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

W. F. Kumlien

Howard M. Sauer

C. Scandrette

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

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

In 1931, 733 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Custer county

but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 375

Each figure represents 100 pupils
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 cost per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Custer 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 Custer County

The total elementary enrollment in Custer county schools reached a peak of 1,245 pupils in 1936, declining to 1,023 by 1940 (Figure 1 below). In the rural schools the decline has been much more drastic, dropping from a peak of 759 pupils in 1928 to only 375 pupils by 1940, a shrinkage of nearly 50 percent. It will be noted that elementary enrollment in the independent districts steadily increased between 1919 and 1938, reaching a peak of 695 students in that year. Since that time elementary enrollment in the independent districts has declined slightly.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Custer County, 1890-1940

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction
Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Custer County, 1930 - 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R1</th>
<th>R2</th>
<th>R3</th>
<th>R4</th>
<th>R5</th>
<th>R6</th>
<th>R7</th>
<th>R8</th>
<th>R9</th>
<th>R10</th>
<th>R11</th>
<th>R12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>+68.4</td>
<td>+80.0</td>
<td>-19.0</td>
<td>-12.1</td>
<td>+35.3</td>
<td>+84.4</td>
<td>+13.8</td>
<td>+6.1</td>
<td>-100.0</td>
<td>-10.0</td>
<td>-76.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>+88.2</td>
<td>-72.5</td>
<td>-38.5</td>
<td>+245.8</td>
<td>+21.0</td>
<td>-45.6</td>
<td>-33.0</td>
<td>-38.5</td>
<td>-40.6</td>
<td>-58.5</td>
<td>-32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>-10.0</td>
<td>-19.5</td>
<td>+42.4</td>
<td>+13.5</td>
<td>-21.0</td>
<td>+35.0</td>
<td>+7.5</td>
<td>-15.0</td>
<td>-39.1</td>
<td>-31.0</td>
<td>-100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>-40.5</td>
<td>-51.0</td>
<td>+33.3</td>
<td>-71.2</td>
<td>-46.5</td>
<td>-95.3</td>
<td>-59.8</td>
<td>-14.3</td>
<td>-53.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>-25.3</td>
<td>-39.5</td>
<td>+58.8</td>
<td>-14.3</td>
<td>-50.0</td>
<td>-16.3</td>
<td>-54.4</td>
<td>-65.6</td>
<td>-19.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:  
- Gained  
- Lost 20.0 - 29.9%  
- Lost 0.0 - 9.9%  
- Lost 30.0 - 39.9%  
- Lost 10.0 - 19.9%  
- Lost 40.0% or more

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

An important factor in the elementary decline is shown in Figure 2, the loss of population through outward migration. Although Custer county as a whole gained 12.5 percent between 1930 and 1940, approximately three out of four of the rural townships within the county suffered population losses. It is significant to note in this connection that it is the rural schools which have shown the most pronounced declines in elementary enrollment. Excluding the parts of townships along the northern border, 16 of the 41 townships lost more than 40 percent of their 1930 populations; 7 additional counties lost between 30.0 and 39.9 percent of their 1930 populations; and 8 townships suffered losses ranging from 10.0 to 19.9 percent. Ten townships showed gains. A substantial portion of the total population gain for the county can be accounted for by the growth of Custer city. Between 1930 and 1940 the combined population of the five incorporated places in Custer county, Buffalo Gap, Custer, Fairburn, Hermosa, and Pringle increased from 1983 to 2541, a percentage gain of 28.1. In this connection it is noteworthy that elementary enrollment in the independent districts increased steadily until 1938. Since that time a slight decrease has been noted.

That a direct relationship exists between population loss 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 enrollment.
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Custer 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 Custer County Superintendent of Schools
Forty-four rural schools in 25 common districts were operating in Custer county during the 1939-40 term. In addition, independent district schools were operating in the towns of Buffalo Gap, Custer, Fairburn, Hermosa, and Pringle. A total of 375 pupils was enrolled in the 25 common districts, whereas nearly twice that number (648) were enrolled in the five independent districts.

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. It will be noted that while a number of districts gained enrollment between 1920 and 1930, a large majority suffered substantial losses during the next decade. Of the 54 rural schools operating in 1920, nearly a fifth (10) had been closed by 1940; nine schools were on the verge of closing, with five or fewer pupils enrolled; ten or fewer (6-10) pupils were enrolled in 13 additional schools; and only 12 schools had enrollments exceeding ten pupils. A comparison of the total number of elementary pupils enrolled in the rural schools of Custer county in 1930 and 1940 is another way of illustrating the serious nature of this decline. In 1930 the rural enrollment was 680 pupils, whereas by 1940 it had been reduced to 375 pupils, a 59.6 percent loss. In spite of the fact that five schools were closed during the period, the average attendance per rural school in 1930 was 13.9 pupils as compared with only 8.5 students in 1930. Barring unforeseen population changes, further enrollment losses in the rural districts 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 Custer County, 1940

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

* Closed prior to 1930
Figure in ( ) indicates district number
Figures below circles represent cost per pupil

Legend: Records of Custer County Superintendent of Schools
As may be seen in Figure 4, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Custer 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 Custer county ranged from $270 in Dean School, District 5, with two pupils enrolled to only $16 in Four Mile School, District 21, which enrolled 29 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 of those schools enrolling five or fewer pupils. The average per-pupil cost for schools in this group was $126.69 as compared with $53.71, the average for all schools.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil For Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Custer 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>376</td>
<td>$20,196.00</td>
<td>$53.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4,941.00</td>
<td>126.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>7,380.00</td>
<td>72.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3,330.00</td>
<td>48.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>4,545.00</td>
<td>27.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on teachers' salaries only
Source: Records of the Custer County Superintendent of Schools
As a means of reducing per pupil costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools during recent years, particularly those in which enrollments had dwindled to five or fewer pupils.

During the 1939-40 term it cost District #3, $2,102.88 to operate three schools for 19 pupils. The following year, with only 14 pupils to be enrolled, the board decided to close one of the schools. That term the total operating expense of the district amounted to $1,558.10, a saving of $544.78. A similar, though smaller saving was made in District 11. With two schools enrolling 12 pupils during the 1938-39 term the operating cost for District #11 was $1,253.04. The following year, with only six pupils to be educated, the board decided to close one of the schools. That year the cost of educating the remaining pupils amounted to only $756.03, a saving of $497.01 over the previous year.

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.
Figure 6. Number of Custer County Tuition Students Attending High School By Place of Attendance, 1940

Legend:

- O - Number of tuition students attending

- Number of tuition students from each district

*** Data incomplete

** Includes seven students from Senator for whom the state pays tuition

* Operate three-year high schools only

Source: Records of Custer County High School Superintendents
Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for 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 number of Custer county tuition pupils attending each of the high schools within the county, by place of attendance. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the rural school boards of Custer county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools in town and village centers. Perhaps a similar plan could be adapted to elementary education, particularly in rural districts adjacent to independent districts. 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 becomes more general, districts may 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.
Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades in Custer county shrunk from 49.5 to 40.7 percent of the total; the proportion enrolled in the four upper elementary grades dropped from 40.7 to 36.7 percent; and the proportion enrolled in secondary schools more than doubled; increasing from 9.8 to 22.6 percent. This may be explained by the fact that an increasingly greater proportion of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Grades, 1920 - 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935 and 1940
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

The county-wide system exists in the four unorganized counties of South Dakota, Shannon, Todd, Washington and Washabaugh. Under this 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.