

South Dakota State University  
**Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional  
Repository and Information Exchange**

---

Bulletins

South Dakota State University Agricultural  
Experiment Station

---

6-1-1948

## Fewer but Larger School Systems in South Dakota

W. F. Kumlien

Follow this and additional works at: [http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta\\_bulletins](http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_bulletins)

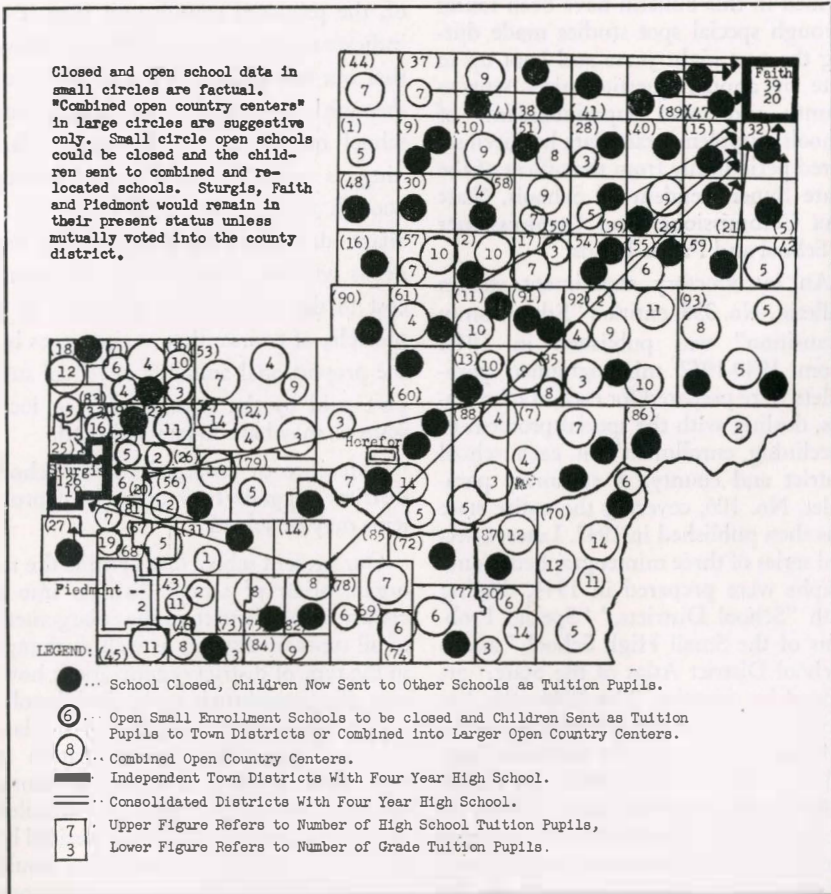
---

### Recommended Citation

Kumlien, W. F., "Fewer but Larger School Systems in South Dakota" (1948). *Bulletins*. Paper 389.  
[http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta\\_bulletins/389](http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_bulletins/389)

This Bulletin is brought to you for free and open access by the South Dakota State University Agricultural Experiment Station at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bulletins by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact [michael.biondo@sdstate.edu](mailto:michael.biondo@sdstate.edu).

# Fewer But Larger School Systems in South Dakota



The above figure suggests a plan for the reorganization of Meade County as a district.

Department of Rural Sociology  
Agricultural Experiment Station  
South Dakota State College, Brookings

## EXPLANATORY NOTE

Most of the rural school trends described in this bulletin have been found through special spot studies made during the past eight years and kept up to date by annual questionnaires sent to county and town superintendents of schools. Supplementary data has been secured periodically from the offices of the State Superintendent of Schools, State Tax Commissioner and Commissioner of School and Public Lands.

An introductory experiment station bulletin, No. 338, entitled "Education in Transition" was published in 1940. From 1940-1942 mimeographed pamphlets were prepared for each of 67 counties, dealing with the special problem of "declining enrollment" in each school district and county. A summary pamphlet, No. 106, covering the entire state was then published in 1942. Later, a second series of three mimeographed monographs were prepared in 1944, dealing with "School Districts," "Special Problems of the Small High School," and a "School District Atlas of the State," arranged by counties. The 1944 atlas has been revised at two year intervals, one in 1946 and the last one, for this biennium, will be ready for distribution in August 1948. These pamphlets have all been issued in limited quantities and were sent mainly to the various educational administrators in South Dakota, and to the district school officers of the state to keep them informed as to the current school situation.

The reference to, and brief explanation of, the proposed county unit plan is to indicate to the citizenry of South Dakota that our school problems can be solved through readjustments of district and school reorganization. If careful planning is carried out in each county, enough savings can be effected so as to adapt our school programs to present day needs without much, if any, additional cost to the taxpayers of the state. It is possible, of course, that as time goes by, the proportional amounts of school support paid by the state, county or local sources, may have to be readjusted.

Reference to proposed county school districts suggests how our school problems may be solved.

Our present school law permits the reorganization of school districts into a county school district, or the enlargement of all types of districts as well as change in the type of district organization; however, the procedure is so detailed, involving so many district units, that the law in effect discourages reorganization to any extent. A permissive law for county districts would eliminate the detailed procedure when such action is desired by the local people. The proposed law would bring the schools in a county under one integrated administrative system so that practical and economical changes could be made as conditions change.

# Table of Contents

I. Explanatory Note.....	Page Inside front cover
II. The Major Rural School Problems .....	4
III. Why and How the Problems Have Arisen.....	12
IV. Proposed Solution to These Problems .....	20
V. Summary and Conclusions .....	30

## List of Figures

Front Cover—A Proposed Plan for a Reorganized Meade County District.....	Cover
Fig. 1a. Common School Districts By Counties in South Dakota Operating Only One School.....	4
Fig. 1b. The Number of Rural School Districts By Counties.....	5
Fig. 2a. Percent of Rural Schools By Counties Which Have Enrollments of Six or Fewer Pupils..	6
Fig. 2b. Varying Numbers of Farm Population Per Square Mile in South Dakota.....	7
Fig. 3a. Assessed Property Valuation Per School Census Child in South Dakota .....	8
Fig. 3b. Average Farm Living Indexes for South Dakota Counties, 1945.....	8
Fig. 4a. The Average Pupil Enrollment For Rural Schools By Counties and Agricultural Areas in South Dakota, 1946-47 .....	10
Fig. 4b. The Number of Rural Schoolhouses Not Used, but Standing Vacant, by Counties, 1946	11
Fig. 5a. The Average Annual Rainfall Belts of South Dakota, 1890-1945.....	11
Fig. 5b. The Agricultural Areas, Average Size of Farm or Ranch, and the Number of Persons Per Square Mile, as Related to the Average Annual Belts of South Dakota.....	12
Fig. 6a. Percent Population Loss or Gain by Counties from Their Respective Peak Years to 1945	14
Fig. 6b. Percent of School Census Loss or Gain by Counties from Their Respective Peak Years to 1945.....	14
Fig. (Center Spread) The Number, Types and Location of School Districts in South Dakota.....	16
Fig. 7a. Percent of Common Schools, Closed in South Dakota as of 1945-46, Based Upon the Largest Number of Schools Ever to Operate in Each County.....	18
Fig. 7b. Total Number of Grade Tuition Pupils By Counties, 1946-47.....	18
Fig. 8a. Total Rural School Elementary Enrollment By Counties, 1946-47.....	19
Fig. 8b. Percent of Common School Districts By Counties, Operating No School, 1946-47.....	21
Fig. 9a. Total Number of High School Tuition Pupils By Counties, 1946-47.....	21
Fig. 9b. Community School Attendance Centers in South Dakota, 1946-47.....	22
Fig. 10a. Where Minnehaha County Rural Schools Send Their Tuition Pupils to Community School Centers .....	24
Fig. 10b. Ziebach County With Only One Town High School, Lends Itself Well to a County District Plan .....	25
Fig. 11a. Hamlin County Has Several Community Centers That Can Easily Accommodate All Rural Children in Both Grade and High Schools .....	26
Fig. 11b. Todd—One of Three Unorganized County Districts Now Having a Uniform County Levy for Both Grades and High School .....	27
Fig. 12a. Spink County, Where Eleven Community School Attendance Centers Are Competing For Patronage by Both Rural Elementary and High School Tuition Pupils.....	28
Fig. 12b. Hand County—Where the Opportunity Is Excellent for the Schools Working Out Co- operative Working Relationships With Several Other County-Wide Services.....	29

# Fewer But Larger School Systems in South Dakota

By W. F. KUMLIEN\*

## SOUTH DAKOTA HAS TOO MANY SMALL UNECONOMIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Considering the relatively small number of farm children, 33,407, to be educated in the public rural schools of the state, there is a large number of small districts which operate only one school or no schools at all, which does not lend itself to school economy. (See Figs. 1a and 8a.) While this statement applies to both town and county districts, the common school districts have relatively fewer children of school age.

There was a total of 3,415 districts of five different types operating 3,926 public schools in 1945-46. This has meant an unduly high overhead of administrative expense for the number of pupils involved. If the rural schools of the state are considered separately, the average enrollment per school is 10.3 pupils. This does not compare favorably with the 15 to 30

pupils per school averages found in the rest of the 48 states of the Union. It has been estimated that an average of less than 25 pupils per school is not considered to be an adequate number for efficient and economical operation.

Figures 1b and 1c (center spread) show the number, type, and location of all school districts in South Dakota. Of the 3,415 total, 3,067, or approximately 90 percent are common (rural) school districts. Of the remaining 10 percent slightly over 8 percent, or 260, are independent districts and less than 2 percent, or 81, are consolidated districts. Less than 1 percent consist of 3 township high school districts, 3 unorganized county districts, and one county high school district.

