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

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

Open School  Closed School
Each symbol represents ten schools

Aurora county, with a total of 80 rural schools, had closed 30 (37.4 percent) of those schools by 1940. At this date nine were operating with five or fewer pupils, Operation of schools for ten or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on an instructional cost-per-pupil basis.

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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 Aurora 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 Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Aurora County

For a number of years population experts have predicted that the steadily falling birth rate would eventually cause a serious decline in elementary enrollment. In Aurora county this prophecy commenced to be fulfilled in 1924. From a peak of 1,850 pupils in 1924 the elementary enrollment shrunk to 901 pupils by 1940. That the rural schools have borne the brunt of this decline is clearly indicated in Figure 1. It will be noted that rural elementary enrollment, which reached a peak of 1,386 pupils as long ago as 1910, had declined to slightly more than a third of that figure (491) by 1940. The birth records for Aurora county reveal a drop of nearly one half in the crude birth rate during the past twenty years. In 1920 there were 30.6 births per 1000 of the population as compared with only 15.4 in 1940. The natural result of the birth rate decline has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age with each passing year.

Figure 1. Elementary Enrollment Trends in Aurora County, 1890 - 1940, and the Birth Rate Trend, 1920 - 1940

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and reports of the State Board of Health
In addition to the sharply falling birth rate, the heavy loss of population offers a further explanation for enrollment declines. Between 1930 and 1940 the population of Aurora county shrank from 7,139 to 5,387 persons; a drop of 24.5 percent. Although the greatest drop in population occurred in the open country areas, the combined population of the three incorporated towns, Plankinton, White Lake and Stickney declined 8.4 percent between 1930 and 1940.

Not one of the 20 townships in Aurora county showed an increase in population between 1930 and 1940. In four of the townships the loss ranged from 10.0 to 19.9 percent; in 7 townships the decline amounted to 20.0 to 29.9 percent; in 7 other townships there was a loss of 30.0 to 39.9 percent; and in 3 townships the population shrank over 40 percent. It will be noted that the greatest population decline occurred in the western half of the county where the drought was most devastating. That a direct relationship exists between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, for the most part the townships with the greatest loss in population (see Figures 2 and 3) had the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollment.
In 1940 there were 50 rural schools operating in 16 townships districts of Aurora county. In addition there were three independent and three consolidated schools. Each of the three consolidated districts embraced an entire township, whereas the independent districts of Plankinton and Stickney included only slightly more territory than their incorporation boundaries. White Lake independent covers the whole township.

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. With only one exception, (Eureka township), all of the districts show an appreciable shrinkage in enrollment during the twenty year period from 1920 to 1940. In 1920 there were a total of 1,070 pupils enrolled in the rural schools of Aurora county as compared with 471 pupils 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. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, in Aurora County, 1940

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

* St. Johns Lutheran School
Figures below circles represents cost per pupil

Source: Records of Aurora County Superintendent of Schools
As a result of shrinking enrollments and consolidation, 30 rural schools in Aurora county closed during the twenty year period 1920-40. By 1940 nine other schools, operating with five or fewer pupils, were on the brink of closing. In other words, by 1940 nearly half (48.8 percent) of the rural schools in Aurora county were closed or operating with five or fewer pupils. Nineteen schools were operating with 6-10 pupils; 18 had enrollments ranging from 11-15 pupils; and only four had more than 16 pupils in attendance. As may be seen in Figure 4, the per pupil cost of operating one-room rural schools in Aurora county ranges from $124 in Cruthoff school, Cooper township, a school of four pupils; to only $25 in Krell school, Eureka township, a school of 20 pupils.

Table I below indicates that the operation of schools for ten or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on an instructional cost-per-pupil basis. This is particularly true for schools enrolling five or fewer pupils, the average cost per pupil for the nine schools in this group being $100.73, as compared with $48.12, the average for all schools.

Table 1. Instructional Cost Per Pupil for Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Aurora 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>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>$23,627.00</td>
<td>$48.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or Fewer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4,130.00</td>
<td>100.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>8,945.00</td>
<td>60.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>8,591.00</td>
<td>38.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1,961.00</td>
<td>26.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' Salaries only
Source: Records of the Aurora County Superintendent of Schools
In township districts where an appreciable decline in elementary enrollment has taken place it is usually more economical to close all except one or two centralized schools. Under this plan pupils formerly served by the closed schools are sent to the schools which remain open, the school district paying transportation benefits as provided by law.

During the 1936-37 school year the cost of operating five schools for 31 pupils in Crystal township district amounted to $2,911.20. Because the enrollment had shrunk to 17 students by the following year the school board decided to close three of the schools. That year, with only two schools in operation, the total cost to the district was only $1,674.65, a saving of $1,236.55. A similar but smaller saving was made in the Eureka township district by closing only one school. During the 1938-39 term Eureka township district operated three schools for 34 pupils at a total cost of $2,277.28. The following year, with a total enrollment of 31 pupils, the board decided to operate only two of the three schools. That year the expense of educating the elementary pupils in Eureka township district amounted to $1,929.63, a reduction of $357.65 over the previous year.

Both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency it seems advisable 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 to a grade there is a lack of intellectual stimulation which comes through competition.
Since 1921, it has been compulsory for school districts that do not have high schools of their own to pay tuition costs for pupils residing within their borders who attend high school in nearby independent districts. Because the expense of operating their own high schools is prohibitive, all of the common districts in the county have sent their high school pupils to independent districts, paying tuition costs.

An examination of the above chart, showing where farm children in Aurora county attend high school, suggests a possible ultimate solution to the problem caused by declining elementary enrollments. Eventually, the common school districts may solve the problem of excessive per pupil costs of elementary education in the same way in which they have already solved the high school problem. In other words, instead of continuing to maintain their own schools at a heavy per-pupil cost, a district may close its school, send the few remaining pupils to the town school and pay tuition and transportation charges. This procedure would save the district money and would also provide greater educational opportunities for the pupils. Since elementary enrollment is declining in the towns as well as in the rural schools, it is probable that within a few years the present independent facilities will be large enough to accommodate both the town and country pupils.

However, until such time as concentration of educational services in town centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollment falls below a minimum and sending the few remaining pupils to the nearest school still operating. This type of adjustment is relatively easy to make in counties having the township district type of school organization.
As may be seen in Figure 7, improved roads, are found in most portions of Aurora county. Good roads, together with the automobile have 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 services 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 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.