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

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

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

In 1931, 1456 pupils were enrolled in the elementary schools of Dewey county

but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 981

Each figure represents 200 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 cost per pupil.

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

For a number of years population experts have been predicting that the downward trend of the birth-rate would cause a serious decline in elementary school enrollments. The fulfillment of this prophecy in Dewey county is shown in Figure 1. During the period 1912 to 1931 the total elementary enrollment increased from 441 to 1,456 pupils. Since 1932, however, the trend has been completely downward only 981 elementary pupils being enrolled in 1940.

In the graph below it is seen that both common and independent enrollments show the expected decline; the enrollments in the common schools declining from a 1926 high of 243 to a low of 97 pupils, and the independent schools declining from a 1934 level of 1,210 to the 1940 enrollment of 855 pupils. It should be noted in this connection that the independent district enrollment includes the enrollments of 15 rural schools within the independent districts of Timber Lake and Eagle Butte, the largest independent districts in the United States.

From 1920 when the birth rate was 28.8 births per 1,000 of the population, the rate showed a persistent decline for an eleven-year period. A sharp increase took place from the 1931 rate of 19 births to reach a peak of 37.1 in 1935. But the rate from this point again began to diminish until in 1940 the birth rate stood at 25 births per 1,000 of the population.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Dewey County, 1912-1940, 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 Dewey County, by Townships, 1930-1940

Legend:

- **Gained**
- **Lost 20.0 - 29.9%**
- **Lost 10.0 - 19.9%**
- **Lost 30.0 - 39.9%**
- **Lost 40.0% or more**
- * No data

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

Another important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2, which records the loss of population through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 Dewey county lost 11.8 percent of its population. While returns are incomplete for approximately one-half of the county, it is evident that losses were general throughout the county. This decrease in population is closely related to rural enrollment decline since the population of the county is largely rural, as was pointed out in Figure 1. The combined population of the three incorporated towns of the county was approximately the same in 1940 as in 1930.

In Dewey county all the townships for which data was obtained lost in population, with one exception. The losses ranged from 17.2 percent in T13 R25 to 100 percent in T15 R25. 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 elementary school enrollment. (See Figures 2 and 2)
In 1940, twenty-three common schools were in operation in Dewey county, 15 within independent districts. In addition, the six independent schools within Timber Lake, Eagle Butte, and Isabel, 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. Reference to the three common districts shows that each dropped in enrollment from 1930 to 1940, District #9 losing 57 pupils. In 1940 only two rural schools were operating in Dewey county with five or less pupils, but 20 schools had been closed, since 1930. The greater number of the 23 schools had a range of enrollments from two to fifteen pupils; ten of the 23 schools enrolling 16 or more.

Disregarding the complexity of the independent-rural enrollments, and discussing only the enrollments of the rural schools within the three common districts, we see the serious nature of the enrollment decline. In 1920 there were, according to the above figure, 201 rural school pupils enrolled, compared with 96 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 Dewey 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 Dewey county ranged from $26 per pupil in District 5, where Lantry school enrolled 16 pupils to $282 in District #9, where Werner school enrolled only three pupils.

That the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis is indicated by Table 1 below. This is particularly true for those schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. In Dewey county only two schools are found in this group, but their average cost per pupil is four times the average cost per pupil for all schools. The average cost per pupil for the two schools enrolling five or less pupils was $217.50 as compared with $54.43 the average for all schools.

Table 1. Instructional Cost Per Pupil for Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Dewey 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>43</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>$21,445.00</td>
<td>54.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer pupils</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,305.00</td>
<td>217.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3,725.00</td>
<td>91.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 pupils</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4,360.60</td>
<td>57.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 pupils or more</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>12,045.00</td>
<td>44.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on teachers salaries only

Source: Records of the Dewey 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 1934-35 school term, school operation costs to District #2 totaled $33,680.30 for the 22 schools in the district. The following year five schools were closed and the pupils were sent to neighboring schools. That year it cost the district $27,805.13 to operate the remaining 17 schools. The saving amounted to $5,875.17; or $1,175.03 per school.

Since the cost per pupil increases and the educational efficiency decreases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, 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 5. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Dewey County Tuition Students, 1940

Legend: -0- Number of tuition students attending
       O Number of tuition students from each district

Source: Records of Dewey County High School Superintendents, 1940

Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for school districts lacking 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 Dewey county tuition students, numbering approximately 40 in 1940. The tuition students of Dewey are necessarily few since more than half of the county is officially independent. The people of the districts of Dewey county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers, realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive. Perhaps a similar plan could be adapted to elementary education. As elementary enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil to 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 of the town school.

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 proportions enrolled in the first four elementary grades of the Dewey county schools shrank from 55.9 to 38.7 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollments. In these figures the direct influence of the declining birth rate mentioned in Figure 1 can be seen. With each successive year there have been fewer pupils entering the first grade. In 1940 the proportions for the first and eighth grades were 24.6 percent and 6.4 percent respectively as compared to 12.1 percent and 8.1 percent in 1940. (See Table II). With the greatly reduced number of persons under six years of age, elementary enrollment will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate should reverse its trend.

The proportion enrolled in high school was almost three times as large in 1940 as in 1920, increasing from 10.8 percent to 27.3 percent since an increasingly greater proportion of eighth graders are entering high school to continue their education.

Table II. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments 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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.
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.