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# The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Fall River County

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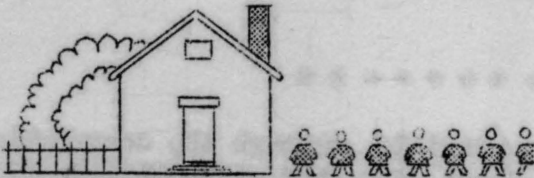
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in  
The Elementary Schools  
of  
Fall River County

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C. Scandrette



In 1920, 676 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Fall River county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 364

Each figure represents 100 pupils

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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 Fall River county leaders, by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution; as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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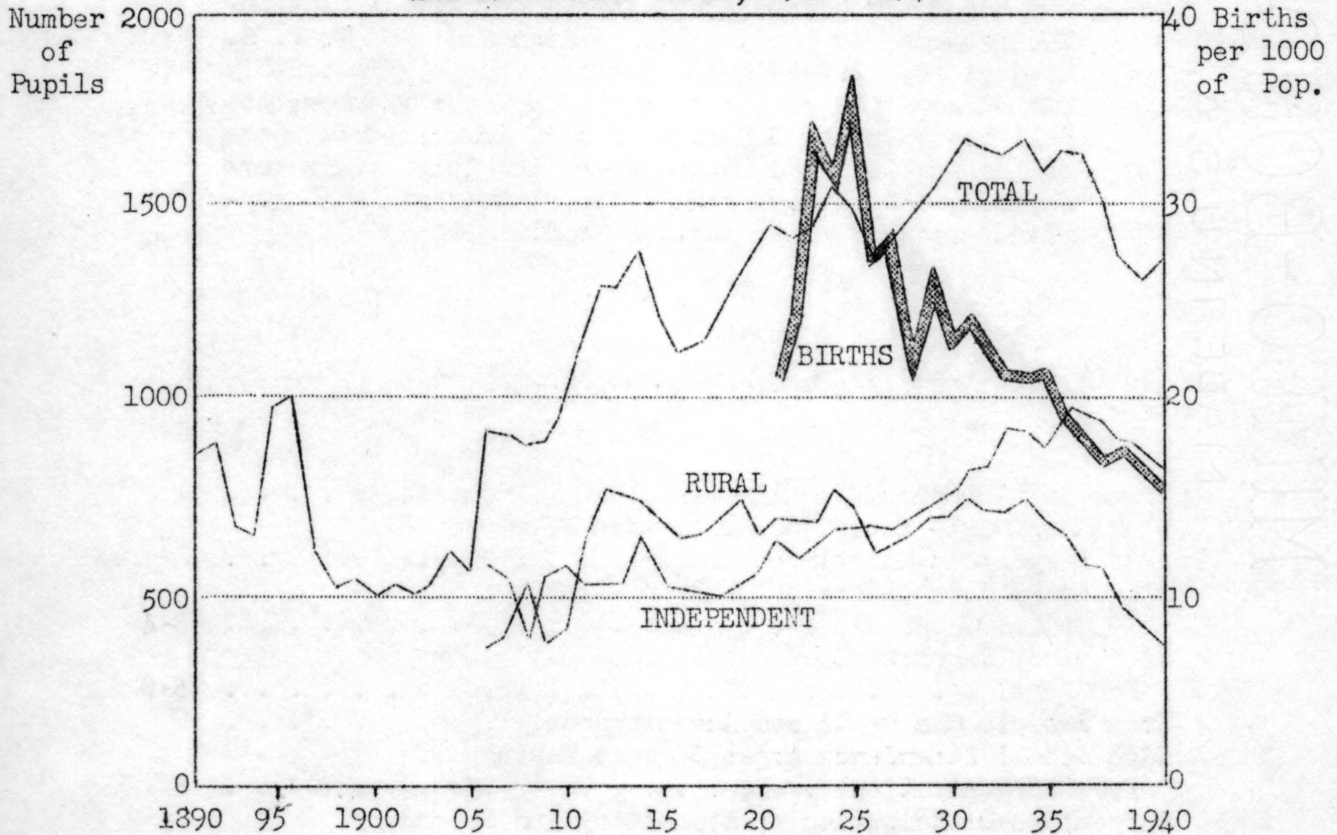
## The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Fall River County

Population experts have been predicting for a number of years that the downward trend of the birth rate will cause a serious decline in the elementary enrollment. The trend of elementary enrollments in Fall River is shown in Figure 1 (below). From 1890 to 1933 total elementary enrollments increased from 869 pupils to 1666 pupils, the county's largest enrollment. From 1933 the enrollment decreased to 1304 pupils in 1939. The 1940 enrollments show an increase to 1356 pupils. As Figure 1 indicates, rural schools show a decided decrease between 1930 and 1940. In the independent schools a slight decrease is evident between 1936 and 1940.