Relatively few school districts are abandoned and thus remain organ-

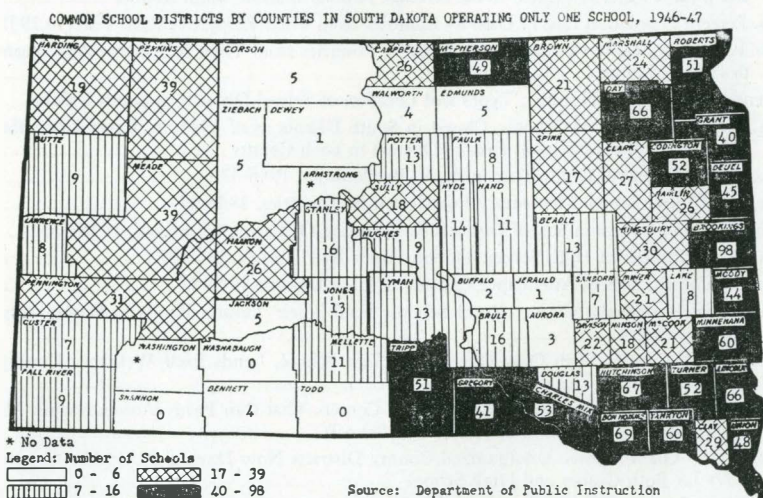


Fig. 1a. Eighty-three percent of the common school districts in South Dakota (1946-47) were operating only one or no school.

\*Rural Sociologist, South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station.



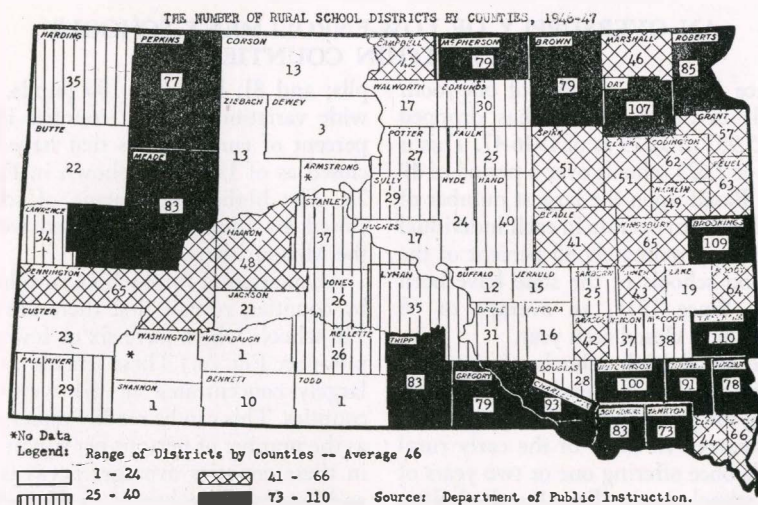


Fig. 1b. There was a total of 3,067 common school districts in 1946-47.

ized territory even when their school or schools are closed. There are various reasons for this. First, many district boards hope to reopen their schools as soon as the number of pupils warrant such action. Secondly, it is usually cheaper to pay tuition and transport their remaining students to nearby rural schools or to graded town schools, especially if the sending school has fewer than ten pupils. In 1947, 333 additional rural schools followed this practice.

There are now 688 rural districts which operate no school of their own. This number comprises 22 percent of the total rural school districts in the state. Approximately 40 additional school districts have followed this practice each year for the past four years.

Probably the main reason why so many rural districts have closed their schools is due to the heavy loss of school population since 1930. In addition to those moving outside the state, there have also been unusual population shifts from the Western and Central parts of the State to the Eastern Counties as well as from rural to city and town districts.

Besides having the smallest average enrollment per rural school of any state in the Union, we also have the smallest average population per district. The state as a whole averages 168 persons per district, while the average for all 48 states is 1,120 per district.

The pattern for rural school district organization was developed during territorial days. Most of the early settlers came from Eastern States which had much denser farm populations. These early pioneers patterned these new rural districts after their former home neighborhoods, which usually consisted of from 20 to 35 farm families.

The peak population for these South Dakota rural neighborhoods was reached in most instances before 1930. The writer has studied population trends in every county and organized township of the state. The tendency has been quite general for both the population at large and school population to decline in numbers. This trend is not peculiar to South Dakota, however, but typical of the Middle West and especially of the Northern Great Plains States.

### AN OVERSUPPLY OF LOW-ENROLLMENT SCHOOLS EXISTS WITHIN COUNTIES

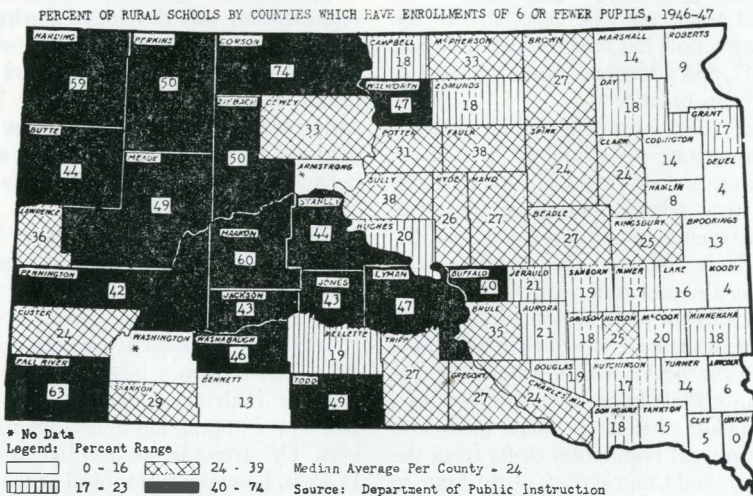
Since 1889, the number of one-room schools in South Dakota has dropped from 5,902 to 3,279 as of 1946-47. This is a loss of 2,623 schools over a period of 49 years. Based upon the largest number of schools ever to operate in each individual county, approximately 45 percent of the common schools of the state have been closed. Since 1918, an average of 68 schools have closed each year.

The small high schools of the state have shown a similar decline in numbers during the past 40 years. The largest loss has occurred in some of the early rural schools once offering one or two years of high school work. Two hundred fifty-four such schools have discontinued their high school departments since 1908. In addition to these, 130 of the smaller high schools, mostly with enrollments of 50 pupils or less, have also discontinued their high school instruction. As of 1946-47, a total of 285 high schools were in operation. Of that number, 104 had fewer than 50 pupils; 100, from 50 to 100 pu-

pils; and 81, had over 100 pupils. The wide variation between counties in the percent of rural schools that have been closed as of 1945-46 is shown in Figure 7a. The highest percentage of schools closed, by counties, are located west of the Missouri River.

An analysis of rural school enrollment, by counties, reveals that there are now 936 schools which have six or fewer pupils. (See Fig. 2a.) These schools are also largely concentrated in the west river counties. This can be readily understood, as the number of persons per square mile in these counties averages between one and two people, whereas, in the counties east of the river, it averages from two to thirteen people per square mile. (See Fig. 2b.)

A "close up" study of one of the largest counties in the state (Meade) has been made with reference to the present location of its rural schools, concentrations of school population, and conditions of roads (See Figure on cover



VARYING NUMBERS OF FARM POPULATION PER SQUARE MILE IN SOUTH DAKOTA, 1945

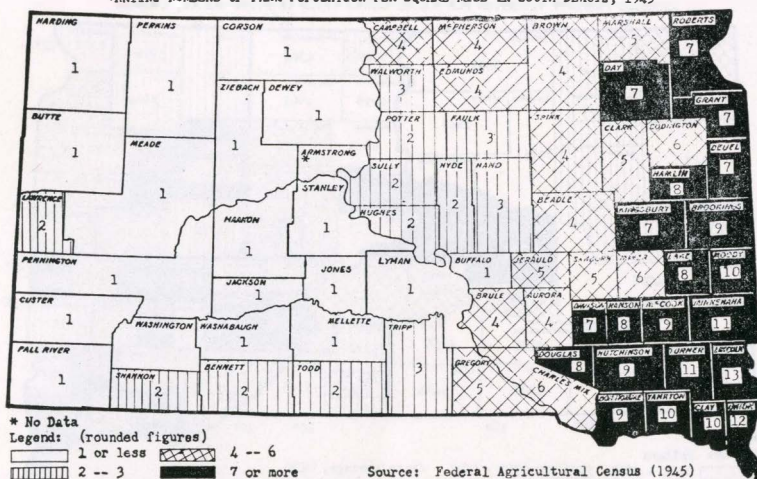


Fig. 2b. This figure is closely related to Fig. 1a. The counties with most of the low-enrollment schools have a much lower farm population density.

page). This study reveals that between 40 and 50 percent of the present number of rural schools in operation in this county could probably be eliminated or combined with other nearby rural schools without interfering with the quality of school work offered. Consideration was also given to the distance pupils would have to travel to these schools after reloca-

tion. The reorganized and relocated schools would not have average enrollments of more than 20 pupils per teacher. This would still be considerably lower than the average enrollment per rural school in some of the other states. The main problem would revolve around the question of transportation. Recent legislation liberalizes and facilitates transportation arrangements.

### UNEQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES PREVAIL BETWEEN COUNTIES

Just as states differ markedly in their ability to support education, so counties vary in a similar way within their own respective states.

The twenty-eighth biennial report of the South Dakota State Superintendent of Public Instruction indicates clearly that the counties differ widely in their assessed property valuations for educational purposes. These amounts, divided by the regular school census youth for that year, show the amount of taxable property expendable for each child of

school age, from 6 to 21 inclusive (See Fig. 3a).

There are of course, other sources of school income from federal and state funds, but the total of such monies available to each district comprises only about 20 percent, as compared to approximately 80 percent raised from local sources mainly through assessed valuation of farm lands and property.

