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THE IMPACT OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT ON EDUCATION
WITH
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

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THE IMPACT OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT ON EDUCATION WITH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Introduction

Ever since World War II ended, American schools have experienced rapid growth, but now more and more school systems are confronted with declining enrollments. The old problems of overcrowding; double sessions, temporary facilities and bond issues have been replaced with new problems of how to finance increasing educational costs while enrollments are shrinking, what to do about empty classrooms, and the headaches of selling old school buildings while attempting to pay for new ones. It thus becomes a business of numbers where enrollment affects long-range planning, staffing patterns, utilization of space, and school finance. Administrators and board members must analyze numbers as the basis for decision-making.

Shrinking school enrollments have crept up on American society which had become psychologically growth-oriented--growth in standard of living, growth in the gross national product, and growth in population. The post World War II "baby boom" created sharp enrollment increases in the 1950's and 1960's. These enrollment increases impacted the country's school systems, particularly in the suburbs. According to U. S. Office of Education (USOE) statistics, the enrollments skyrocketed by 52% in that period from 28 million to 42.7 million. (14, p.8) And, Bedford, Massachusetts Superintendent William Keough, Jr. pointed out in a recent *School Management* magazine article that:

Small country towns were transformed, seemingly overnight, into fields of residential rooftops, their symmetrical patterns broken only by the open spaces of the neighborhood schools. As these small communities turned into mushrooming suburbs, the focal point of civic interest as well as the major municipal tax investment was school construction. (33, pp. 32)

George Grier alerted the nation in his 1971 report, "The Baby Bust," that growth had peaked. His report finally brought into focus what the 1969 and 1970 dropping enrollments in kindergarten and first grade had indicated.

It has been an overwhelming task for a growth-oriented educational system to shift gears to declining enrollments and rapidly inflating costs. The matter has been complicated by the uneven distribution of the impact within districts and across states. Those "country towns" transformed overnight into large communities with increased population, and now faced with fewer children, do not dry up and blow away but remain with approximately the same number of houses, only with a lower ratio of children per home. Therefore, growth and decline are not mutually or statistically related. Homes are

not eliminated because of the declining household population, and classrooms still exist, but with fewer students. To make the transition from boom to bust is very difficult, to say the least.

The enrollment dip has been reflected across the country, and the statistics spell trouble. From peaks in the late 60's, Boston, Massachusetts, has lost 4%; Buffalo, New York--20%; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania--25%; Memphis, Tennessee--18%; Tulsa, Oklahoma--9%; Portland, Oregon--8%; and Los Angeles, California--5%. (33, p. 32)

In addition, Louisville, Kentucky, has lost 12%, and indications are that Louisville will lose another 20% in the next three years. Wichita, Kansas, following the closing of a major industry and changes in military base commitments, has been forced to close thirteen schools over the past five years. Salt Lake City, Utah, felt the problem as early as eight years ago and has since lost 35% of its enrollment and closed 20 schools. (17, p. 7)

Even though the trend is for declining enrollments, the impact for most people is specific, and some cities and suburbs are going against the national trend. Atlanta, Georgia, Houston and Dallas, Texas, and San Jose, California, are among the large communities in this category. (17, p. 7)

Adjusting to enrollment fluctuations from city to city or within a school district is not easy. For example, what does one do when peak enrollments are in the middle grades--from grades four to nine? Does a district ignore this bulge and place children in the more crowded grades on double sessions? Or, does the district provide additional facilities, knowing full well that these new facilities may be declared surplus in a few years?

The stresses on education created by this difficult transition from growth to decline have been and will continue to be very trying. Perhaps we should reprimand ourselves for the oversimplification we practiced during the growth period. It was easy to convince people to spend more money on education when growth was obvious, and it appeared that continued growth was inevitable. We translated growth into simple teacher-pupil-classroom ratios and placed an appropriate price tag on providing for this growth. And, because entire neighborhoods were being built, our methodology seemed reasonable. Unfortunately, this same methodology does not work so well when dealing with declining enrollments. Educational costs do not go down the way they go up. We need to work to close the credibility gap which has developed as the result of our simplistic explanation of enrollments and costs.

