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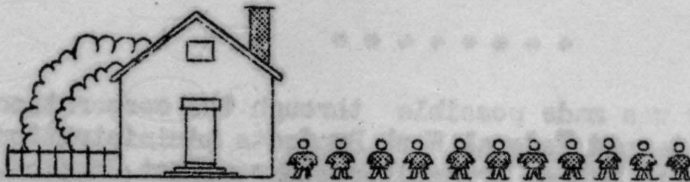
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools
of
Corson County

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Howard M. Sauer
C. Scandrette



In 1919, 1066 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Corson county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 444

Each figure represents 100 pupils

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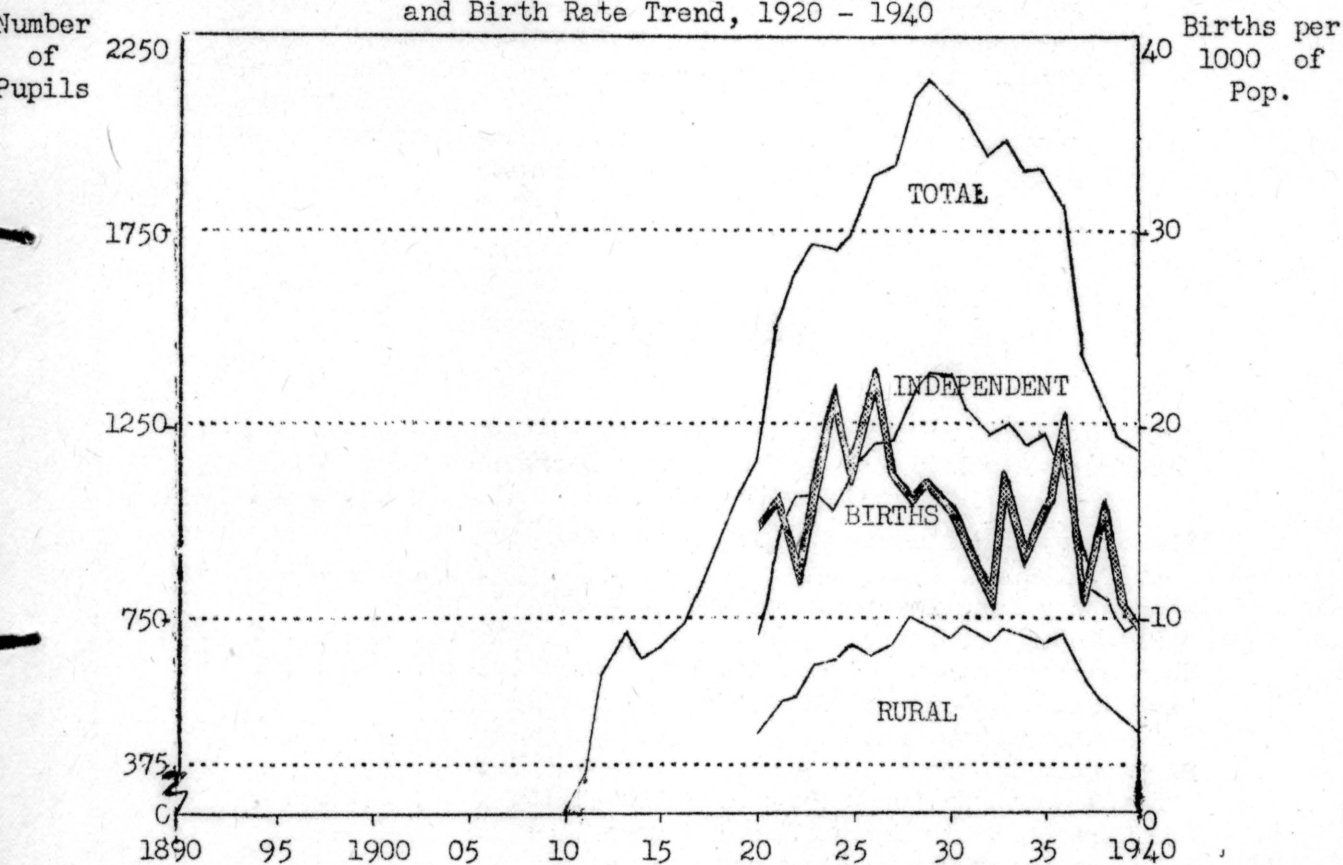
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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Corson County

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.

