

PROGRESS IN SCHOOL REORGANIZATION IN ILLINOIS

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Illinois had 242 community unit schools in February, 1951.¹ These 242 12-grade districts were operating in 73 of the 102 counties of the state (some cutting across county boundaries). The average school population was 226 high and 646 elementary, or a total of 872 school pupils enrolled. Assuming one in five of the community's population is in school, these districts would have an average of 4,360 people. The area from which the districts draw their pupils is about 110 square miles or slightly more than three townships.

School reorganization is a social process. Reorganization on a state-wide scale was recognized as necessary more than three decades ago. The Illinois Education Association, as early as 1925, had appointed committees to study school district reorganization. In 1928 a recommendation was made for a county school districting committee. Succeeding reports favored county boards of education to make studies and formulate recommendations. A commission on taxation and expenditure recommended consolidation of school districts of the state into 400 to 500 administrative units in 1931²

The Illinois Educational Commission of 1935 recommended reorgan-

ization of school districts by legislative action following recommendations of a state board of education. This report showed a close relation between high cost per pupil and low numbers of pupils in average daily attendance—costs ranging from \$30 to \$747 per pupil in average daily attendance in one-room elementary schools.³ Nevertheless, few changes were made until 1945. At that time Illinois had 11,955 districts, 9,680 of which were one-room elementary.⁴ Citizen groups had been active for a decade or more before changes began to take place. No little importance can be given to the Illinois Rural Education Committee, formed in 1939 and made up of representatives from all state-wide organizations and most state-supported higher educational institutions. At about this time, and probably as a result of discussions in the quarterly conferences, the University of Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station began to make studies, and the Illinois Agricultural Association formed a citizen's committee to make a study. Studies had been made also by the University of Illinois College of Education, Western Illinois State Teachers College, and other teachers colleges, and by the University of Chicago and Northwestern University.

¹ *Progress Report on School Reorganization in Illinois*, State Advisory Commission Report No. 14, Centennial Building, Springfield, Illinois.

² Howard Dawson and others, *Your School District*, chapter by Irving Pearson, Illinois Education Association, page 161, published by the Rural Education Department, National Education Association, Washington, D. C., 1948.

³ Report of the advisory staff made to Illinois Education Commission, Thomas E. Benner, Chairman, State of Illinois, 1935, page 8.

⁴ *School District Information*, State Advisory Commission on School Reorganization, Springfield, September, 1950.

Studies of the University of Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station were made in McDonough, Pike, Fayette, Crawford, and McHenry counties. These were issued in mimeographed form, and a popular manual or guide to reorganization was issued carrying a resumé of the data in the other studies.⁵ Over 70,000 copies were distributed, chiefly through county farm and home advisers and school administrators and teachers.

A Progress Report of the Illinois Agricultural Association School Committee was issued in January, and a final report in November 1944. Copies of this report went to all farm bureau offices and were distributed freely among the farm people of the state. It recognized the advantages of 12-grade administrative units and made specific recommendations for reorganization.

The people of rural Illinois did not respond to suggestions for state legislative reorganization of schools. It was only when proposals for action based on local surveys became a reality that changes began to take place. The first survey effort was in 1941 when 17 county survey committees were formed as a result of enabling legislation. Little reorganization took place, however, primarily because no legal means were provided for the people's acting upon county survey committee's recommendations.

Various forces cumulatively made possible the enactment in 1945 of the second county survey law. This law required the people to vote upon recommendations made by county

survey committees. The law required, also, that the county superintendents call meetings of school directors and school board members to vote on whether to set up county survey committees. It was significant that in 1945 these officials in all but nine of the state's 102 counties elected to form county survey committees. By 1947 eight of the other nine counties had followed suit.

Farmer leadership was important in the progress made in school reorganization in Illinois. About three-fourths of the votes cast for county survey committees was favorable. Approximately three-fourths of all voting was rural, mostly farmers. The law required that five of the nine members of the committees to be elected were to reside in rural areas. It turned out that two-thirds of them lived on farms.⁶ Hence, the movement for making studies basic to reorganization included a large number of the farm people of the state.

From 1938 to 1949, one-room school districts were reduced by 71 percent, the reduction in the total being 58.6 percent. These changes, however, fell considerably short of the recommendations of county survey committees.

Most county survey committees favored the community unit type of district. It is significant that out of 89 committees, 17 county committees recommended county units, 46 recommended one or more community units, and only 26 recommended dual systems. The area in which most reorganizations took place was in the central part of the state; even in the

⁵ *A Guide for the Study of Rural School District Reorganization*, RSM-104, University of Illinois College of Agriculture, Extension Service and Home Economics, 1948.

⁶ David E. Lindstrom, *Illinois School District Boundaries*, RSM-24, Research in Rural Sociology, Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Illinois Agr. Experiment Station, Urbana, 1950.

east-central section, in which many county survey committees recommended dual systems, considerable change toward unit districts has taken place. The lack of change in southern Illinois, in light of the uniformity with which county committees recommended 12-grade systems, is remarkable. Change comes more slowly in this area, evidently. Probably part of the reluctance to change is due to lack of state-aid financial incentive, and part to the fact that schools in this section did not have the low attendance per school so characteristic of those in other parts of the state.

Reorganization was rapid in 1945-49. It was stimulated by permissive state legislation (the community unit act) and the desire for better schools. It was made possible as a result of county survey committee recommendations which called for action or vote on the part of the people. It has since slowed down. County survey committees have finished their work and have been dis-

charged. Evidently state-aid incentives for reorganization are not enough to stimulate the kind of action necessary to complete the task in the state. Probably the basic requirements for a community unit district — 2,000 population and \$6,000,000 valuation—are not suited to all areas.

Progress in school reorganization will continue in the state, under present conditions, as the people of a community see its desirability and petition to set up a community unit district. Most communities can probably qualify under the 2,000 minimum population requirement. But in some areas a minimum of \$6,000,000 valuation may require so much territory to be included that the community is lost in the larger area. A system of state aid that would enable the less favored areas, economically, to organize and be insured of enough financial support for a good program may be needed before reorganization of community schools can be completed in Illinois.