The Problem

Briefly stated, then, the problem is the relationship of declining enrollments to (1) Staff, (2) Finance, (3) Program, and (4) Facilities. However, a discussion of the general topic of "declining enrollments" is in order before examining each of the components related to the problems.

The U. S. Office of Education reported last May that from 1962 to 1972 enrollment had grown from 44.8 million to 50.7 million or a 13% increase. The projections from 1972 to 1982 indicate a drop from 50.7 million to 45.1 million which is an 11% decrease and will leave the country's school systems just slightly above the 1962 level. (33, p. 32)

The K-12 enrollment may be graphed according to level and type of institution. Enrollment data contained in the USOE Projections of Educational Statistics to 1982-83 and shown in Figure 1 reveal that the total public and nonpublic elementary and secondary enrollment began to decline prior to 1972 and is projected as a continued decline until approximately 1980. That same pattern is basically reflected in the public elementary school projections through 1980. However, the public secondary enrollment shows a slightly different configuration. Those projections indicate an increase until approximately 1975, then begin to decline until 1982. The enrollment in nonpublic elementary schools began declining in 1967 and leveled out in 1972, while the nonpublic secondary enrollment has shown less fluctuation. In fact, as Figure 1 shows, it is difficult to graphically represent those nonpublic school enrollment shifts. Also, it should be noted that the editors of Projections assumed constant nonpublic school enrollments between 1972 and 1982 because of limited data available from that sector. (16, p. 5)

Figure 2 on page 4 shows an age-grouping representation of these enrollment trends. By viewing Figure 2, one can see the downward trend in both the 5 to 13 and 14 to 17 age categories. However, the increase in the 18 to 21-year olds by 1982 is also apparent. (16, p. 9)

It is obvious that enrollments are declining and will continue to decline in elementary schools until 1980. This generalization is true, but we must avoid accepting it at its face value. Even though there is and will continue to be a general decline in school enrollments until 1980, the various components of the enrollment situation present some dichotomies. For example, there is a "bulge" that is evident in any study of the specifics of enrollment trends. This "bulge" is in the upper elementary grades and the junior high schools now which means increasing high school enrollments for the next several years. However, the graduation of this "bulge" will produce a startling effect on the overall enrollment statistics. Instead of the rather gradual enrollment decline the country's schools have been experiencing, the loss of the "bulge" will produce accelerated declines for a period of time. This situation is graphically presented in Figure 3 page 5 even though the main thrust of that representation concerns staffing problems brought about by declining enrollments.

In summary, then, declining enrollments are a "fact of life" and will continue to be until 1980. Even though there are a few spots of continued growth (Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, San Jose), this growth has "slowed down," and most school systems will continue to experience declines. And, the present "bulge" in the upper elementary grades and junior high schools will create accelerating declines in the near future.

Staff

Staffing patterns is foremost among the issues related to declining enrollments. Specifically, teacher-pupil ratios, staff reduction policies, and affirmative action programs cry for attention when dealing with this aspect. Before dealing with each of these subjects in detail, though, a general overview of the staffing situation is in order. Figure 3 on page 5 contains such an overview. It will be noted that the directions exemplified by the curves on that chart are similar to those depicted in Figures 1 and 2, pages 3 and 4 respectively. The general declines in enrollments in the late 60's and early 70's have produced similar decreases in need for classroom teachers, but this relationship has not been commensurate. The rate of enrollment declines has been higher than the rate decreases in staff positions.

This fact, then produces one of the few positive aftermaths of the declining enrollment situation. There is a definite trend to smaller pupil-teacher ratios. The USOE Projections (16, p. 3) indicate the following:

Table 1. Ratio of Students to Classroom Teachers

Year	Elementary	Secondary	Total
1962	28.5	21.7	25.7
1972	24.4	18.9	21.8
1982 (Projected)	22.0	17.6	20.0

As can be seen from these statistics, there has been a decrease in pupil-teacher ratios of nearly 16% which is quite significant.

