The Rural School Today

ELLEN HARTNETT

All too frequently in our educational planning do we ignore the needs of almost half the children in the United States—those living in rural areas. In this article Ellen Hartnett, formerly field representative for the Iowa State Education Association and currently a graduate student at Iowa State College, reviews the disturbing situation in rural education and makes specific proposals which should serve as guides in planning adequate educational opportunites for *all* American children and youth.

JOE AND BETTY MORTON are fortunate country children. Three years ago the people in Lockwood voted to abolish the ten common school districts into which the community was divided and to establish one large district that would provide an educational program, both elementary and secondary, for all children in the community.

A School Designed for Living

This action was taken after the people had held a number of meetings, under the leadership of the county superintendent of schools, and agreed on the kind of education they wanted for their children. The new elementary school building which Joe and Betty attend was constructed last year, complete with gymnasium-auditorium, hot-lunch room, library, crafts and hobbies shop, a nurse-teacher's room, and ten classrooms including a large kindergarten.



Each day of living in their school brings a new series of interesting experiences to Joe and Betty. The twenty-minute ride to and from school on the yellow bus, selecting a balanced and appetizing noonday meal from the food containers in the cafeteria, new games in the gymnasium and on the playground, play practice on the stage, shelves of interesting new books to read, movies, field trips, band practice, and singing in the school chorus—these and dozens of other activities make the new large district school a good place in which to live. The new teachers, all of whom hold college degrees, not only teach the three R's well but they relate classroom work to solving real problems of living in the world of today.



The school physician found that Joe had diseased tonsils and helped his parents arrange for the operation. The dental hygienist cleaned everyone's teeth and notified parents about cavities. The nurse-teacher visits the school daily.

A Major Social Problem

The vast majority of rural children have never seen a school such as the one Joe and Betty attend. Millions of rural children attend school in mere shacks, old dwelling houses, or country churches; they use a few worn-out dirty textbooks, and are taught by teachers without adequate professional preparation. Moreover, in 1947 there were over 700,000 rural children between the ages of six and thirteen not enrolled in *any* school.[1]

The provision of adequate educational opportunity for all of the nation's rural children is one of the most pressing social problems today. It is not a new problem; present inadequacies of rural elementary schools have developed from a number of chronic social and economic ills of long standing. However, recent increases in birth rates, the current shortage of qualified elementary teachers, and other conditions have brought a state of crisis.

Almost half (49.1 percent) of all children in this country between six and thirteen years of age live in rural areas. Four and one-half million of them live on farms and four and one-fourth million live in villages of less than 2,500 population.[2] Unfortunately, it is difficult to describe exactly the quality and types of schools attended by these children because recent national studies have not treated rural elementary and secondary schools separately.

However, the latest comparison made by the U. S. Office of Education of rural and urban schools (both elementary and secondary) clearly shows some of the inadequacies of rural elementary schools.

- For urban schools the average length of the school term was 180 days; for rural schools it was 167 days
- The average salary for rural teachers was one-half that for urban teachers
- The value of school property per city pupil was over two times the value per rural pupil
- Of the 222,660 public school buildings in this country, over 86 percent were in rural areas
- In urban schools there was an average of fourteen teachers per building; the average was 2.4 in rural schools.[3]

Many One-Room Schools Inadequate

Although there has been a very marked reduction in the number of one-teacher schools, in many states these schools still typify rural elementary education. In 1942 there were about 108,000 one-teacher schools enrolling approximately two and a quarter million pupils.[4] By the 1947-48 school year the number had been reduced to about 75,000.[5] There will always be a need for some small schools because children in many sparsely settled and mountainous areas cannot be transported to larger consolidated schools.

However, the number of such schools in many states is far larger than is justified by sparsity of population and topographic conditions. For example, Illinois has almost 7,000 one-room schools and Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska,

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[1]U.S. Bureau of the Census, *School Enrollment of the Civilian Population:* April 1947. Series p-20. No. 12. February, 1948.

[2]Ibid.

[3]U.S. Office of Education. *Statistical Summary of Education,* 1943-44. p. 12.

[4]NEA Department of Rural Education, *Report on the White House Conference on Rural Education,* Washington, D. C. 1945. p. 30.

[5]The Council of State Governments, *The Forty-Eight School Systems.* Chicago, Ill.

and Wisconsin each have over 4,000. In each of these states less than one-fourth of all elementary schools have more than one teacher; 96.8 percent of Iowa's elementary schools have but one teacher.[6]

Admittedly, not all small schools are poor. Small schools can be good schools if they have specially qualified teachers and such special facilities as health services, general and special subject supervisors, bookmobiles, mobile shops, and visual aids equipment available to them. However, even if all of the above conditions are met, the advantages still weigh in favor of the larger school.

