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The Problem of Declining Enrollment in Elementary Schools of Union County

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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT

in the Elementary Schools

of Union County

Cross-hatched areas represent rural school districts enrolling 25 or more pupils. There were 35 such districts in 1920 and only 12 in 1940. Shaded areas indicate independent or consolidated school districts.

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Union county leaders by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Union County

In view of the rapid falling-off of the birth rate, population experts for a number of years have predicted a widespread decline in elementary enrollments.

Although the enrollment decline in Union county has not been so pronounced as in many other South Dakota counties, the trend seems to be definitely downward (see Figure 1). The peak enrollment was attained as long ago as 1898. Between 1930 and 1940 the total enrollment dropped 18.2 percent—from 2,550 to 2,086. When the rural enrollment is considered separately, the decline assumes much greater significance. During the decade 1930-1940, enrollment in rural schools of Union county dropped off 29.1 percent. Independent schools have maintained their enrollments at a rather constant level. The slump during the interval 1917-1931 is due to the fact that one of the independent school districts operated during this period as a consolidated district.

Between 1920 and 1940 the birth rate in Union county fell from 23.1 to 14.2 per thousand of the population. The natural result has been a decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age with each passing year. However, since enrollment shrinkage tends to lag several years behind birth rate decline, the full effect of the dwindling birth rate has probably not yet been felt, especially by upper grade and high school enrollments.

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

![Graph showing enrollment trends from 1890 to 1940 for total, rural, independent, and consolidated enrollments.]

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Union County Townships, 1930-1940.

Between 1930 and 1940 the population of South Dakota declined 7.5 percent as a result of heavy out-of-state migration. Union county, however, showed a gain during the decade of 1.6 percent.* This increase in numbers was supplied by gains in village population** rather than by an upswing in the population of rural farm areas. In Figure 2, which shows the extent of population change in Union county townships, 1930-1940, it can be seen that only three townships (Big Sioux, Civil Bend and Prairie) reported population gains.

Losses in the other rural civil divisions ranged from 1.5 percent in Big Springs Township to 15.1 percent in Sioux Valley Township. Numerical losses in rural areas and the accompanying gains in village population help to explain why it is that rural elementary enrollments have declined significantly while independent enrollments have held their ground (see Figure 1).

It is of importance to note that the townships which suffered the heaviest population losses generally showed the sharpest enrollment declines between 1930 and 1940. In Sioux Valley township, where population losses, 1930-1940, reached 15.1 percent, enrollments fell off almost 50 percent. On the other hand, Big Sioux township, which showed a net gain over the decade of 31 percent, had an enrollment drop of only 9.3 percent. Migration from rural areas of Union county has undoubtedly been a factor in the elementary enrollment decline; yet the fact that enrollment losses have been proportionately greater than population losses and have occurred for the county as a whole despite a slight gain in numbers would indicate that other forces are at work. The downward trend in the birth rate is apparently the underlying factor in the declining enrollment problem.

* The population of Union County in 1940 was 11,665 as compared with 11,480 in 1930.
** Each of the four villages in the county showed a gain in population during the decade. The total village population increased from 3,328 in 1930 to 3,815 in 1940—a gain of 487 persons.
In 1940, 63 elementary schools were being operated within 66 common districts of Union county. Three of these districts had no school in operation during that year. The small, one-school type of district organization prevails in Union county, as in several other of the extreme eastern counties of South Dakota. Four independent districts were operating elementary schools at Elk Point, Jefferson, Alcester and Beresford.

A glance at the 1920, 1930 and 1940 enrollments in each of the Union county districts (as shown in Figure 3) suffices to indicate the general downward trend. Three rural districts had closed their schools by 1940. Three others were operating with only five pupils in each. Five schools enrolled 6 to 10 pupils; 24 had enrollments of 11 to 15; and A, just under one-half of all schools, enrolled 16 or more pupils.

District No. 4 enrolled 102 pupils and employed four teachers. The average enrollment—19 pupils per school—ranks extremely high in comparison with other counties of the state. Still, the declines which occurred between 1920 and 1940 are significant. In the former year 35 districts enrolled 25 or more pupils, and in the latter year only 12. Enrollment in one district dropped from 62 to 17 over the 20 year period. If the downward trend continues—and it seems likely that it will—it may be only a matter of a few years before the dwindling enrollments in many districts will constitute a very real problem.

* * * * * *

Legend: * To Clay County
Top figure - 1920 enrollment
Middle figure - 1930 enrollment
Lower figure - 1940 enrollment
Source: Records of Union County Superintendent of Schools.
Figure 4. Elementary Enrollments and Total Costs per Pupil in Union County School Districts, 1940.

