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

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In 1931, 449 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Washabaugh county but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 284.

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 Washabaugh 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. In reading this bulletin it should be borne in mind that Washabaugh county is one of the four counties in the state in which the entire county is organized as one school district.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Washabaugh County

The fluctuation of the rural enrollments of Washabaugh county is graphed in Figure 1. In accord with the general state-wide trend of decline for rural enrollments, Washabaugh rural enrollments have declined. No records have been obtained for enrollments before 1918, but the enrollment in 1919 is recorded as 35 pupils. From this small beginning the county rural enrollment increased rapidly; by 1931 the enrollment had reached 449 the highest enrollment on record for the rural enrollments of the county. After this date the enrollment began an almost uninterrupted decrease until in 1940 the enrollment stood at 264 pupils.

Washabaugh county lies within Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and consequently has comparatively few white people included in the population, although its percent of white inhabitants is higher than in any of the surrounding Indian populated counties. Since Indians are educated in government schools, figures given above do not include them.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Washabaugh County, 1918-1940,

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction
In Washabaugh county the most important factor in elementary enrollment decline is the population loss through outward migration as shown in Figure 2. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss for Washabaugh county was 20 percent, one of the highest losses among the counties west of the river.

Washabaugh county is an exception to the Indian-populated counties in this high loss; most Indian-populated counties remain stable or decrease only slightly in population. The explanation lies in the fact that Washabaugh contains a much higher percent of whites than most of the similar counties. Adverse conditions may cause a general migration of whites, whereas the Indian population remains stable.

Sixteen out of the 20 townships of Washabaugh county for which data have been obtained lost in population between 1930 and 1940. Losses ranged from 4.2 percent (R35 T43) to 64.2 percent (R37 T40). High population loss, declining birth rate, and diminishing rural enrollments are all directly related.
Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Washabaugh County Districts, 1920, 1930, and 1940.

* Includes High School enrollments at Wanblee

Legend: (Totals)
- Top figure 1920 enrollment
- Middle figure 1930 enrollment
- Lower figure 1940 enrollment
- Circles = Locations of 1940 school enrollments

Source: Reports of Washabaugh County Superintendent of Schools.

In Washabaugh county 20 common schools were in operation in 1940. The county is organized as one common district under one school board with a county superintendent in charge of the schools. There are no incorporated village centers and consequently no independent schools in the county. There are, however, several unorganized village centers.

The enrollments above show a gain in the 1920-1930 period, and a loss in the 1930-1940 period, as indicated in Figure 1. Separate school enrollments have been obtained for 1940 only. In 1940 five schools had been closed, three were operating with five or fewer pupils, and seven schools had only six to ten pupils. In 1931 there were 449 rural school pupils enrolled, compared to 284 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.
As may be seen in Figure 4, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Washabaugh 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 Washabaugh county ranged from $29 in Wanamaker school which enrolled 20 pupils, to $135 in Potato Creek school which enrolled only four 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 applicable to those schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil for the three schools in this group was $118.92 compared to $46.93 the average for all schools.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Washabaugh 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>25</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>$12,155.00</td>
<td>$46.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1,665.00</td>
<td>118.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3,855.00</td>
<td>67.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1,620.00</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>5,015.00</td>
<td>32.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' salaries only
Source: Records of the Washabaugh County Superintendent of Schools.
Figure 5. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments, By Grade Groups, in Washabaugh County, 1920 - 1940.

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1930 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Washabaugh county shrank from 74 percent to 41.3 percent of the total number of elementary and high school pupils. By 1940 only 10.5 percent were first graders while in 1925 19 percent had been first graders. Meanwhile the grades from the fifth through the eighth grade had gradually increased from 26 percent to 43.7 percent in 1940. With the 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 trend should be reversed.

There was no high school in Washabaugh county before 1925; but by 1940 the upper grade group (9-12) had increased from the 1.3 percent of 1925 to 15 percent. Note that the proportions of the first two grade groups were almost equal in 1940. The high school proportion has increased steadily since an increasingly greater proportion of eighth graders are entering high school to continue their education.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Grades, 1920 - 1930.

<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></td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td></td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Percentage Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920-1940.
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.