The trend in the Fall River county birth rate is also illustrated by Figure 1. Note that the birth rate shows a sharp decrease, which fact points out the relation between the birth rate and the declining enrollments. From the high point of 37.1 per 1,000 persons in 1924 the birth rate declined to 15.4 per 1,000 persons of the population in 1940.

The result of the downward tendency in the birth rate has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age.

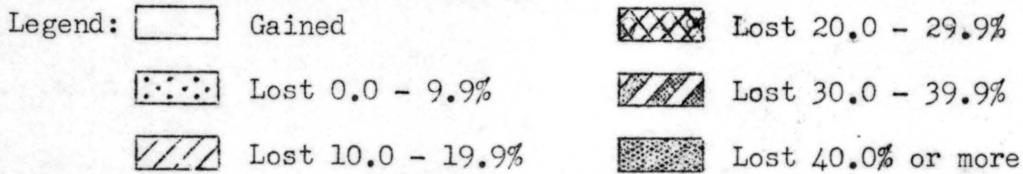
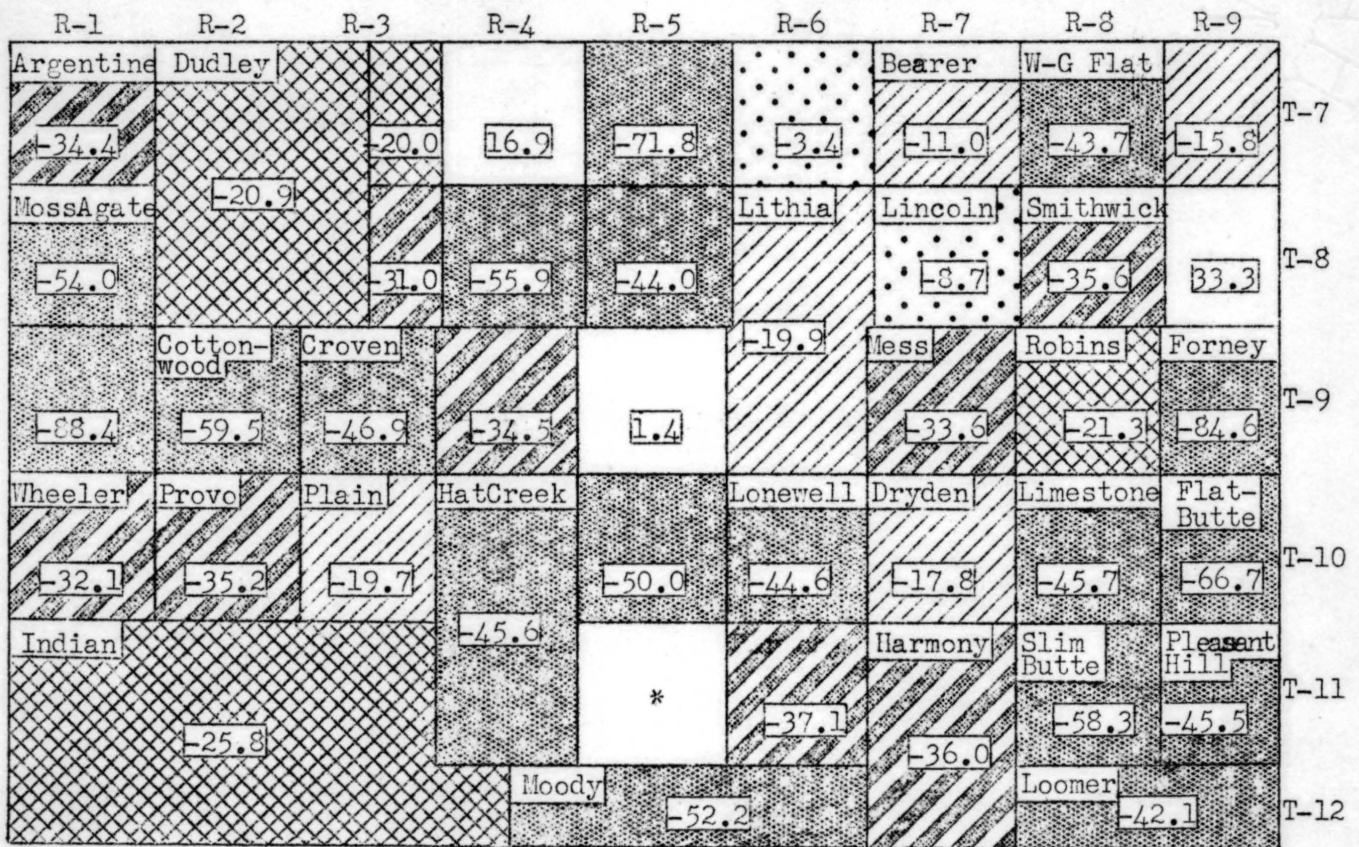
Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Fall River County, 1890-1940, And Birth Rate Trend, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health



Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Fall River County, 1930 - 1940



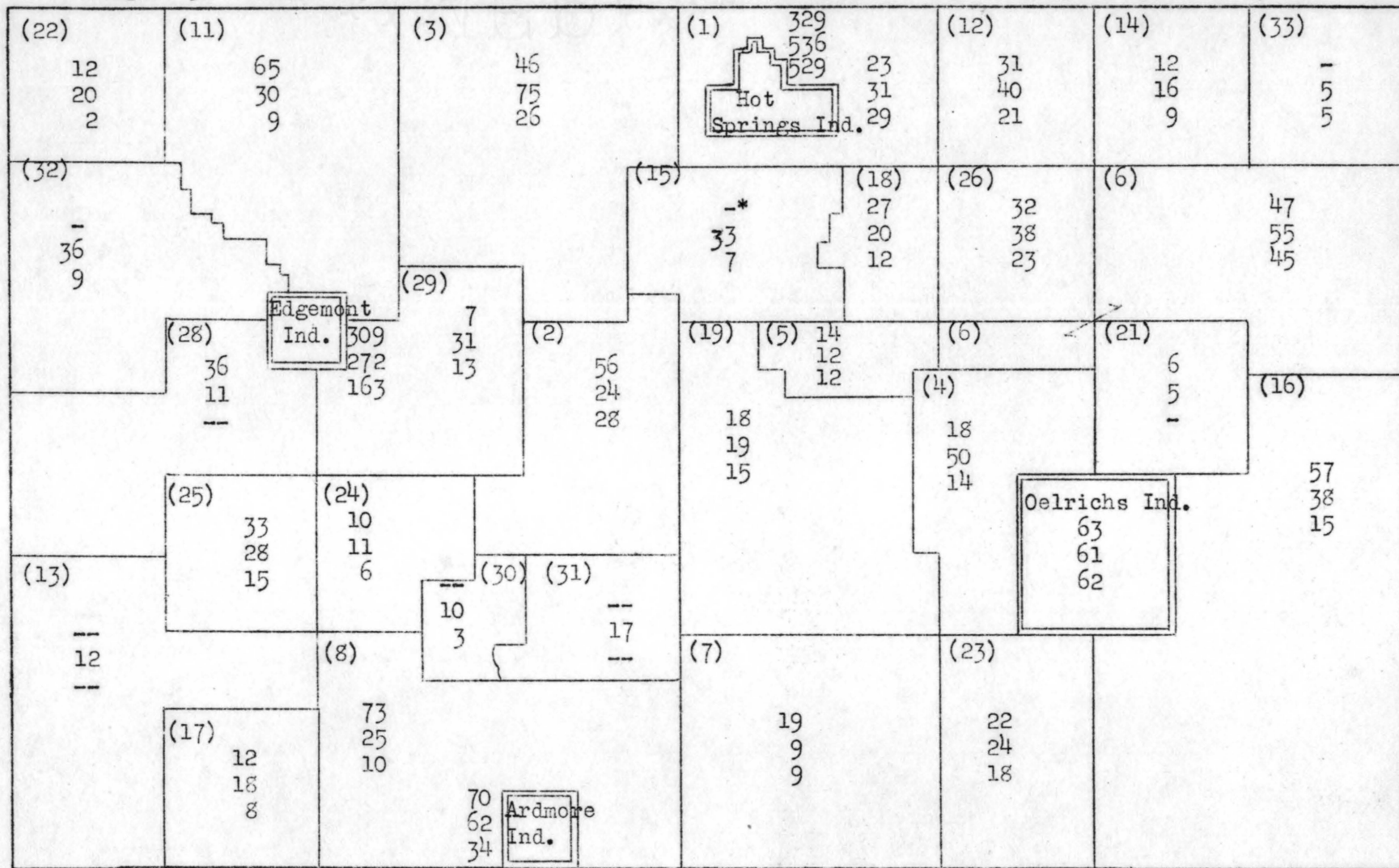
\* No records

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

Another important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2, which records the loss in population through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss for Fall River county was 7.5 percent, approximately the same as for the state, but less than that of most other counties. However, this decrease is closely related to rural enrollment decline, since the bulk of the loss was suffered by rural areas. Hot Springs, the county seat, experienced a population gain of 14.1 percent. That the brunt of the loss is suffered by the rural areas is a fact reflected in the greater decline in rural enrollments compared to urban enrollments.