The reader should note that the 20 inch rainfall belt, in the east quarter of the state, has the highest assessed prop-



# South Dakota Experiment Station Bulletin 389

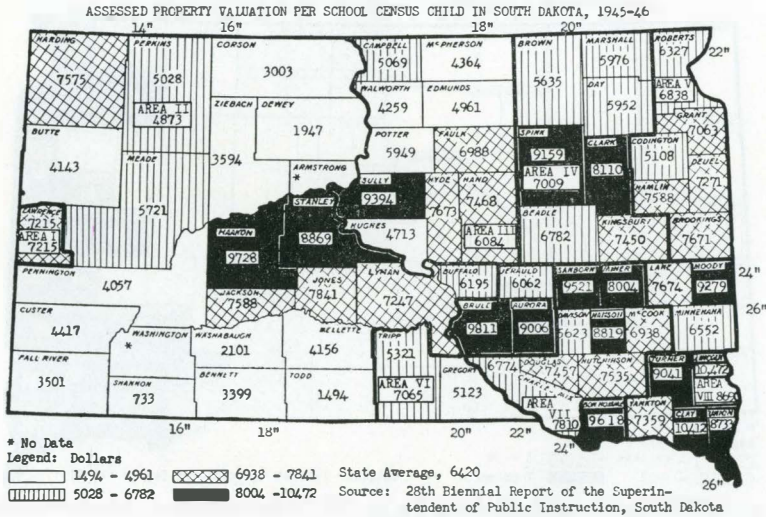


Fig. 3a. Assessed property valuations are more comparable in common school districts, because assessments are based largely on farm lands, buildings and machinery.

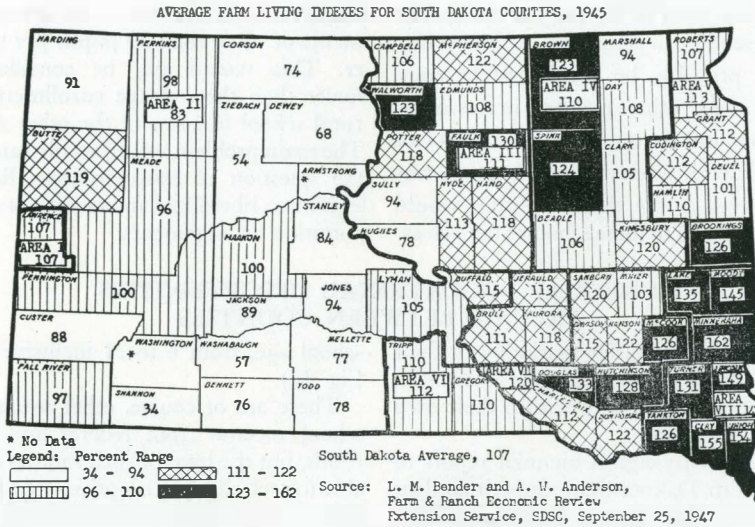


Fig. 3b. Average farm living indexes are also quite comparable, due to similarities in occupation.

erty valuation per child. As one goes from east to west it is quite noticeable that the assessed valuations per child vary almost directly with the amount of

average annual rainfall, the density of farm population, and the average size of farms and ranches in what are known as the eight varying types of agricultural

areas in the state.

While income per capita has greatly increased during the later year of exceptionally good farm production and high prices, the actual assessed valuation of property has not raised in proportion. Thus the figures used for 1945-46 are fairly typical for the past seven or eight years.

Another good test of the amount of annual income per child of public school age is to compare South Dakota with the other 47 states. By taking the per capita income tax data as observed in the federal treasury reports, we can make a fairly accurate estimate as to how the various states compare. For 1945, South Dakota averaged \$4,500 for each child from 5 to 17 years of age. This does not mean, of course, that the income per child is equally distributed by counties in South Dakota. It is simply an average for the state as a whole.

Another basis for showing the inequality in educational opportunity between counties is to compare what is called the "Average Farm Family Living Index, by Counties, in South Dakota as of 1945." (See Fig. 3b.) This is presented as a scoring device worked out by the Department of Agriculture through its Bureau of Agricultural Economics. The scoring was based on four items, namely: (1) the average value of farm products sold, traded, or used per farm in each

county; (2) the percentage of farm homes in the county using electricity; (3) those having telephones; (4) those having automobiles. These items have been used in various combinations so that they seem fairly applicable to all parts of the United States. The average score for the country as a whole was set at 100. For the year 1945, South Dakota ranked 107th. The same test was also applied in 1940 when South Dakota ranked 87th which indicates that the state has improved 23 percent in that time. The national improvement for the same period was 25 percent which places South Dakota slightly under the national figure.

The point we wish to illustrate in this connection is the relationship of these index figures to the various agricultural areas of South Dakota. Here again the scores ranged from 143 in the southeastern area to 83 in the less productive range area in the year 1945. The implications of this data are that school districts and counties vary widely in educational opportunities, because of the differences in economic ability. Various other illustrations might have been used, but all seem to point equally well to the same conclusion. State and county aid has improved the situation somewhat in recent years by tending to equalize the amount of school support for each child regardless of what part of the state he might call home, but there is still a decided deficit in some portions of the state.

### **BETTER VALUE CAN BE OBTAINED FROM THE EDUCATIONAL DOLLAR**

There are great differences in the ability of school districts to obtain the maximum value for each dollar spent. Varying conditions among school systems help to explain this difference.

But how can a district be certain it is receiving the greatest return from its expenditures? There are two broad prin-

ciples for testing this. First, is there consistent planning toward a long term improvement program, and second, is prudent business management being used in expending funds?

South Dakota schools may be compared through the three following general functions: school administration,

school finances, and school instruction.

Under administration, we find South Dakota's 10.3 student average per rural school is the lowest of any state in the Union. The large number of districts, which were formed during territorial days, have been pointed out as one of the causes for this condition. While far reaching changes have occurred in our social and economic life, few changes have been made in school district systems since early days and as a consequence too many small uneconomic districts have resulted. This has caused an extremely high overhead of administrative costs, and unnecessarily high cost per pupil.

Not only are costs high, but the programs offered in one-room rural schools limit the advantages of the pupils. The use of many "permit" teachers during

recent years has made this situation still worse.

Probably the greatest shortcoming of these low enrollment schools is the lack of challenge in their instructional program, caused by the limited number of pupils per class or grade. Teachers in the 936 rural schools operating with six or fewer pupils could handle from 20 to 30 pupils.

Various combinations of a number of these schools could be made by making wider use of transportation facilities. Savings effected could be used for improvement in quality of teachers, subject matter, supervision, and special teachers to serve several schools within each county. A richer instructional program without increasing the cost could also be accomplished.

THE AVERAGE PUPIL ENROLLMENT FOR RURAL SCHOOLS BY COUNTIES AND AGRICULTURAL AREAS IN SOUTH DAKOTA  
1946-1947

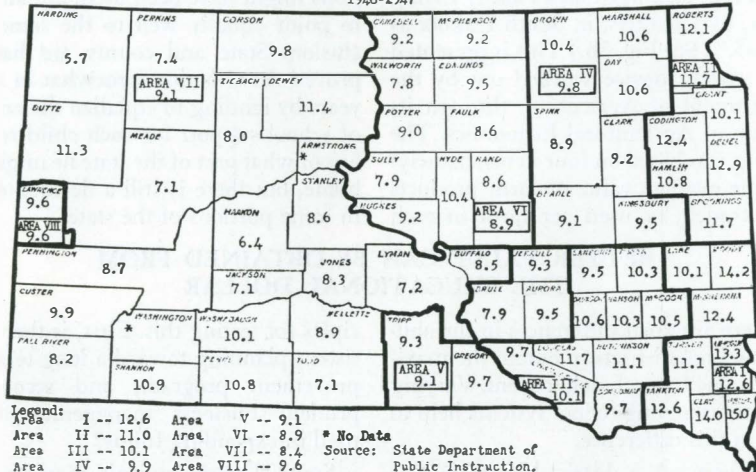
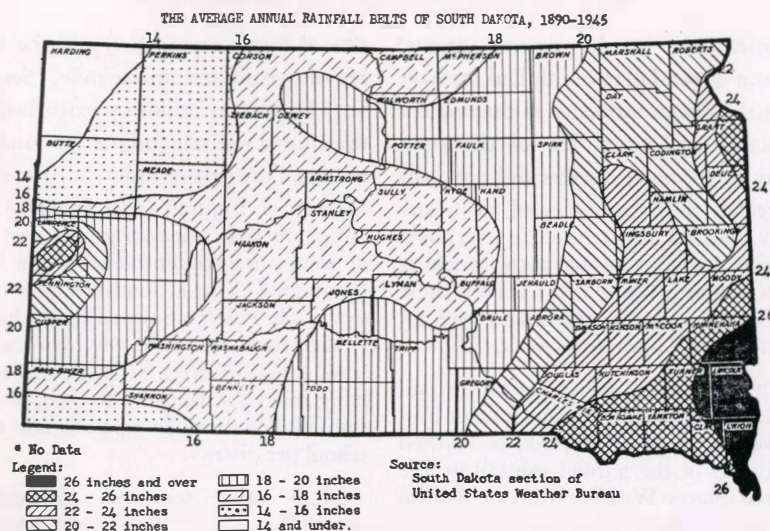
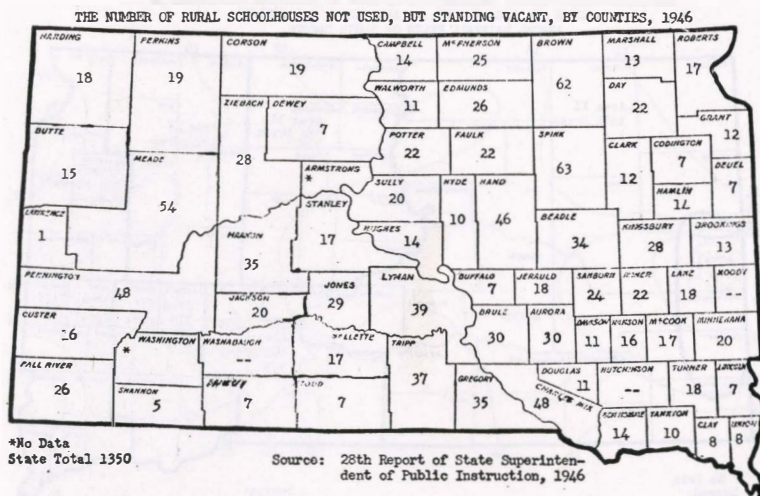


Fig. 4a. Average pupil enrollments for common schools by counties are closely related to variations in farm population density.







