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

W. F. Kumlien

C. Scandrette

Raymond Hatch

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

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette
Raymond Hatch

Enrollment Losses in Buffalo County, 1930 - 1940

The percentage decline in elementary enrollments, 1930-1940, is shown above by school districts of Buffalo county. Only two districts reported enrollment gains during the period. The sizeable increase of over 40 percent in Victory district is apparently due to the tendency for the government school at Fort Thompson to draw Indian students from neighboring districts, which, it will be noted, showed heavy enrollment losses.

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College
of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota
EXPLANATORY

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 Buffalo 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 Buffalo County

For a number of years population experts, viewing the downward trend in the birth rate, have predicted a widespread decline in elementary enrollments.

That this decline has been operating in Buffalo County is clearly shown in Figure 1. Culminating several years of rapid increases, the peak enrollment of 428 pupils was reached in 1923. Since that year enrollments have fallen off steadily, with the 1940 total of 292 pupils representing a decrease of 29.8 percent from the 1923 figure.

Because of apparent inaccuracies until recent years in the recording of births for the Indian population, it is impossible to show a long-time birth rate trend for Buffalo county. However, judging from the recent trends in adjoining counties, one can be fairly certain that the birth rate, at least for the white population of Buffalo county, is tending definitely downward. This situation naturally gives rise to a steady decrease from year to year in the number of children who arrive at school age.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Buffalo County 1890 - 1940.

Number of Pupils

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

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

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

In seeking a further and more tangible factor in the Buffalo county enrollment decline, one may refer to Figure 2 which shows the percentage change in population by townships, 1930 to 1940. During that decade the population of Buffalo county, one of the most thinly settled counties of the state, fell off 4 percent—from 1,931 to 1,853.

As will be noted in Figure 2, population decreases were reported for each of the seven townships for which census data are available, and that these losses ranged to as high as nearly fifty percent. The remainder of the county (approximately the western half) is lumped together into one census district, which reported a net increase of 18.9 percent between 1930 and 1940. This region, made up of unorganized townships, corresponds roughly to the boundaries of the Crow Creek Indian Reservation. Its population increase is reflected in the sizeable growth in elementary enrollments in the Indian school at Fort Thompson, located within this area. One hundred fifteen pupils were enrolled in 1940, as compared with 82 in 1930.

A comparison of Figures 2 and 3 shows a rather strong relationship between population losses and enrollment declines. In general, it is those areas in Buffalo county from which outward migration has been heaviest which show the most marked reduction in school enrollments.
Buffalo county is divided for educational purposes into eleven common school districts whose bounds correspond roughly to township areas. The situation is unique in that there are no independent or consolidated districts. The two villages of the county—Gann Valley and Fort Thompson—are unincorporated. The former has a common district organization (Elvira district) while a government Indian school operates at the latter (in Victory district).

Figure 3 shows the elementary enrollments in each district of Buffalo county for 1920, 1930 and 1940. It will be noted that between 1930 and 1940 a distinct enrollment drop occurred in every district except Eden and Victory. Five rural schools had been closed because of enrollment shortages by 1940. One school enrolled as few as three pupils, while nine, or three fifths of all schools in operation, had limited enrollments of ten pupils or fewer. Four schools enrolled 11 to 15 pupils, while in two others enrollments exceeded 15 pupils.
Considerable variation is found among schools of Buffalo county in respect to per pupil costs for education. In general, the schools with the smallest enrollments had the greatest per pupil outlays. Instructional costs ranged from $31 per pupil in Shelby school, district 11, in which 16 pupils were enrolled, to $180 in Knippling school, district 9, where only three pupils were enrolled.

Table I (below) shows the total costs and average costs per pupil in common schools of Buffalo county grouped according to size of enrollments. In addition to the extremely high cost per pupil observed for the school enrolling only three pupils, it will be noted that the costs also range high for schools enrolling 6 to 10 pupils. For the latter group they were $63.69, as compared with only $35.00 for the two schools enrolling over 15 pupils. The average for all schools (Fort Thompson Indian school ommitted) was $52.78.

Table I. Costs of Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Buffalo County, 1940*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of School</th>
<th>No. of Schools</th>
<th>No. of Pupils</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
<th>Average Cost Per Pupil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>$8,550.00</td>
<td>$52.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 pupils</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>540.00</td>
<td>180.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 pupils</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4,140.00</td>
<td>63.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 pupils</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2,295.00</td>
<td>46.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 pupils or more</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1,575.00</td>
<td>35.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on teachers' salaries only.
Source: Records of Buffalo County Superintendent of Schools.
Some school districts in Buffalo County, when confronted by enrollment shrinkages, have found it expedient to cease operating one of their schools. Figure 5, in which a comparison is made of total costs before and after the closing of one school in each of two districts, illustrates the financial advantages of this line of action.

During the 1938-39 term, two schools were operated in Arlington district with a combined enrollment of 10 pupils and an aggregate cost of $1460.13. With one school closed by the following year, total costs were reduced to $1020.95, even though the district enrolled one more pupil than in 1938-39. Similarly, costs in Dewey district were pared from $1277.54 in 1935-36 to $739.35 in 1936-37 through the closing of one of its two schools.

In view of the considerable savings which result it would seem advisable for school districts to continue their policy of closing schools whose enrollments drop below the level of economical operation.
Figure 6. High School Attendance Areas in Buffalo County, 1940.

Grey Hill

Arlington

Grant

Eden

Victory

Fort Thompson

Wilson

Dewey

Pershing

Eldorado

Chamberlain

Since 1921 it has been compulsory for school districts having no secondary schools of their own to pay tuition costs for their students who go outside the home district to attend high school. Realizing that costs of maintaining separate high schools for their few pupils would be prohibitive, rural districts of Buffalo county send their students to high schools in village centers within or adjoining the county. Figure 6 shows the areas in Buffalo county from which three high schools—located at Gann Valley, Fort Thompson and Chamberlain—drew some fifty tuition students in 1940.

It has been suggested as a means of relieving the declining elementary enrollment problem in many areas of South Dakota, that rural schools be closed and now community-wide districts set up, served by elementary schools located in the village centers. Such an arrangement would probably resemble the high school attendance areas pictured above. Because of the sparsity of the population and the relatively great distance separating the village centers this plan would probably not be thoroughly applicable to Buffalo county. However, the expanding radius from which the Government Indian School at Fort Thompson is drawing its elementary pupils indicates at least a step in this direction.

Since the Buffalo county school districts are largely of the township size, most of them should be able to maintain one centrally located school with an adequate enrollment, to which all pupils in the district might be sent. The immediate policy would seem to call for continued closing of those schools whose enrollments drop to a minimum.
As may be seen in Figure 7, improved roads, while not numerous, are found in most portions of Buffalo county. Throughout the state the automobile and improved roads have greatly modified the patterns of rural life. As village centers have become increasingly accessible to farm families they have assumed a widening range of services, many of which were formerly performed by open country institutions.

Even in relatively isolated areas, as much of Buffalo county must be classed, farmers and ranchers go to the village centers to buy their groceries, clothing, machinery and a host of other articles; to sell their produce; to attend church; and to take part in social and recreational activities. As previously noted, their sons and daughters attend the village high school. In line with this trend, the coming years may see larger numbers of farm children attending elementary schools in the village centers. This will be particularly true in those areas not too far removed from village centers.
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.