Even though the pupil-teacher ratio situation is improving somewhat, there is still a need to reduce staff in many school systems. The real "sticky wicket" concerns the method that is used.

Dr. Myron Lieberman, in a recent *School Management* article discussed the many dimensions of the staff reduction problem. He pinpointed the following items: (40, pp. 16-17)

1. Voter resistance to school taxes has increased so dramatically that staff reductions and other cost-cutting practices are being forced on school districts out of proportion to declining enrollments.
2. Because of the job market, fewer teachers are leaving the profession, thus affecting normal attrition.

FIGURE 1. ENROLLMENT IN GRADES K-12 OF REGULAR DAY SCHOOLS, BY INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL: UNITED STATES, FALL 1962 TO 1982 (16, p. 5)

(Millions of Students)

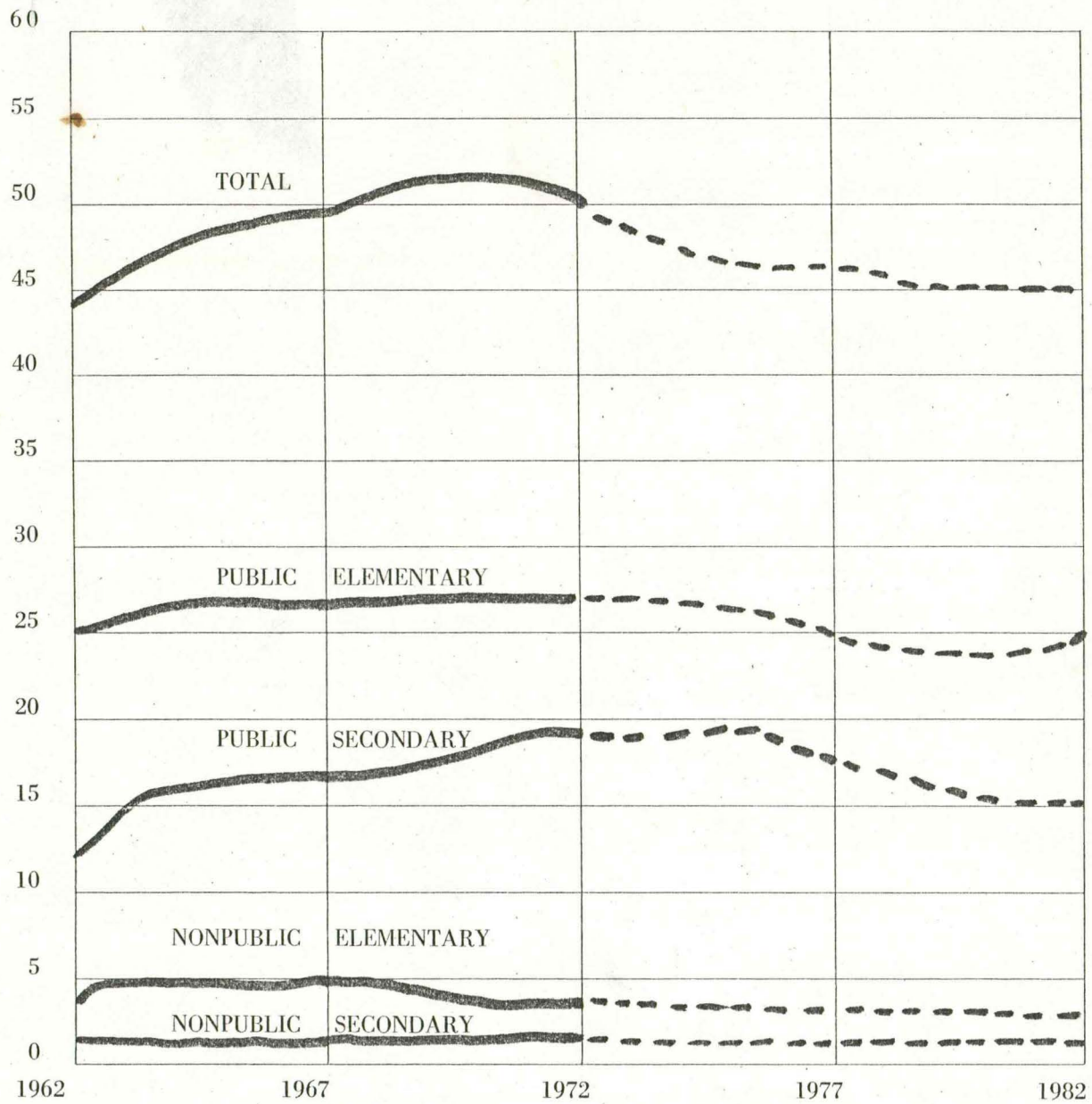


FIGURE 2. SCHOOL-AGE POPULATION: UNITED STATES,

OCTOBER 1962 TO 1982 (16, p. 9)

(Millions)

