3-15-1941

Problem of Declining Enrollment in Elementary Schools of Grant 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 Grant County" (1941). Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets. 19.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_rural-socio/19

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
Grant County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch

Shaded areas represent rural districts whose schools enrolled an average of 15 or more pupils. There were 32 such schools in 1925 and only 14 in 1940. Cross-hatched areas are independent districts.

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. 665-74-3-143. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mrs. Lydia Luerschow, the Grant 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 Grant County

For a number of years population experts have pointed to the extensive falling off of the birth rate and have predicted that a general decline in elementary enrollments must naturally follow.

Has this prediction been borne out in Grant county? Figure 1 shows that elementary enrollments reached their peak as long ago as 1899. The greatest decline, however, has occurred since 1928. The 1940 enrollment of 1,822 represents a 23.5 percent drop from that of 1928 (2,382). It will be noted that while independent enrollments have remained fairly constant, rural enrollments have shown an almost unceasing downward tendency since 1905.

Between 1920 and 1940 the number of births in Grant county dropped from 26.2 to 19.2 per thousand of the population—a decline of almost 27 percent during the 20 year period. As a result fewer children have reached school age with each passing year. The trend has proceeded to the point where even high school enrollments are being similarly affected.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollments in Grant County, 1890-1940.

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
One additional factor has contributed heavily to enrollment declines in South Dakota. The decade 1930-40 was one of unprecedented migration from the state. During this period, South Dakota suffered population losses amounting to 7.5 percent of its 1930 numbers. Grant county, however, lost only 1.7 percent.* Figure 2 shows the percentage population changes in Grant county townships, 1930-40. It will be noted that losses ranging from less than 1 to over 19 percent occurred in every township except Osceola. The fact that the net loss for the county was far below those suffered by the respective townships would indicate that much of the Grant county migration has been local in nature, consisting of movements from rural areas to towns and villages within the county. The gains in town and village population have largely offset the losses in the rural farm numbers. The population of Milbank increased 13 percent during the decade—from 2,339 to 2,745. Increases in town and village population explain why it is that elementary enrollments in the independent schools of Grant county have been maintained at a fairly constant level.

There is a definite relationship between the size of population losses in the several townships and the extent of enrollment decline. A drop of over 40 percent in elementary enrollments occurred in the four townships suffering the heaviest percentage losses in population; whereas enrollments slumped only 10 percent in the four townships which showed the least tendency toward population decline. It would appear that the falling birth rate is the underlying factor in the elementary enrollment decline, but that population depletion through migration has, at least temporarily, rather seriously aggravated the problem.

* The 1940 population of Grant county was 10,543, as compared with 10,729 in 1930.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollments in Grant County School Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>1920 (1)</th>
<th>1930 (2)</th>
<th>1940 (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Osceola</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvin Ind.</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blooming Valley</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmington</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lura</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

--- School District Boundaries

Independent Districts

Top figure - 1920 enrollment
Middle figure - 1930 enrollment
Lower figure - 1940 enrollment

N. B. - No building

(School districts take the township name: i.e., Grant Center 1, Grant Center 2, etc.)

Source: Records of Grant County Superintendent of Schools.
Seventy-six elementary schools were being operated in 1940 within 56 common districts of Grant county. In addition there were ten independent districts, centered chiefly in towns or villages of the county. Although large township districts are found in scattered sections of the county, the small, one-school district constitutes the prevailing type of school district organization. In this respect Grant resembles other of the early settled counties in eastern South Dakota.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollments can be traced in Figure 3, which lists the enrollments in each district for 1920, 1930 and 1940. One-seventh of all rural schools in Grant county (see Figure 4) were operating with five or fewer pupils in 1940, while well over half enrolled 10 or fewer pupils. Only one school in every six had an enrollment of 16 pupils or more.

It will be noted that only three schools were marked closed by 1940. However, it would appear that common districts are faced with the immediate prospect of closing certain additional schools whose enrollments have dwindled to the point where continued operation seems hardly justified.

Two of the common schools were operating within Marvin Independent district.
Figure 4. Enrollment and Cost Per Pupil in Common Schools of Grant County, 1940

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

The figure below or adjacent to each school is the instructional cost per pupil.
Source: Records of Grant County Superintendent of Schools.

In order to be rendered meaningful, school costs should be reduced to a per pupil basis. In 1940 the instructional costs of operating Grant county schools ranged from $25 per pupil in School No. 1, Lura district, where 20 pupils were enrolled, to $168 per pupil in School No. 3, Osceola district, which had an enrollment of only three pupils. It becomes quite evident upon examination of Figure 4 that the smaller the school the greater is the per pupil cost.

The comparative per pupil costs listed in Table I (below) indicate that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive. This is especially true for schools having five or fewer pupils. The per pupil cost for the 11 schools in the latter group averaged $120.94, as compared with the average for all schools of $50.64, and was four times as great as that for schools enrolling 16 or more pupils.

Table I. Cost of Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Grant 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>77</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>$41,070.00</td>
<td>$50.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>$5,442.50</td>
<td>120.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 pupils</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>16,735.00</td>
<td>64.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 pupils</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>11,507.50</td>
<td>41.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>7,385.00</td>
<td>31.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools
* Costs are based on teachers' salaries only.
In 1932-33 the school in Melrose District, No. 1 was operated for five pupils at a total cost of $674.96. Because of the small enrollment and the mounting per pupil cost, the school was closed before the 1933-34 term commenced. During that year with the remaining pupils sent to neighboring rural schools, the total cost for educational purposes dropped to $209.05. The net saving to the district through the closing of the school amounted to $465.91 in a single year.

From a financial standpoint it seems advisable to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.
What provisions are made for supplying high school education to students from rural-farm areas of Grant county? Obviously, the high costs involved make it impossible for common districts to maintain their own high schools; instead they avail themselves of high school facilities in nearby towns and villages, to which they send their young people as tuition students. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools in and adjacent to Grant county drew their Grant county tuition students (numbering over 200) in 1940.

This plan which has proved successful in handling the high school situation presents a possible solution to the problem of declining elementary enrollments. As previously noted, the costs of operating elementary schools in a number of districts are becoming prohibitive. Why should the district not close its school, or schools, when enrollment declines produce excessive per pupil costs, and send its remaining pupils to a nearby village school, paying transportation and tuition costs? Not only would such a plan involve savings to the district, but it would also provide enriched educational opportunities for farm children.

As an immediate measure, the large districts may retain one or more centralized schools, closing the others as enrollments fall below a minimum and transporting all pupils of the district to the remaining schools. The smaller one-school districts which find that decreased enrollments make continued operation impractical, can close their schools and send their pupils either to a village school or to the nearest rural school still in operation. The common districts may ultimately find it to their advantage to allow the educational function to pass to elementary schools in towns and villages.
As shown in Figure 7, improved roads are found in every portion of Grant county. The automobile and good roads have enabled farmers, wherever they might live, to gain ready access to town and village centers in Grant and adjacent counties. This feature has done much to revolutionize the patterns of rural life.

Many functions formerly performed by open country institutions have been shifted to town and village centers. The farmer now goes to his trade center to buy groceries, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to participate in social and recreational activities. In addition, he sends his sons and daughters to the town or village high school. With the ever-increasing tendency for functions to be concentrated in the community center, the time may not be far distant when the farmers' younger children will receive their elementary education in town and village schools.
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.

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.