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

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In 1920 the average rural school enrollment was 23 pupils

but by 1940 the average enrollment had shrunk to 11 pupils
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 Gregory 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

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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Gregor7 Count1

For a number of years population experts have called attention to widespread declines in the birth rate and have held that a serious reduction in elementary school enrollments will naturally follow.

The reliability of this prediction as applied to Gregory county is shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that enrollments increased tremendously during the period of rapid settlement of the county (1905-1910), remained somewhat constant for a number of years, and reached their peak in 1923, when 3,293 elementary pupils were enrolled. Since that date the decline has been sharp and almost uninterrupted, with the 1940 enrollment of 1,689 representing a drop of 48.7 percent from the 1923 figure. Although Figure 1 conveys the idea that rural enrollments have suffered most severely, the proportionate losses in independent and consolidated enrollments (combined) have been almost equally as great.

Also shown in Figure 1 is the trend in the Gregory county birth rate 1918-1938. It will be noted that the number of births per 1000 of the population has dropped since reaching a peak of 30.0 in 1924. The 1938 figure was 16.4 births, or little over one-half that of 1924. The result of this downward trend in the birth rate has been a steady decrease in the number of children who reach school age.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Gregory County, 1890-1940. Births per 1000 population

No. of Pupils and Birth Rate Trend, 1918-1938.

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

Legend:
- Gain in population
- Lost 0.1 - 9.9%
- Lost 10.0 - 19.9%
- Lost 20.0 - 29.9%
- Lost 30.0 - 39.9%
- Lost 40.0 - 49.9%

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940.
A further explanation for the decline in elementary enrollments in Gregory county is found in Figure 2, which shows the percentage change in the farm population by townships, 1930 to 1940. It will be noted that all except one of the 29 townships reported losses in population during the decade, with the decrease in three amounting to over 40 percent. For the county as a whole population dropped off 16.3 percent—from 11,420 in 1930 to 9,554 in 1940—with outward migration accounting for a major share of the decrease. Five of the six villages of the county (the lone exception being Gregory) showed population losses, with their combined population dropping from 3,395 to 3,242. This is in keeping with the enrollment trends (see Figure 1) which indicate declines in both rural and village enrollments.

The northern and western portions of Gregory county, where population losses have been heaviest, have likewise suffered the most pronounced enrollment declines. In the four townships reporting the greatest decreases in population enrollments dropped off almost 61 percent, while in the four townships showing the least tendency toward depopulation the drop was less than 19 percent. In view of these facts it would seem that population losses through migration have operated as a strong contributing factor in the elementary enrollment decline.
Figure 3. Elementary Enrollments in School Districts of Gregory County 1920, 1930 and 1940.

Legend:
Top figure - 1920 enrollment
Middle figure - 1930 enrollment
Bottom figure - 1940 enrollment
* Included in the enrollment figures for District 86 in 1920.

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools.
Seventy-nine common school districts were operating a total of 75 rural schools in Gregory county in 1940. In addition, four independent, and three consolidated districts, were functioning in and around village centers of the county. Two parochial schools enrolled a total of 110 pupils in 1940. Although a few of the common districts are organized along township lines, the prevailing type of organization is that of the small, one-school district. This pattern was established at an early date by settlers from more densely settled states where the small district system was prevalent.

Figure 3 shows the elementary enrollments in all districts of Gregory county for 1920, 1930, and 1940. The general downward trend can be traced, with declines apparent in a majority of the districts even by 1930. By 1940 no fewer than 29 rural schools had been closed because of inadequate enrollments. Of the 78 which were still operating, 12 enrolled five or fewer pupils, while 44 had enrollments of ten pupils or less. Thus 73 of the 107 rural schools were either closed or were operating with limited enrollments. Nineteen schools had 11 to 15 pupils, while 15 enrolled 16 pupils or more.

As an indication that small school districts are not well adapted to counties as thinly populated as Gregory, 17 of these districts had no schools in operation during the 1939-40 term. It becomes apparent that a reorganization of the rural school structure in Gregory county must be undertaken.
Figure 4. Elementary Enrollments and Instructional Costs Per Pupil in Common Schools of Gregory County, 1940

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

The figure below each school site is the cost per pupil.

Source: Records of Gregory County Superintendent of Schools.
A glance at Figure 4 will indicate that considerable variation is found in per pupil costs of elementary education among common schools of Gregory county. In general, however, costs vary inversely as the enrollment, with the smallest schools showing the greatest costs per pupil. Instructional costs in Gregory county schools ranged from $20.00 per pupil in Rhoades school, Rhoades district, which enrolled 27 pupils, to $200.00 in Hawk school, Hawk district, where only two pupils were enrolled.

