

The End of the First Phase

In 1920 the consolidated school movement appeared to be unstoppable. Governor W. L. Harding told the first National Conference on Rural School Consolidation held at Cedar Falls that "in about five years if you will come back we will have one relic that we can show you, and that will be an old one room school house with the windows boarded up." A thousand consolidated schools by 1925 was the prediction of competent authorities. All at once, late in 1921, organization of new districts halted, not to be resumed for a quarter of a century.

The most frequent explanation for this sudden turn of events has been that the agricultural depression, which gripped American farmers beginning in 1921, discouraged further rural consolidation in Iowa. "It is not a question of the merits of the consolidated school," State Superintendent Agnes Samuelson wrote in 1926, "but of the price of corn." Farm prices dropped sharply, and land values plummeted from the heady heights attained during the wartime boom. District school taxes, which had risen from \$22,000,000 in 1917 to nearly \$48,000,000 by 1921, became a heavy burden for the hard-hit farm owners. At the same time taxes

for road improvements were also increasing. Retrenchment became the byword in the state. In January, 1922, the Farm Bureau Federation, which had supported consolidation, called for an end to all except the most essential public construction.

But even without the collapse of farm prices it is probable that the increase in the number of new consolidations would have slowed down if not stopped soon after 1921. Before the change in the farmer's economic position, the number of consolidation proposals that were rejected was sizable. Probably, as W. H. Lancelot contends, farmers had decided that in districts containing both rural and urban elements the burden of support fell too heavily upon the former. The Brookings Report of 1933 on all phases of Iowa government concluded that the real reason consolidation stopped was that no more districts could be organized under existing legislation.

Consolidated districts were hard hit by the farm depression. Already in December, 1921, the subject of how to reduce costs aroused most interest at the annual meeting of consolidated school officials at Cedar Falls. Some delegates seemed disappointed when no magic formula was produced for operating a good school without money. Economies were made by combining classes, dropping some courses, and offering others in alternate years. Whenever possible, State Super-

intendent May Francis reported in 1924, her department "recommended the elimination of surplus teachers rather than the lowering of teaching standards."

Some of the schools' financial difficulties were the result of unwise school board policies. As early as 1916, C. R. Scroggie had warned of the danger of overbonding a district. He knew of only one case of extravagant construction, but in many districts patrons were hard pressed to adjust to the sudden rise in taxation levied to meet the interest on bonds. The post-war inflation in construction costs came just at the peak of the consolidation movement. Some districts held up building projects, preferring to use temporary school facilities until prices came down. However, by 1922 the bonded indebtedness of the consolidated schools was 39 per cent of the total state public school debt, although enrollment in these districts was only about an eighth of the state's entire student body. The per pupil debt of consolidated districts in 1924 was the highest of any type of school district in Iowa.

By 1926 school construction in consolidated districts had virtually ended, to be succeeded by programs of debt payment. The number of consolidated schools was now stabilized at about 385. There were some twenty other districts which operated no central school and had no intention of doing so. By 1925 nineteen districts had been

dissolved, but in no case had they built a central school or sold bonds for that purpose.

No sooner had the schools gotten their initial financial problems under control than they were hit by the terrible depression of the Thirties. By heroic effort the schools somehow survived. Typical of the cooperation of all concerned during the crisis was a resolution presented to the Dumont Consolidated School Board in the spring of 1932 which stated:

We, the teachers of the Dumont Consolidated School District of Dumont, have decided unanimously that we will reduce our salaries. Since the prices that farmers receive are not a fair return on their investments, we are therefore willing to cooperate with them by a reduction in all salaries.

In 1934, only four consolidated schools were unable to pay debt interest when it was due. The rigid economizing had in some cases, Inspector R. A. Griffin reported, "led to ineffective teaching, the neglect of school property, and lack of adequate supplies, especially in providing much needed maps, apparatus, and library books." Both teachers and students, however, although greatly handicapped, had "accepted the challenge with determination to make the most of the situation."

The experiences of the Twenties and Thirties demonstrated anew the need for drastic organizational and financial changes which would equalize the burden of support now distributed so un-

equally among the state's many districts and borne so disproportionately by farm property owners. Two methods were proposed for reaching these goals: greater state aid and the reorganization of districts.

Supporters of state aid argued that, by establishing certain standards with respect to courses, attendance and the like, the state had a duty to furnish schools with more financial assistance. "If the State at large is to enforce such requirements on the public schools," Ray L. Gribben of the Farm Bureau Federation had declared in 1926, "the State must be prepared to make possible the attainment of those standards by every school." Besides, Cameron M. Ross of the State Department of Public Instruction declared, surely the education of her youth "should receive as much attention and interest from the state as the roads, . . . sewers at Spirit Lake, pheasants, the criminals, the insane, corn and hogs, and a multitude of other things which have had the consideration of the state in the past."

