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

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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools
of
Lincoln County

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

1920

In 1920, 42 Lincoln county schools were operating with 20 or more pupils.

1940

By 1940 only 13 Lincoln county schools had 20 or more pupils

Each symbol represents three schools

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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 Lincoln 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 Lincoln 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 enrollment. This prediction has been fulfilled in Lincoln County as shown in Figure 1. During the period 1890 to 1900 the total elementary enrollment increased from 2,779 to 3,263 pupils, the county's largest enrollment. From 1900 the enrollment declined gradually, then more rapidly, ultimately reaching the 1940 enrollment of 1,963 pupils, which is lower than the original 1890 enrollment. As is also shown in Figure 1, the enrollment of rural schools has decreased from the 1904 enrollment of 2,639 pupils to the 1940 enrollment of 1,069 pupils. Independent schools trace only a slight loss.

The trend in the Lincoln county birth rate is also illustrated by Figure 1. Note that the birth rate shows a sharp decrease, which fact points out the relation between the birth rate and the declining elementary enrollments. From the 1920 average of 27.9 births per 1000 of the population, the birth rate dropped to the 1927 low of 12. By 1940 the birth rate had increased slightly to reach a rate of 13.3 births per 1000 of the population. The result of the downward tendency 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 Lincoln County, 1890 - 1940, and the Birth Rate, 1920 - 1940

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and reports of the State Board of Health.
Another important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2, which records the loss of population through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss for Lincoln County was 5.4, which is a comparatively small population loss. However, this slight decrease is closely related to rural enrollment decline, since the bulk of the losses was suffered by the rural areas. That is, Canton, the county seat, experienced a population gain of 10.9 percent, and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county increased 9.1 percent. That the brunt of the loss is suffered by the rural areas is a fact reflected in the greater decline in rural enrollments compared to urban enrollments.

In Lincoln County all of the townships lost in population during the 1930-1940 period. The losses range from 4.7 percent in Eden township to 27.1 percent in Canton township. The direct relation between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the township which has the greatest loss in population, (Figures 2 and 3) has the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Township</th>
<th>Population Loss 1930-1940</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delapre</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springdale</td>
<td>-17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>-11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Valley</td>
<td>-5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayton</td>
<td>-6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>-6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>-10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton</td>
<td>-27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>-17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>-19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland</td>
<td>-13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairview</td>
<td>-12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>-25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>-12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>-10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eden</td>
<td>-4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- Lost 0.0 - 9.9%
- Lost 10.0 - 19.9%
- Lost 20.0% or more

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Lincoln County Districts 1920, 1930 and 1940

Legend:  
Top figure 1920 enrollment  
Middle figure 1930 enrollment  
Lower figure 1940 enrollment

( ) Indicates District number  
* Joint District—reports sent to Union County

Source: Reports of Lincoln County Superintendent of Schools.
In Lincoln County 74 common schools were in operation in 1940, in addition to the six independent districts of Canton, Hudson, Fairview, Worthing, Tea, and Lennox, and the consolidated district of Harrisburg.

The definite downward trend is evident in Figure 3, which lists the elementary school enrollments of each district for 1920, 1930, and 1940. Of the 80 common school districts of Lincoln County, 69 districts dropped in enrollment from 1930 to 1940. In 1940 three rural schools had been closed but the enrollment situation was better than in many counties: only one school had an enrollment of five or less pupils, and 25 schools had 16 or more pupils. However, the rural enrollment from 1920 to 1940 had dropped from 1,717 pupils to 1,069 pupils. Since 74 rural schools were in operation both in 1920 and in 1940, the average number of pupils per school dropped from 23.2 in 1920 to 14.4 in 1940. Further enrollment losses may be expected in the future, unless unforeseen population changes occur,
Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, in Lincoln County, 1940

Legend:
- Closed School
- 6 - 10 Pupils
- 5 or fewer Pupils
- 11 - 15 Pupils
- 16 or more

Figure in ( ) indicates School District Number
Figure in ○ indicates Cost Per Pupil

* To Union County
** 4 1/2 Months School. *** 6 1/2 Months School.

Source: Records of Lincoln County Superintendent of School, 1940
As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Lincoln County vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Lincoln county ranged from $18 in district 24 which enrolled 23 pupils in 1940, to $108 in district 80 which enrolled only five pupils in 1940.

Table 1 (below) indicates that the operation of schools for less than ten pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. Schools with five or fewer pupils illustrate this sharply. As mentioned above, the average cost per pupil for the one school in this group reached $108 as compared to the $42.50 average for all schools.

Table 1. Per Pupil Cost of Operating Rural Schools of Various Size in Lincoln County in 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>77</td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>$45,142.75</td>
<td>$42.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>540.00</td>
<td>108.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>9,975.00</td>
<td>65.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>18,653.75</td>
<td>47.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>16,074.00</td>
<td>31.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' Salaries only

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

During the 1936-37 school term, school operation costs for District 23 totaled $981.98. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district with the home district paying their tuition and transportation. That year school operation costs to the district, including the tuition and transportation payment, were $341.95, a saving of $640.03. A similar though smaller saving was made in District 38. During the 1936-37 school term operating costs for this school were $1207.77, which dropped to $758.27, the first year it was closed.

Since the cost per pupil increases and the educational efficiency decreases, as the number of pupils attending school decreases, it seems practical 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, school districts of South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside of the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Lincoln County tuition students, numbering approximately 356 in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Lincoln County have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. The adoption of a similar plan to elementary education seems practical, as elementary enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil to mount. Rural schools could be closed and the remaining pupils sent to village schools, with the home district paying the tuition and transportation costs. This plan has the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the superior educational facilities of the town school.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in town centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and of sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating.
As may be seen in Figure 7, improved roads are found in most portions of the county. Good roads, together with the automobile have placed the towns of the county within easy reach of a vast majority of farm families, 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. Noteworthy cases are the crossroads general store and the open-country church. The farmer finds it increasingly convenient to reach the village center in order to buy groceries, clothing, and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to engage in various forms of recreation. In addition, the farmer finds it increasingly convenient to send his sons and daughters to the village high school.

In view of the trend toward concentration of service, it would be a natural occurrence for many of the younger children to be taken into the village to attend elementary schools. Since village enrollments have also declined, the pupils from farming areas could probably be absorbed into the village and city schools without any great expansion of existing schools.
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 the school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.