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THE PLAN AND COST OF OPERATING THE SCHOOLS OF PRINCE GEORGE COUNTY, VIRGINIA

Abstract of address delivered before the Rural Education Section, Department of Superintendence, National Education Association, at Chicago meeting, February 27, 1924.

FROM thirty white schools to eleven since 1920—such is the record of consolidation in Prince George County, Virginia. As a result of this program, every white child in the county can sleep at home, attend high school each day, and get back home at night without having to walk more than two miles to school or more than one mile to some means of transportation. Our percentage of attendance has increased from 70% in 1920 to 91% in 1923. The high school enrollment has increased three fold, and educational opportunities have been made equal for all children.

The development of the school system of Prince George County has been characterized by a State wide change in the County Unit plan of operation, and by a series of rather carefully planned consolidations.

By a division, we mean in Virginia, a unit of school administration composed of a county, a city, a county and a city, or two or more counties. By a district, we mean a political unit composing a part of the county. It corresponds to the township in many states. Under the county unit law, which became effective Sept. 1, 1922, one member of the school board is appointed for each district and these district members so appointed form the county board of education.

The school division of Prince George County and the City of Hopewell, covering an area of 294 square miles, with a school population of 5000, with a property assessment of \$10,000,000, and with an annual source of revenue of approximately \$210,000 for school purposes, has attempted to provide a system

of schools which will give every white child in the division the advantages of standard elementary and high school education.

Before the year 1920, there was no such thing in the division as equalization of educational opportunities. There were three accredited high schools, accessible to less than 50% of the school population, and 27 small elementary schools, most of which were one and two room schools, with meagre equipment, poorly trained teachers, and with short terms. Two of the five districts had no provision whatsoever for high school instruction, and only one district was attempting to offer high school instruction to all its children. One teacher had an average daily attendance of 9.6 pupils and another teacher had 39.8. Some children were walking six miles in order to get to school, while others were being transported at the expense of the county.

A careful study of conditions soon convinced our school officials that consolidation of schools and transportation of pupils were essential to the equalization of educational opportunities. The school district was made the unit. During the following year, consolidations were made, and each district had one central school in which high school instruction was offered. School trucks began bringing in pupils to these schools from all parts of the districts. Because of bad roads and peculiar local conditions three small schools are still operated, but pupils in the upper grades are transported from these schools to the larger central schools. At present all of our children have the opportunity of attending high schools. The number of white schools has been reduced from 30 to 11.

Costs

The increased costs incident to this change were very small indeed, especially so when compared with the advantages offered. In 1920 the average salary paid all white teachers was \$780.70. In 1923 this average was \$886.20, an increase of 13%. During this period of time, the average increase in teach-

ers' salaries in the United States as a whole was 21%; so, in our division, there certainly has been no increased cost of instruction chargeable directly to our program of consolidation. When we consider that the average annual salary paid all teachers in the United States in 1923 was \$1020.00, according to Dr. Evenden's study, we see that our cost of instruction has not increased so much as it should have.

The per capita cost of instruction in the elementary grades based on average daily attendance was \$22.59 in 1920 and \$29.66 in 1923, an increase of 31.3%. Here again we are somewhat below the national average. In high school, the per capita cost of instruction has increased from \$50.00 in 1920 to \$58.70 in 1923, or an increase of 17%.

The annual cost per pupil transported to school is \$26.00. The cost per pupil housed in new buildings erected during our period of consolidation was \$96.15. These buildings are the "C" type as defined by the American Institute of Architects. The per capita cost of general control is \$1.45; of operating expenses \$5.93; and of maintenance \$1.50. The average total tax rate for school purposes has increased from 88 cents per hundred dollars worth of property to \$1.00 or 13.6%. This increased rate provides for interest and sinking fund for bonds issued for capital outlay, as well as for other expenses.

Pupil Accounting

Our record in pupil accounting is somewhat encouraging.

The percentage of attendance has increased from 70% in 1920 to 91% in 1923. Our consolidated schools seem to hold stronger attractions for our pupils than did the smaller schools. The percentage of all pupils in high schools has increased from 5% in 1920 to 14% in 1923. In this respect we are somewhat above the national average.

The percentage of elimination in grades one to four in 1920 was 17; and this was the same in 1923. In grades five to seven the percentage of elimination has decreased from 21% to 15%. In high school elimination has decreased from 12% to 10%. Our schools are holding pupils longer than they formerly did, especially in the higher grades.