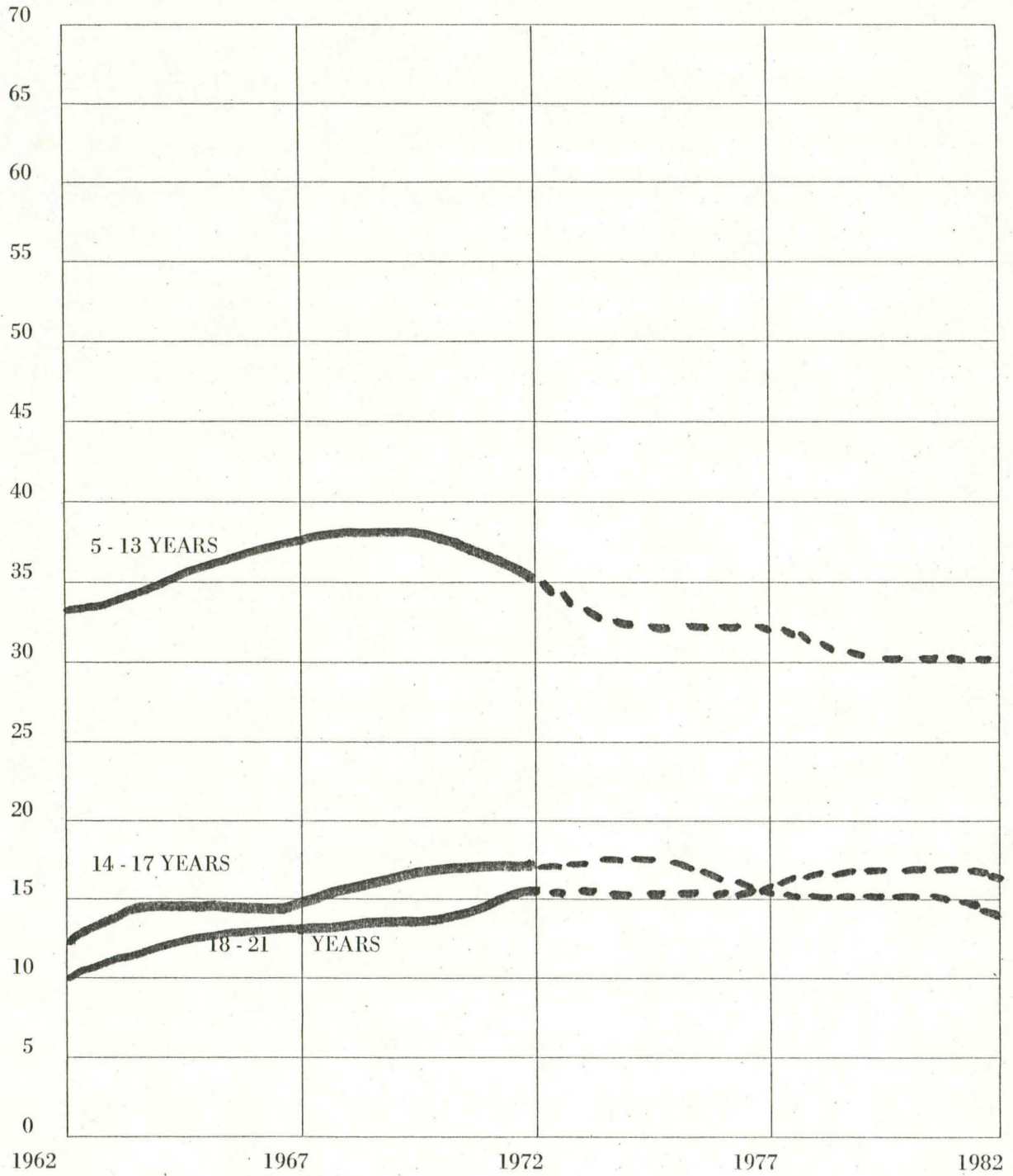
