs According to Size of School, McCook County, 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>67</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>$37,505.00</td>
<td>$55.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>580.00</td>
<td>116.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>19,275.00</td>
<td>70.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>11,115.00</td>
<td>43.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>6,535.00</td>
<td>30.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' salaries only.
In 1936-37 the Emery District operated six schools with a total enrollment of 66 pupils. The total costs that year were $6,203, or $94 per pupil. One school was closed before the beginning of the 1937-38 term and its pupils were sent to other schools within the district. During that year, with a total of 68 pupils in the five remaining schools, the total costs amounted to $5,321, or $78.25 per pupil. The closing of a single school resulted in savings of $872 to the district during the first year after closing.

In general, it seems advisable to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.
How is the problem of educating high school students from farm areas solved in McCook county? Since the costs of maintaining their own high schools are obviously prohibitive, the common districts send approximately 260 students to 10 independent and consolidated high schools in or near McCook county, paying tuition costs as provided by the 1921 statute. The figure above shows the areas from which high schools draw their tuition students, and gives the number of such students enrolled at each school in 1940.

This plan offers a possible solution to the problem of declining enrollments. When enrollment drops to a minimum, the costs of operating the common school become prohibitive in much the same manner as would costs of operating a separate high school within the district. Why, then, should the district not close its schools when enrollments drop to a specified figure (possibly 5 or fewer) and send its remaining pupils to a village school, paying transportation and tuition costs? Such a move has the double advantage of economy to the district and added educational opportunities for farm children.

Since McCook county school districts are relatively large, it seems reasonable to expect that they will continue to have enough children of elementary school age to justify at least one centralized school within each district. As an immediate policy, schools with shrinking enrollments could be closed and the remaining pupils sent (with transportation costs paid) to the centralized school.
Figure 7. McCook County Highway Systems, 1940.

Legend:

- Hard surfaced roads
- Graveled roads

Source: Official Map of the State Highway Commission, 1940.

Figure 7 shows that improved roads are found in all parts of McCook county. The automobile and good roads have made it possible for farmers, wherever they might live, to gain ready access to village centers in and adjacent to McCook county. This feature is revolutionizing the pattern 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 take part in recreational and social activities. It has been noted that he also sends his sons and daughters to the village high school. With the increased tendency for functions to be centralized in the village center, the time may be near at hand when the farmer's younger children will receive their training in the village elementary school.
Suggestions for Solving the Elementary School Problem

A school board 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.