In addition, it is very difficult for small schools to attract and hold well-qualified teachers. After a careful analysis of all factors involved, the National Commission on School District Reorganization strongly recommended that all rural elementary schools, except in the most sparsely settled areas, have not fewer than 175 pupils in the kindergarten and grades one through six, with at least seven full-time teachers employed. The Commission further indicated that a more desirable minimum would be 300 or more pupils with twelve or more teachers.[7]

District Reorganization Necessary

Closely associated with the small rural school and its inadequacies is the large number of rural school administrative units. Of the 103,660 basic units of school administration in the forty-eight states, seven-eighths are of the common school district type, typically having one school and one teacher.[8] Even if the small school could adequately meet the usual instructional needs of rural children, this large number of administrative districts would not be justified. There are several reasons why this is true.

Small districts vary greatly in the amount of wealth available for educational purposes. In many instances the taxable wealth of these small districts is inversely proportional to the number of children to be educated. Moreover, there are many districts that do not operate any kind of school, serving only to protect local people from paying property taxes for the education of other people's children. Gross inequalities in educational opportunity result from these conditions. Expenditures per pupil per year have been found to range from $3.70 to $200 or more, a ratio of sixty to one.[9]

The per pupil cost of providing adequate school building facilities is prohibitively high in most small districts. The Council of State Governments Study concluded that under existing plans of school district organization there are extensive areas in many states where the rural children can never have adequate school buildings. In small school district states variations of 100 to 1 in ability to finance school building facilities are not uncommon.

It is generally agreed by competent authorities on school district organization that effective local administrative units must provide a number of services not presently available to millions of

[6]Ibid. p. 56.
[7]National Commission on School District Reorganization, *Your School District*. NEA, 1948. p. 81.
[8]Ibid. p. 56.
[9]Institute of Administrative Research, Teachers College, Columbia University, *Still Unfinished Business*. NEA, 1948. p. 33.

rural children. The National Commission on School District Reorganization, after an analysis of the needs of rural children, concluded:

> Satisfactory local school administrative units provide the services of educational and business administration; supervision of attendance, instruction, and transportation; school library service if the community has no public library; adult education leadership; physical and health examinations of children; specialists for the identification of atypical children; the services of school psychologists and nurse-teachers; and a research staff. In localities where the school must of necessity be small, the central staff of the administrative unit should include special teachers in instrumental and vocal music, art, and specialized types of vocational education. In order to perform these services, a school administrative unit should have:
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> a. At least 1,200 pupils between ages 6 and 18; and
> b. If possible as many as 10,000 pupils ages 6 to 18.
>
> If the number of pupils falls much below 10,000 the unit should become a part of an intermediate unit to supplement its services.[10]

It should be pointed out that these standards apply to the administrative district and not to the size of schools. The Commission took the view that every district should have at least one high school and that most districts would have more than one elementary school. Assuming a pupil load of twenty-five per teacher, the minimum size district recommended above would have forty teachers.

The above standard of size for effective school districts has been achieved in only three states. In nine other states the majority of districts meet the standard. There are thirty-one states in which less than ten percent of the districts employ forty or more teachers.[11] Unfortunately, data are not available showing the extent to which the districts having forty or more teachers are providing the services recommended by the Commission.

The Rural Teacher

The school may be a model in every other respect but it will fail to achieve its purposes in very large measure to the degree that the quality of instruction is low. Assuming a high positive correlation between professional preparation of teachers and the quality of their instruction (in general, a sound assumption), millions of rural elementary pupils are severely handicapped in the instruction they receive. In 1944, Dawson stated:

> . . . Nearly 60 percent of all teachers in rural elementary schools having one or two teachers have had less than two years of education beyond high school. This percentage can be compared with 30 percent for teachers in three-teacher schools; 20 percent in villages under 2,500 population; and 10 percent in cities over 2,500 population.[12]

Meanwhile, the shortage of qualified teachers for rural elementary schools continues to be critical. The Council of State Governments found that 115,000 teachers, more than one-eighth of the total employed during the 1947-48 school year, had less than two years of college preparation. Most of these teachers were teaching in rural elementary schools and were most highly concentrated either in states having large

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[10] *Your School District*. op. cit. p. 131.

