
BUILDING RURAL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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People in towns and cities have become greatly concerned about schools in the country areas, many because Illinois has more school units than any other state in the nation. It is fortunate, therefore, that 93 of 102 counties of the state have formed county survey committees so that farmers and small town inhabitants can study their own school conditions and make their own recommendations for school reorganization. There are powerful pressure groups in the state that know that the state legislature is the supreme school board and can pass legislation for compulsory school reorganization. So this survey effort must be done well if rural people are to build their own community schools.

Many are recognizing the need for reorganization. Some of the outstanding facts are: that the number of school age children is decreasing; farm families are getting smaller; those, especially tenant and labor families, on the poorest lands are the largest; farms are getting larger and fewer in number; and both one-room schools, as well as high schools, are too small. Studies have shown that in 1945 more than three-fourths of the one-room schools in Illinois had fewer than 15 pupils in average daily attendance. This number is below the minimum generally considered adequate to make a good school. Experience has shown that 20 to 25 pupils per teacher and at least three teachers per school are a much better and more economical

number. Two-thirds of the high schools in Illinois outside of Cook County, moreover, had fewer than 150 pupils in average daily attendance in 1943-1944. This is the barest minimum needed for good and efficient high schools to provide what is generally considered by many authorities as the minimum for a good high school; seven teachers and an average of 30 pupils per teacher would require high schools with not less than 210 pupils per school.

Farmers in Illinois want to keep control of their elementary schools. Any plan of rural school reorganization should carry with it some means whereby they can retain the kind of control that will make for the best schools for rural people. A loss of the country school can mean the loss of one of the chief remaining ties in the neighborhood, which throughout the history of America has meant so much to farm people. Everything possible, therefore, should be done to preserve the neighborhood school or to build a better school in the country neighborhood as well as in the village and the town. This can be done if town and country people will work together in the reorganization of larger administrative districts. These administrative districts should be large enough to maintain a high school and as many elementary attendance units as are needed to carry through a good school program. In this way the entire school program from elementary to high school can be unified under

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one system of administration and the cost can be cut considerably if no more than the present school program is provided.

Farm people, however, want the best schools they can get. If they once understand the difference between an administrative and an attendance unit and that schools can be reorganized on a larger administrative basis now, allowing attendance units to remain as they are until conditions permit changes, then they are willing to see these kinds of changes made, especially if they see the advantages of the larger unit.

Larger community administrative units would make possible spreading the tax load more equitably over all the property. In other states it has been shown that the setting up of larger administrative units has actually reduced the cost of education. In general, however, the cost of larger administrative units and better schools is greater than the cost of smaller schools because of improved and more extensive offerings.

Any good school program, it is now recognized, should provide services in seven distinct fields: (1) A health program that provides for periodic examinations, corrective treatment, instruction and guidance in healthful living, hot lunches, adequate means to prevent and control contagious diseases, recreation, physical exercise and play suited to children. Only the larger unit can provide for this kind of a health program. (2) Every school should provide for the mastery of the basic skills, reading, writing, and arithmetic; we are discovering that this can be done best in schools which provide for larger administrative units. (3) Every school should give attention to the development of the appreciations, abilities, and the ex-

pression of the pupils through the creative arts, music, drama, painting, drawing, crafts, etc., and the larger schools can best provide these.

(4) All systems should include adaptation of the school program to the especially talented or handicapped, and it is only in the larger areas that attention can be given to these.

(5) Every school should provide for training for vocations, rural and urban, and the larger units are in the best position to do this. (6) The rural child needs to be given these things in terms of the environment in which he now lives as well as in terms of the environment in which he may some day live. The curriculum in the rural school should, therefore, be rural life centered. Such training cannot be given in the average one-room school as this requires properly trained teachers, library, laboratory, and similar facilities, all of which can be made available only through larger administrative units in schools financed from a larger base and with adequate state and federal aid. (7) The schools should be neighborhood and community centers, providing not only classroom, library, gymnasium, playground, and laboratory facilities, but also facilities for community meetings, entertainment, and special group meetings, so that the school really is a community center.

Rural people of Illinois can have good rural schools if they want them. The work of the present county school survey committees can be done so that Illinois can have the most modern and effective schools that can be found anywhere in the nation. Centering upon recommending larger community administrative districts and securing the people's support of them is the first important step toward modern rural schools in Illinois.