What Can Be Saved by Combining the Smaller Schools of Wisconsin

In presenting the data regarding the rural situation little has been said of the amount of money that might be saved by the combinations of the smaller schools. On the basis of the data collected, an estimate of the amount that could be saved by combining the schools of 15 or fewer pupils will be attempted.

As previously pointed out, there were 69 schools with 5 or fewer pupils enrolled in Wisconsin during 1933-34, 550 with from 6-10 pupils, and 1068 with 11-15 pupils enrolled. Thus, there were 1687 schools with 15 or fewer pupils enrolled.

In the 13 counties from which adequate information was obtained there were 554 schools of 15 or fewer pupils. As rated by the local superintendents, 333 of these schools had some practical possibility of combining with others. If these figures are taken as representative of the entire state, then approximately 60% of the schools with 15 or less enrollment can be combined with other schools. Thus it would be practical to combine approximately 1000 of the smaller schools of Wisconsin.

The average cost of maintaining a one-teacher rural school, with 15 or fewer pupils, in Wisconsin last year (1933-34) was $828.50. The average state cost of maintaining a transport school in 1933-34 was $720.77. This figure includes the cost of several large transport districts and consequently is probably greater than the cost would be for maintaining a transport school with 15 or fewer pupils. The average cost of maintaining a transport school for 15 or fewer pupils in the 14 counties studied was $514.56 in 1933-34. The amount that could be saved by combining all schools of 15 or fewer pupils would probably be somewhere near $300 ($828.50-$514.56) per school. For the 1000 schools this would approximate $300,000 for the schools that could be closed. In addition to the money that could be saved by the schools which closed and organized as transport schools, money could be saved by the districts to which the pupils from the closed schools would go. These schools would receive tuition money from the children coming from the closed school which is more money than would be needed for books, supplies, and equipment. These costs, in a normal year averaged approximately $5.00 (1930 was taken as a basis) per pupil per year whereas the tuition averages approximately $30. A saving of about $25 for each non-resident pupil can be realized by the school to which the pupils from the transport schools go. If 1000 schools of 15 or fewer pupils were combined, it would mean the transfer of approximately 9000 pupils (1932-33 figures). At a saving of $25 per pupil it would save approximately $225,000 for the schools to which the pupils would go. This, added to the $300,000 saved by the districts which closed, would be a saving of approximately $525,000. On the basis of present data, any estimate substantially greater than this amount seems a little optimistic. However, future studies may reveal factors that will increase the saving.
Permissive Laws on District Changes

The foregoing indicates what savings might reasonably be expected from a maximum operation of the laws on consolidation and transportation as they now stand. It is also prefaced upon the assumption that voluntary or forced consolidation of districts has fairly well-established limits as far as savings or adoption of the plans are concerned. The study is based upon the districts as they are under present district organization and law.

It is quite common to hear the term "consolidation" used loosely. It means the closing of a school, the abandonment of the original supporting district, transfer of assets, abolition of its school board and complete transfer of prerogatives to a newly created district. This may be done by referendum according to Section 40.35 which reads:

40.35 Consolidation of schools by referendum. (1) This section shall not apply to a school district, any part of which is within a city. When fifteen per cent of the electors, in each of two or more contiguous common school districts, shall petition therefor, the school boards shall meet at a time and place designated by the school board of the most populous district, to fix a time for an election to determine whether the district shall be consolidated, which election shall be not less than two, nor more than four weeks from the date of their meeting. Such election shall be called for eight o'clock in the afternoon, at the regular places for holding the district meeting. The district clerk of the respective districts shall give notice of the election as notices of annual school district meetings are given. The elections shall be conducted by the school officers of the respective districts, and the votes shall be by ballot. They shall, within three days, report the result of the elections in their respective districts to the clerk of the district in which the meeting to fix the time of the election was held. The several school boards, one week after the election, shall meet at said place and shall canvass the returns.

(2) If a majority of the votes cast in each district is in favor of consolidation, the school districts shall thereby be consolidated into a single school district, and the school boards, at the time of canvassing the returns, shall name and number the new district, and shall appoint a time and place for the first district meeting, and they shall give notice thereof as notices of annual meetings of common school districts are given.

