

Economics force closure of Simnasho school

by Marsha Shewczyk

The small, one-teacher four-grade school at Simnasho, Oregon is the target for 509-J budget cuts in the 1982-83 school year. "It's a matter of economics" says 509-J school superintendent Darrell Wright.

The Simnasho school has been on and off the axing board for years now. Community involvement and concern has kept it in operation until now.

But the budget for the 1982-83 school year shows a one million dollar increase. With cuts in personnel, cafeteria services, building funds and the elimination of Simnasho school the increase in funds over last year's budget is down \$500,000, according to Wright.

Federal budget cuts have reduced funds to many school districts. But in the 509-J district, impact aid funds have also been reduced. The total reduction has made it necessary to tighten purse strings in the district.

Simnasho school being the target for closures does not result from reduction of Indian monies per se, says Wright. Expenses have increased and the cost per pupil at Simnasho is not comparable to the rest of the district. Three thousand dollars per pupil is the amount spent throughout the district except at Simnasho where the per pupil cost is five thousand dollars. This is not an equitable distribution, expresses Wright.

The projected cost for operation of Simnasho school for the 1982-83 school year includes \$35,093 for salaries, \$13,128 for fringe benefits and \$14,148 for other costs including: \$250 for assemblies, \$100 for contracted services;

\$936 for electricity; \$12,095 for fuel (diesel and propane), \$57 for services (water and garbage); \$100 for out-of-district travel; \$225 for telephone; \$360 for supplies and \$25 for miscellaneous awards. The grand total is \$62,369.

The cost of maintaining an empty building upon closure of the school is estimated to be \$4,200 annually for electricity and fuel. Wright added that the Simnasho School building will be put to use either by the Tribe or by the school district.

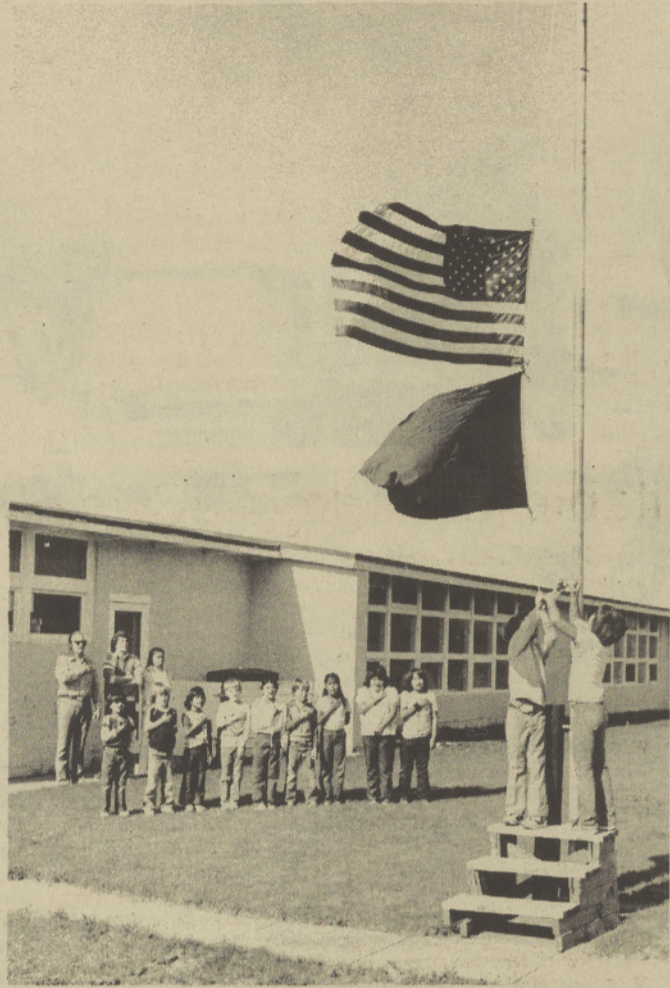
Wright emphasizes that he tried "to make cuts fairly equitable across the board." He says it's hard to justify to the tax payer the spending of \$62,000 for 12 students.

As far as the loss to the community Wright says, "If Simnasho were a community school in the sense that the students all lived in Simnasho...then the losses would be greater than the current situation."

When the school reopened after being closed for many years in 1972 there were 47 students in attendance. It was then "more truly a community school than it is now," Wright maintained.