Three townships in Fall River county gained in population during the 1930-40 period. In all other townships losses were general, ranging from 3.4 percent in T7-R6 to 71.8 percent in T7-R5. The direct relation between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the township which has the greatest loss in population, (Figures 2 and 3) has the greatest percent of decline in elementary enrollment.

Figure 3. Elementary Enrollments in Fall River County School Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940



Legend:

Top figure 1920 enrollment      Middle figure 1930 enrollment      Lower figure 1940 enrollment

( ) Indicates District Number      \* Included in District 2 in 1920

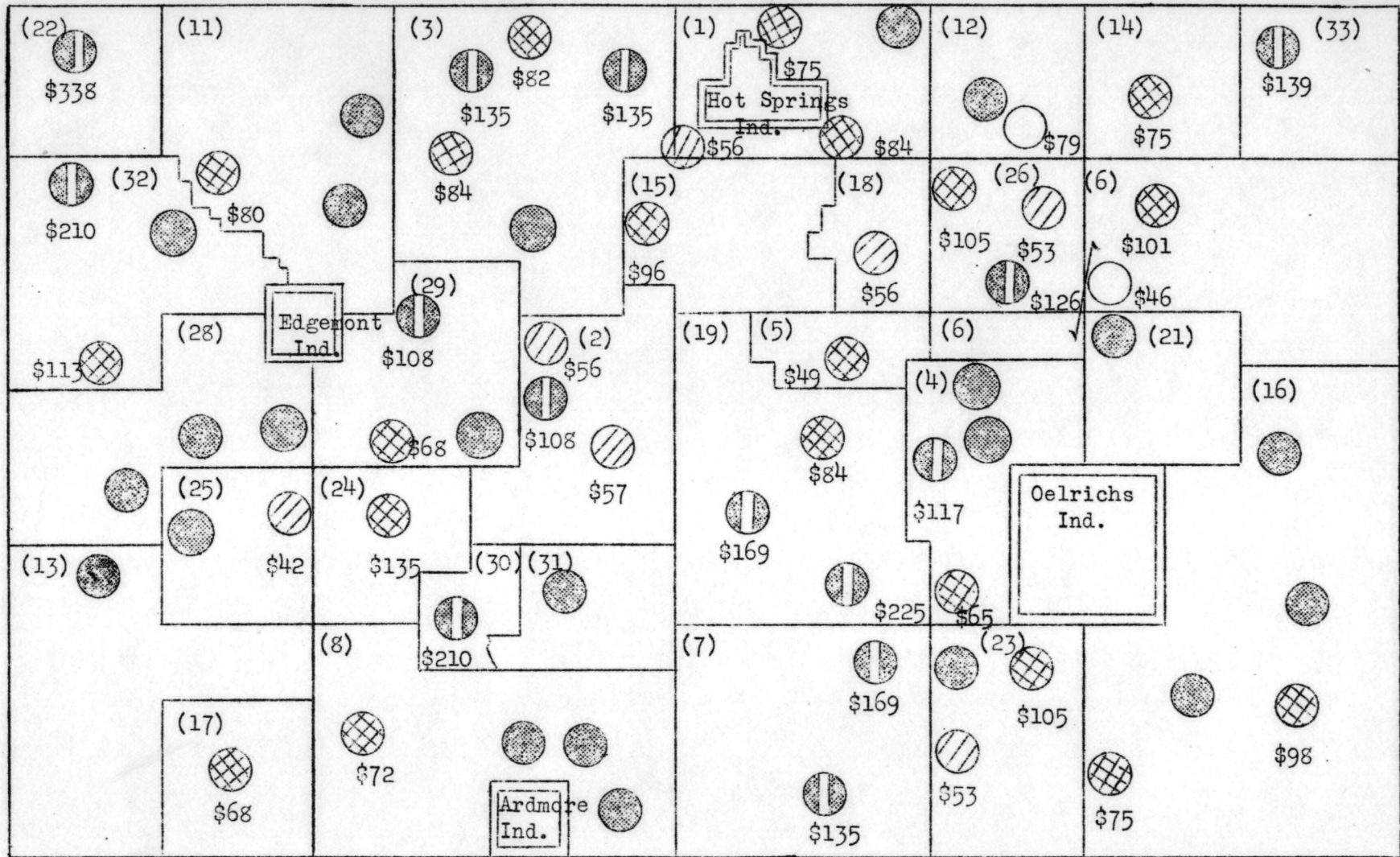
Source: Records of Fall River County Superintendent of Schools