Also there seems to be a better adjustment of pupils to the course of study and perhaps a more intelligent and sympathetic classification

of pupils, for the percentage of failures has decreased. In 1920 in grades one to four, 25% of the pupils in average daily attendance failed of promotion, as again 16% in 1923. In grades 5 to 7, 11% failed in 1920 and 9.3% in 1923. In high school 9% in 1920 as against 4% in 1923 failed to advance their classification. By failures we mean pupils who failed in more than one subject. The average number of pupils per teacher based on average daily attendance was 19.1 in 1920 and 26 in 1923. If we subscribe to the theory that a teacher can teach 26 pupils successfully, then our program of consolidation has effected an economic saving of 36% without any definable loss in instruction.

All accredited high schools in Virginia must have an annual term of 180 days. Consequently, when high school opportunities were provided for all parts of our division the average length of term was increased from 174 days to 180 days per year.

Transportation

Two hundred of our pupils are transported on an electric car line at a per capita annual cost of \$6.75. Five hundred others are transported on motor trucks, practically all of which are Ford one-ton trucks, at an average annual per capita cost of \$26.00. In every case except one, bids were received and contracts were made with individuals who furnish their own trucks, at an average annual cost of \$29.00 per pupil transported. As an experiment one truck was purchased last year by the school board and a large school boy was employed to operate it. This truck has been operated at an average annual cost of \$21.00 per pupil. This estimate fixes the life of the truck at three years. School owned trucks are probably 40% more economical for us than are privately owned trucks, which fact will very likely cause our School Board to purchase more trucks next year.

Administration

From the standpoint of administration, our division is composed of two distinct units, one for the city of Hopewell and the other for Prince George County. This arrangement is fixed by state law which provides for a system of schools in each city and county. These two units are about equal in school population. There is a separate school board for each unit of the division, but the central offi-

ces are the same for both. The superintendent, clerk of the county school board, stenographer, home demonstration agent for the county, visiting teacher and attendance officer for the city all occupy the central offices. Two separate systems of record are kept.

The superintendent is the executive officer for both systems and all records, financial and otherwise, are kept under his general supervision. Both school boards meet regularly once a month, on different days, for the purpose of approving bills, deciding on general policies, and attending to other routine and new business. In this connection it is interesting to note that the county unit system has made possible the simplification and directness of business procedure, equalization of educational opportunities, more economic buying, and that it has attracted men of wider vision, influence, and interest to position on the school board.

Supervision

The superintendent is the chief supervisory officer. Except in the colored schools, there is no special supervisor of instruction. The principal of each large school is a supervising principal and devotes all of his time to supervision and administration. In the smaller school the principals must spend at least 80 minutes per day in supervision.

Principals' meetings are held monthly in the superintendent's office. These meetings are held in addition to the regular teachers' meetings and are solely for the purpose of discussing problems of supervision and administration. Methods are discussed, comparative studies are made, and uniform procedure is decided upon. These are real cabinet meetings in which policies are evolved. This is our most effective means of planning and organizing for action, as well as for checking results. Our last project in these meetings was the making of a series of uniform objective tests, based on the standards of our state elementary course of study. The results of these tests have diagnosed our weaknesses and have fixed goals to be reached during the spring term by each school, class, teacher and pupil. Another interesting and valuable project worked out in these meetings was a uniform objective grading system now used in all of our schools. The group method is used as a basis, the median corresponding roughly to 80%, for it was found in our division that

80% was the median grade given by all teachers covering a period of two years. By the use of these tests, and with the use of this grading system, the marking of pupils, their classification, acceleration, and retardation have been made uniform and objective. Comparisons can be made among the various schools and weaknesses can be detected and remedied.

Summary

A brief survey of our development reveals the following accomplishments:

- 1st.—Standard elementary and high school opportunities for all children.
- 2nd.—Equalization of opportunities.
- 3rd.—A school board composed of intelligent, active, influential men, vitally interested in the improvement of their schools.
- 4th.—An increase of 13% in teachers' salaries.
- 5th.—An increase of 31% in per capita cost of instruction.
- 6th.—An increase in attendance from 70 to 91%.
- 7th.—An increase in high school enrollment from 5 to 14%.
- 8th.—A decided decrease in elimination and failures in the higher grades.
- 9th.—An increase in the length of term from 176 to 180 days per year.
- 10th.—Real county unit of administration and supervision.

While our progress has been encouraging, we must realize that for the future, economy and efficiency alike demand the further consolidation of all high school work in one central school. With the coming of good roads and with the increased demands made on our present smaller school plants this opportunity will come. 1926 should, and I believe will, see every white child attending high school in our county housed in one large central school plant where opportunities of selection of courses, educational and vocational guidance and attention to individual needs may be provided more freely. We have succeeded in equalizing educational opportunities within our own division. Our next problem is to make these opportunities equal to those offered in the best schools of the country at large.

R. K. HOKE.