THE AGRICULTURAL AREAS, AVERAGE SIZE OF FARM OR RANCH AND THE NUMBER OF PERSONS PER SQUARE MILE, AS RELATED TO THE AVERAGE ANNUAL RAINFALL BELTS OF SOUTH DAKOTA

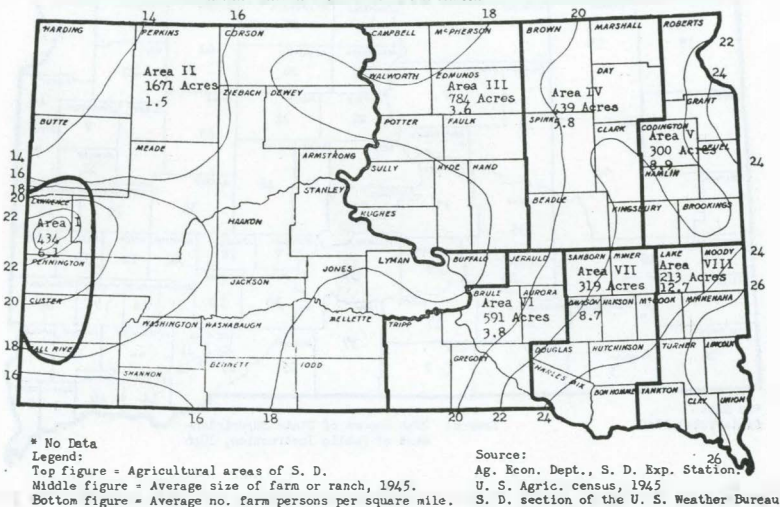


Fig. 5b. There are numerous other social and economic relationships that reflect differences in rainfall belts in South Dakota.

## COUNTY EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES STEM MAINLY OUT OF DIFFERENCES IN RESOURCES

Differences in the normal annual amount of rainfall in South Dakota have exerted a potent influence in shaping the economic and social life of the state. Many of the early settlers did not fully appreciate the significance of such rainfall variations and tended to overpopulate what are now known as the ranching areas of South Dakota. It has been these lower rainfall areas which have had the greatest population losses since 1930.

That there is a steady decline in annual rainfall as one progresses from East to West across the State, may be verified in studies of the annual rainfall by the United States Weather Bureau Station for South Dakota. (See Fig. 5a.) A striking correlation has been noted between these rainfall areas and types of farming,

size of farms or ranches, and the number of persons per square mile. (See Fig. 5b.) Another relationship exists between the annual rainfall and the type and size of school districts in different parts of the State. (See Figure-Center Spread.) The larger districts, consisting of a township or more, are concentrated in the West River and Central South Dakota counties while Eastern South Dakota has inclined more toward the neighborhood, or small school district. Seventeen counties, lying mainly within the 20 inch, or over, rainfall belt, usually operate one rural school per district.

Many other resources, material or otherwise, help to produce educational inequalities between counties; however, rainfall still plays the principal role in

our agricultural state. As farmers and ranchmen gain in experience and make ever increasing use of labor saving devices, drouth resistant seed, scientific weed and pest control, and better breeding methods, educational opportunities

will improve correspondingly. There is little prospect of our present pattern of population density changing to any great extent, except through the development of some new resource such as irrigation.

### POPULATION SHIFTS ARE RELATED TO SCHOOL CENSUS TRENDS

The peak in the total number of persons in South Dakota was recorded in the 1930 census. The record reveals, however, that the peak number of persons for each county varied for a period of years. (See Fig. 6a.) Some counties reached their maximum growth as early as 1910 and have been on a downward trend since then, while a few others have kept on growing each five or ten year period. Breaking the county population down still farther, we find that the farm population has declined generally since 1930. While this trend is true for most of the rural areas of the Middle West, it has been more decided in the Northern Great Plains States.

The same tendency is true for the majority of the small towns with populations of less than 500 persons. In South Dakota, fully three-fourths of such towns have declined in population since 1930. Towns with over 500 persons have shown greater stability and have been more successful in maintaining their numbers. Especially is that true of cities of over 2,500 persons. It has often been noted that the number of towns people in an area increase correspondingly with the increasing number of farms. This is particularly true in the strong agricultural states, where the number of small town manufacturing and industrial

plants have remained relatively limited.

In discussing population trends by states, counties, and townships, attention is directed to the agricultural revolution that the Middle Western states have been experiencing since the First World War. Particular reference is made to farm mechanization and to the consequent increase in the average size of farms and ranches. In 1945, 76 percent of the 68,705 farms in South Dakota operated tractors, usually in conjunction with other large scale machinery. This almost complete shift to power farming has been the main factor in expanding the average size of farms in the state from 335 acres in 1910 to 626 acres in 1945.

One finds a rather close relationship between county population changes and county school census changes. (See Figure 6b.) The variation in percent loss or gain in each county reflects the relative proportion of youth of school age to the total population. Other factors also enter the situation. The proportion of farm tenants to farm owners and the percent of the population of child bearing age emigrating from the state has had considerable bearing on population trends. During the drouth of the depression period, between 1930 and 1940, 65 percent of the farmers who left the state averaged approximately 35 years of age.

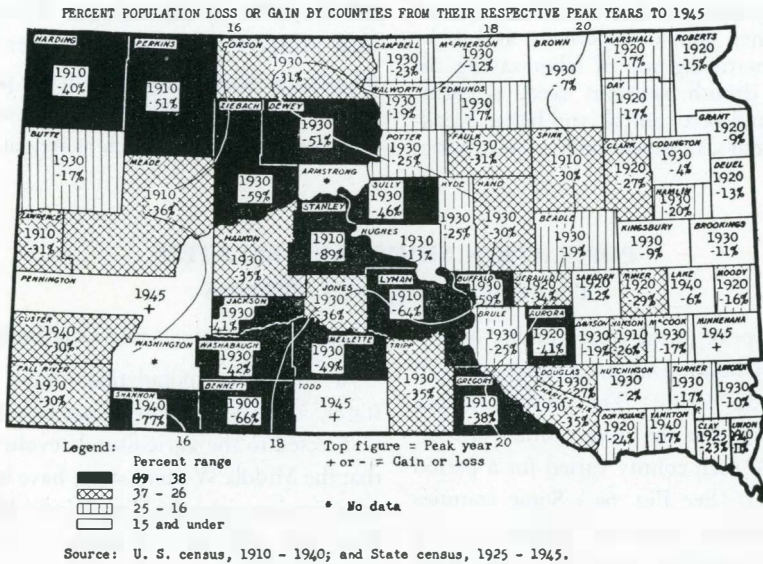


Fig. 6a. Population losses or gains, by counties, over a period of years have directly influenced the changing size of farm, (See Fig. 5b.), and the present density of farm population, (See Fig. 2b.).

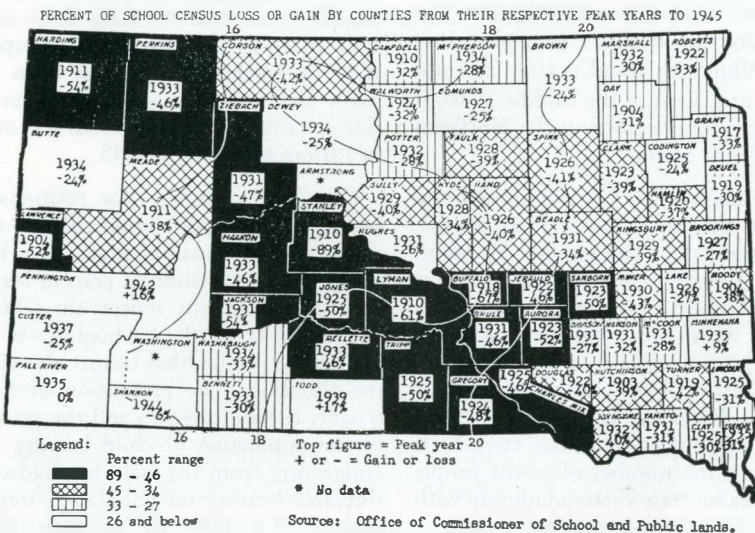


Fig. 6b. The school census losses or gains are broadly related to Fig. 6a, but not the same. The school census population includes only the age groups from 6-20, while Fig. 6a includes all age groups.



## THE CLOSED SCHOOL MOVEMENT IS AN ADJUSTMENT PROCESS

The rapid trend in the closing of rural schools, as well as small high schools, has been in process for over 30 years. The largest number of rural schools ever to operate in South Dakota was 5,902. This peak occurred in 1918. Since that time, and up to 1946-47, an average of 68 rural schools have closed each year. Based upon the peak number ever to operate in the various counties, 2,623 rural schools, or 45 percent, are now closed. (See Figure 7a.)

The number and percent of schools closed are not uniform over the state, however. A western and west central county each have 90 percent of their schools closed while one eastern county has closed only 13 percent.

The main causes of rural schools closings are: (1) declining enrollments, (2) inadequate tax bases, (3) high per capita cost of operation, (4) increasing number of rural parents sending their children to city and town schools, and (5) the shortage of properly qualified teachers.

