5-15-1941

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

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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in the Elementary Schools
of Jerauld County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch

In 1920 the average enrollment in rural schools was 17 pupils.

but by 1940 the average enrollment had dropped to 9 pupils.

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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 Jerauld 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.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and 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 Mr. Clyde Fite, the Jerauld County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study was secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Jerauld County

Population experts have predicted for a number of years that a widespread decline in elementary enrollments would be inevitable in view of the steady drop in the birth rate.

Figure 1 shows rather conclusively that this prediction has been fulfilled in Jerauld county. It will be noted that the downward trend, which dates from 1921, has been especially pronounced since 1930. From a peak of 1,481 pupils in 1921, the total elementary enrollment had dropped almost 50 percent to 781 by 1940. The 1930 enrollment totalled 1,338 pupils. Rural enrollments, it will be observed, have been hardest hit, although independent and consolidated school enrollments have shared in the decline.

The trend in the Jerauld county birth rate, 1920 to 1940 is also shown in Figure 1. A rather high degree of relationship is seen to exist between birth rate and enrollment declines. In 1920 there were 24.2 births per thousand of the population, but the number had decreased to 16.2 by 1940. As a natural result of the fall in the birth rate, fewer children have reached school age with each passing year.

Figure 1: Trends in Elementary School Enrollment, Jerauld County, 1890 - 1940, and Birth Rate, 1920 - 1940.

Note: For the birth rate trend, the positions 500, 1000 and 1500 correspond to 10, 20 and 30 births, respectively.
Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
Another important factor in the elementary enrollment decline which has occurred in Jerauld county is the heavy loss of population through migration. Between 1930 and 1940 it is estimated that the net loss from migration for the state as a whole was 119,000 persons.* During this period the population of Jerauld county dropped 18.3 percent—from 5,816 to 4,752—with outward migration accounting for a major share of the decline.

Figure 2 shows the percent of population change, 1930-40, in each township of Jerauld county. Losses occurred in all townships, and ranged from 6.5 percent in Anina township to 43.8 percent in Marlar township. The village population (not included in township figures) also declined, but to a much lesser extent than the farm population. The combined population for Wessington Springs, Alpena and Lane dropped from 2,087 in 1930 to 2,006 in 1940. In general, enrollment declines were most pronounced in townships having the heaviest population losses. In the four townships which suffered the greatest losses in numbers, elementary enrollments declined 58.8 percent, as compared with 37.2 percent in the four townships showing the least tendency toward population decline.

Although the falling off of the birth rate is undoubtedly the underlying factor in the enrollment decline, the trend has been considerably hastened in Jerauld county by widespread migration from the county. A combination of these two factors has produced a declining enrollment situation which must take rank as Problem No. 1 from a planning standpoint.

During the 1939-40 school term, Jerauld county had 45 schools operating in 15 common districts. In addition, there were two independent districts and one consolidated district. As in other central South Dakota counties, the township plan is the prevailing type of common district organization.

The general scope of the enrollment declines in Jerauld county may be gleaned from Figure three, which shows the 1920, 1930 and 1940 enrollments for each district. In every instance the 1940 enrollment was appreciably lower than that for 1930. In most districts the downward trend had set in prior to 1930, as evidenced by lower enrollments in 1930 than in 1920.

Chiefly because of shrinking enrollments, 12 common schools had been closed by 1940. Six schools were operating with five or fewer pupils, while 29, or almost two-thirds of all common schools had enrollments of ten or less. Not a single rural school enrolled more than 15 pupils. The average enrollment has dropped steadily from 16.8 in 1920 to 13.8 in 1930 and 9.3 in 1940.
As shown in Figure 4, a wide variation exists among the schools of Jerauld county in the instructional costs per pupil. In general, those schools having the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. In 1940, instructional costs in common schools ranged from $35 in Madden school Media district, and in Martin school, Anina district, where 13 and 14 pupils, respectively, were enrolled, to $150 in Howman school, Viola district, which had an enrollment of only three pupils.

Table I (below) shows that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis, particularly when the school enrollment is as low as five or fewer pupils. The costs in schools with 1 - 5 pupils was $111.67 per pupil, as compared with $42.24 in schools with 11 - 15 pupils. The average for all schools was $56.78 per pupil.

Table I. Cost of Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Jerauld 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>Cost per Pupil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>$22,770</td>
<td>$56.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5 pupils</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>$3,015</td>
<td>111.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>$11,565</td>
<td>63.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>$8,190</td>
<td>42.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools

* Based on teachers' salaries only.
Several school districts in Jerauld county, as in other South Dakota counties, have recently closed one or more of their schools in which enrollments have dropped to a minimum. This step has usually involved a considerable saving to the school district. District 15, in Jerauld county, operated three schools during the 1937-38 term, with a combined enrollment of 20 pupils and a total cost of $2,987.33. One of the schools was closed before the next school term, and with two schools serving the 18 pupils total costs in 1938-39 were reduced to $2,300.16. Costs per pupil were sliced from $149.37 to $127.79 and the net saving to the district during the single year amounted to $687.17.

In view of the experiences of a number of school districts which have been studied, it would seem advisable to close a school when enrollment drops to as low as five or six pupils.
Figure 6 shows the areas from which village high schools draw their Jerauld county tuition students. Since 1921 it has been compulsory for school districts which do not have their own high schools to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school in nearby towns and villages. Because of the prohibitive costs of operating secondary schools, the common districts of Jerauld county send their students—who numbered approximately 150 in 1940—to village centers in or near the county. This plan has worked out to the satisfaction of both town and country areas and presents a possible ultimate solution to the problem of declining elementary enrollment as well.

In view of the mounting costs per pupil as observed in many common districts, it would seem advisable for these districts to close their school or schools and send their remaining pupils to village elementary schools when distances permit. Even with the added costs of tuition and transportation, which must be borne by the home district, substantial savings have been realized in districts of the state which have tried this plan.

However, since the common districts in Jerauld county are organized along township lines, most districts have sufficient enrollments at present to support one centrally located school. This alternative plan is perhaps more practical than that outlined above in districts somewhat removed from village centers. The immediate step in such event would call for the closing of all except a central school which school would provide for the elementary education needs of the entire district.
As may be seen in Figure 7, improved roads are found throughout Jerauld county. Good roads and the automobile have made the village centers quite accessible to farm families wherever they might live. This is especially true in the eastern portion of the county where the villages are clustered and good roads are more numerous.

Largely because of the increased ease of transportation, many services formerly performed by open country institutions on a localized neighborhood scale have been shifted to the village centers, which are tending to become true service stations for their surrounding country areas. The farmer now goes to the village to purchase groceries, machinery, clothing and other articles; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to an increasing extent to take part in social and recreational activities. His sons and daughters, as previously observed, go to the village to attend high school. The next step, which is likely to be hastened by shrinking enrollments and excessive per pupil costs of operating common schools, may involve the sending of the farmer's younger children to the village elementary school. Since village enrollments have also decreased, the pupils from country areas could probably be absorbed by village schools with little, if any, additions to the school plants.
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.