Figure 1 shows that the elementary enrollments of Corson county have fallen rather rapidly. After reaching a peak of 2,148 pupils in 1929 the enrollments began decreasing until in 1940 a total of 1,197 pupils were enrolled in the elementary schools, a decrease of 44.27 percent. The decrease was approximately the same for both rural and independent districts. The Independent districts of McLaughlin and McIntosh comprise about 700 square miles each; hence, all but one school in each of these districts are actually rural schools. While recent population losses through migration account for a part of the enrollment decline, the recent downward trend of the birth rate in Corson county is without doubt responsible for a part of the decline. Between 1920 and 1940 the birth rate fell from 20.0 per thousand of the population to 14.7 per thousand of the population. Since no immediate change in the birth rate trend is likely and since no immediate gains in immigration are in prospect, it is likely that there will be a steady decrease in elementary enrollments.

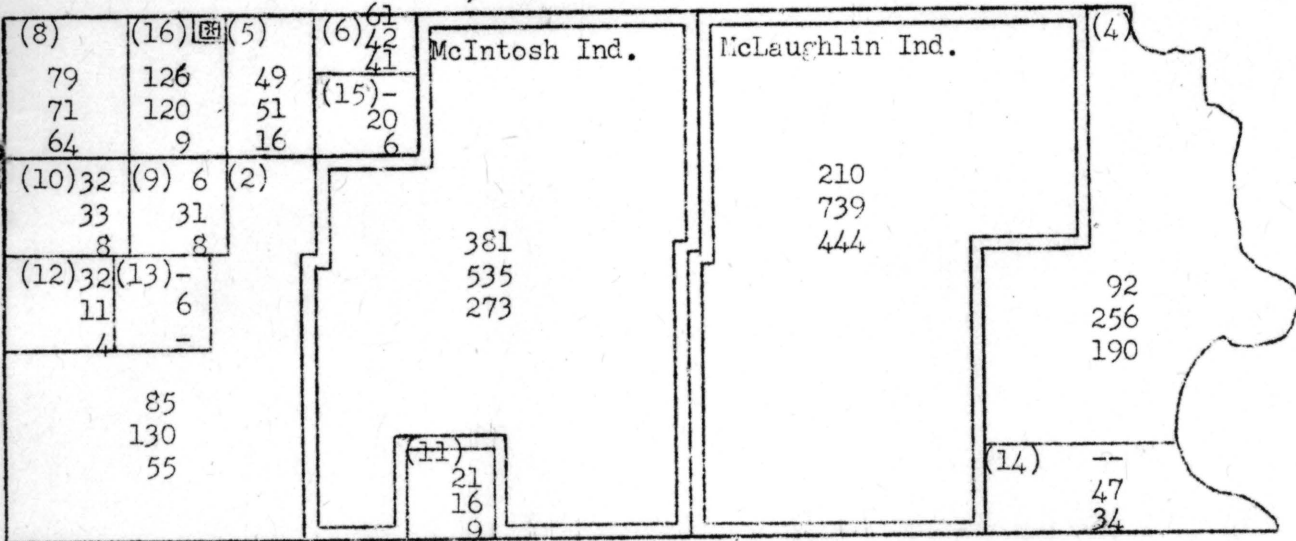
Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Corson County, 1910 - 1940, and Birth Rate Trend, 1920 - 1940



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

Another important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2, which records the loss of population through outward migration, 1930 - 1940. This loss was especially heavy in those counties where the drouth and consequent depression of this period were the most severe. In 1940 Corson county had lost 29.2 percent of its 1930 population. Wakpala township gained 3.5 percent in population during this period but throughout the remainder of the county decreases were generally large, with 27 townships showing a decrease of over 40 percent. Returns are incomplete for a number of the townships through the central part of the county but losses were also general throughout this area. In a comparative study of Figures 2 and 3 it will be noted that enrollments held up comparatively well in the eastern part of the county where population losses were smallest. Losses in enrollment were large throughout the remainder of the county where, as previously noted, population losses were great.