Forty-three common schools were in operation in 1940 in 29 school districts of Fall River, in addition to the four independent districts of Hot Springs, Edgemont, Celrichs, and Ardmore.

Figure 3 lists the elementary school enrollments of each district for 1920, 1930 and 1940. These figures indicate the definite downward trend in elementary enrollments throughout the county. Enrollments dropped in all except three of the 29 districts between 1930 and 1940. Fourteen schools had an enrollment of five or fewer pupils in 1940, while only two schools enrolled 16 or more pupils. Thirty-three of the forty-three schools enrolled ten or fewer pupils. Total rural enrollments declined from 743 pupils in 1930 to 363 pupils in 1940. Further enrollment losses may be expected in the future, unless unforeseen population changes occur.



Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, Fall River County, 1940



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

Figures below circles represent cost per pupil      ( ) Indicates district number

Source: Records of Fall River County Superintendent of Schools, 1940



As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Fall River county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per-pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Fall River county ranged from \$42 in District 25 with 15 pupils enrolled to \$338 per pupil in District 22 with only 2 pupils enrolled in 1940.

Table 1 (below) indicates that the operation of schools for less than ten pupils is excessively expensive on a cost-per-pupil basis. Schools with five or fewer pupils illustrate this sharply. As mentioned above, the cost per pupil for one of the schools in this group reached \$338 as compared to the \$83.06 average for all schools. The average cost per pupil in the schools with five or fewer pupils enrolled was \$152.88 as compared to \$58.19, the average cost per pupil in schools with 16 or more pupils enrolled.