During the past ten years an increasing number of rural children are being sent as tuition students to neighboring rural schools and nearby town schools. (See Figure 7b.) Approximately 4,000 elementary rural school children were sent as tuition pupils to town schools during 1946-47. The average tuition paid by the rural districts for each pupil was \$9.29 per month. An average obtained from the reports of 250 town schools serving rural tuition pupils indicated that each served 14 pupils. An additional 42

town schools are known to have rural tuition pupils in attendance.

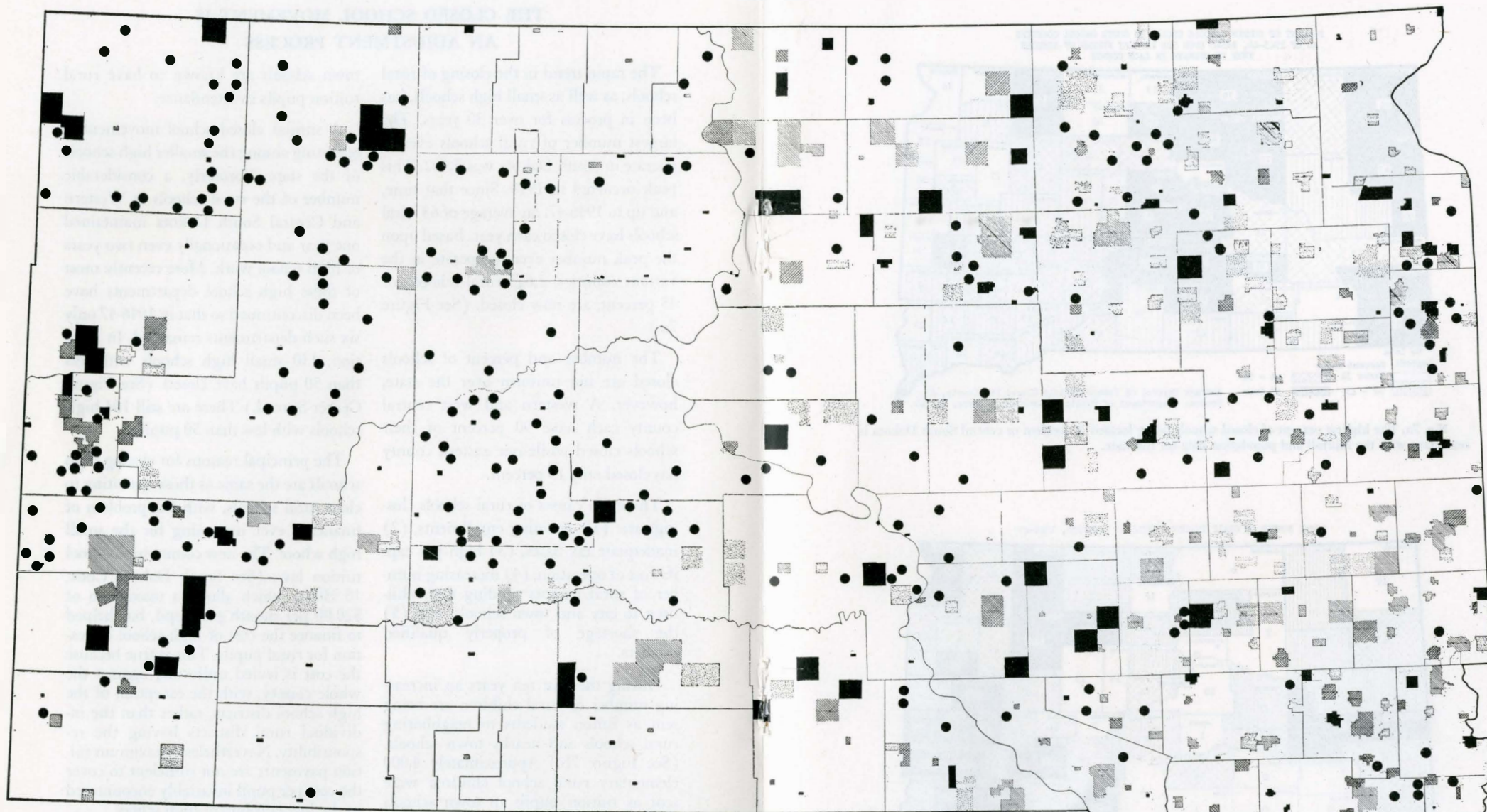
A similar closed school movement is operating among the smaller high schools of the state. Formerly, a considerable number of the rural schools in Western and Central South Dakota maintained one year and occasionally even two years of high school work. More recently most of these high school departments have been discontinued so that in 1946-47 only six such departments remained. In addition, 130 small high schools with less than 50 pupils have closed. (See Figure Center Spread.) There are still 104 high schools with less than 50 pupils.

The principal reasons for closing high schools are the same as those operating to close rural schools, with the problem of financing ever increasing for the small high school. The new county high school tuition law, (See South Dakota Code, 15.3304), which allows a maximum of \$20.00 per month per pupil, has helped to finance the cost of high school education for rural pupils. This is true because the cost is levied uniformly against the whole county, with the exception of the high school districts, rather than the individual rural districts having the responsibility. Nevertheless, maximum tuition payments are not sufficient to cover the cost per pupil invariably encountered in the low enrollment high school.

To indicate the extent of this trend, it may be noted that approximately 12,307 rural pupils of high school age, 14 to 17 inclusive, were enrolled as tuition students in 1946-47.









# THE NUMBER, TYPES, AND LOCATION OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN SOUTH DAKOTA



TYPE	NUMBER
COMMON SCHOOL	3067
INDEPENDENT	260
CONSOLIDATED	81
TOWNSHIP H. S.	3
UNORGANIZED COUNTY	3
COUNTY H. S.	1
TOTAL:	3415

## LEGEND:

-  HIGH SCHOOLS OF MORE THAN 100 PUPILS
-  HIGH SCHOOLS OF 50 TO 100 PUPILS
-  HIGH SCHOOLS OF 50 OR FEWER PUPILS
-  HIGH SCHOOLS THAT ARE CLOSED
-  RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS, 3067
-  RURAL SCHOOLS DISCONTINUING HIGH SCHOOL WORK

Interspersed between five other types of districts, are 3,067 common school districts, the boundaries of which do not show on the map. West of the 20-inch rainfall line these districts are of a township or more in size. East of the 20-inch rainfall line, the small district type prevails.





TOTAL RURAL SCHOOL ENROLLMENT BY COUNTIES, 1946-47

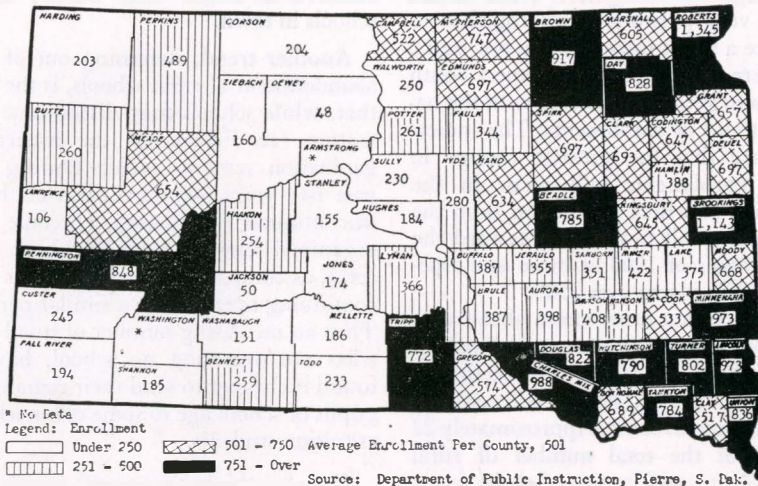


Fig. 8a. There was a total of 33,507 elementary common school pupils in 1946-47.

### RURAL SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS CONTINUE TO DECLINE

The common schools reached their peak enrollment in 1915 when they registered 85,145 pupils. By 1946-47 the number had dropped to 33,507 which is a loss of about 60 percent. In that year the total rural school enrollment of 33,507 amounted to an average of 501 pupils for each of the 67 counties. The distribution was not uniform, however, as might be expected, with the more densely populated rural counties having the largest total enrollments and the largest average per school.

The 16 counties in South Dakota which have a total of less than 250 rural pupils, the 17 counties with over 250 but less than 500 pupils, the 18 which fall in the grouping between 500 and 750 pupils, and the 15 counties which have over 750 pupils are shown in Figure 8a. This classification includes the rural children attending city and town schools as tuition pupils as well as those attending

rural schools within the county.

As yet, no one can quite foresee what the future may hold in rural school enrollments. The 1946-47 rural school census showed no significant upward swing or any trend away from the declining one which began in 1931. Only 14 counties showed more than 10 pupils increase for the year, while 35 counties showed a decline of more than 10 pupils.

There has been some speculation as to the significance of the recent upward spurt in the birth rate generally attributed to the "war boom" in marriage. Admittedly there was an increase in births during and immediately after World War II, and the results of that increase will soon be temporarily enlarging the enrollments in the primary grades. There has also been the fact to reckon with, that more than the usual number of our elderly farm operators are now retiring and younger couples, with children of pre-

school age, are taking over. These factors could, very possibly, work together to produce a slight increase for a few years, but there is little reason to expect South Dakota to get far out of step with the national trend of enrollments. The indications are that the greatest change in school enrollments will occur in the transition of school population from the farm and small town areas, toward the larger towns of 1000 or more and especially urban places over 2500.

An important crisis looms ahead as to what will happen in the rural school situation. It seems certain the decline in the number of rural schools will continue for sometime to come. Approximately 22 percent of the total number of rural schools have enrollments of six or fewer pupils. (See Figure 2b.) It is not economically sound to continue the operation of the small enrollment school with resultant high per capita costs in view of improved transportation facilities, which have materially reduced both the cost and the inconvenience of sending the

children to larger rural schools or to schools in town.