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollment in Corson County Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940



*Morristown Independent

Enrollments for 1920 and 1930 were included in the enrollments for district #16
The 1940 enrollment was 36

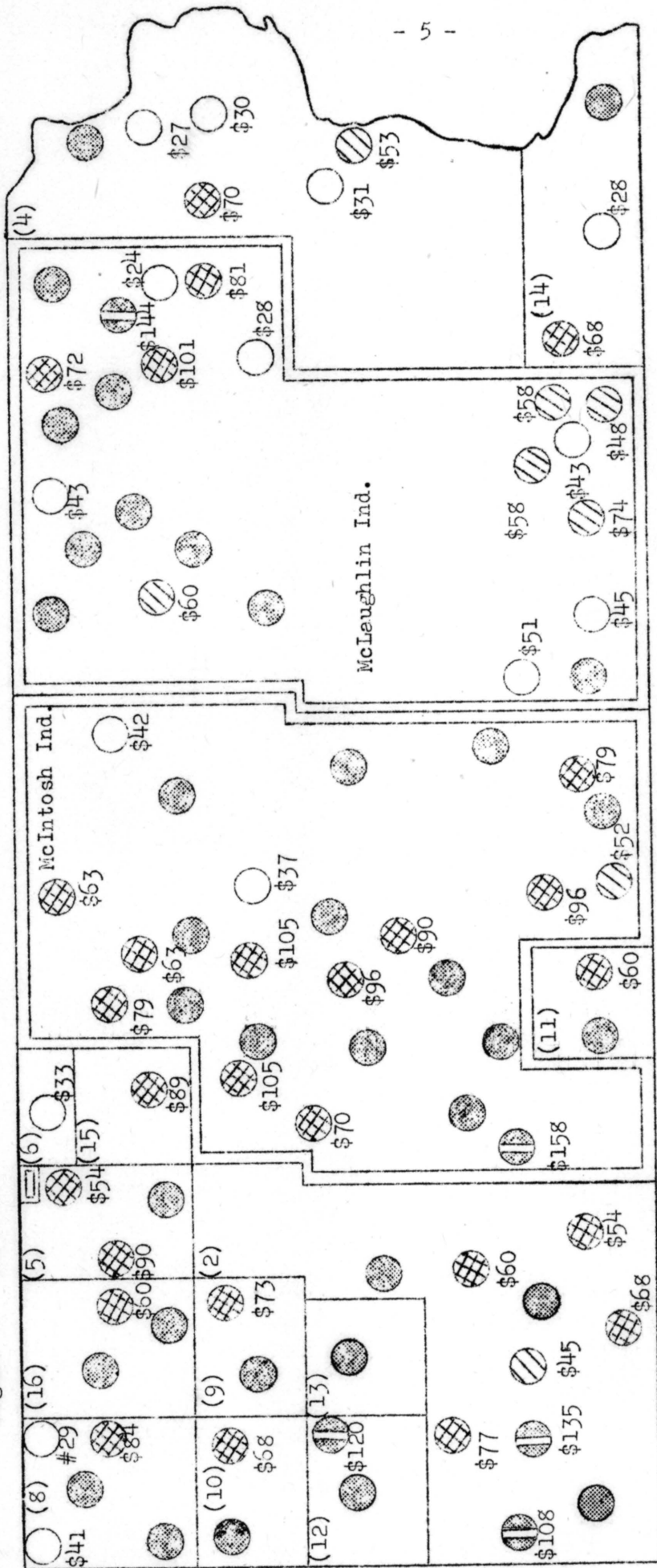
Legend: Top Figure 1920 Enrollments
Middle Figure 1930 Enrollments
Lower Figure 1940 Enrollments
() indicates district number

Source: Records of Corson County Superintendent of Schools

There were 26 schools in operation in thirteen common school districts in Corson county, in 1940. Of the three independent districts, two, McLaughlin and McIntosh, were very large, comprising approximately 700 square miles each. Twenty-nine rural schools were in operation in these two independent districts. These with the 26 common schools make a total of 55 rural schools in operation in Corson county in 1940.