(3) When a consolidated school district shall be organized, the school districts out of which it shall have been formed shall cease to exist, and the title to all property and the assets of every nature of such several school districts shall thereupon become vested in the consolidated school district, and claims and obligations and contracts of said several school districts shall become the claims and obligations and contracts of such consolidated district. The consolidated district shall conduct the schools theretofore maintained and conducted by the several districts until such time as the consolidated district shall have made new provisions therefor. [1931 c. 67 s. 55; 1933 c. 140 s. 2]

Municipal governing boards have the power to alter district boundary lines. Such procedure is governed by Section 40.30, as follows:

40.30 Common school districts; creation, alteration, dissolution. (1) NAME, CONTIGUOUS TERRITORY. Town and village boards and councils of cities of the fourth class may, by order, create, alter, consolidate or dissolve common school districts. Such districts shall be known by the names of the municipalities in which they lie, and if there is more than one district in a municipality, those districts shall be further designated by numbers. Such districts must be of contiguous territory, and no territory shall be detached from a district unless it be by the same order attached to another district, and no district shall be created having less than one hundred fifty thousand dollars of taxable property as shown by the last assessment roll.

(2) NOTICE OF PROPOSED ACTION. Whenever such alteration, creation, consolidation or dissolution shall be contemplated, the municipal board shall give at least five days' notice, in writing, to the clerk of each district to be in any way affected thereby of the day, hour and place it will be to decide upon proposed changes. Each district clerk shall immediately notify the other members of his board.

(3) JOINT ACTIONS OF BOARD. When the territory to be affected by proposed order lies in more than one municipality, the municipal boards shall act jointly, and the concurrence of a majority of each board shall be necessary to a valid order.

(4) ORDER AS EVIDENCE. Such order shall be presumptive evidence of the facts recited therein and of the validity of all proceedings preliminary thereto.
5) DISTRICT NUMBERED. An order creating a district shall number the district and mention the municipality in which it is situated.

6) ORDER FILED AND RECORDED. Every order shall be promptly filed and recorded in the office of the clerk of the municipality in which the school districts affected by the order are situated (and if in more than one, a sufficient number of originals shall be executed so that one may be filed with each municipal clerk), and a copy of such order shall be mailed to the county superintendent.

7) FIRST DISTRICT MEETING. When a common school district is created, the municipal board shall fix the time and place for the first district meeting, and shall give six days' notice thereof in the manner provided for giving notice of an annual district meeting, and proof of such notice shall be filed with the municipal clerk.

Consolidation of districts results in the loss of identity of original districts and may be accomplished by the statutory methods cited. Too often any closing of a school is termed "consolidation" when it may not be that at all. A school may be suspended for an indefinite period and its children transported to an adjoining district. Such is not consolidation. The closed school district operates as a district in every sense of the word. It has its district meetings, school board, budget and identity. This arrangement is what is commonly called a transport school. It may reopen the school any year. The law on transportation reads as follows:

40.34 Transportation, board, lodging. (1) SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION. The school district meeting may authorize the board to provide transportation for all the children of school age residing in the district. The board of every consolidated school district or in a district which has voted to close its school and provide tuition and transportation shall provide transportation to and from school for all school children residing in the district and over two miles from the schoolhouse. The board shall provide transportation to and from school for all school children residing in the district and over two and one-half miles from the schoolhouse, in case of a common school and four miles in case of a union high school. And if it fails to provide such transportation the parents may provide suitable transportation for their children, and shall be paid therefor by the district, at the rate of twenty cents per day for the first child and ten cents per day for each additional child transported; provided, the child shall have attended not less than one hundred and twenty days during the school year unless prevented by absence from the district; provided further, that any child residing more than four miles from the school of his district may attend the school of another district, in which case the home district shall pay the tuition of such child. The district shall be entitled to state aid on account of such transportation at the rate of ten cents per day for each child transported.

(1m) CRIPPLED CHILDREN. Any district may provide transportation for crippled children to any schools located in said district regardless of distance, provided the request for such service is approved by the crippled children division before any reimbursement is made for service. State aid for such approved cases will be granted on the same basis as transportation of normal children. The approval of such cases shall be based on whether or not the child can walk to school with safety and comfort and whether he can carry the regular academic course. In the case of a crippled child, attendance of one hundred twenty days during the school year shall not be necessary in order to receive transportation aid, if the child's absence from school is due to illness or treatment.

(2) SUSPENDED SCHOOL. The board of any district which has suspended school shall pay the tuition of all children of school age residing in the district who attend other district schools during such suspension, and shall provide transportation to and from school for all children residing more than two miles from the nearest school which they may attend, and the district shall receive the regular state and county money and state aid on account of such transportation; and in the event such district shall provide such transportation for all such children residing more than two miles from the nearest school which they may attend one hundred dollars additional state aid.