Another trend, stemming out of the abandonment of rural schools, is the fact that, while schools may discontinue operation, (see Figure 8b), the district organization remains intact. During the past five years, only five districts have discontinued functioning, (become unorganized territory without school officers), as compared with 350 schools discontinuing operation in a similar period. Thus an increasing number of small districts are operating no school, having found it cheaper to send their remaining pupils of school age to some other school as tuition students.

Thus far, this happens most frequently where the abandoned school is from three to six miles from town, where the transportation problem is relatively simple, but it is expected that this arrangement will be extended farther as confidence in school bus transportation is gained through experience.

### ENCOURAGE COUNTRY SCHOOLS TO MERGE INTO NATURAL COMMUNITY SYSTEMS WHEREVER PRACTICABLE

Regardless of what plans are suggested for the reorganization of public, rural or town school systems, a definite and logical trend is already well underway towards what might be called the formation of community school attendance areas.

This trend has risen from the closing of rural schools and sending the children as tuition students to independent or consolidated graded schools. This has become so general over the state that there are not many town schools with accredited high schools that do not have an increasing number of rural tuition students. (See Figure 7b.)

This process began among older rural students attending high schools located in towns. (See Figure 9a.) Since it is not practicable for rural districts to maintain high school departments, the trend has definitely been toward town operated schools. These are usually in larger centers where enrollments are at least 100 pupils or more. Such schools offer a richer curriculum with such courses as: agriculture, home economics, music, art, industrial arts, and physical education. This curriculum calls for a larger faculty and an enrollment of both town and country pupils.



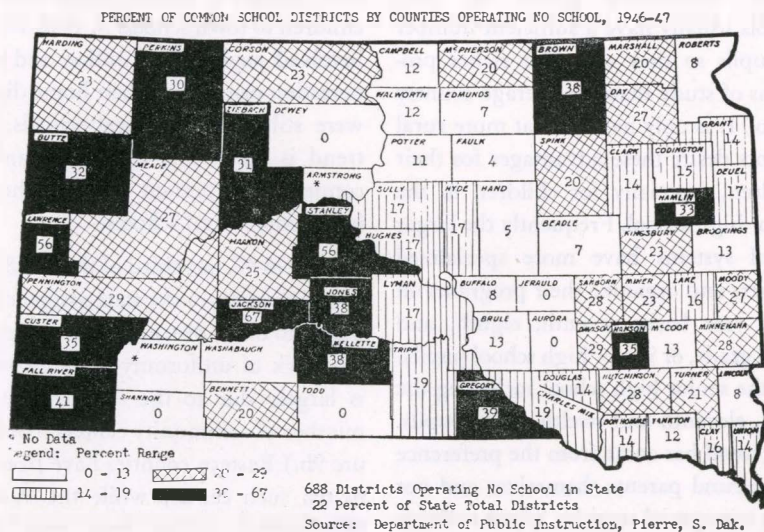


Fig. 8b. The highest percent of common school districts operating no school in 1946-47 are closely related to Fig. 2a, Fig. 2b, Fig. 4a, Fig. 5b, Figs. 6a and 6b, Figs. 8a and 8b, and Figs. 9a and 9b.

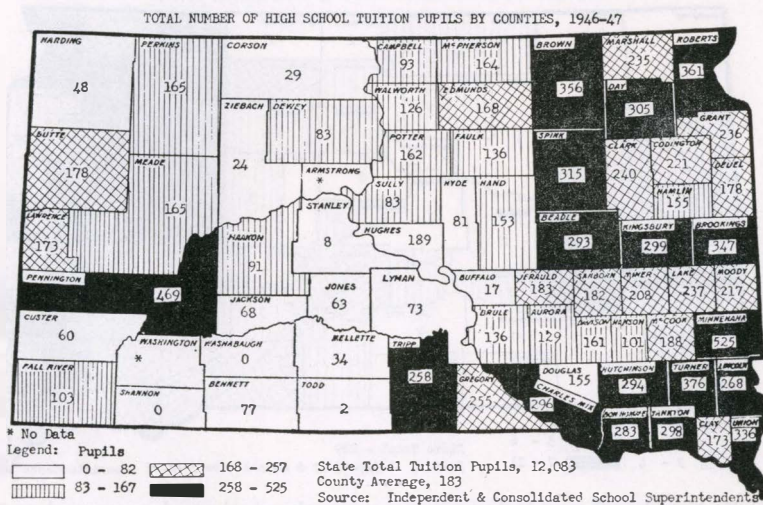


Fig. 9a. The main problems in connection with both elementary and high school tuition pupils attending other schools lie in the lack of transportation and adequate dormitory facilities.

The elementary grades of such schools usually have a sufficient number of pupils so they can offer richer programs of study than the average country school. It is only natural that more rural parents desire these advantages for their children, especially for children in the junior high school. Frequently the larger school systems have more specialized teachers and organize their programs on a six year basis: seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, or junior high school pupils, and the senior high school including the tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade pupils. This trend has come from the preference of the rural parents themselves and not from any special urge by school authorities. Questionnaires show that over 400

rural parents in South Dakota sent their children to town schools in 1946-47. This involved paying both tuition and transportation privately as their home districts were still operating local schools. This trend is apparently increasing and becoming an important factor in the closing of more rural schools.

In 1946-47, one-third of the 3,068 rural school districts in the state assigned their pupils to other districts as tuition pupils. The lack of uniformity among counties is largely due to the difference in the number of community centers. (See Figure 9b.) Eastern counties have from five to ten such centers while the Western and Central counties have only one to four centers.

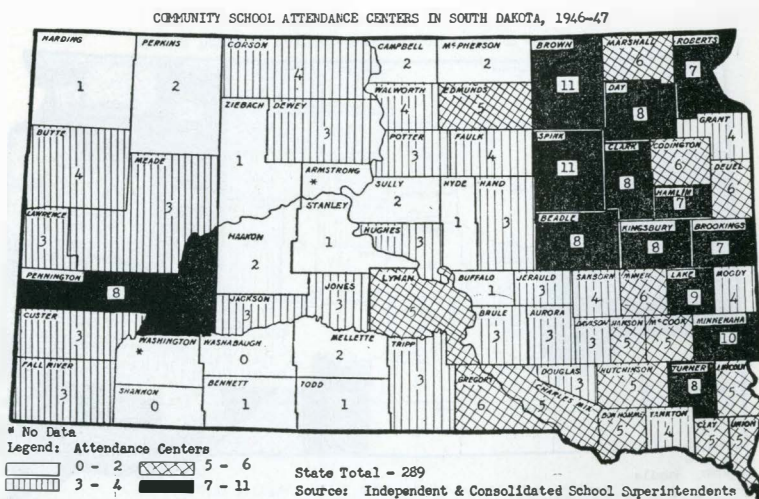


Fig. 9b. Note the difference in the number of community school attendance centers between the eastern, central and western counties of the state.

## REORGANIZE RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS INTO COUNTY UNITS WHERE DESIRED

A comprehensive movement towards the reorganization of rural school districts into fewer but larger units has been underway throughout the United States for the past 15 to 20 years. The Middle West is one of the last regions of the country to undertake such a program. The states of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas are all sponsoring reorganization campaigns. Most of these states have already had state surveys made and have submitted recommendations for the approval of their respective legislatures. In most instances, they have some plan of action underway, frequently on a county basis.

Most of South Dakota's professional educational association, co-operating with several other state agencies interested in education, have been surveying the possibilities of a permissive reorganization act for this state. In order to introduce the subject for consideration in the various counties, a permissive educational bill for the reorganizing of school districts into county units has been prepared and sponsored by the South Dakota Educational Association and the State Committee for Education.

Research in the above mentioned states, reveals that two general plans of reorganization are recommended, depending on the circumstances of the respective areas concerned. Both are on a permissive basis with the merits of each to be decided by each county as it sees fit.

Plan (1) is to combine several rural districts into a community district, (see Figure 10a), usually with a town as its center. Such a district would be somewhat comparable to the trade territory surrounding a village or town. It could

be either an independent district including agricultural land, or a consolidated district of both town and country areas. Each district would maintain at least one graded elementary school and a four year high school.

Plan (2) would be for the establishment of county districts, organized so that anyone of two possible variations would be effective, depending on the local situation. The basic variation of this plan would be to combine all rural districts into one county unit, which would operate in a manner similar to a common school district except that it would be county wide in scope. (See Figure 10b.) There would be one board of education made up of five members. The salary and legal qualifications of county superintendents would be higher than the present officers, but they would be elected as they are now on the non-political ballot. The county superintendent would cooperate with one county board rather than a larger number of district boards of education. The county superintendent would recommend teachers for election by the county board. Detailed county studies show that by relocating rural schools so as to serve larger areas, a number of schools could be eliminated without impairing the general quality of training.

A second type of county district would include all rural districts as a basis and all or some of the city and town districts within the county. Such a district would thus include all elementary and secondary schools in the county except perhaps an occasional large city system.

