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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools
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In 1905, 1,620 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Clay county,

but in 1940 the total rural enrollment was only 750 pupils

Each figure represents 250 pupils

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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 Clay 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.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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For a number of years population experts have been predicting that the downward trend of the birth rate will cause a corresponding decline in the elementary school enrollment. This prediction has been fulfilled in Clay county as Figure 1 illustrates. During the period 1890-1899 the elementary enrollment increased from 1,637 pupils to 2,198 pupils, the county's largest enrollment. From this point the enrollment varied considerably before a persistent decline began, which brought the 1905 enrollment of 2,120 pupils to the 1940 low enrollment of 1,514 pupils. As Figure 1 also shows the rural enrollment has declined steadily from the 1905 enrollment of 1,620 pupils to the 1940 enrollment of 750 pupils. Independent enrollments however, after a slight decrease, began to increase.

The corresponding decline in the Clay county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1. From the 1920 highest birth rate of 29.2 births per 1000 of the population in 1940, the rate dropped to 18 births per 1000. The steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age has been based on this downward trend in the birth rate.

**Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollments in Clay County, 1890-1940, and the Birth Rate, 1920-1940**

![Graph showing elementary school enrollments and birth rates](image-url)
The loss of population through migration, an important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss in Clay county was 4.9 percent. This is a comparatively small loss, but is closely related to rural enrollment in the county. During this same period, 1930-1940, Vermillion, the county seat, showed a population gain of 16.6 percent and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county showed an increase of 10.3 percent. This indication that the bulk of the losses was suffered by the rural areas is reflected in the comparatively greater decline in rural enrollment compared to urban enrollment.

Every township of Clay county lost in population during the 1930-1940 period. Losses ranged from 3.6 percent in Fairview township to 23.2 in Prairie Center township. The direct relationship between population decline and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the township which had the greatest loss in population also had the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollment. (See Figures 2 and 3.)
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollment in Clay County Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940

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

Source: Reports of Clay County Superintendent of Schools.

( ) Indicates district number
Jt. Indicates joint district with one in the adjoining county
Forty-three common schools were in session in Clay county in 1940, in addition to one independent district of Vermillion, and the two consolidated districts of Wakonda and Meckling.

The definite downward trend in elementary enrollment in Clay county is shown in Figure 3, which records the enrollment of each district in the county for 1920, 1930, and 1940. A few districts gained in enrollment during the period 1920-1930, and 1930-1940, but a large majority showed a loss. Specifically, of the 44 common districts in the county, 36 showed a loss in enrollment for 1940 as compared with 1930 figures. In 1940 only one school had been closed, only three were operating with five or fewer pupils, and 17 schools had 16 or more pupils enrolled. However, a comparison of the rural enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 shows the serious nature of the enrollment decline. In 1920 there were 1,063 rural school pupils enrolled, compared with 750 in 1940. While there was an average of 24.2 pupils per rural school in 1920, there was an average of only 17.4 pupils per school in 1940. Although the rate of decline may be more gradual, further enrollment losses may be expected in the future unless unforeseen population changes occur.
Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, Clay County, 1940

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

Figures below circles represent cost per pupil.
( ) Indicates district number.
Jt. Joint district. Part of district in adjoining county.

Source: Records of Clay County Superintendent of Schools, 1940
Variation is evident in the cost per pupil in the schools of Clay county, with schools having the smallest enrollment showing the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Clay county ranged from $24 in District 33 where the school enrolled 29 pupils, to $135 in District 9 where there was an enrollment of only five pupils.

Table 1 (below) indicates that the operation of schools for ten 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 one school of this group was $123 as compared with $43.40, the average for all schools.

Table 1. Cost* Per Pupil of Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Clay County, 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>44</td>
<td>742</td>
<td>$32,538.00</td>
<td>$44.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1,845.00</td>
<td>123.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>7,945.50</td>
<td>72.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>6,615.00</td>
<td>48.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>16,132.50</td>
<td>33.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' Salaries only.

Source: Records of Clay County Superintendent of Schools, 1940.
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 the districts. Figure 5 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Clay county tuition students, numbering approximately 225* in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Clay 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 to 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. Aside from the economical advantage, these plans would extend to farm children the superior educational facilities of the urban schools.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in urban centers becomes more general, districts may continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and send their pupils to the nearest rural school in operation.

Centerville high school also draws tuition students from several districts but since the data has not been available we have omitted it both from the article and the corresponding figure.
As may be seen in Figure 6, improved roads are found in most sections of the county, good roads, and the advent of 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. Services formerly performed by open-country institutions on a neighborhood basis have been shifted to town and village centers. Notable cases are the crossroads general store and the open-country church. The farmer finds it increasingly convenient to go to the village center 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 more convenient to send his sons and daughters to the village high schools.

A natural result of this tentative trend toward a compact service center would be for many of the younger children to be taken into the village to attend elementary 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 schools.

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.