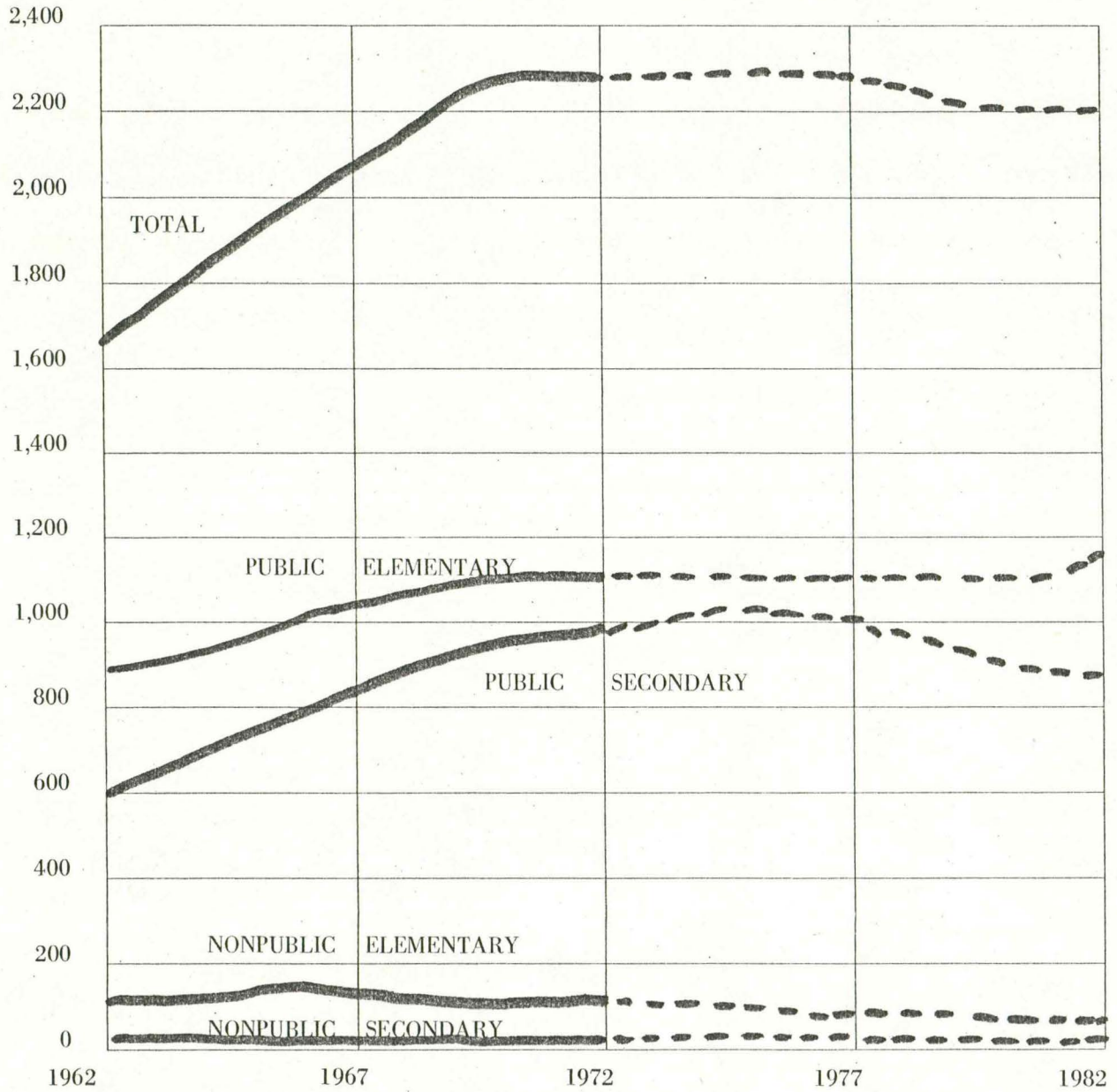


