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

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

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

In 1918, 619 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Jones county

but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 235

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 Jones 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

This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W. P. A. Project No. 265-1-74-97. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Miss Mabel Eggers, the Jones County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study were secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in The Elementary Schools of Jones County

For a number of years population experts have been predicting that the downward trend of the birth rate would eventually result in declining enrollments. Figure 1 indicates that elementary enrollment has declined since 1926, declining sharply since 1933. Undoubtedly both the drop in the birth rate and heavy outward migration have contributed to this situation. In 1926 there were 866 elementary pupils enrolled in Jones county schools as compared with only 414 in 1940, a drop of 52.2 percent. Rural enrollments show an even sharper downward trend falling off 61.9 percent between 1917 and 1940. It will be noted that elementary enrollments in independent districts have declined slowly since the peak year of 1925.

While the declining birth rate is not wholly responsible for this serious enrollment decline in Jones county, its effect is significant. From 34.8 births per 1,000 of the population in 1921 the birth rate declined to 12.7 births per 1,000 of the population in 1932. Since then it has fluctuated, increasing to 23.9 births per 1,000 of the population in 1940. In spite of the erratic year by year fluctuations in the birth rate during the past 21 years the trend has been unquestionably downward. The downward trend in the birth rate is more clearly revealed in the 1920-25 average of 26.5 births per 1,000 of the population as compared with the 1926-40 average of the 20.6 births per 1,000 of the population. The result of the downward tendency in the birth rate has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Jones 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 Jones County, By Townships, 1930 - 1940

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

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. Jones county lost 21 percent of its population between 1930 and 1940. It is self-evident that such a decrease would have a serious effect on elementary enrollments. Since the exodus has been largely from the farms, rural enrollments have borne the brunt of the decrease.

Losses in population occurred in all except four of the 27 townships in Jones county between 1930 and 1940. The losses range from 9.9 percent in Banner to 72.2 percent in Richland. Ten townships lost more than 40 percent of their population during this period. The direct relation between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the township which had the greatest loss in population (Figures 2 and 3), had the greatest number of closed schools.
In Jones county 27 common schools were in operation in 1940, in addition to the two independent districts of Hurdo and Draper and the consolidated district of Capa.

The definite downward trend is evident in Figure 3, which lists the elementary school enrollments of each district for 1930 and 1940. Thirty-three schools had been closed in 1940 and six schools had an enrollment of five or fewer pupils. Of the other 27 schools, 19 had enrollments of ten or less, leaving only eight schools with enrollments of ten or more. This situation is not surprising in view of the fact that rural enrollments for the county as a whole decreased 40.7 percent between 1930 and 1940. 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 Jones County, 1940.

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

Figure below circle represents cost per pupil  
Figure in ( ) indicates district number

Source: Records of Jones County Superintendent of Schools
As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Jones county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per-pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Jones county in 1940 ranged from $20 in the Mussman school which enrolled 30 pupils to $248 in the Ziebrick school of District 14 which enrolled only two pupils. The fact that two teachers were employed in the Okaton grade school accounts for the high per-pupil cost in this school which enrolled 18 pupils.

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. The average cost per pupil of the schools in this group was $146.72 as compared with the $40.76 average for the schools which enrolled 16 or more pupils.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Jones 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>60</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>$16,429.95</td>
<td>$64.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>3,375.00</td>
<td>146.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>7,272.45</td>
<td>72.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2,317.50</td>
<td>50.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>3,465.00</td>
<td>40.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' salaries only
Source: Records of the Jones 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 1935-36 school term, the cost of educating pupils in District 37 with two schools in operation was $1,372.79. The following year one of the schools was closed and the pupils were sent to the other schools. That year school operation costs to the district were $565.06, a saving of $807.79. A similar saving was made in District 43. During the 1935-36 school term the operating costs for this district with one open school were $502.25. This school was closed the following year and the school district costs dropped to $59.35. When a school is closed the district is required by law to pay tuition costs of pupils who are sent to other districts and transportation charges for any pupils who live four miles or more distant from the nearest school in operation.

Since the cost per pupil increases and the educational efficiency decreases,* as the number of pupils attending school 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 in school work.
Since 1921, school districts of South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required to pay tuition costs for resident students who attend high school outside of the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Jones county tuition students, numbering approximately 57 in 1940. Ten of these students attended high schools outside of the county. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the district boards of Jones county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. Where towns are situated at strategic points throughout the county, the adoption of a similar plan to elementary education seems practical. As elementary enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil to mount rural schools would be closed and the remaining pupils sent to village schools, with the home district paying the tuition and transportation costs. When distance and lack of good roads make this plan impractical, the centralized rural school might be a solution. These plans have the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the superior educational facilities of larger schools.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in town centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and of sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating.
Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments By Grade Groups, in Jones County, 1920 - 1940

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Jones county shrank from 51.2 to 38.6 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. The explanation of this fact is 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. Seventeen and one-tenth percent of those enrolled in school in 1920 were first graders and 9.9 percent were eighth graders, whereas in 1940 the proportion of first graders and eighth graders was exactly the same, namely 9.6 percent. (See Table 4) With the reduced number of persons under six years of age, it is obvious that elementary enrollments will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate should be reversed.

Figure 7 shows that the high school enrollment was more than four times as large in 1940 as in 1920, increasing from 5.7 to 25.3 percent. This trend may be explained by the fact that an increasingly greater number of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table II. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment By Grades, 1920 - 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1925, 1930, 1935, 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.