Note: District 16 which enrolled 28 pupils in 1920, has virtually disappeared through a change in the course of the Missouri River. The school was abandoned in 1928. The former school site is now indicated as being in the river channel.

Legend:
- Closed school
- 1 - 5 pupils
- 6 - 10 pupils
- 11 - 15 pupils
- 16 or more pupils

The figure within the circle indicating school location is the total cost per pupil.

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools.
When school costs are reduced to a per pupil basis, wide variations can be discerned among common districts of Union county (see Figure 4). In four districts, 7, 34, 67 and 74, the total costs of elementary education were only $33 to $34 per pupil. The average enrollment in these four schools was 30 pupils. At the upper extreme, the per pupil costs in Districts 75 and 9 were $223 and $237, respectively. District 75 enrolled only 5 pupils. The high per pupil cost in District 9, which enrolled 14 pupils, can be attributed to the fact that in 1940 a total of $2,249.82 was spent for a new building and site. When this sum is deducted from the total expenditures, the per pupil cost becomes comparable to other districts with equivalent enrollments. In all districts enrolling 9 or fewer pupils the per pupil costs were well over $100. The general conclusion which may be drawn is that the smaller the district enrollment the greater is the per pupil cost of operating its school.

Table I shows the per pupil costs in Union county schools according to size groupings. Comparison of the costs for schools enrolling 1 to 5 pupils and those enrolling 6 to 10 pupils with the average for all schools would indicate that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. This is especially true for schools having five or fewer pupils. The per pupil cost for these schools was $165.36, as compared with the average for all schools of $59.61.

<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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1176</td>
<td>$70,098.52</td>
<td>$59.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>$2,480.34</td>
<td>165.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4,311.40</td>
<td>105.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>24,306.05</td>
<td>75.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>39,000.73</td>
<td>48.93</td>
</tr>
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</table>
During the 1938-39 school term, District 17 operated its school for six pupils at a total cost of $1,083.03. Because of the small enrollment, the school was closed in 1939-40 and the remaining pupils were sent to neighboring schools. Despite the fact that $686.15 was paid out for tuition during the latter year, the total expenditures for the district dropped to $941.15. This represents a saving of over $140 during the first year after the school's closing. District 17 was the only one of the three closed districts in which comparative figures were obtainable for the last year of operation and the first year after closing. However, District 23, which last operated its school in 1903-04 at a total cost of $1,555.98, had expenditures of only $439.55 in 1940.

From a financial standpoint it seems advisable for a school district to close its school when the enrollment drops as low as five or six pupils.
Figure 6. Areas from Which High Schools Drew Their Union County Tuition Students, 1940.

According to a legislative act of 1921 it is compulsory for school districts without high schools to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Since the costs of operating their own secondary schools are prohibitive, common districts of Union county send their young people to nearby villages for high school attendance. Figure 6 shows the areas from which seven town and village high schools enrolled their Union county tuition students, numbering nearly 350, in 1940.

This plan suggests a possible solution to the declining enrollment problem. When enrollment within a district has declined to the point where per pupil costs become excessive, it would seem advisable to close the school and send the remaining pupils to the nearest village school, paying transportation and tuition costs. In South Dakota districts which have tried this procedure, costs to the districts have been materially lowered and the relatively superior facilities of the village schools have been extended to farm children.

The first step in the reorganization of the rural school system on a village-centered community basis may involve the sending of pupils to the nearest open country school still in operation after the closing of the home school. Such a plan is especially applicable in areas somewhat removed from village centers.

Source: Records of High School Superintendents.
Figure 7. Highways of Union County, 1940.

It will be noted in Figure 7 that a hard surfaced highway extends the length of Union County and that, in general, improved roads are found in all parts of the county. The automobile and good roads have made the trade centers in and adjacent to Union county readily accessible to farm families no matter in what part of the county they might live. This expansion in the range of the farmer's contacts has had profound effects on the pattern of rural life.

Towns and villages have assumed many of the functions once performed by open country institutions whose service areas were much more restricted in scope. The farmer now goes to his trade center to buy groceries, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to engage in social and recreational activities. As previously noted, he also sends his sons and daughters to town or village for their high school training. As a further step in the process of centralization, the farmer may eventually send his younger children to elementary schools in town or village.

* * * * * *

Legend: 
- Hard surface  
- Graveled  
- Graded

Source: Official Map of the South Dakota Highway Commission, 1940.
How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

In at least one west river county a county-wide district plan is now in operation. Under such a plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.