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

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

In 1931, 129 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Washington County

but in 1938 the total enrollment was only 61

Each figure represents 25 pupils

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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 Washington 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 kept in mind that Washington 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 Washington County.

Figure 1 (below) shows the trend of elementary enrollments in Washington county between 1922 and 1940.

The Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction show no enrollment figures prior to 1922, only 38 pupils being enrolled in the elementary schools of Washington county during that year. By 1931 the enrollment had increased to 129 pupils, the peak enrollment for the county. From that time on a steady decrease occurred until 1938 when only 61 pupils were enrolled. By 1940, however, the number of elementary pupils had increased to 101.

Washington county lies within Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and consequently has comparatively few white people included in the population. Since Indians are educated in government and private or parochial schools the enrollment figures given above do not include them.

With ranching and sheep raising as the chief occupations, the population is widely scattered and this creates a serious problem in maintaining adequate schools for the children of the county.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Washington County, 1922-1940.

Number of Pupils

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction
The most 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 Washington county was 2.1 percent. This is a comparatively small loss considering the fact that the average loss for the entire state was 7.5 percent for the same period. The loss in enrollment between 1930 and 1940 was slight indicating the close relationship between population and enrollment trends. Furthermore, in the eight years preceding 1930 the population and elementary enrollment both increased rapidly.

As previously noted the land in Washington county is more suitable for grazing and herding than for small farming. Apparently the population has been adjusting itself to the number of persons the land will support and for this reason probably little variation may be expected in the population of this county. Enrollments will probably shrink rather than increase, however, following the general trend caused by the declining birth rates.
In Washington county eight common schools were in operation in 1940. The entire county is organized as one common district, under one school board with the County Superintendent in direct charge of the schools. Since there are no incorporated village centers, there are no independent schools in the county.

Figure 3 shows the total elementary enrollments for 1920, 1930, and 1940. Enrollments dropped from 109 pupils in 1930 to 101 pupils in 1940. Three schools had been closed in 1940 and only one school had an enrollment of fewer than five pupils.

Two schools enrolled ten or fewer pupils; five schools enrolled from 11 to 15 pupils; and one school had an enrollment of more than 16 pupils. The average enrollment, 12.6 pupils per school, compares favorably with more densely populated counties, indicating that an effort has been made to adjust the number of schools to the population.
Figure 4. Cost Per Pupil by Size of School in Washington County, 1940

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

Source: Records of Washington County Superintendent of Schools.

As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Washington county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Washington county during the 1939-40 term ranged from $32 in the Curry school which enrolled 21 pupils to $169 in the Gull school which enrolled only four 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 clearly. As mentioned above the average cost per pupil for the one school in this group reached $169 as compared to the $57.85 average for all the schools in the county.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Washington 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>12</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>$6075.00</td>
<td>$57.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed schools</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or Fewer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>675.00</td>
<td>169.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 pupils</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1350.00</td>
<td>84.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11- 15 pupils</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3375.00</td>
<td>52.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more pupils</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>675.00</td>
<td>32.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on Teachers' salaries only
Source: Records of the Washington County Superintendent of Schools
Between 1925 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first grades of the Washington county schools shrank from 66.7 to 54.3 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. The explanation of this trend may be found in the fact that birth rates have fallen since 1920. With each successive year there have been fewer pupils entering the first grade. In 1940 the proportions for the first and eighth grades were 22.9 and 3.1 percent respectively, as compared to 13.3 percent and 10.5 percent in 1940. With the reduced number of persons under six years of age it is obvious that elementary enrollments will continue to shrink for a number of years even if the birth rate should be reversed. In 1940 there were only four pupils attending school above the eighth grade and these were in the ninth grade.

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

<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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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