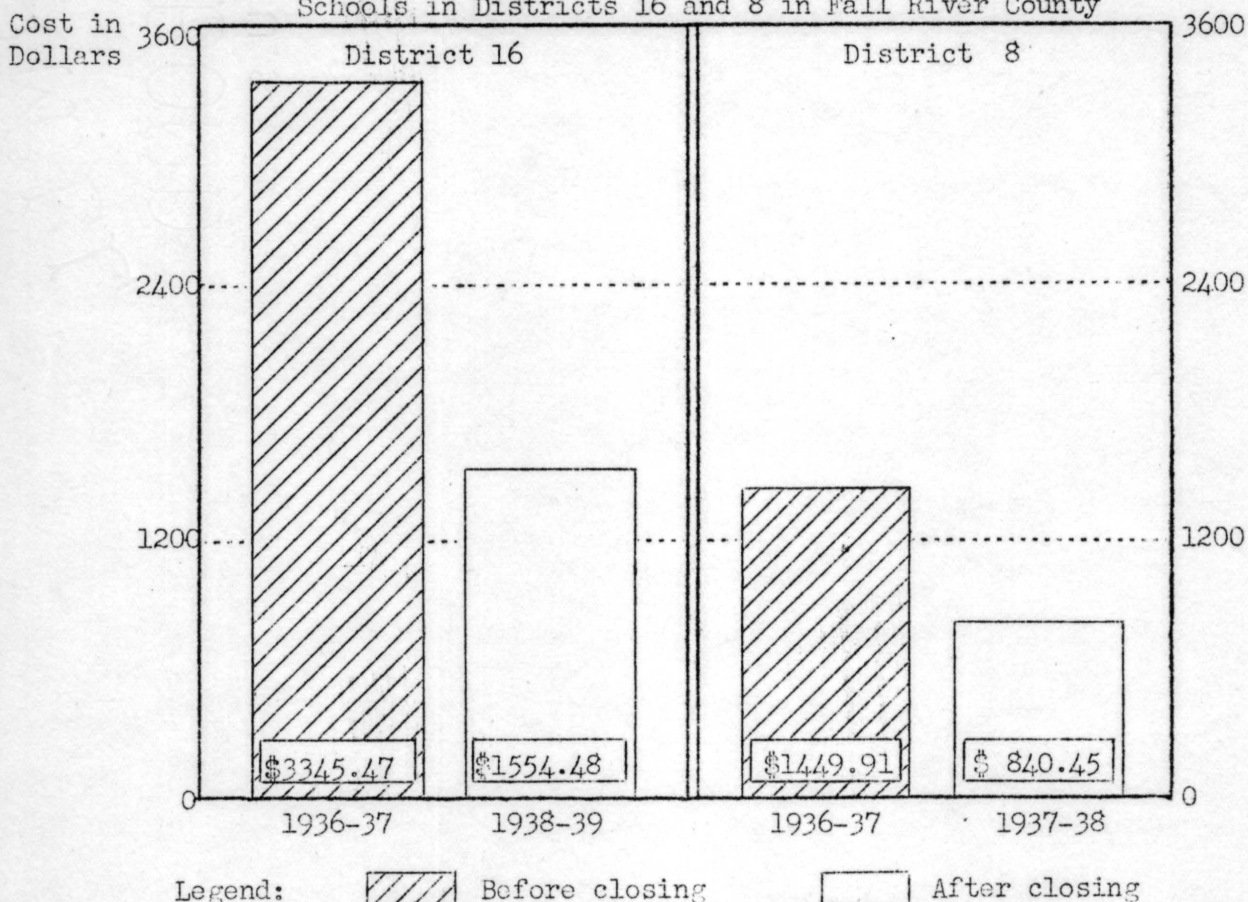
Table 1. Instructional Cost\* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Fall River County, 1940

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	66	363	\$30,150.00	\$83.06
Closed Schools	23	---	--	--
5 or fewer pupils	14	59	9,020.00	152.88
6 - 10 pupils	19	148	12,625.00	85.03
11 - 15 pupils	8	98	5,130.00	52.45
16 or more pupils	2	58	3,375.00	58.19

\* Based on teachers' salaries only

Source: Records of the Fall River County Superintendent of Schools.

Figure 5. Cost of Educating Pupils Before and After Closing Schools in Districts 16 and 8 in Fall River County