(3) CONTRACTS FOR TRANSPORTATION. The board, when authorized or required to provide transportation, shall enter into a written contract which shall provide that the children shall be transported in a safe and comfortable manner, with suitable protection against cold and stormy weather. The driver of each conveyance shall be of good moral character, and shall have control of the children while going to and from school. He shall report all cases of insubordination to the parents and to the teacher or principal of the school. When a contract is entered into with a person, other than the parents of the children to be transported, such person shall furnish a bond in the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars running to the school district, with approved surety, to insure the faithful performance of his contract. In case it is
the intention of the parent to provide transportation for his children, he shall notify the district board of his plans prior to the beginning of transportation.

(4) **Board and Lodging.** If, in the judgment of the board, and the parent or guardian, it is to the advantage of the district and also to the advantage of the child to provide board and lodging in lieu of transportation for all or part of the time for children of the district, residing more than two miles from the school, the board and parent or guardian shall enter into a written contract under which such children shall be properly boarded and lodged not more than one mile from the school, and the board shall pay for such board and lodging from the general fund not to exceed two dollars per week. The district shall be reimbursed by the state at the rate of one dollar per week of five days for each child so boarded and lodged. It shall also be the privilege of the parent or guardian to select the home in which the child be boarded and lodged. If the parent or guardian prefers to transport his child or children he shall be compensated and the district reimbursed as provided by subsection (1) of this section. The board may, if in its judgment it is to the interest of the district, in lieu of furnishing transportation or board and lodging, pay the tuition of such children in a school in another district which such children can conveniently attend without transportation.

(5) **Transportation and Lodging; Records and Report; State Allowance.** The school clerk shall give the teacher at the opening of the school the names of all children of school age in the district, residing more than two miles from the school, and the teacher shall inquire of every such child when enrolled, whether he is to be transported, and the manner of transportation, and shall keep a record that shall show every day each child is transported and, at the close of the term, the teacher shall file a special report of such attendance with the clerk, who shall include such report with his annual report, to the county superintendent, giving the names of the parents, the names and ages of the children, the distance transported, the number of days transported, the amount due for each child, and the total sum paid by the district. The parent shall keep a daily record of such attendance and present such record with his bill for transportation. A similar report and record shall be kept and made for all children who are boarded and lodged. The county superintendent shall make personal inspection of the transportation and lodging furnished, and shall report his findings thereon to the state superintendent at the close of the school year. If the state superintendent shall be satisfied that the law and the contracts for the transportation and board and lodging of pupils have been substantially complied with, he shall certify to the secretary of state the sum due each district under the provisions of this section. In case of differences concerning the character and sufficiency of the transportation or board and lodging, the state superintendent shall have the power to determine such matter and his decision thereon shall be final.

(5a) **Rent House for Family.** Whenever in the judgment of the board it is to the interest of the district in lieu of transportation to rent a house for the family of children required to be transported, it may enter into a written lease for such house and pay as rental therefor not more than the amount which would have to be paid for transportation pursuant to subsection (3).

(6) **Limitation.** This section does not apply to children who reside in cities.

(7) **Appropriation Prorated.** If in any year the total of the claims for state aid under this section shall exceed the amount appropriated in subsection (2) of section 20.25, the state superintendent shall equitably prorate the amount available among the several school districts entitled to share in this state aid. [1933 c. 140 s. 5; 1933 c. 154 s. 2; 1933 c. 494 s. 13; 1933 c. 495.]

**The Problem**

The nub of the small-enrollment school problem is found in district boundary lines. Under present law little improvement can be expected. Any one reflecting upon the facts presented in the previous pages will be impressed with the multitude of factors surrounding our school districts. Variations have a range so wide that they crowd the extremes of any distribution scale. Besides variables common to many, there are conditions peculiar to individual districts. Each district differs from others in certain aspects and these must be recognized and comprehended in any practical discussion seeking to terminate in a solution of the problem. Enrollments, fluctuating from year to year, have always been a puzzler to districts contemplating temporary discontinuance. Another, and perhaps the most retarding influence, is the reluctance of people to surrender local self-government as they conceive it. Local autonomy is deeply imbedded in the mind of the body politic and it will maintain a "show me" attitude before relinquishing anything now extended.
under district school law. In our opinion, then, the savings possible under the present law and as previously computed, approximate the limit of economy unless the way is opened for complete revision of boundary lines.

No phase of educational organization has received more public comment than the small-enrollment rural school. So great is the zeal of some in this direction that it obliterates any other serious considerations of education. While the problem demands attention, it should be kept in mind that the job of remediing the situation is not as easy as some would have us believe. Any action toward closing schools should be the result of careful impartial study of factors involved. A blanket law closing all schools of less than a predetermined enrollment will not work. Nor should the solution be actuated by a definite sum to be saved by the revision. Financial saving to be sure, but educational advantage should always be in the picture.