Figure 3 lists the elementary enrollments of all school districts, independent and common, for 1920, 1930, and 1940. A definite downward trend is evident since enrollments dropped in all districts between 1930 and 1940. The total enrollment dropped from 2,108 pupils in 1930 to 1,197 pupils in 1940. The fact that there were 33 closed schools in the county in 1940 indicates that an endeavor has been made to meet this declining enrollment situation. There are still five schools in operation with five or fewer pupils enrolled and 27 schools with from six to ten pupils enrolled. While population losses from outward migration have reached their peak, further losses can be expected, due to the declining birth rate. Consequently, further enrollment losses may be expected in the future.

Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil By Size of School, In Corson County, 1940



As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Corson county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollments show the greatest per-pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Corson county ranged from \$24 in the Roosevelt school, McLaughlin District #3, which enrolled 34 pupils in 1940, to \$158 in the Neumiller school, McIntosh District #1, which enrolled only four pupils 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. This is especially true for schools having five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil in the schools having five or fewer pupils enrolled in 1940 was \$132.27 as compared to \$33.45, the average cost per pupil in schools having 16 or more pupils enrolled.

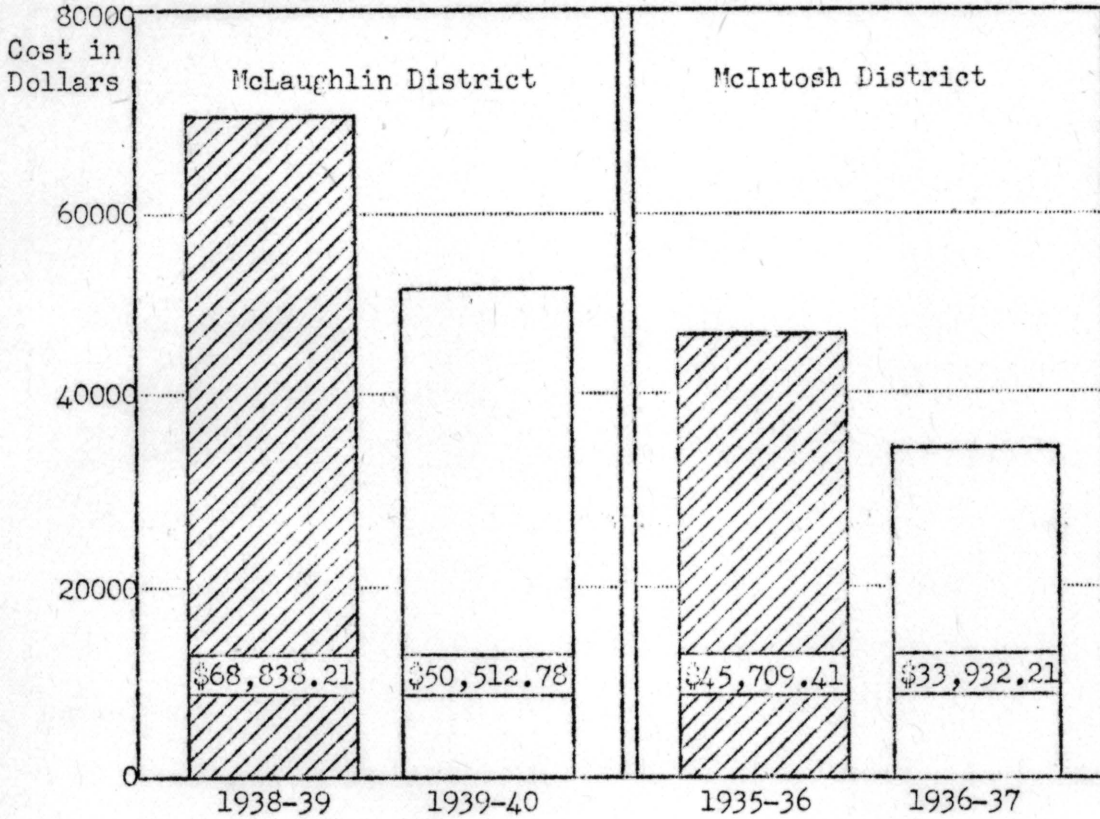
Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Corson County, 1940



Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	88	799	\$40,361.16	\$50.51
Closed schools	33	--	--	--
5 or fewer	5	22	2,010.00	132.27
6 - 10 pupils	27	221	16,596.66	75.10
11 - 15 pupils	8	102	5,670.00	55.59
16 or more pupils	15	454	15,184.50	33.45