FIGURE 3. CLASSROOM TEACHERS IN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS, BY INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL: FALL 1962 TO 1982 (16, p. 7)

(Thousands of Teachers)



3. Seniority in some form inevitably becomes an issue in any staff reduction program.
4. Finally, the entire issue of a staff reduction policy ultimately ends up as a negotiable item. (Note: Dr. Lieberman advises school boards to keep the staff reduction policy outside the negotiation process, but recognizes that that isn't always possible.)

A further refinement of the staff reduction problem brought about by declining enrollments is its effect on affirmative action programs. It has not been easy to successfully implement affirmative action programs. The lack of significant numbers of properly trained women and people from minority groups, coupled with a high degree of competition for those who do qualify, accounts for this difficulty.

A recent article in *Nation's Schools* by Robert Yeager deals with that issue. (64, pp. 16-18) He quotes Louis Zlokovich, assistant to Berkeley Superintendent Richard L. Foster, as follows: "When employment is down, affirmative action is down, too."

Hayward, California, Director of Personnel Robert Cochrane in that same article presents this appraisal of the affirmative action dilemma:

Declining enrollments come at a time when pressure for more minority hiring is mounting, particularly from Chicano groups. But landing qualified minority job candidates can be tough. Competition from other districts is unusually keen. Affirmative action programs make the competition even rougher. As a result, if there's a choice between equally qualified applicants, we probably would lean toward the minority member. Such leanings give affirmative action plans their greatest impact and cause the most resentment among would-be employers and unsuccessful white candidates.

To summarize, then, pupil-teacher ratios, staff reduction policies and affirmative action programs are all affected by declining enrollments.

Finance

Perhaps the most complex of the "related" issues is that of finance. Declining enrollments and the financing of schools have a somewhat strange and complex relationship. One would expect that a declining number of children needing to be served would produce a commensurately reduced need for financial resources. Even though a one-to-one relationship is not to be anticipated, some savings should be possible. This is not happening and is not expected to occur in the immediate future. Figure 4 dramatically illustrates that fact. The sharp increase in the 60's, which were paralleled by increases in enrollments, are projected to continue in the late 70's and early 80's without a corresponding increase in enrollment.

What, then, are those factors at work which are reversing what could seem to be a logical relationship between enrollment and costs?

Two angles quickly emerge. First, the lower pupil-teacher ratios discussed previously in this paper are rapidly increasing the per pupil costs. Personnel costs always account for a major portion of a school district's budget. Therefore, when there is a less efficient use of staff (lower pupil-teacher ratios), unit costs increase. This conclusion is quantitative in nature and does not consider qualitative issues.

Second, the runaway inflation of the past several years is probably the real "culprit." The topic of inflation received considerable attention in the most recent "Cost of Education Index" (CEI) published by *Nation's Schools*. (47, pp. 14-15 and 63) Rubin Pollock, assistant superintendent from Monticello, New York, and this year's interpreter of the CEI, pointed out that in spite of falling enrollments, total expenditures for education increased by almost 15% during 1973-74. He further states:

The declining enrollment trend complicates the interpretation of increased expenditures which are reflected in this year's CEI. Since the CEI is based upon expenditures per pupil, ADA as well as cost figures influence the results. For example, if a district spending \$1,000 per pupil were to keep its total expenditures constant and if it were to experience a 5% decline in enrollment, the cost per pupil would rise to \$1,503 with no corresponding increase in appropriations.