Source: Records of Fall River County Superintendent of Schools

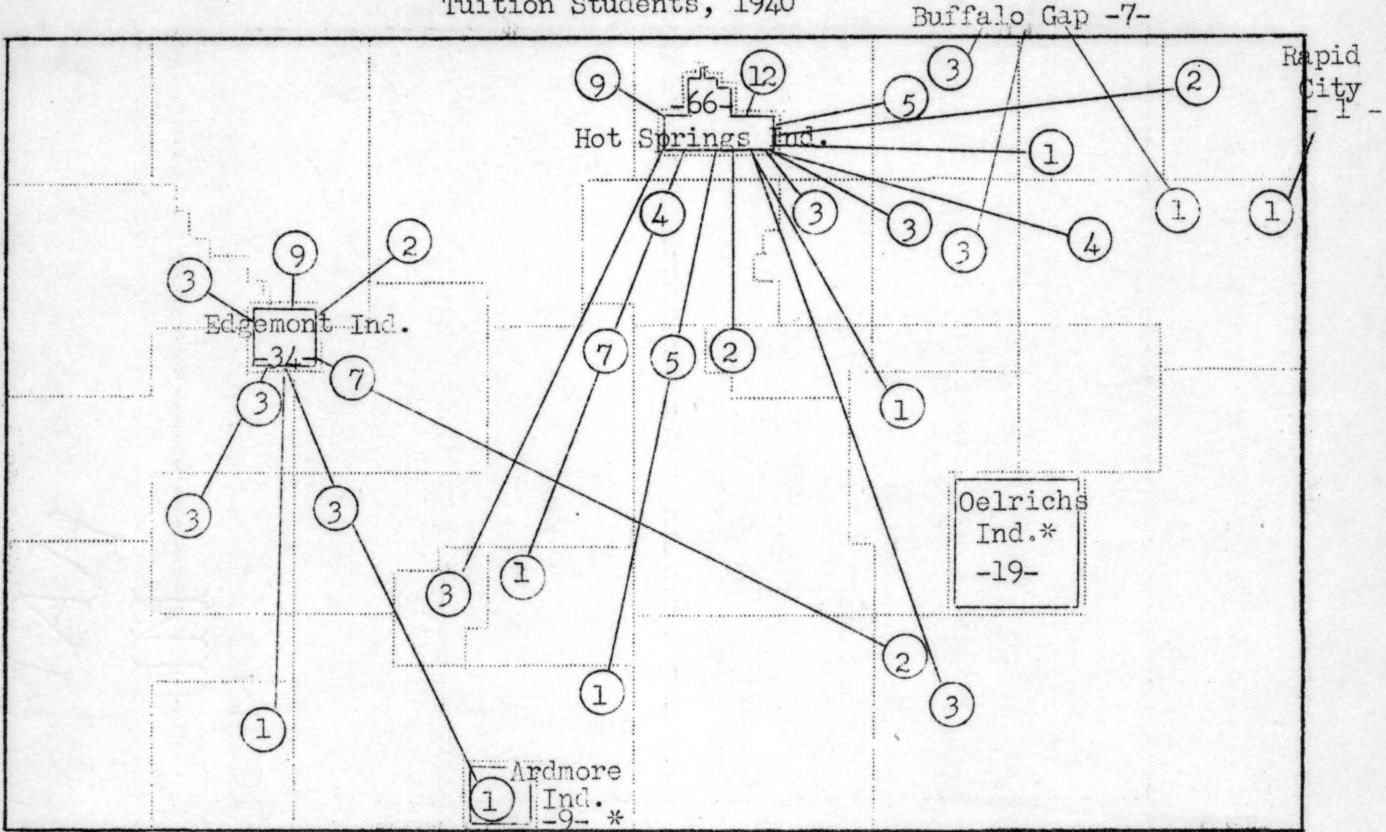
To reduce high per pupil costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools, during recent years, particularly those with diminishing enrollments.

During the 1936-37 school term, school operation costs for the five schools in District 16 totaled \$3,345.47. The following year four of these schools were closed and the pupils were sent to the open school with the district paying transportation of pupils where necessary. That year school operation costs to the district, including transportation, were \$1,554.48, a saving of \$1,790.99. A similar saving was made in District 8. During the 1936-37 school term operating costs for the two schools in this district were \$1,449.91, which dropped to \$840.45 the next year after closing one of the schools.

Since the cost per pupil increases and the educational efficiency decreases\*, as the number of pupils attending school declines, it seems practical both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

\* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to properly motivate students.

Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Fall River County Tuition Students, 1940



\* Records not obtainable

Legend: -0- Total number of tuition students      ○ Number of tuition students from each district