So far, the committee working on the proposed plan for South Dakota favors



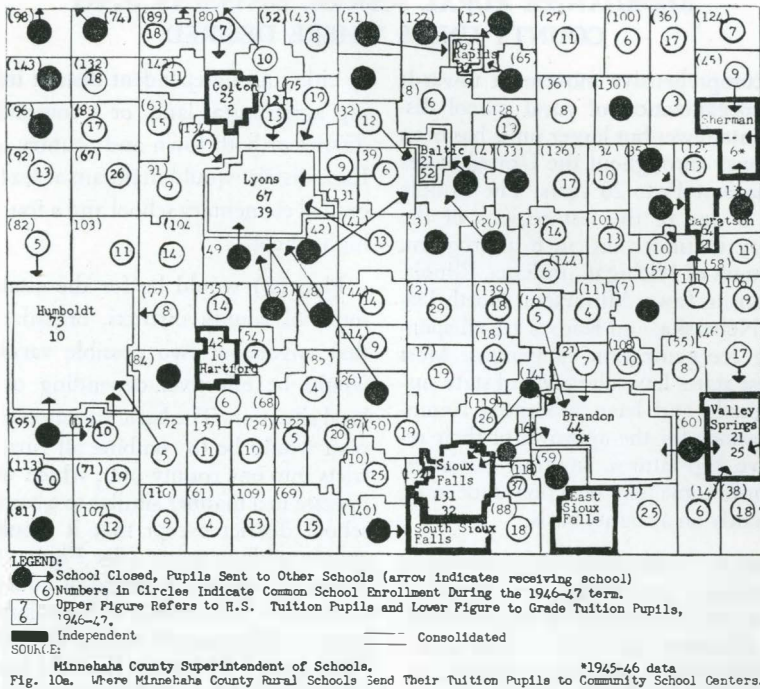


Fig. 10a. Where Minnehaha County rural schools send their elementary tuition pupils to community school centers.

plan (1). This plan would be especially adaptable to many counties in South Dakota. Where there is but one fair sized town in the county, its high school would operate as the county high school.

In large counties, with only fair roads, it would probably be necessary to maintain a dormitory for high school students rather than depend on daily transportation.

### EQUALIZE LOCAL SCHOOL SUPPORT BY A COUNTY LEVY

One of the greatest problems among local rural districts, with their widely varying financial resources, is the equalization of educational opportunities for their children of school age. The key to the solution of this problem lies in administrative units, or districts, larger than a neighborhood, township, or even

several townships. For rural areas, where the assessable property consists almost entirely of agricultural lands, the most logical administrative district would seem to be the county. Between 800 and 900 such county districts have already been established among approximately 3,000 counties in the 48 states. This type

of unit is apparently growing more popular as it makes possible many advantages not possible under the small district system.

One of the greatest advantages of the

county district is that it equalizes educational opportunities within the county. (See Figure 11a.) This becomes possible through a uniform levy similar to the present county high school tuition law

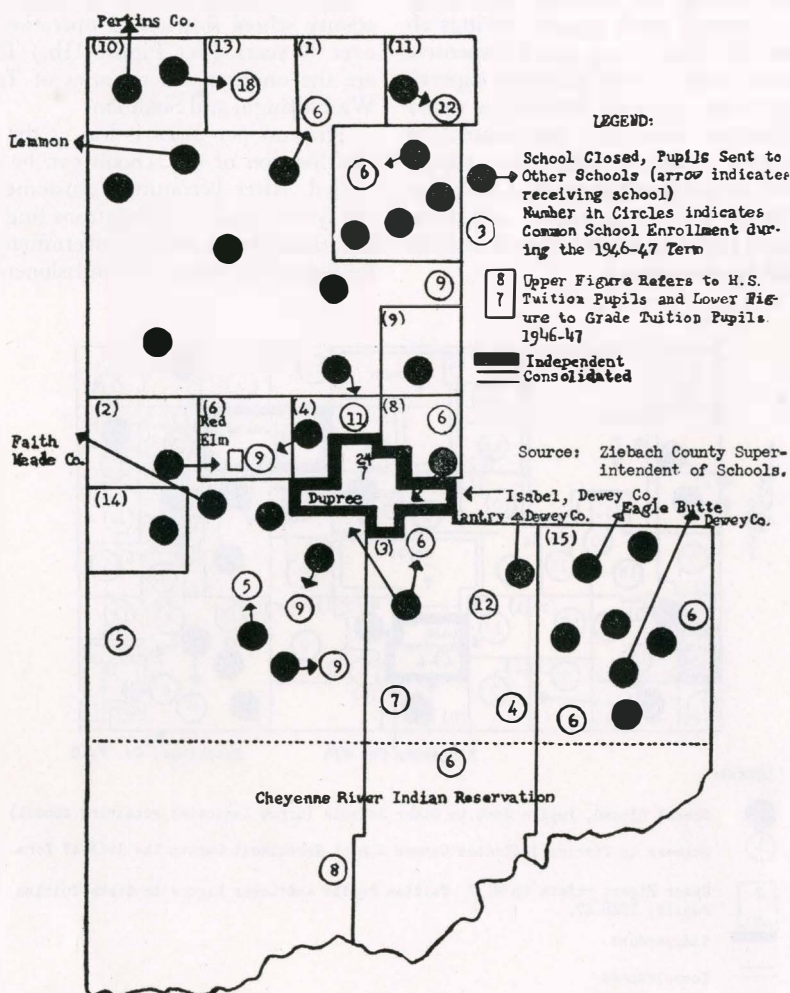


Fig. 10b. Ziebach County, with only one town high school and with so many of its common schools closed, could well consider reorganization on a county district basis.

previously referred to. In this manner all rural schools of the county would be treated alike with regard to provisions for instruction, equipment, transportation, and related needs. Larger schools could be maintained at the most logical points by combining the personnel and facilities of several small schools. Savings effected by eliminating small expensive schools could be used for better supervision, better qualified teachers, a richer curriculum, expanded extra-curricular activities, a more thoroughgoing county health program, efficient use of the county library plan, an improved and co-ordinated highway service, as well as additional improvements.

Each of the two proposed types of school district organizations would be a decided improvement in most instances. Each has areas in the state where it would be most applicable. The choice would lie in combination of local circumstances and conditions.

South Dakota has had at least three county school districts in operation for over 30 years. (See Figure 11b.) These are the unorganized counties of Todd, Washabaugh, and Shannon.

The cost per pupil is less as the size and location of the schools can be controlled. After becoming accustomed to the system, local school patrons find it is as satisfactory as county government administered by county commissioners.

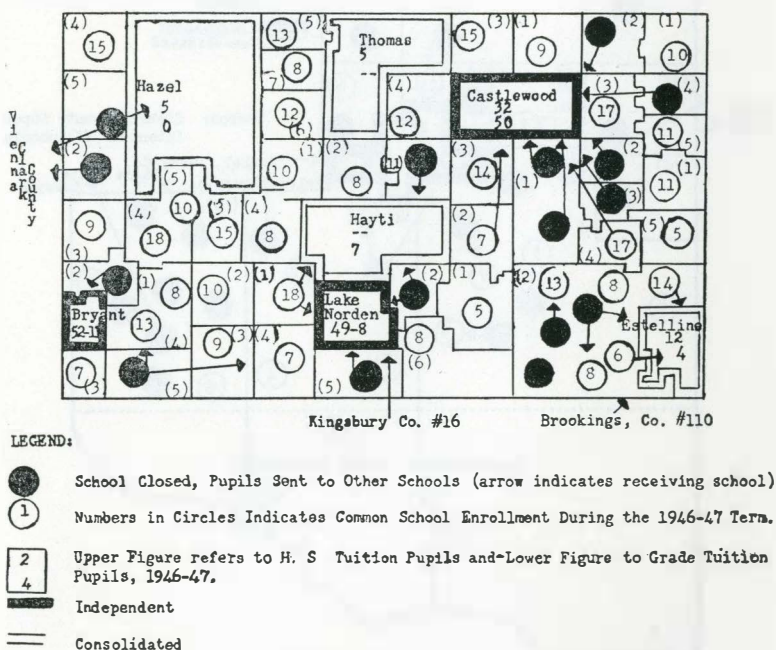


Fig. 11a. Hamlin common school districts are probably the best located with reference to community school attendance centers, of any county in South Dakota.



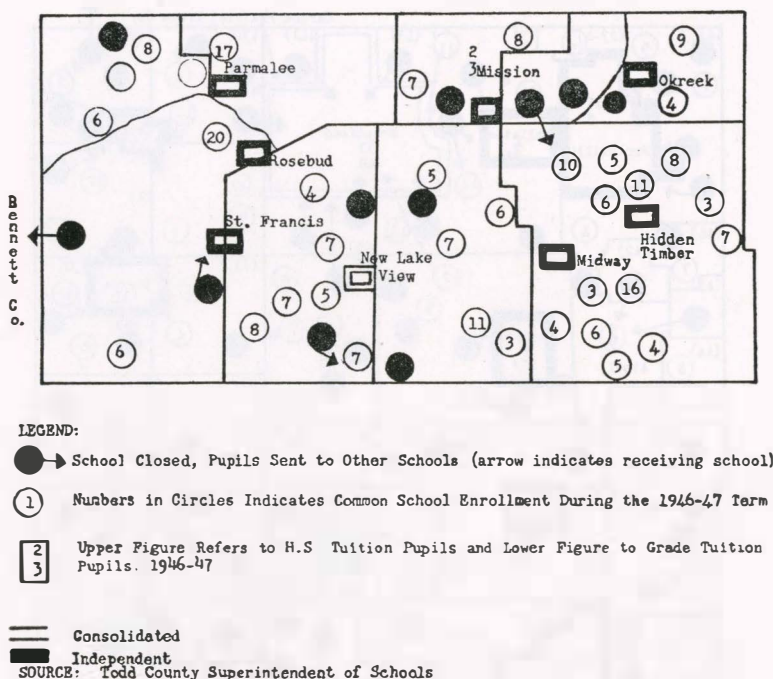


Fig. 11b. Todd County is one of three unorganized counties that, according to school law, must operate as county units both for elementary and high school purposes. They have a relatively low county levy.

### ADAPT SCHOOL SYSTEMS TO PRESENT DAY NEEDS

Many of South Dakota's rural school districts are operating inefficiently and a majority of the high school districts are in financial distress.

In tracing through the causes, results, and implications of the situation in this state, it should be remembered that the present system of common schools for the open country areas and the independent schools in the incorporated town and city areas were established during territorial days. Recent drastic changes in rural life have been so comprehensive as to change the entire school situation, practically forcing some type of reorganization.