Mr. Pollock also discusses another interesting dimension of the finance problem--the "linearity" of an expenditure/enrollment curve. A linear relationship would produce "straight line" relationships between enrollments and expenditures. A nonlinear relationship produces "curves" with "horizontal sections followed by sharp changes."

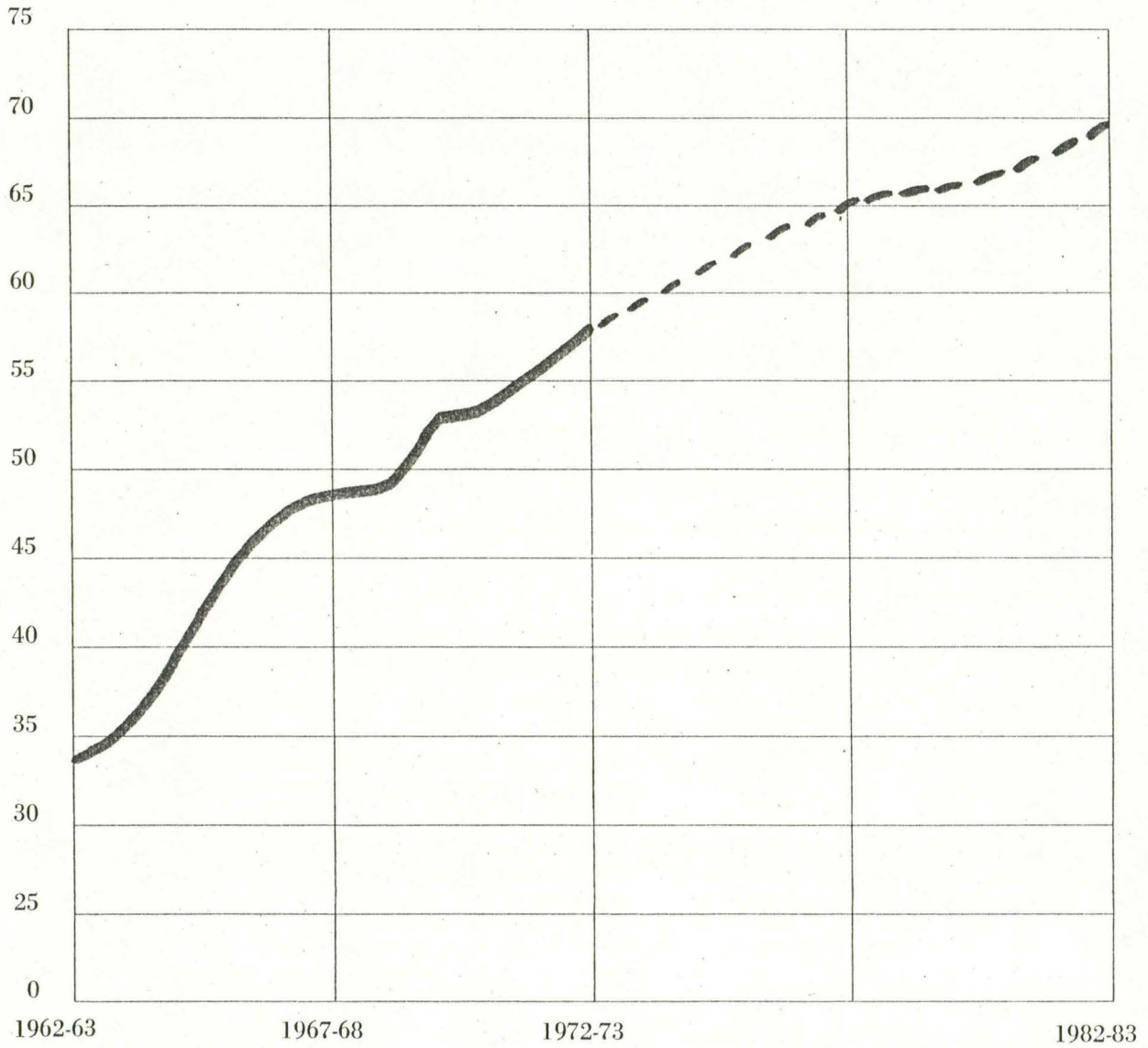
He explains it this way:

In the short term, the nonlinear relationship of costs to enrollments appears to be an acceptable hypothesis. A decrease in the ADA of an elementary school from 625 to 600 probably does not result in any meaningful change in the appropriations required to operate that facility. Decreases in expenditures for textbooks and teaching supplies, which represent about 2% of the cost of operation, are the only obvious cost savings. There is no apparent change in the need for the major appropriations such as salaries, maintenance and operations.

