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

W. F. Kumlien
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools of
Pennington County

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

In 1934, 1482 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Pennington County

but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 1139

Each figure represents 100 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 cost per pupil.

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

For a number of years population experts have predicted that the downward trend of the birth rate will affect the elementary school enrollments. In Pennington county, however, the relation between the birth rate and the decreasing rural enrollment is not immediately discernible, since the decrease of rural enrollments and the increase of the independent and the total elementary school enrollments (see Figure below) is more a direct result of the industrialization of the Black Hills area. The birth rate of Pennington county suffered a persistent decrease, and the result of a declining birth rate is a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age. Obviously then, enrollments in Pennington schools have been affected by this declining birth rate, although the effect has been modified by the increase in population and the concentration of the population in urban areas. While the total elementary enrollments climbed from an 1890 enrollment of 831 pupils to the 1940 enrollments of 3,912 pupils, the rural enrollments have decreased from a 1911 high of 1,827 pupils to a 1940 enrollment of 1,139.

The trend of the Pennington county birth rate is indicated in Figure 1 also. From the 1921 high of 27.9 births per 1000 of the population the rate decreased steadily to the 1939 rate of 19.9, which increased slightly in 1940 to 20.2 births per 1000 of the population.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Pennington County, 1890-1940, 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 in Pennington County, 1930 - 1940.

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.
The diverse effects of the rapid population increase, mentioned in Figure 1, are more evident in this figure. Here we see that although the county as a whole showed the comparatively high population gain of 18.5 percent, the bulk of the townships for which data has been obtained, suffered losses ranging from 8.9 percent in District 16, in RST2; to 100 percent in five of the townships. Meanwhile, Rapid City, the county seat, showed a 33.1 percent gain in population, and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county showed a gain of 33.2 percent.

Thus it is apparent that the rural areas bore the brunt of any population loss in the county, a fact which is reflected in the decline of rural enrollments in comparison to a sharp increase in urban enrollments. 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 the elementary school enrollments. (See Figures 2 and 3.)
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments

Legend:
- Top figure 1920 enrollment
- Middle figure 1930 enrollment
- Figure in ( ) indicates district number

Source: Records of Pennington County Superintendent of Schools
in Pennington County, 1920, 1930 and 1940

Lower figure 1940 enrollment
In 1940, 84 common schools were in operation in Pennington county. In addition, the five independent districts of Rapid City, Wasta, Keystone, Quinn, and New Underwood, as well as the five consolidated districts of Owanka, Hill City, Caputa, Hart Table, and Wall were in operation.

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. A few districts gained in enrollment during the period 1930 to 1940, but a large majority showed a loss. Specifically, of the 65 common districts in the county, 47 showed a loss in enrollment for 1940 as compared with the 1930 figures. In 1940, 27 rural schools had been closed, 18 were in operation with five or less pupils, and 38 of the common schools were operating with only six to ten pupils.

A comparison of the rural enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1930 shows that the total rural enrollment has dropped from 1,331 to 1,139 pupils. In view of the declining birth rate and the increasing concentration of the population in urban units, further rural enrollment losses may be expected in coming years.
Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per

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

Figure below circle represents
Figure in ( ) indicates district

Source: Records of Pennington County Superintendent of Schools
Pupil by Size of School, in Pennington County, 1940

- 16 or more pupils

Cost per pupil number

(Unorganized)
As may be seen in Figure 4, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Pennington county, with those schools with the smallest enrollments generally showing the greatest per-pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Pennington county ranged from $17 in District 11, Rockerville school which enrolled 29 pupils, to $440 in District 2, Longfellow school which enrolled only one pupil.

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 applicable to those schools enrolling five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil for 18 schools of this group was $123.73, as compared with $46.51 for all schools.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Pennington 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>111</td>
<td>1147</td>
<td>$53,356.50</td>
<td>$46.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>9,032.50</td>
<td>123.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>20,944.00</td>
<td>71.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>7,180.00</td>
<td>46.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>16,200.00</td>
<td>25.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' salaries only.
Source: Records of the Pennington 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 term, school operation costs to District 47 totaled $1,314.51. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another school within the home district. That year school operation costs to the district, for the remaining two schools, was $1,107.51, a saving of $207.00. A similar though smaller saving was made in District 46. During the 1937-38 school term it cost $1,699.18 to operate the schools of this district, which dropped to $1,494.63 the first year one was closed.

Since the cost per pupil increases and the educational efficiency decreases, as the number of pupils 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.*
Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Pennington County Tuition Students, 1940

Legend:  
- 0- Number of tuition students attending  
○ Number of tuition students from each district  
* Scenic High School is located in Hart Table Consolidated  

Source: Records of Pennington County High School Superintendents
Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for school 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 areas from which high schools drew their Pennington county tuition students, numbering approximately 337 in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of Pennington 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 to some extent, as 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 districts paying the tuition and transportation costs. Where distance makes this course impracticable the centralized rural school may be a solution. If the distances are too great for daily transportation the dormitory plan for housing pupils might be used. (As may be seen on the figure, two students traveled a distance of approximately 90 miles from District 40 to attend high school in the Rapid City independent district; another student traveled 80 miles from District 59.) Both the economical and educational advantages are strong points in any of the above plans; superior educational facilities would be extended to the farm children.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in urban centers becomes more pronounced, 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.
Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Pennington county shrank from 48.5 percent to 38.2 percent. In these figures the direct influence of the declining birth rate mentioned in Figure 1, is unmistakable. With each passing year there have been fewer pupils entering the first grade. In 1940, 10.4 percent of those entering school were first graders, but in 1920, 13.1 percent of the grades had been first grade children. The eighth grade however, showed only a slight increase, in contrast with most counties. (see Table II). With reduced number of persons under six years of age, elementary enrollments will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate should be reversed.

Figure 7 also shows that the high school enrollment has almost doubled from 1920 to 1940, increasing from 13.4 percent to 29.2 percent of the grades. Note that the proportions for the three grade groupings(first to fourth, fifth to eighth, and ninth to twelfth) were almost equal in 1940. As the proportion of first graders, in correspondence with the birth rate, has decreased, the proportion of eighth graders entering high school to continue their education has increased.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment By Grades, 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>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.