

PROGRESS REPORT ON SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION IN IOWA\*

by  
 J. C. Wright  
 State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
 State of Iowa

School Years 1954-1955 to 1957-1958

There are three major reasons for reorganizing local school districts. These are (a) to provide the best possible education for all of the children in all of the schools of the state, (b) to provide quality educational programs at the least possible cost, and (c) to devise a fair and equitable distribution of these costs among all segments of our society.

Most sections of the country are much farther along on school district reorganization than Iowa. Some forty years ago there were well over 200,000 school districts in the United States. Ten years ago, the number had dropped to about 100,000. Today, there are less than 50,000 districts. Iowa, Nebraska and the two Dakotas have lagged behind other states in reorganizing schools. Last year, these four Midwestern states educated only 4 per cent of the school children of the nation, yet they had a trifle more than 25 per cent of all of the school districts in the entire United States!

Approvals at Record Rate

School patrons in Iowa are, however, beginning to approve reorganizations of their local districts at a record rate. This fine progress in solving our most critical public school problem is largely due to the constructive leadership of county and local administrators and school boards, teachers and informed lay citizens. Valuable assistance has been rendered by courageous and farsighted editors of daily and weekly papers. Radio and TV stations have also made important contributions.

The table below lists the number of our public school districts of all types for the last four years:

1954-1955	4,417
1955-1956	4,142
1956-1957	3,691
1957-1958	3,323

Thus, in a three-year period the total number of districts has been reduced by 1,094, a decrease of approximately 25 per cent. This is a significant achievement in such a short time. One or more successful reorganizations have occurred in 80 of the 99 counties within the state in the past few years.

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### Rural Areas Ahead of Towns

It is interesting to note that in general people in rural areas are ahead of those in many towns in this matter of school reorganization. People in the non-urban areas have demonstrated their desire for the best possible schooling for their children by closing rural schools at a rapid rate. In 1930 there were over 10,000 one-room rural schools in Iowa. The numbers of such schools in operation during the last four years are:

1954-1955	3,261
1955-1956	2,903
1956-1957	2,442
1957-1958	1,904

Several counties have eliminated all rural schools. At the present rate one-room rural schools will be gone in most of our counties in a few years.

### Biggest Problem is High Schools

Our major concern is not with the rural schools. As indicated above, farm people are closing them and sending their children to elementary schools in urban centers. Nor is it with elementary schools in small or large towns. Most of these are doing a reasonably good job. Our most serious problem is the large number of small, inefficient high schools which we are operating. We have the dubious distinction of having five per cent of all the high school districts in the entire United States. Of every twenty high schools in the country, one is in Iowa. Only three states, all with large populations, have more. These states are Pennsylvania, Ohio and Texas.

While our record in the reduction in the number of small high schools through reorganization is not so impressive as for non-high school districts, we are making progress. Statistics on the number of districts maintaining approved four-year high schools for the last four years are:

1954-1955	819
1955-1956	808
1956-1957	788
1957-1958	745

The reduction in the number of high school districts by 74 in three years is encouraging; however, if we are to assure each boy and girl of an opportunity for a well-rounded high school education, we will need to combine or eliminate a good many more of our small high schools.

## Farmers Favor Bigger Schools

Wallace's Farmer and Iowa Homestead, in its December 15, 1956 issue, announced the results of a poll of Iowa farmers on the question, "What size high school do you think is likely to provide the best education for your children?" Farmers responded as follows:

Around 100 pupils	18%
Around 200 pupils	32%
Around 300 pupils	30%
Around 400 pupils	11%
500 or more pupils	9%
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	100%

It will be noted that 82% of the rural people who participated in the poll favored high schools of 200 or more pupils for their children. In order to maintain an enrollment of 200 pupils in the four high school grades, a district would need at least 400-500 children in the grades kindergarten through eight.

Many citizens do not realize that the large majority of high schools in Iowa are much smaller than 200 pupils. High school enrollments in the 745 districts which are maintaining approved four-year high schools in Iowa during the 1957-1958 school year are distributed as follows:

0 - 24	11
25 - 49	135
50 - 74	146
75 - 99	106
100 - 149	147
150 - 199	58
200 - 299	60
300 - 399	35
400 - 499	12
500 - 599	10
600 and above	25
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	745

Of these 745 districts which are operating high schools this year, 603 or over 80% have less than 200 pupils; 398 or 53% have less than 100 pupils, while 146 or nearly 20% have less than 50 pupils!

More Youngsters in Districts

It is encouraging to note, however, that our people are beginning to "raise their sights" with reference to the numbers of children in reorganized districts. Data on the per cent of reorganizations approved by the voters which have included as many as 500 or more children in grades kindergarten or one through twelve during the past four years are:

1953-1954	10%
1954-1955	33%
1955-1956	50%
1956-1957	80%

There is a tendency to measure progress in school reorganization in terms of the number of districts eliminated. Probably a more accurate evaluation would be in the number of good reorganizations formed. Good districts include enough children and, if possible, sufficient taxable valuation to enable local citizens to provide broad programs of education at a reasonable cost per pupil without financial hardship on the individual taxpayers. It is also important to remember that normally, new districts should not be formed at the expense of already-existing good districts.

Enough Pupils for Broad Programs

While it is true that the number of pupils in a school district is surely not the only factor which should be used to measure its adequacy, it does rank high in the opinion of national school authorities. A reasonable high school enrollment is necessary if pupils are to have adequate scholastic competition with their fellows as well as desirable social contacts with a substantial number of other youngsters. Then too, broad programs for both college and non-college bound pupils are seldom offered unless high schools have enough pupils to enable them to operate efficiently.

In recent years the large majority of our people, who have concerned themselves with school district reorganization to the extent of studying and voting on the matter, have decided that they want administrative units of adequate size. Such reorganized districts or administrative units should contain as many attendance centers, or separate school buildings, as are needed to provide modern programs of education at reasonable costs for each pupil and reduce travel time on school busses, particularly for children in elementary grades.

Most Areas in High School Districts

As a result of the larger reorganizations which have occurred during the past three years, the number of high school districts with 500 or more

pupils from grades kindergarten through twelve in the state has been substantially increased as shown below:

1954-1955	165
1955-1956	184
1956-1957	206
1957-1958	227

Because of the sharp increase in the number of school reorganizations in the last three years, a majority of the total land area of Iowa is now in high school districts. It is anticipated that the trend will continue at an accelerated rate with the result that in another four or five years, virtually all of the state will be included in such districts. Here are the percentages of the state's area in high school districts for the last four years:

1954-1955	36.9%
1955-1956	41.9%
1956-1957	48.9%
1957-1958	55.6%

The State Department of Public Instruction has always contended that the schools are the most important "industry" in any community, regardless of its size. We insist that this is true because the "product" of our schools, our children, is our most valuable resource.

It is heartening to observe that the citizens of Iowa, under leadership of enlightened lay and professional people, are moving in the direction of making it possible for boys and girls to receive a sound, modern educational program which will enable them to compete successfully with those of other states and countries in this "satellite" age.

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