The Solution of the Rural School Problem

It must be emphasized that this study is merely suggestive in the problem of enlarging the rural school unit. Additional studies of each district should be made by groups authorized to act on their findings in determining what rural schools should be closed. Plans for complete re-districting must be studied and legislative action must be provided if any material change is to be made. Let it be pointed out in this connection that the schoolmen of the state are in favor of and are working for the combination of the smaller schools. The fact that so much remains to be accomplished is due to local opposition to closing the schools in the districts of small enrollment. Legislators have done little to remedy the situation and it is the consensus of opinion of the people in close touch with the situation that little can be done unless and until some group or board is authorized to decide what schools shall be allowed to operate. The solution of the rural school problem is in the hands of the legislators more than it is in the hands of the educators of Wisconsin.

What specifically can be done to improve the rural school situation in Wisconsin? What procedure is most likely to result in economy and at the same time provide at least as good an educational offering for the boys and girls of the state as is available at the present time? Obviously any reorganization cannot be left to local initiative. In spite of the splendid efforts of local superintendents of schools much remains to be accomplished. Local opposition to combining schools has proved time and again that dependence on the action of the local districts is no solution to the problem.

Several plans might be suggested. Delaware has made the state the unit of control and support. In this small state, state control has proven a very satisfactory plan. However, since Wisconsin is unlike Delaware in many respects a state system might not prove satisfactory here. A more practical plan for this state seems to be the establishment of the county to replace the district for the unit of control of school affairs, transferring the power of the town board to the County Board of Education authorizing them to close all small schools except those where road conditions, cost of transportation, etc., make closing inadvisable. If the County Board of Education fails to make needed changes some other board not dependent on popular vote for office should be authorized to do so. Many studies have shown the county unit superior in the intelligent and economical management of schools. Under a county unit plan many small schools are closed with an accompanying saving of funds. To quote from but two examples:

West Virginia, a state with approximately 200 schools in the several counties with an average daily attendance of 8 pupils, has indicated that under a "County unit law" recently going into effect, these very small schools are rapidly disappearing.1

The county board is authorized to close all schools with an average daily attendance below 20 and "if the board fails or refuses to consolidate when, in the judgment of the state superintendent consolidation is wise, all state aid is withheld."2

In Oregon,3 the county unit of school administration reduced to a marked degree the per capita cost of the rural schools. It was found that in a county operating under the county unit plan the annual cost was $5.68 less per pupil than in a county otherwise similar but operating under a district plan. When it is remembered that the average annual per pupil cost in rural schools (in Wisconsin) is less than $50 the percentage saving under the county unit is apparent. Savings possible by combining the smaller schools have been shown in studies in Iowa4, Illinois5, Kansas6, Missouri7, Arkansas8, and other states.

As has been pointed out repeatedly throughout this study, local opposition makes it impossible to combine schools which should be closed and little can be expected until legislative action has provided a larger unit of control.

There is no doubt that it is within the jurisdiction of the state to pass regulatory measures for school administration. The state of Wisconsin has through its equalization law provided assistance for the elementary schools of $250 per teacher and made it mandatory that the county furnish a like amount. Equalization aid in addition is given all schools with an equalized value of less than $200,000 per teacher. In addition this year the state has given $30,250.00 in emergency aid to the rural schools, of which $6,400.00 has been paid to rural schools enrolling 15 or fewer pupils. Since education is a function of the state, in theory,—and as far as elementary education is concerned, in practice,—it is the responsibility of the state to see that the best possible education is provided for the money invested. If the present administration of school affairs is not satisfactory to guarantee the best education for the money spent it is a state obligation to provide the necessary revisions. The foregoing data indicate that there is an opportunity to improve the situation. Local autonomy and democracy in school affairs are not to be discouraged but the autonomy should present itself in effective substance, not merely in form. Autonomy and self-government do not surrender when they operate through larger units of control. The administration of schools needs to be based upon a larger unit, supported by a larger base and animated by a larger sphere of influence. This principle has been approved at various times by the Wisconsin Teachers Association.

2 Statutes—Chap. 9 Extra Session 1933—W. Virginia.
3 Huffaker, C. L. A survey of Lane & Klamath Counties, Manuscript, Univ. of Ore. 1933.
4 Bachman, Dr. Frank P. Peabody College for Teachers.
6 O'Brien, F. F. "Small School Situation in Kansas".

We thank the county superintendents who furnished information and checked data submitted by this office, and also the Department of Public Instruction and State Highway Commission for generously providing access to records.

Large-scale maps of the counties referred to in this booklet are at Wisconsin Teachers Association headquarters. The maps show district boundary lines, roads, types of connecting roads, distances between schools, closed schools, active schools, enrollments, etc. These may be examined at the office by any group or individual interested in the problem.