Recent cultural changes have effected an unbalanced relationship between school districts with respect to educational responsibilities, population changes, and financial ability. These school district structures are now inadequate, due to legal limitations which were fixed in pioneer days. This situation is not peculiar to South Dakota. Nearly all of the Middle Western states are now in the midst of reorganizing their systems, mainly along the lines of fewer but larger school districts.

In most states, the procedure has been for the state legislature to enact legislation providing for the appointment of a

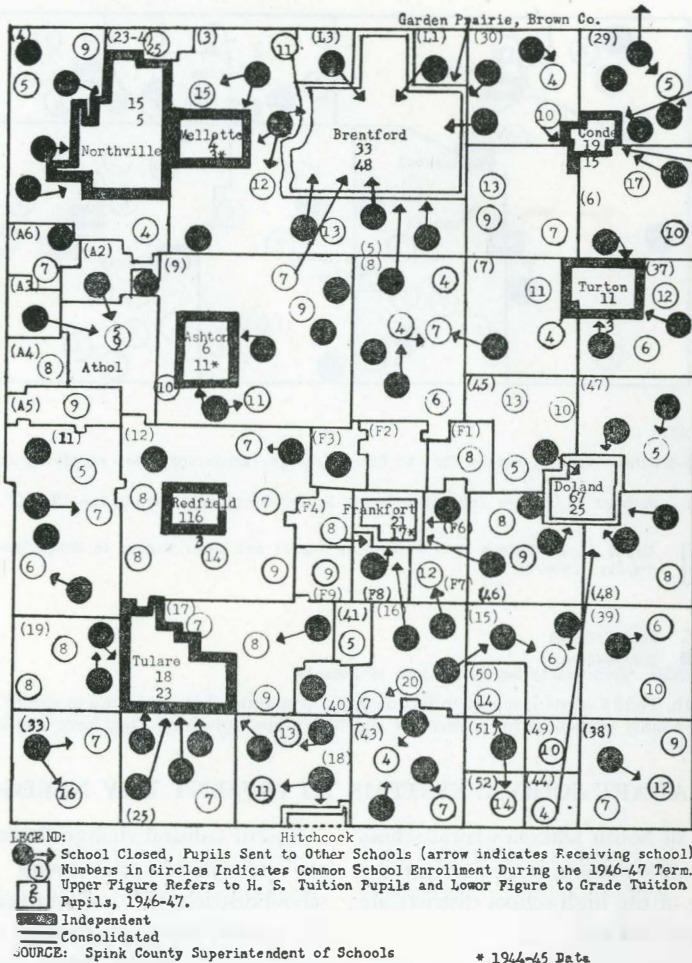


Fig. 12a. Spink County's most serious school problem lies in her eight small high schools with enrollments of fewer than 50 pupils each.

state commission to study the need for school district reorganization. Such a commission is charged with making a careful survey of the state situation as a whole, and with formulating a permissive standard plan of action to be used as a guide by each county in considering a solution of its individual problems.

The South Dakota Education Associa-

tion, in co-operation with several agencies in the state especially interested in education, has had a research commission working for the past three years on the problem. A suggestive county unit plan has been worked out by this commission which will be submitted to the 1949 legislature for that body's careful consideration. If the bill is passed, it

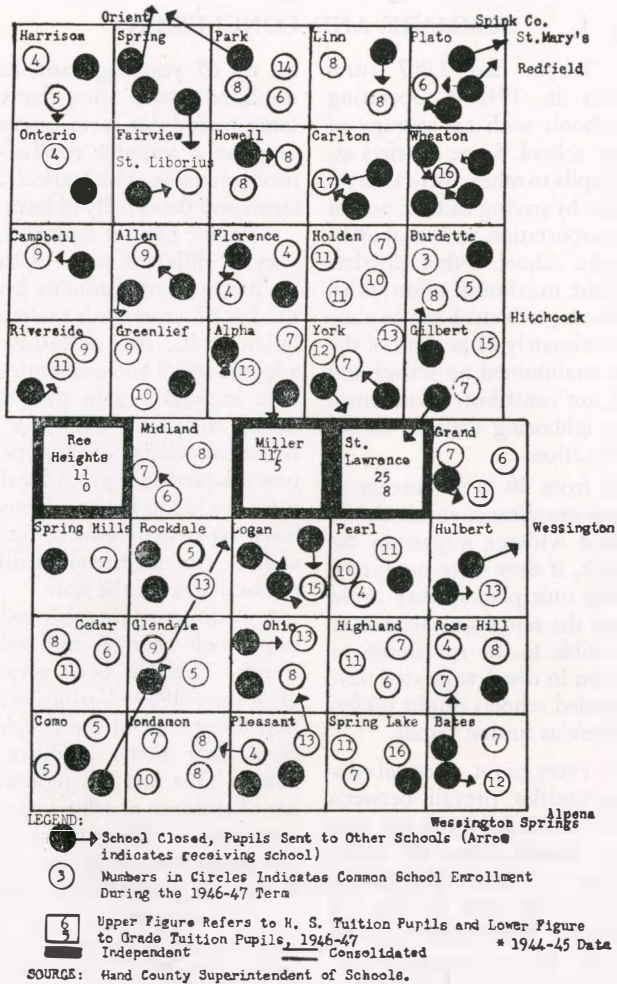


Fig. 12b. Hand County is fortunate in having a relatively new county library and county hospital. A county district high school could benefit greatly.

would enable each county through a local committee to survey its own situation. Should that committee then recommend action leading to some form of reorganization, the final decision would rest with the people of the areas concerned, who would be asked to vote on the plan recommended by the committee.

The proposal provides that common

school districts and unorganized territory in a county shall be the basis of the county district. Other types of districts maintaining high schools (cities and towns) may be included as a part of the county unit at a later date contingent upon a majority vote of all districts concerned.



**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

1. South Dakota had 3,067 rural school districts in 1945-46 operating 3,926 rural schools with an average of 10.3 pupils per school. Some districts assigned their pupils to other districts to reduce their costs, by paying tuition, and in some cases transportation, in lieu of operating their own school. Other districts had to make the maximum effort, with low tax valuations, to furnish inadequate schools. Approximately 22 percent of the rural districts maintained no school and therefore did not contribute commensurately with neighboring districts in the support of education.

2. Probably from 30 to 40 percent of the present low-enrollment rural schools could be closed without impairing the quality of work, if they were organized under a county unit plan so they could legally relocate the remaining schools to be more accessible to the maximum of people. Children in districts located near good town graded schools might preferably be sent there as tuition pupils.

3. On nearly every count, unequal educational opportunities prevail between counties so far as rural schools are concerned. Rural schools reflect the influence of rainfall and other natural resources more directly than do the city and town schools. This is shown, with some exceptions, by comparing the assessed property valuation per school child and the average farm family living index by counties in the state.

4. Surveys reveal that reorganization of the rural schools, and small high schools is urgently needed. There are numerous evidences of considerable wastage in the expenditure of the educational dollar for rural schools. This applies to their administrative, financial, and instructional functions. The pattern for the common schools of the state was

set up 65 years ago and has not been modified greatly since that time. In the same period our farm economy has undergone a veritable revolution through mechanization which affected the size of farms and the density of farm population.

5. While natural resources will always vary in different parts of the state, adjustments have gradually been made in the last 65 years with reference to population shifts, size of farms, and better adapted social and economic institutions. One important gain that has emerged during the past two or three decades is a better knowledge of the type of farming best adapted to a given locality. This in turn has led to better adapted crop varieties, types of livestock, weed and pest control, etc., for the eight different agricultural areas of the state.

6. A direct relationship exists between population changes and school census trends. This has been greatly accentuated since 1930. Various studies reveal that 65 percent of the people migrating from their home localities are young adults. This fact has reduced the number of children of school age in the rural areas and in like manner has increased the proportion of oldsters, 65 and over, in both the farm and small town areas.

7. The number of rural schools in the state has been reduced by 45 percent since 1890. This downward trend was first evident in 1931. From an overall viewpoint the closed-school movement should be looked at as an adjustment process. The present 10.3 average rural school enrollment is the lowest among the 48 states.

8. How long will rural school enrollments continue to decline? It is difficult to say, as the trend is a national one which apparently stems out of a number of combined causes. The one-time farm neighborhood is gradually breaking

down due to new modes of transportation and increased mobility. A surprising number of South Dakota farm families feel that the rural school is becoming outmoded in the light of new developments in education and, therefore, send their children to town schools, frequently at their own expense.

9. In the proposed solutions for the major rural school problems of the state, the most important step is to have a local lay committee make a survey of its county school situation. If this is done carefully, and a written report with recommendations is submitted to the voters of the county, something constructive is almost certain to follow.

It is not likely that a large proportion of the 67 counties will want to reorganize their rural districts into a county unit at once. This is why the proposed bill is permissive only, and enables the counties to act when they feel that the time is ripe. There are, however, about 18 counties in which the rural school enrollment is less than 250 pupils. Under such circumstances it would be a more efficient and economical administration if the entire county were treated as a unit.

10. A rapidly growing trend is already underway for small rural schools to close. The children are sent to nearby town schools as tuition pupils. This plan is en-

tirely workable where families live within five to eight miles from a good graded town school. Several states have found that where the rural schools have fewer than 10 pupils it is cheaper to use the tuition method unless transportation is not practicable. As logically might be expected, the tuition method started with high school students. More recently it has included the elementary pupils in the same attendance area.

11. The wide variation in the ability of school districts to support education makes it advisable to equalize the responsibility through a county levy. If high school tuition payments can be equalized through the new county high school tuition law, it is only logical to presume that total schools costs may also be paid in the same manner.

12. One of the weakest aspects of our present rural school system is that the local district operates independently of the other rural districts in the county. Thus inequalities are perpetuated from year to year among the smaller and more inadequately financed districts. If rural districts in a county were included in a single unit, it would be possible to effect substantial savings which could be used in making definite improvements in supervision, curriculum, and personnel.