Table I (below) shows that the costs per pupil are excessive in schools enrolling five or fewer pupils, and also high in those schools with six to ten pupils. The instructional costs per pupil in these two groups of schools were $106.57 and $59.89, respectively, as compared with $25.69 for schools enrolling 16 or more pupils. The average for all schools was $44.47. The problem of lowering costs per pupil without sacrificing educational advantages is confronting practically all districts of Gregory county.

Table I: Cost of Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Gregory 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>107</td>
<td>852</td>
<td>$37,891.00</td>
<td>$44.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5 pupils</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>5,435.00</td>
<td>106.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>15,151.37</td>
<td>59.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>9,445.00</td>
<td>39.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 pupils or more</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>7,860.00</td>
<td>25.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Records of Gregory County Superintendent of Schools

* Based on teachers' salaries only.
Figure 5. Costs of Elementary Education in Two Gregory County School Districts Before and After Each Closed Its School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1937-38</th>
<th>1938-39</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dist. No. 40</td>
<td>$124.35</td>
<td>$557.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dist. No. 20</td>
<td>$151.05</td>
<td>$523.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: 
- - - - - - - - - Before closing
- - - - - - - - - After closing

Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools

A widely-used procedure for reducing the high costs of elementary education has been that of closing the school when enrollment falls below a stipulated figure. This has been done to advantage in several districts of Gregory county as well as elsewhere in the state. District 40 operated its school in 1937-38 for four pupils at a total cost of $557.76. The following year the school was closed and the two remaining pupils were sent to a neighboring school, with the home district paying tuition and transportation costs. Even with these added expenses the total costs during 1938-39 were only $124.35. In a single year the district had affected a saving of $433.41, and per pupil costs had been reduced from $139.44 to $62.18.

A similar experience was noted by District 20 which had only two pupils enrolled in its school during 1936-37. The total costs that year were $523.44, or $261.72 per pupil. With the school closed by the following year and the two pupils sent to an adjoining school, total costs to the district were cut to $151.05, or $75.52 per pupil. The closing of the school in this instance made possible a saving to the district of $372.39 during the first year after closing.

In view of the experience of a number of districts which have been observed, it seems advisable to close a school when the enrollment drops to as low a figure as five or six pupils.
Figure 6, which shows the areas from which high schools draw their Gregory county students, suggests a possible ultimate solution to the declining elementary enrollment problem. Since 1921, it has been compulsory for school districts having no high schools of their own to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high schools outside the district. The costs of operating high schools for their few students being obviously prohibitive, common districts throughout Gregory county send their students as tuition pupils to village high schools of the county. The eight villages in the county enrolled more than three hundred tuition students from rural areas in 1940.

In similar fashion why should common districts which are confronted by problems of dwindling enrollments and mounting costs per pupil not close their schools and send their remaining elementary pupils to village schools as tuition students? This is being done at present by a few districts lying adjacent to village centers. Besides providing savings to the common districts such a plan extends to children from rural-farm areas the advantages of village schools' superior facilities.

Most of the large school districts in Gregory county can probably solve their problem by closing all except one or two centrally located schools to which all pupils of the district can be sent. The small, one-school districts, however, must send their students as tuition pupils to nearby rural or village schools when enrollments no longer justify the operation of the district school. In time, town-centered community education areas may evolve along lines similar to the high school attendance areas shown in Figure 6.

Source: Records of High School Superintendents
Figure 7 shows that improved roads are found throughout most of Gregory county. This feature, together with the widespread use of the automobile, has tended to make village centers readily accessible to farm families from all but a few isolated sections of the county, thus revolutionizing many aspects of rural living. In line with this trend, many services formerly performed by open country institutions on a localized basis have now been shifted to the village.

The farmer now goes to the village center to buy his groceries, clothing, machinery and other articles; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to take part in social and recreational activities. As previously observed, he also sends his sons and daughters to the village high school. In view of the increasing tendency toward concentration of services, it would not be surprising in the course of a few years to find his younger children attending village elementary schools. Since village enrollments have also declined appreciably, it seems likely that the rural children could be absorbed without great expansion of existing school plants.

Legend:
- Hard surfaced
- Graveled
- Graded

Source: Official Map of the South Dakota State Highway Commission, 1941
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.