* Based on Teachers' Salaries only

Source: Records of the Corson County Superintendent of Schools

Figure 5. Cost of Educating Pupils Before and After Closing Schools in McLaughlin and McIntosh Districts in Corson County



Legend:  Before closing  After closing

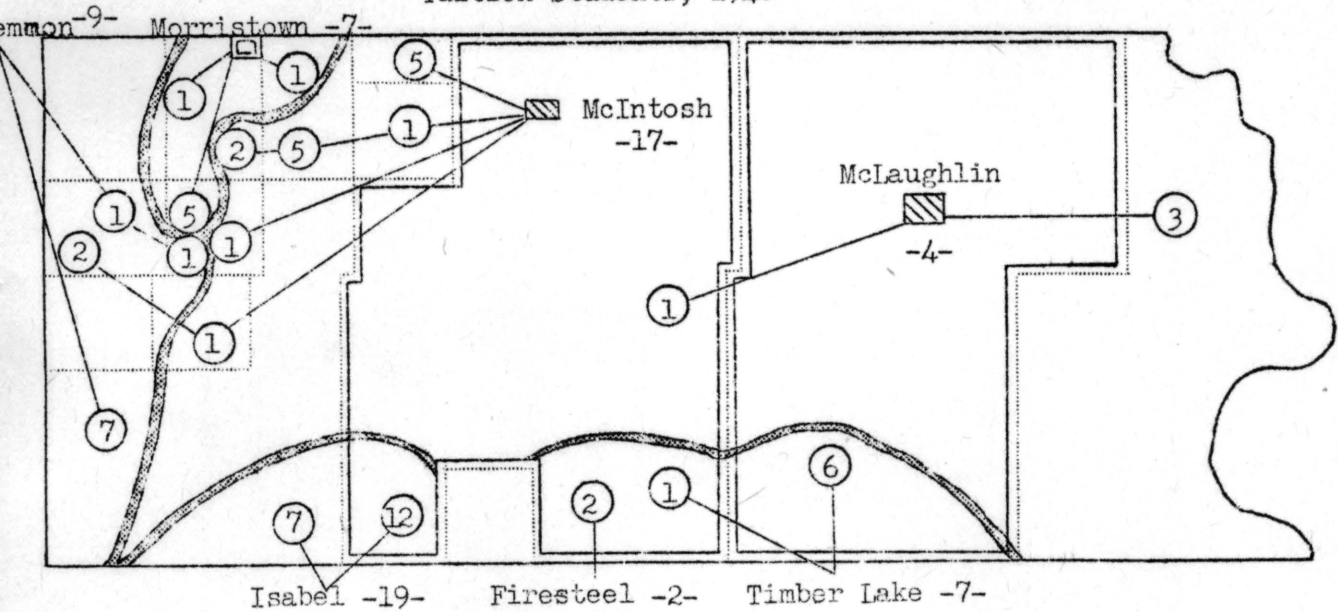
Source: Records of Corson County Superintendent of Schools

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. As previously noted, this plan has been followed in Corson county.

During the 1938-39 school term, school operation costs for McLaughlin district totaled \$68,838.21. The following year two schools in this district were closed and the pupils were sent to other schools, with the district paying their transportation. That year, school operation costs in that district, including the transportation payment, were \$50,512.78 a saving of \$17,825.43. In McIntosh district a saving of \$11,777.20 was made by the closing of twelve schools in the district for the school term of 1936-37. Since the cost per pupil increases and educational efficiency decreases, as the number of pupils attending school decreases, 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 get students interested.

Figure 5. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Corson County Tuition Students, 1940



Legend:

