Change Control of Rural Schools

By Dr. Joseph Schafer, Professor of History and Director of Extension Work in the University of Oregon at Eugene.

In his first article on the country school, Dr. Schafer took a stand in favor of consolidation of several districts so that the old-time one-room district school might become the up-to-date four or five room grade school. In such schools as the latter, much greater efficiency is likely to be achieved at an expense not necessarily any greater, Dr. Schafer maintains. This article is a continuation and conclusion.—Editor.

IN THE FIRST PAPER of this series, I pointed out the old type of "district school of one room and one teacher" had become defective because it could no longer do the work required of a school furnishing the main opportunity for the education of country children in this new age. I indicated, also, some of the reasons why it has been found difficult to get rid of the old established district in favor of a new district capable of supporting the new and higher type of school which the times demand.

In the present paper I shall try to point out some of the political and institutional changes which we must have, as it seems to me, before we can hope to secure generally for our people the benefits of the new type of rural school

Statewide Movements.

To begin with, we wish to promote a statewide movement for the organization of proper districts, call them consolidated districts, union districts, rural life school districts, or what not. Now, a very practical, immediate obstacle in the way of consolidation in most cases is the question of building new school houses to take the places of several existing school houses which, by the consolidation of districts they have served, are rendered of little or no value.

There is usually an initial expense in building which under present conditions means a special tax upon the property of the district. This fact prevents many districts, which would otherwise be favorable to consolidation, from taking the first step toward that desired end. In Wisconsin the Legislature recently set aside a small apportionment called the "Consolidation Fund," which is used for the sole purpose of promoting consolidation by aiding new consolidated districts to build new school houses. One-half the expense of the building is born by the state fund, the local district paying the other half. The result is to stimulate the movement toward consolidation.

Organize School Interests.

Secondly, we need an organization of school interests which shall take hold of this problem officially with a new zeal and a new authority. Our county superintendents are generally favorable to the new type of rural schools; but they have not the authority nor the opportunity of leadership necessary to bring about rapid changes in the system. In matters like the changing of school boundaries, the county school superintendent is obliged to work with the county commissioners. These men, excellent citizens in their way, are primarily interested in other county matters. They have been elected usually on the issue of good roads, or the issue of lower taxes, or some other local issue wholly aside from the question of education. In educational matters therefore they represent the people of the county only dimly and indirectly.

There is another educational board, so called, in each county, which, however, is not a representative one. It is appointed by the county superintendent and its sole purpose is to aid the superintendent in the selection of rural supervisors for the county.

Create County Education Board.

In place of these two boards, the boundary board, which has important educational functions but not necessarily any interest in education, and the educational board, which has some educational interest, but no adequate power or functions and which is not elective as such boards ought to be, there should be created a thoroughly representative county board of education of say five members to have entire control of the general educational policies of the rural schools. They should be chosen from the citizens of the county most deeply and intelligently interested in rural education and rural life improvement through education; they should have the power with, by and through the county superintendent, who is their educational expert—and who as I personally believe should be appointed by them—to redistrict the whole county on the authorization of a majority of the voters, to initiate changes looking toward consolidation of districts, to administer state regulations relating to teachers' certificates, to fix standards for school buildings, grounds, equipment, etc., and in brief to have general supervision of local rural schools, school districts and school children.

In some states, of which Wisconsin is an example, there is a tendency to centralize the supervision of rural schools in the State Department of Education. The State Department, for example, has direct supervision over the newer types of rural schools, the distribution of the funds for aiding consolidation, the administration of buildings, etc.

There is much to be said in favor of this policy of centralization.

Nevertheless, I believe it would be wise in Oregon to try out the other plan in which more power and initiative is exercised by the people of the counties themselves through the elective boards of education. The policy of centralization removes educational control farther from the people's leadership, is more expensive, and less regardful of the local needs, which in our state differ greatly from county to county.

Besides, this plan of centralization abandons the very real advantage to be gained from the activity of a considerable number of county educational boards, each vying with all the others in the effort to make the rural schools of their county the best of all in the state. The county plan makes use of more widespread educational interests. It utilizes most fully the educational talent of our people and at the same time it does not exclude the leadership of the State Department, which can be exercised in a multitude of ways toward the betterment of the rural schools in every county of the state. In fact, it strengthens the State Department by making it necessary for it to co-operate with the vital educational forces of each county whose support the department is sure to have so long as it exercises a real leadership in educational affairs.

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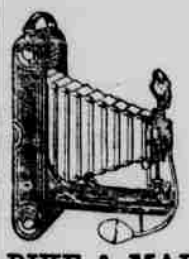

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