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

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In 1920 there was an average of 22 pupils per rural school

but by 1940 the average enrollment had shrunk to 14 pupils

Each symbol represents two pupils

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Pamphlet No. 69

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

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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 Hutchinson 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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Basing their calculations on the downward trend of the birth rate, population experts have, for a number of years, predicted a serious decline in the elementary school enrollment. The fulfillment of this prediction for Hutchinson county is graphically traced in Figure 1. From 1890 to 1902 the total elementary enrollment increased steadily from 2,259 pupils to 3,100 pupils. From 1902 to 1928 the enrollment showed abrupt variations climaxing by a 1928 enrollment of 3,196 pupils, the county's highest enrollment. From 1928 to 1940 the enrollment declined steadily, to leave the enrollment at 2,246 pupils, which is slightly lower than the original 1890 enrollment. As is shown in Figure 1, the enrollment of common and independent schools has also been declining.

The trend in the Hutchinson county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1, having undergone a decline similar to that of the elementary enrollments. From the high birth rate of 28.4 births per 1000 of the population in 1920, the rate dropped to a low of 16 births in 1933. From this point the birth rate began a slight increase reaching a rate of 19.6 births per 1000 of the population in 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, in addition to the declining birth rate, is the loss of population through outward migration as shown in Figure 2. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss in Hutchinson county was 8.9 percent. This is not a very great loss but is closely linked to the rural enrollment decline in the county. For instance, during the period 1930-1940, Olivet, the county seat, showed a population gain of 31.5 percent, and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county increased 1.1 percent. It is evident, therefore, that the brunt of the population loss was suffered by the rural areas, a fact which is reflected in the relatively greater decline in rural enrollment compared to urban enrollment.

In Hutchinson county all the townships but one lost in population during the 1930-1940 period. The losses ranged from 4.1 percent in Milltown township, to 27.1 percent in Fair township. The direct relationship between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the townships which have the greatest loss in population have the greatest percent of decline in elementary enrollment.
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Hutchinson County Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940.

Legend: Top figure 1920 enrollment Middle figure 1930 enrollment Lower figure 1940 enrollment
* Milltown Consolidated in 1920. ** No enrollment figures given.

Source: Records of Hutchinson County Superintendent of Schools.
In 1940, ninety common schools were in operation in Hutchinson county, in addition to the four independent districts of Parkston, Freeman, Olivet, Menno, and the consolidated district of Tripp.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollment is shown in Figure 3, which lists 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 90 schools in session in 1940, 69 had dropped in enrollment, as compared with 1930 figures. In 1940 ten schools had been closed, nine were operating with five or fewer pupils, and 27 schools had only six to ten pupils. A comparison of the rural enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 shows the drop in enrollment. In 1940 there were 1,834 rural school pupils enrolled, compared to 1,226 in 1940. While there was an average of 21.8 pupils in 1920, there was an average of only 13.6 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. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil by Size of School, in Hutchinson County, 1940

Legend: 🔴 Closed School 🔵 5 or fewer pupils 🔴 6 - 10 pupils 🔴 11- 15 pupils 🔴 16 or more pupils () indicates School District Number. Figure below circle indicates cost per pupil.

* Based on Teachers' Salaries only

Source: Records of Hutchinson 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 Hutchinson county. In general, schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Hutchinson county ranged from $22 in district 91, where the school enrolled 37 pupils to $246 in district 60, where the school enrolled only seven 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 schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil for the five schools of this group was $123.85 as compared with $56.65, the average for all schools.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil for Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Hutchinson 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>100</td>
<td>1,249</td>
<td>$70,758.51</td>
<td>$56.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$72,000</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or Fewer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4,437.13</td>
<td>123.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>19,611.41</td>
<td>87.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>14,552.72</td>
<td>59.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>32,151.25</td>
<td>43.21</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Based on Teachers' salaries only

Source: Records of the Hutchinson 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 1938-39 school term, operating costs to District 80 totaled $550.59. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district with the home district paying tuition and transportation costs. That year school operation costs to the district, including tuition and transportation payment, were $252.45, a saving of $298.14. A similar though smaller saving was made in District 4. During the 1936-37 school term operating costs for this school were $408.42, which dropped to $199.85, 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 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 school districts of South Dakota without high schools of their own have been required 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 Hutchinson county tuition students, numbering approximately 308 in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Hutchinson 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. This plan has the advantage of economy, and of extending to farm children the superior facilities and techniques of the town school.

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 of sending their pupils to the nearest rural school in operation.
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. 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's sons and daughters attend the village high schools.

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 disruption of the 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 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.