1-19-1941

Problem of Declining Enrollment in Elementary Schools of Brown County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch

Follow this and additional works at: http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_rural-socio

Part of the Rural Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
Kumlien, W. F.; Scandrette, C.; and Hatch, Raymond, "Problem of Declining Enrollment in Elementary Schools of Brown County" (1941). Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets. 16.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_rural-socio/16

This Pamphlet is brought to you for free and open access by the SDSU Agricultural Experiment Station at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.
PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
the Elementary Schools
of
Brown County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch

Each symbol represents 300 students

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota
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 Genevieve Arntz, the Brown 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 Brown County.

For some years past population experts have been calling attention to the rapid declines in birth rate throughout the United States and advancing the prediction that decreased elementary enrollments will inevitably follow.

It is readily seen that Brown county elementary enrollments have passed their peak and that the trend is definitely downward. Figure 1 shows that enrollment in rural schools has fallen steadily since 1910, while the total enrollment, bolstered by population increases in village and city (principally Aberdeen), continued to rise until 1928. Since that date the decline has been sharp. The 1940 enrollment of 4863 pupils represents a drop of 28.9 percent from the peak enrollment of 6835 reached in 1928.

To what extent has the falling birth rate been responsible for this decline in elementary enrollments? A comparison based on figures for 1920 and 1940 shows that in the former year there were 25.2 births per thousand of the population while during the latter year there were only 18.9. This means that the birth rate fell off one-fourth over the comparatively short period of 20 years. As a natural consequence, each passing year has seen a shrinkage in the number of children who arrive at school age. The trend has proceeded to the point where high school enrollments are beginning to be similarly affected.

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

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
One additional factor has tended to lower elementary enrollments. This factor—the loss of population through migration—is reflected in Figure 2, showing the extent of population changes in Brown county townships, 1930-40. Population losses during the past decade have been heavy and widespread. Aberdeen township alone gained in numbers, while several townships suffered losses as high as one-fourth to nearly two-fifths of their 1930 population. These losses can be largely attributed to migration from rural areas to towns and cities within the county and to points outside the county. The second type of movement was especially heavy during the decade.

It is evident that a relationship exists between population losses and the extent of enrollment declines. Five townships which suffered the heaviest percentage losses in population, 1930-40, experienced enrollment declines of 56.7 percent, while the enrollment drop in five townships showing the least tendency toward population decline was only 15.9 percent. Yet the fact that enrollments dwindled even in Aberdeen township, which showed a 22 percent population increase (see Figure 3), indicates the existence of other factors. It appears that, although migration is a strong contributing factor, the falling off of the birth rate has been the chief force in bringing about elementary enrollment declines.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollment in Brown County School Districts 1920, 1930, 1940,

Legend: Upper figure 1920, Middle figure 1930, Lower figure 1940.
Source: Records of Brown County Superintendent of Schools.
* Aberdeen totals do not include enrollment in private and parochial schools.
** Enrollment for Columbia Independent District includes eight pupils attending a rural school operated by the independent district.
In 1940, 117 rural schools were operating in 60 common districts and one independent district of Brown county. Seventeen additional common districts had no school in operation that year. Nine independent and two consolidated districts were operating within the county. The prevailing type of school district organization is the large township plan, although there is some departure from this pattern, especially in the southern part of the county.

Figure 3 shows the total elementary enrollment in each of the Brown county districts for 1920, 1930 and 1940. A general downward movement is clearly in evidence, with declines reaching drastic proportions in a number of districts. It is to be noted that independent and consolidated enrollments have shared in the widespread decline, especially after 1930. Between 1930 and 1940 the total enrollment in public and parochial schools of Aberdeen dropped off 5.4 percent despite a population increase during the period of 2.8 percent.

Of extreme importance is the fact that 45 schools had closed by 1940 (see Figure 4). This indicates forcefully the seriousness of the declining enrollment problem. Thirteen other schools were operating with only five or fewer pupils in 1940, while well over half of all schools enrolled ten or fewer pupils*. This would indicate that enrollments in a number of schools are shrinking to the point where continued operation is hardly justified, and points to the early closing of more schools.