-0- Number of tuition students attending

○ Number of tuition students from each district

Source: Records of Corson County High School Superintendents, 1940

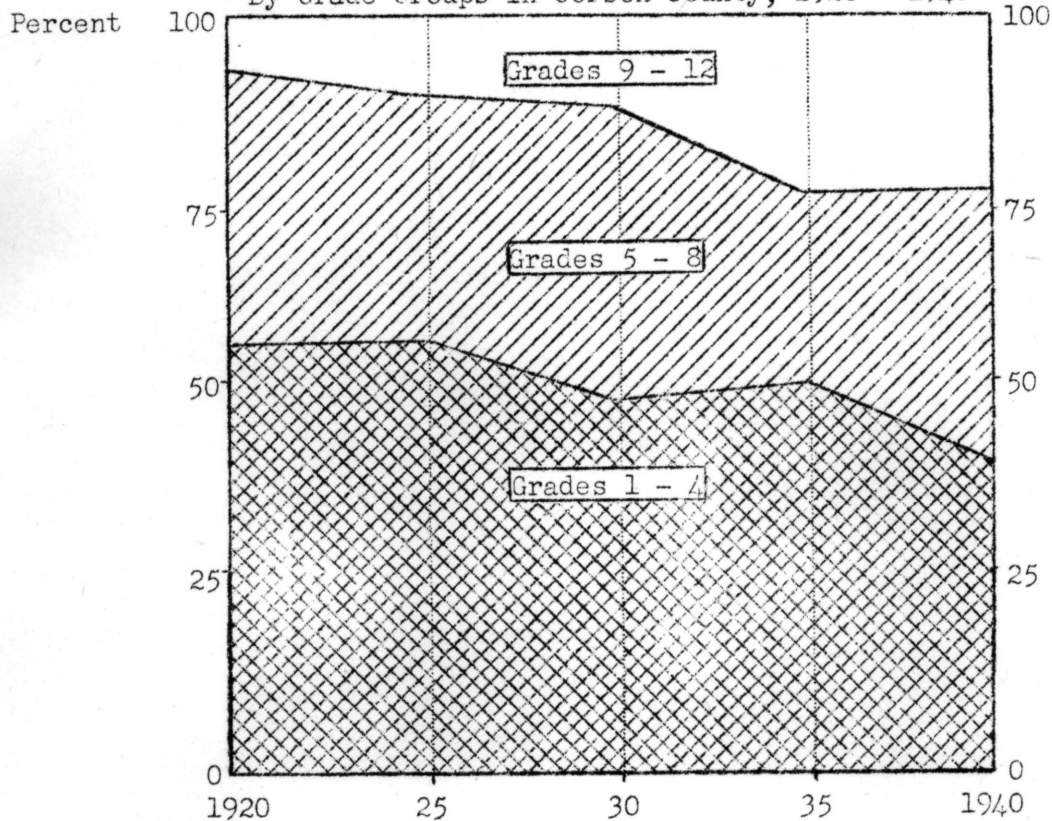
Since 1921, school districts of South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Corson county tuition students in 1940. Twenty-eight of these students attended schools within the county while 37 attended schools in towns of neighboring counties. *

Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive the people of the districts of Corson county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in village centers. The adaption of a similar plan to 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 makes this course impracticable the centralized rural school may be a solution. If distances are too great for daily transportation the dormitory plan for housing pupils might be used. Any of these plans would have the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the superior 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.

* Since McLaughlin and McIntosh are independent districts including large areas, many of the high school students of these towns live within the district and therefore are not tuition students.

Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments, By Grade Groups in Corson 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 Corson county schools shrank from 57.8 percent to 41.4 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. The explanation of this trend may be found in the fact that birth rates have fallen sharply since 1920. Consequently with each passing year there have been fewer and fewer pupils to enter the first grade. In 1940 the proportions for first and eighth grades were 10.8 percent and 8.3 percent respectively as compared to 23.8 percent and 9.4 percent respectively in 1920. (See Table 2). With the greatly reduced number of persons under six years of age, it is obvious that elementary enrollment will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate trend should be reversed.

The proportion enrolled in high school grades was more than three times as large in 1940 as in 1920, increasing from 6.6 percent to 22.8 percent. 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	Grades											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	23.8	12.1	10.8	11.1	8.4	10.4	7.4	9.4	3.5	1.8	0.9	0.4
1925	17.3	12.9	14.0	13.3	10.5	8.0	7.8	6.7	3.1	3.4	1.5	1.5
1930	16.6	10.4	11.1	11.4	12.1	10.1	9.1	8.2	3.6	3.2	2.2	2.0
1935	15.7	11.2	13.0	11.4	10.9	11.6	11.0	10.1	9.5	5.3	4.4	3.6
1940	10.8	11.3	9.9	9.4	10.3	8.1	9.1	8.3	6.4	6.0	5.8	4.6

Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920 to 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.