[11] The Council of State Governments, op. cit. p. 53.

[12] *Report on the White House Conference on Rural Education*. op. cit. p. 30.

numbers of school districts or in states having extremely low salary schedules.[13]

Rural schools are in a very unfavorable position to attract their proportionate share of new teachers. Lower salaries, small schools, poor building facilities, inadequate instructional equipment, and, in many instances, less desirable living conditions in rural areas cause many new teachers to turn to the city school for employment. In addition, these same conditions handicap rural elementary schools in holding their well-qualified teachers with experience. While it is true that some of the best teachers remain in rural schools, in almost every state small schools are the training ground for substantial numbers of teachers in urban schools.

Farm Income and School Cost

Most of the weaknesses of rural schools can be traced to the methods used in financing them. Historically, the American people have depended heavily on the property tax for support of local governmental functions, including education. Nationally speaking, the major support for education, urban and rural, still comes from property taxes levied locally.

This system places an unduly heavy burden on rural people. Farmers have about 10 percent of the nation's income but they have 29 percent of all children of school age to educate.[14] In 1944, the personal income back of each farm child of school age was $1621; for each non-farm child of school age the amount was $6419.[15] It is obvious that farm people do not have the resources that non-farm people have to provide the kind of education their children need.

It is generally recognized that financial assistance should be given to local districts to provide adequate educational opportunities for all children and to equalize the burden of school support. Although all states give some financial assistance for support of local schools, the percentages vary widely. In twelve states, in ten of which a large share of the population is rural, less than one-fifth of the total cost of public school education comes from the state.[16]

The methods of apportioning state funds to local districts likewise vary widely. At least half the states have poor financial plans for guaranteeing sufficient funds to local units for support of a minimum foundation program of education for all children.[17] Moreover, the plans for apportioning financial aid in most states have placed a premium on the retention of numerous small rural administrative districts.[18] Thus, millions of rural people are placed in the anomalous position of having school districts too small to provide the educational services their children need but are discouraged from disturbing the status quo because of a loss in state support.

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[13]Council of State Governments. op. cit. pp. 72-74.

[14]Unpublished data on file in Dept. of Rural Education, NEA, which was derived from (1) U. S. Dept. of Commerce, *Survey of Current Business*. August, 1945. (2) 16th Census of the United States, 1940, *Population*, Vol. II, Parts 1-7. (3) Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. 1949. p. 272.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Council of State Governments, op. cit. p. 224.

[17]Howard A. Dawson, "Financing Rural Education." *School Executive*. Vol. 68, No. 7, March 1949. pp. 41-44.

[18]Ibid.

National, State, and Local Support

It should be pointed out that there have been some noteworthy gains for rural children during recent years. In at least seventeen states action is under way to reduce the number of small districts and to establish units of school administration large enough to provide more and better educational services. It appears highly probable that within the next few years other states will move in the same direction.

Gains have also been made in the amount of support given by the state to local districts and a number of states have been recognizing to a greater degree the desirability of establishing a foundation program of school support which would provide the essential educational services for all children.

However, even if every state equalizes the opportunities for every child within its borders, creates optimum size school districts, and establishes larger rural elementary schools wherever practicable, glaring inequalities in opportunity for an adequate education will still exist for millions of rural children. The states that are least able to pay for an adequate educational program are those having the highest proportions of rural children.

In fourteen states the income for 1944 back of each child (rural and urban) of school age was more than $6000. In only one of these states was the percentage of school age farm children as much as one-third of all school age children; in eleven states the percentage was less than one-fifth of the total; and in four states less than one-tenth.

But at the other end of the scale there were eleven states where the income back of each school age child (rural or urban) was less than $3000. In eight of these states more than half of all children of school age lived on farms; in the remaining three states the proportions of farm children were one-third or more.[19]

The great differences among the states in the wealth per child make federal aid for public school education imperative. Moreover, it is the rural children who are in greatest need for this assistance from the national level.

[19]Unpublished data on file in NEA Dept. of Rural Education. op. cit.

Growing Room for Young Children

(*Continued from page 53*)

about him as a living, active, energy system which starts at a very early age to fix its habit patterns, its attitudes toward its learning, and to make itself felt socially.*

Since the public school of the immediate future is going to be obliged to adjust and expand tremendously to provide even sitting room for the 11,500,000 little children approaching its portals, now seems to be an opportune time to suggest that this adjustment include not only better school laws, more funds, better buildings, and suitable materials, but also better informed teachers and administrators to insure for these children not only sitting room but *growing* room.

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