Unlike previous state aid, such as that granted to consolidated schools in 1913, where the same amount was distributed to each school regardless of its size or wealth, the proposed aid would take into account the resources of each district. It was designed to guarantee that a certain minimum amount of money would be spent for the education of every public school child. After much prompt-

ing from several special school committees the General Assembly in 1945 finally passed the Supplemental Aid Act. Although the amount appropriated was not nearly enough to carry out its provisions, a precedent had been set for the greater equalization programs that followed. Two important companion measures were passed at the same time. One was the School Transportation Act, which appropriated \$2 million to be used to reimburse school districts for transportation costs. The Agricultural Land Tax Credit Act sought to insure farm owners from being taxed excessively for school purposes.

The General Assembly also enacted at its 1945 meeting a school district reorganization law that put into effect the county-wide planning of school redistricting that State Superintendent John Riggs had proposed in 1908. A companion reform, establishing elective county boards of education which in turn appoint the county superintendents, was not passed until 1947. The county boards, working in cooperation with the State Department of Public Instruction, were ordered to prepare plans for the reorganization of school districts consistent with the state's newly voiced policy of encouraging the establishment of districts that "are necessary, economical and efficient and which will insure an equal opportunity to all children of the state."

Meanwhile, during the period between 1945

and 1947 before this reorganization program went fully into effect, a new outbreak of consolidations occurred. Encouraged by the prospect of greatly increased state aid and hoping to reorganize on their own terms before the new law restricted their actions, about a score of consolidated districts were formed while many other communities discussed the possibility.

The revived movement centered in Benton County where the number of consolidated schools jumped from the four created before 1921 to twelve in the space of eighteen months. Like a chain reaction districts sprang up all over the county, including the 120-section Vinton district organized in October, 1946. In most cases rural districts were consolidated with town schools to which they were already sending their children on a tuition basis. The consolidations were promoted partly by town businessmen, who feared that if any of the nearby rural areas were lost to another town's consolidated district the farmers in those sections might trade in that town also.

Fearing a repetition of the mistakes of the earlier era of rapid consolidation the legislature in 1947 imposed a moratorium on all school district changes until June 30, 1953, except those approved by the county boards of education and the State Department of Public Instruction under the new state reorganization law. Since 1953, no new "consolidated" districts have been formed. In-

stead, "community" districts may be organized, but only under the terms of the amended law that gives county and state school officials much greater control over reorganization movements than was the case before.

Thus ended the first phase of the attempt to equalize educational opportunities in Iowa. Whereas the emphasis during the period beginning in 1897 had been upon transporting rural students to central, consolidated schools, the approach following World War II was both different and more extensive. Through state aid it was now hoped that the quality of a child's education would no longer be determined by the accident of birth in a poor or rich district. Several districts might now combine on an administrative level, but instead of transporting all students to one school, there might be several units of instruction, especially on the elementary level, as in the immense 170-section Webster City Community District formed in 1954. Finally, with county school administrations reorganized it was possible to furnish small schools with special services, which they themselves could not afford, and thereby raise the level of education in areas not included in the large districts.

The consolidated school movement had made numerous mistakes. Many of the small districts would have to be absorbed into larger and more effective units, a procedure the patrons of the tiny

Lincoln-Lee district in Buena Vista County had voluntarily submitted to in 1946. But despite its errors, the movement had been the means of demonstrating what could be done in the way of providing better schools for rural children. Without its trail blazing efforts support for the broader activities of recent years would have been much less easily gained.

In addition, such consolidated schools as those at Tipton, Jesup, and Boxholm received national attention. In the early 1920's delegations from China, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and Texas, not to mention neighboring states, visited Iowa in search of information about consolidation. When a group of Alabamans asked the United States Commissioner of Education in 1920 where they could find the best country schools in the nation, he replied, "Go to Iowa and see the consolidated schools."

Whether the education offered by the consolidated school was better than that of the old one-room school was a point some educational theorists might dispute. But none could deny that physically the new school was far better equipped to meet the educational needs of the rural community or that it offered more years of training to its pupils. Of the 808 school districts in Iowa in 1955 operating high schools 345 were consolidated districts, and 120 more were community districts.

Undeniable also was the fact that the consoli-

dated school was doing much to fulfill the promises of its early supporters with respect to its value to the entire community. The entertainment derived from the school's sporting events, the inspiration furnished by the student choral and instrumental concerts, the instruction offered in the lecture series and adult education courses sponsored by many consolidated schools — these things touched the lives of everyone in the district, young and old.

Perhaps the most important result of the consolidated school movement was the new pride in schools that it created in small rural communities. Where once the first things visitors were shown were the latest farm improvements in the area, now increasingly they were taken to see the new school. The mingled pride and awe that the consolidated school aroused was well expressed by an old gentleman attending the dedication of the Sioux Rapids school in 1915. Gazing at the building he murmured, "She's as big as a college."

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