* 66 of the 117 common schools in 1940 enrolled 10 or fewer pupils.
Figure 4. Elementary Enrollment and Cost Per Pupil* in Brown County Schools, 1940.

* Based on teachers' salaries only.
The instructional costs of operating common schools of Brown county ranged from $30 per pupil in Ylitalo school, District No. 30, with 21 pupils enrolled, to $160 in Garden View School, District 36-4, which school enrolled but three pupils. In general the smaller the school the greater is the per pupil cost. The total costs for educating 60 pupils in the 13 smallest schools were almost one-half as large as those for furnishing instruction to 440 pupils in the 19 largest schools. The per pupil cost for the first named group of schools were 400 percent higher than those for the latter. The per pupil costs for schools enrolling 6 to 10 pupils was $75.28, which was likewise well above the average for all schools--$58.59.

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

Table I. Instructional Costs per Pupil According to Size of School, Brown 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>117</td>
<td>1323</td>
<td>$77,519.50</td>
<td>$58.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7,657.50</td>
<td>127.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>31,995.00</td>
<td>75.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>20,828.00</td>
<td>52.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>17,039.00</td>
<td>38.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1938-39, District No. 31 (Liberty) operated five schools with a combined enrollment of 53 pupils. The total expenditures for the district that year amounted to $5583.90, or $105.35 per pupil. One school was closed the following year and the 49 pupils were sent to the four remaining schools. The total costs that year (1939-40) were $3874.20, with the per pupil cost reduced to $79.02.

One school was operated in District No. 24-2 (East Gem) during 1938-39 with an enrollment of only five pupils. Since total costs were $996.63, this meant a per pupil expenditure of $199.38. The number of pupils within the district had fallen to three by 1939-40, so the district closed its school and sent the remaining pupils as tuition students to adjacent districts. This action lowered the total expenditures for education to $354.05, or $118.02 per pupil. Since it would have cost approximately as much to operate the school for three pupils in 1939-40 as it had cost for five the preceding year, the closing of the school actually meant a saving of $641.88 to the district.

In general it seems advisable to close a school when enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.
Where do farm youths of Brown county attend high school? Figure 6 shows the areas served by high schools in 14 villages and cities within or adjacent to Brown county, along with the number of students drawn from each school district. Since the costs of operating their own high schools are obviously prohibitive, common districts avail themselves of the high school facilities which are found in city and village. To these centers high school students—numbering over 500 in 1940—are sent, with the home district paying tuition costs as provided by the state law of 1921.

This method of handling the high school situation offers a possible ultimate solution to the problem of declining elementary enrollments. Why could the elementary enrollments not be handled in a similar manner? It has been seen that the costs of operating elementary schools has become prohibitive in a number of districts. To close the common school or schools and to send the remaining pupils to village or city elementary schools would not only result in savings to the district, but would also provide enriched educational opportunities for farm children. As an immediate suggestion for areas somewhat removed from village or city centers, it is recommended that schools continue to be closed when enrollments drop to five pupils or fewer, with the remaining pupils being sent to the nearest common school still in operation. In the case of township districts, one school might be retained at the center of the district to serve the needs of the entire district.
As may be seen in Figure 7, improved roads are found in all parts of Brown county. The automobile and good roads have made it easy for the farmer, wherever he might live, to reach his nearest village center, as well as the city of Aberdeen. This feature has had far-reaching effects upon rural life in Brown county.

Many functions formerly performed by open-country institutions have been shifted to the trade center. The farmer goes to the village or city to buy groceries, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to take part in social and recreational activities. It has been noted that he also sends his sons and daughters to the village or city high school. In view of the increased tendency for functions to be centralized in the trade center, the time may be near at hand when the farmer's younger children will receive their instruction in the village or city elementary schools.
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.

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.

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.