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

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

W. F. Kumlien
Howard M. Sauer
C. Scandrette

Enrollment Gains or Losses by Districts in Deuel County, 1930 - 1940

Legend:
- Gained
- Lost 0.0 to 19.9%
- Lost 20.0 to 39.9%
- Lost 40.0 to 59.9%
- Lost 60.0 to 79.9%
- Lost 80.0 or more
- Independent or Consolidated

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota
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 Deuel 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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trend in Elementary Enrollments, 1890-1940</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declining Birth Rates and Population Decrease as Factors in Enrollment Trends</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Enrollments by Districts—1920, 1930, 1940</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Enrollment as Related to Costs Per Pupil</td>
<td>5-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Schools can be Closed Advantageously</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Attendance Areas Suggest Basis for Reorganization</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved Roads Show Increasing Accessibility of Farm Areas to Village Service Centers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities are Successfully Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Deuel County.

The downward trend of the birth rate has led population experts for a number of years to predict that a serious decline will occur in elementary school enrollment.

This prediction has been fulfilled in Deuel county as shown in Figure 1. Elementary enrollments increased steadily during the period 1890-1919, going from 1362 pupils in 1890 to 2127 in 1919. Since that time there has been a gradual decline leaving the 1940 enrollment of 1469 pupils about where it was fifty years ago. The decline has been especially pronounced since 1916 in the rural enrollment which dropped 50.5 percent (from 1678 pupils in 1919 to 848 in 1940). The independent and consolidated school enrollments have changed very little during the last 20 years.

The trend in the Deuel county birth rate 1920-1940 is also shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that the birth rate trend is even more abrupt than the enrollment trend for the same period. During the 5 year period 1920-1924 the average number of births per 1000 of the population was 24.4 as compared with 13.4 for the five years at the close of the period (1936-1940). The result of this downward trend in the birth rate has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age.

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

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
Figure 2. Population Gains or Losses in Deuel County, 1930 – 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Township</th>
<th>Population Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>-5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>+6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowe</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antelope Valley</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwin</td>
<td>-5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altamont</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenwood</td>
<td>-9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havana</td>
<td>+7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Lake</td>
<td>-15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horrick</td>
<td>-23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hidewood</td>
<td>+9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandt</td>
<td>-12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norden</td>
<td>-5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>-10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elom</td>
<td>-13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavia</td>
<td>-10.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- Gained 0.0 - 9.9%
- Lost 10.0 - 19.9%
- Lost 20.0 - 29.9%

Source: Sixteenth Census of U. S. 1940.

An important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2—the loss of population through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss in Deuel county was 3.3 percent. Although this is not as great a loss as was experienced in some counties, it is a factor closely related to rural enrollment decline in the state. During the same period (1930-40) Clear Lake, the county seat, showed a population gain of 19.5 percent and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county increased 8.8 percent. Thus it is apparent that the bulk of the losses were suffered by the rural areas, a fact which is reflected in the relatively greater decline in rural enrollments.

In Deuel county all townships except three, Havana, Hidewood and Portland, lost in population during the 1930-40 period. The losses ranged from 3 percent in Altamont township to 23.6 percent in Herrick township. That a direct relationship exists between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that the townships with the greatest loss in population (see Figure 2) had the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollment.
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Deuel County School Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940.

Legend: Top Figure - 1920 Enrollment
Middle Figure - 1930 Enrollment
Lower Figure - 1940 Enrollment

Source: Records of Deuel County Superintendent of Schools

* To Codington County
** To Estelline District
In 1940, 61 elementary schools were in operation in Deuel county. In addition there were 5 consolidated schools—Gary, Goodwin, Brandt, Clear Lake and Toronto—and two independent districts located at Altamont and Astoria.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollments is shown in Figure 3, which lists the enrollment of each district for 1920, 1930 and 1940. While there were a few districts that gained in enrollment during the periods 1920-30 and 1930-40 a great many districts showed a loss. In fact, 45 of the 63 common school districts and five of the 7 consolidated and independent districts showed a loss in enrollment for 1940 as compared with the 1930 figures. In 1940 two schools had been closed, four were operating with 5 or less pupils and 15 schools had only 6 to 10 pupils. A comparison of the enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 show the serious nature of the enrollment decline. In 1920 there were 1272 rural school pupils enrolled, compared with 848 in 1940, or—where there was an average of 20.2 pupils per school in 1920 there was an average of only 13.8 pupils per school in 1940. Barring unforseen population changes, further enrollment losses may be expected in coming years, although the rate of decline may not be so rapid.
Figure 4. Cost Per Pupil as Related to the Size of Rural School, in Deuel County 1940.

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

* Go to Estelline Cons., Hamlin County.

Figures in () represent district numbers.

Figures in O represent cost per pupil in dollars.

Source: Records of Deuel County Superintendent of Schools
As may be seen in Figure 4, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Deuel county. In general, it is those schools with the smallest enrollments which show the greatest per pupil cost. The costs per pupil of operating the common schools of Deuel county ranged from $34 per pupil in District 32 where the school enrolled 28 pupils, to $335 per pupil in District 68 which had an enrollment of only 3 pupils.

Table I (below) indicates that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. This is particularly true for those schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil for the four schools in this group was $196.52 as compared with $78.09 the average for all schools.

<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>63</td>
<td>849</td>
<td>$66,301.96</td>
<td>$78.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(395.50)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3,537.27</td>
<td>196.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 pupils</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>13,770.95</td>
<td>105.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 pupils</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>23,813.42</td>
<td>80.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>24,784.82</td>
<td>61.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Cost Per Pupil for Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Deuel County, 1940.

Source: Records of Deuel County Superintendent of Schools.
As a means of reducing high per pupil costs school districts throughout South Dakota have during recent years, closed a large number of schools, particularly those with diminishing enrollments.

During the 1935-36 school term, it cost a total of $531.70 to operate District number 46. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district where their tuition and transportation were paid. That year it cost the district $192.10, a saving of $339.60. A similar saving was made in district 73. During the 1934-35 school term it cost $578.58 to operate this school as compared with $258.02 the first year it was closed.

Since the cost per pupil increases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, and the fact that the small school is relatively inefficient from an educational point of view due to lack of intellectual stimulation which comes through competition,* it seems advisable from a financial and educational standpoint to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to get students interested.
Figure 6 shows the country areas from which high schools drew their Deuel county students, numbering over 190 in 1940. Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for school districts without high schools of their own to pay the tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the common districts of Deuel county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. Perhaps a similar plan could be adapted to elementary education. As enrollments continue to shrink and costs per pupil mount, it would appear to be a practical solution to close the rural schools and send the remaining pupils to village schools, the home district paying tuition and transportation costs. Such a plan has the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the superior facilities and techniques of the town school.

However, until such time as concentration of educational services in town centers become more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum, sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating.
The above map indicates that good roads are found in every town-ship of Deuel county. No matter where he may live, practically every farmer in the county has good roads to his nearest trade center. Good roads, together with the automobile, has placed towns and villages of the county within easy reach of a vast majority of farm families, thus revolutionizing many aspects of rural life. A number of services formerly performed by open country institutions on a neighborhood basis have been shifted to town and village centers. Cases in point are the crossroads general store and the open country church. The farmer now goes to the village center to buy groceries, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to visit and engage in various forms of recreation. In addition, the farmer’s sons and daughters attend the village high school. In view of the trend toward concentration of services it would not be surprising to see the younger children being taken into the village to attend elementary schools. Since village enrollments have also declined, the pupils from farming areas could probably be absorbed without any great expansion of existing 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 districts 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.