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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT in the Elementary Schools of Bon Homme County

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

Percentage Distribution of School Enrollments in Bon Homme County, 1920 - 1940

The enrollment for the first four grades made up about 55 percent of the total school enrollment for all grades in Bon Homme county in 1920; by 1940 it had fallen to about 35 percent. During the same period the high school enrollment increased from 7 percent to over 31 percent of the entire enrollment.

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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 Bon Homme 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Bon Homme County

Population experts have been predicting for a number of years, that the downward trend of the birth rate will cause a serious decline in the elementary school enrollment. This prediction has been fulfilled in Bon Homme county as shown in Figure 1. During the period 1890-1896, the elementary enrollment increased from 1745 pupils to 2985, the county's largest enrollment. From 1896 to 1927 the enrollment declined very little. Since 1927, there has been a rapid decline leaving the 1940 total enrollment of 1545 pupils lower than it was in 1890. As shown in Figure 1 the enrollment in the common and independent school has also been declining since 1925.

The trend in the Bon Homme county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that the birth rate has also declined in Bon Homme county. During the five-year period 1922-1926 the average number of births per 1000 of the population was 20, as compared with 15.5 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 Bon Homme County, 1890-1940, and the Birth Rate, 1922-1940

![Graph showing elementary school enrollment and birth rate trends over time.](source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health)
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 Bon Homme county was 12.7 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, 1930-1940, Tyndall, the county seat showed a population gain of .15 percent and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county decreased only 2.7 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 Bon Homme county all the townships lost in population during the 1930-1940 period. The losses ranged from 1.4 percent in Monroe township to 30.4 percent in Running Water township. That a direct relationship exists between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the townships which had the greatest loss in population (see Figures 2 and 3) had the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollments.
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Bon Homme County Districts, 1920, 1930, and 1940

Legend:
Top figure 1920 enrollment
Middle figure 1930 enrollment
Lower figure 1940 enrollment
( ) Indicates District number

Source: Records of Bon Homme County Superintendent of Schools
In 1940, 76 elementary schools were in operation in Bon Homme county. In addition, the five independent districts of Avon, Scotland, Springfield, Tabor and Tyndall were in operation.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollments is shown in Figure 3, which lists the enrollment of each district in the county for 1920, 1930 and 1940. While there were a few districts that gained in enrollment during the period 1920-1930 and 1930-1940, a large majority showed a loss. In fact, of the 76 districts in the county, 60 showed a loss in enrollment for 1940 as compared with the 1930 figures. In 1940, seven schools had been closed, five were operating with five or less pupils and 31 schools had only six to ten pupils. A comparison of the enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 shows the serious nature of the enrollment decline. In 1920 there were 1,757 rural school pupils enrolled, compared with 907 in 1940. While there was an average of 21.7 pupils in 1920 there was an average of only 11.9 pupils per school in 1940. Barring unforeseen 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, Bon Homme County, 1940

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

Figures in circles represent cost per pupil in dollars.

Figures in ( ) represent district numbers.

Source: Records of Bon Homme County Superintendent of Schools, 1940
As may be seen in Figure 4, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Bon Homme county. In general, it is those schools with the smallest enrollments which show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Bon Homme county ranged from $28 per pupil in District 38 where the school enrolled 20 pupils, to $145 in District 6 where there was an enrollment of only 4 pupils.

Table 1 (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 five schools in this group was $129.35 as compared with $57.58 the average for all schools.

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

<table>
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<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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>$52,400.41</td>
<td>$57.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(173.99)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2,975.03</td>
<td>129.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>20,632.22</td>
<td>78.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>19,323.06</td>
<td>53.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 pupils or more</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>9,296.11</td>
<td>36.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Records of Bon Homme 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 1936-37 school term, it cost a total of $1,326.06 to operate District Number 63. 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 $564.50, a saving of $761.56. A similar though smaller saving was made in District 15. During the 1938-39 school term it cost $655.28 to operate this school, as compared with $532.96, the first year it was closed.

Since the cost per pupil increases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, and because there is a lack of intellectual stimulation which comes through competition,* it seems advisable both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency 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.
Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for school districts without high schools of their own to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Bon Homme County tuition students, numbering approximately 273 in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Bon Homme 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 elementary enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil mount, it would appear to be a practical solution to close the rural schools and send the remaining pupils to village schools. In such a plan the home district would pay tuition and transportation costs. This 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 education services in town centers become more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating.
As may be seen Figure 7, improved roads are found in most portions of the county. Good roads, together with the automobile has placed the towns 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 service it would not be surprising to see many of 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 in the village and city schools 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 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.