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

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

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

In 1920, 417 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Stanley county

but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 150

Each figure represents 100 pupils

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of
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 Stanley 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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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Stanley 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. Figure 1 shows the trend of elementary enrollments and of birth rates in Stanley county. Prior to 1914 the boundaries of Stanley county were changed several times. This accounts to a large extent for the abrupt rise and fall in elementary enrollments during that period. In 1915 the enrollment for the newly organized county was 456 pupils. This enrollment increased to 862 pupils in 1922, from which year a gradual decrease began and continued until in 1940 only 261 pupils were enrolled in the elementary schools. The rural enrollment decreased from 417 pupils in 1920 to 150 pupils in 1940. Independent schools show a similar though smaller loss.

To doubt a part of this decrease may be attributed to outward migration from the county. On the other hand, the fact that the birth rate also shows a decrease would indicate the relation between the falling birth rate and the declining elementary enrollments. From the 1920 average of 24.8 births per 1000 of population the birth rate had dropped to 16.3 births per 1000 of population in 1940. The result of the downward tendency in the birth rate had been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Stanley County, 1891 - 1940, and Birth Rate Trend, 1920 - 1940

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health
Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses by Townships in Stanley County, 1930 - 1940

Legend:

- Gained

- Lost 0.0 - 9.9%

- Lost 10.0 - 19.9%

- Lost 20.0 - 29.9%

- Lost 30.0 - 39.9%

- Lost 40.0% or more

* Records Incomplete

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940
Another important factor in 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 Stanley county was 17.7 percent. The close relationship between this decrease and the decrease in rural enrollment is brought out by the 45.3 percent decrease in rural enrollment during the same period. The loss in independent enrollment during this period was 16.5 percent. That the brunt of the loss was suffered by the rural areas is a fact reflected in the greater decline in rural enrollments as compared to urban enrollments.

In Stanley county seven townships gained in population during the 1930-1940 period. Eighteen townships lost more than 40 percent of their population. The direct relation between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated by the fact that, usually, the township which has the greatest loss in population, (Figure 2 and 3) has the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollment.
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollment in Stanley County, 1921, 1931 and 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1940</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(91)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(61)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(51)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(94)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: Top figure 1921 enrollment
Middle figure 1931 enrollment
Lower figure 1940 enrollment
Figures in ( ) indicates district numbers

Source: Records of the Stanley County Superintendent of Schools

- 4 -

- 133
- 111
- Ft. Pierre
- Ind.
In 1940, eighteen elementary schools were operating in 18 common districts in Stanley county, in addition to the independent district of Fort Pierre. No schools were in operation in the remaining 19 districts of the county.

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 18 common school districts in operation, fifteen districts dropped in enrollment from 1920-1930. This fact together with the fact that the schools had been closed in 19 districts reveals the seriousness of the declining enrollment situation. Twenty-seven schools (60 percent of total) were closed; six schools were operating with five or fewer pupils, eight schools enrolled from 6-10 pupils; three schools enrolled 11-15 pupils; only one school enrolled 16 or more pupils. Since the enrollment in the independent district of Fort Pierre also declined, it is evident that the decline has not been limited to the common school districts. 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 Stanley County, 1940

Legend:
- Closed schools
- 5 or fewer pupils
- 6 - 10 pupils
- 11 - 15 pupils
- 16 or more pupils
* Unorganized
** No Buildings

Source: Records of Stanley County
St. Pierre Superintendent of Schools
As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Stanley county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Stanley county ranged from $39 in District 14 which enrolled 14 pupils in 1940, to $200 in District 16 which enrolled only two 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 one of the schools in this group reached $200 as compared to the $48.23 average for the school in which 16 or more pupils were enrolled.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Stanley 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>45</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>$10,104.00</td>
<td>$67.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2,830.00</td>
<td>113.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>4,365.00</td>
<td>71.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1,655.00</td>
<td>43.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1,254.00</td>
<td>48.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' salaries only

Source: Records of the Stanley County Superintendent of Schools
To reduce high per pupil cost, school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools, during recent years, particularly those with diminishing enrollments. The fact, previously noted, that schools have been closed in 19 districts indicates that this plan is being followed in Stanley county.

During the 1936-37 school term, school operation costs for District 3 totaled $654.23. 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 tuition and transportation payments, were $373.50, a saving of $280.73. A similar though smaller saving was made in District 9. During the 1936-37 school term operating costs for this school were $599.30, which dropped to $432.05, the first year it was closed.

Since the cost per pupil increases and the educational efficiency decreases,* as the number of pupils attending school declines, 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 properly motivate the students.
Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Stanley County Tuition Students, 1940

Legend:
- O- Number of tuition students attending
- Circle - Number of tuition students from each district

Source: Records of Stanley County High School Superintendents

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 the Fort Pierre school in Stanley county and the Pierre school in Hughes county drew their Stanley county tuition students, numbering 59 in 1940. It will be noted that only eight of these pupils attended the Fort Pierre school, the only high school in Stanley county.

Realizing that the costs of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Stanley county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in village centers. In many counties which have a number of independent districts at strategic points throughout the county, the adoption of a similar plan for elementary education seems practicable. In such counties rural schools could be closed and the remaining pupils sent to the town schools, with the home district paying the tuition and transportation costs. Except for districts near Fort Pierre, such a plan would not appear to be practical for Stanley county, however, due to the distances involved and the lack of good roads. In most of the county it would appear desirable for districts to continue their present policy of closing more schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and of sending their pupils to the nearest school still operating, paying tuition and transportation as provided by law.
Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Stanley county shrank from 52 percent to 35.7 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. (See Figure 7) The explanation of this trend may be found in the fact that birth rates have fallen sharply since 1920. Consequently with each passing year there have been fewer and fewer pupils to enter the first grade. By 1940, 11.5 percent of those attending school were eighth graders and 9.1 percent were first graders, whereas in 1920, 17 percent were first graders as compared to 9.1 percent eighth graders. (See Table 2) With the greatly reduced number of persons under six years of age, it is obvious that elementary enrollment will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate trend should be reversed.

Figure 7 also shows that the proportion enrolled in high school nearly doubled, increasing from 10.4 percent in 1920 to 19 percent by 1940. This trend 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, 1920-1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instructions, 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.