Asked about the possibility of reopening Simnasho School in the future again Wright answered that it would be possible if the population of Simnasho would increase while at the same time increasing the number of students in that community. Or if for some reason finances in the district should improve it might be possible to reopen Simnasho School.

In Wright's estimate smaller is not necessarily better. He



The one-classroom school at Simnasho has been targeted for elimination by the 509-J budget committee because of the expense involved. Twelve students attend the four grade rural elementary school. Spilyay Tymoo photo by Shewczyk

sees value in the interaction of students in larger schools along with the generation of more ideas.

More resources are available to the students at larger schools. Teachers provide specialization, for instance in

larger schools, there is a music teacher and a physical education teacher. The child has the advantage.

Many students indicate the worth of the small school but some studies also indicate that there is value in larger classroom sizes. "Smaller is not

always better," Wright asserts.

What is the loss to the community of Simnasho school. For many years it has drawn the community and parents together through its activities and its children.

No one wants the school to close and the loss will be the greatest to the students attending the one-room school and particularly to teacher Rich Little.

Little has taught at Simnasho School for the past five years. Not only is he teacher but he is a community member and a 4-H leader for students of the school.

Along with other community members he has brought some of the Warm Springs' traditions to the school. He has worked towards keeping these alive in the young people attending the Simnasho school.

"I think I'm satisfying social needs of the community" along with teaching basic education, Little explained. As a teacher in this small school, Little has found it difficult to separate academics and the traditions of the people. There has been no difficulty in combining them.

Warm Springs Elementary school counselor Ed Roley feel that Little "teaches some important things. He teaches ideas beyond the curriculum, such things as getting along with others."

The students have learned to count in both English and Indian. The songs they learn reflect Indian traditions. Artistic activities include Indian dancing and beadwork. It is all unique to this small reservation school.

The community will certainly feel the loss of this small rural school and possibly so will the educational system as it sees education being urbanized and modernized.

Small schools have definite advantages

A first grade student was having difficulty with his mathematics. With individual help from the teacher and sometimes a third grade student he soon learned what he was doing wrong.

Students helping one another and taking pride in both learning and helping to teach, is one element which separates the one-room school from the larger school.

At one time, the one-room school was considered backward, as a matter of necessity. In many places it is now looked at with local pride and new respect.

In these small schools the teacher takes the time to see

that children are progressing in the basics. The teacher has to be dedicated for oftentimes there is little time during the day to rest. He has the aid of older students who learn while helping the younger. The individualization can't be matched.

Geographical reasons have kept rural schools in existence however they are becoming fewer and fewer. At the turn of the century there were 200,000 one-room schools in the United States. In 1930 there were 14,282 and today there are barely 1,000.

The movement away from one-room, one-teacher schools

began with modernization and technology. Many communities are forced to fight to retain their rural school.

It has been found that students who attend small rural schools perform just as well on standard tests as those attending modern elementary schools.

The anecdote to bigness and bureaucracy could be the small school where there are fewer children and everyone can be important.

Consolidation of many small schools into larger multi-grade schools has occurred, according to Jonathan Sher, education director for the Center of Community Change in Washington, D.C., primarily because of a consensus among influential policy makers. The values of local control, close relations possible among teachers, parents and students and the opportunity for more students to participate in school at a more meaningful level seemed overshadowed by the promise of new buildings, more courses and sophisticated equipment.

Economy, equalization of expenditures per pupil and improved quality were the promises with consolidation. But, as yet, there is no proof that the larger school has

provided all of these, claims Sher.

Why consolidation ever occurred at all is not a mystery. There has been a great population redistribution and consolidation of small, rural schools was part of this urbanizing trend.

Finally, money was a factor for consolidation. Many states provided substantial financial incentives for local districts who were willing to accept mergers, such as construction funds.

Arguments in favor on consolidation cite economic factors as being of primary importance. This is true in many cases. But weigh it against the value of the small school and which has the greatest importance?

Consider the small school. Children learn in these small schools to relate well with

each other. They gain a strong self-concept. Local pride is generated through the children as parents and community work closely with the school.

South Dakota state school superintendent Thomas Todd describes one-teacher schools "as an essential part of the education system."

Small schools are praised for the absence of problems characteristic of big schools. There are few disciplinary problems and both teachers and students have a log of independence. The limited resources in these rural schools are often a challenge demanding creativity.

Very importantly, the students in these rural schools are involved in the community along with adult community members. With consolidation this is lost. "Bigger is not always better," Sher asserts.

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