Source: Records of Fall River County High School Superintendents

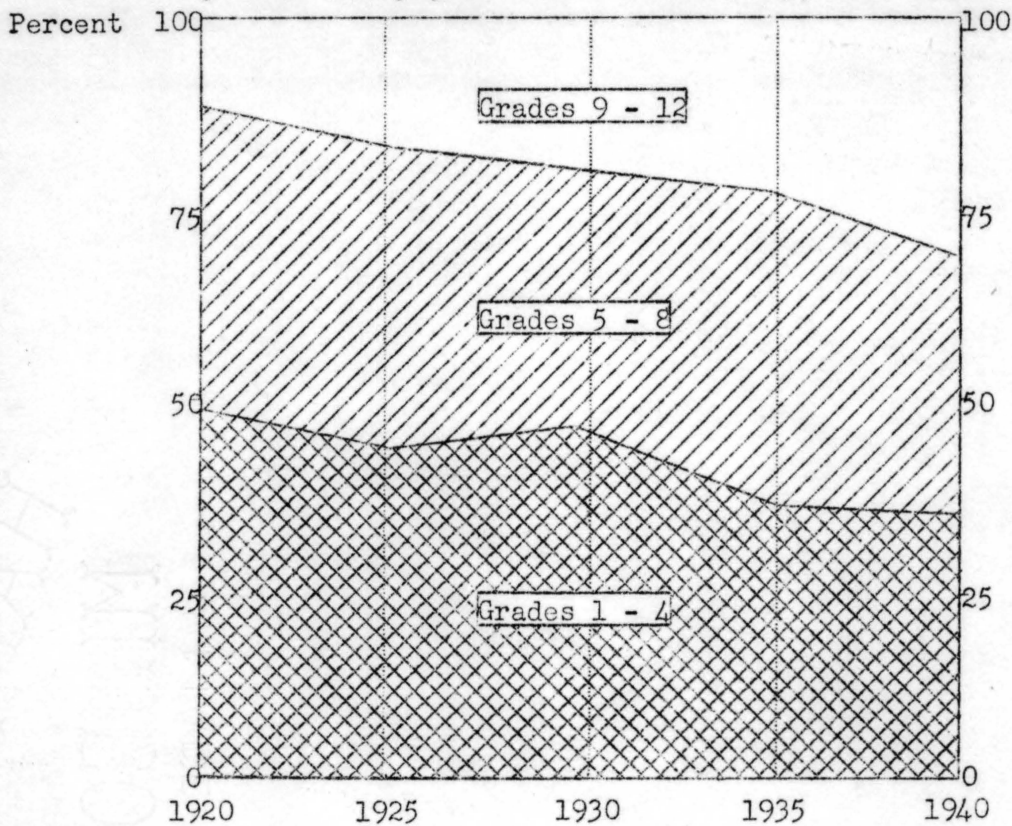
Since 1921, school districts in South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside of the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Fall River tuition students, numbering 129 in 1940. Of these students one attended the high school in Rapid City.

Realizing that the costs of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Fall River county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town or village centers. The adoption of a similar plan for elementary education seems practical, to some extent, as enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil to mount. Rural schools could be closed and the remaining pupils sent to village schools, with the home district paying the tuition and transportation costs. Where distance and lack of good roads make this course impractical the centralized school might be a solution. These plans would have the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the educational facilities of larger rural schools or of town schools.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in town or rural centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and of sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating.



Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments, By Grade Groups, in Fall River County, 1920-1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Fall River county shrank from 49.5 percent to 34.9 percent. The explanation of this trend may be found in the fact that birth rates have fallen since 1920. Consequently with each passing year there have been fewer and fewer pupils to enter the first grade. By 1940 eight and two-tenths percent of those entering school were first graders and 8.9 percent were eighth graders, whereas in 1920, 14.1 percent were first graders as compared to 11.6 percent eighth graders. (See Table 2). With the greatly reduced number of persons under six years of age, it is obvious that elementary enrollments will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate trend should be reversed.

Figure 7 also shows that the high school enrollment was nearly three times as large in 1940 as in 1920, increasing from 11.3 percent to 31.9 percent. It will be noted that the proportions for the three grade groupings are nearly equal in 1940. This trend may be explained by the fact that an increasingly greater proportion of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Grades, 1920 - 1940

Year	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	14.1	11.6	11.5	12.3	9.4	11.1	7.2	11.6	4.7	2.9	2.3	1.3
1925	11.6	10.8	10.3	9.5	10.6	10.1	10.8	9.1	7.5	4.3	3.1	2.3
1930	13.2	12.1	11.2	10.1	9.5	8.3	8.2	7.8	6.0	5.9	4.1	3.6
1935	10.4	8.5	8.5	8.8	10.0	10.0	10.5	10.4	6.8	6.0	5.3	4.8
1940	8.2	8.3	8.9	9.2	8.2	8.9	7.5	8.9	9.2	7.6	7.7	7.4

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

In at least one west river county a county-wide district plan is now in operation. Under such a 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.