As stated earlier, the relationship of finance and declining enrollments is a strange and complex one. However, the complexity doesn't diminish the necessity of dealing with it. Even though the statistics, both present and projected, indicate continued increases in expenditure levels, those on the

FIGURE 4. TOTAL EXPENDITURES (1972-73 DOLLARS), BY
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS
1962-63 TO 1982-83 (16, p. 8)

(Billions of 1972-73 Dollars)



"firing line" know how difficult it has been just to "keep even" in these inflationary times. In addition, the propensity of state legislatures to impose statutory budget limitations on school districts based on enrollments has added to this problem.

Program

The relating of declining enrollments to program is a bit more difficult to verbalize. The relationship is there, but it in turn must be related to the staff and finance issues which have just been discussed as well as the "facilities" problem yet to be explored in this paper.

For example, it is difficult to prove that declining enrollments per se have much affect on programs unless a school system is so small that it no longer has enough students to have a degree of comprehensiveness in its program offerings. Rather, it is the lack of financing that has forced staff reductions that ultimately affects programming. People make programs possible. If they are not available or are expected to extend their talents too thinly, programs suffer. It is in this dimension, then, that the relating of declining enrollments to programs takes place.

To carry this a step further, the ability to improve programs or to add new ones is practically impossible. In fact, inflation has made it hardly possible to maintain status quo programming, let alone aspire to expansion. The need for improved and expanded programming in special education and career education are but two examples of "needs of the times." Thus, it is important to understand this interrelatedness of declining enrollments, staff reductions and dwindling finances to programming problems.

Facilities

The final relationship issue to be discussed in this paper before dealing with recommendations is the affect of declining enrollments on school facilities. An initial reaction might be that this is a "plus" factor. After all, overcrowding of facilities during the "growth" period was the rule rather than the exception. A decrease in enrollment should make it possible to have that special music room or to provide more than "closet-like" space to speech therapists and other specialized personnel. In fact, a few walls can be removed to allow for some team teaching and other flexible programming patterns. Here's where the facilities issue can have a positive affect on program.

All of these factors are indeed pluses and should be exploited to the fullest to bring about improvements in the entire school program. It's only when this process results in too much space for the enrollment involved, and the school district must consider closing of buildings that real problems arise.

The closing of a school building can be a traumatic experience for all parties concerned. Katherine E. Eisenberger has written an article entitled, "Closing a School: Some Ways

to Ease the Trauma," which provides insight into this problem. The important points may be summarized as follows: (8, pp. 33-35)

1. Loyalty is not system-wide. There are no district supporters, only school supporters. Those dedicated parents, who worked to get the district budget passed, were in reality working for their local school which needed a part of the district budget.
2. School closings are not only economic or financial problems, instead they are people problems. Parents fight to preserve a unique personal investment. The local school provides for meaningful involvement and purposeful participation with local school principals, teachers and other parents. Reputations, influence, and acceptance have been established. The loss of these three is threatened when there is talk of closing a local school.
3. Teachers oppose school closings because they mean the cold reality of loss of jobs or transfers. The loss of jobs is an obvious concern; however, transfers create psychologically threatening situations involving the potential loss of reputation, influence, and acceptance, at least temporarily.

In summary, then, the following generalizations seem appropriate when considering the relationship of declining enrollments to the issues of staff, finance, program, and facilities.

1. There is a relationship between declining enrollments and staffing patterns but not a direct one. For example, the number of classroom teachers is declining but not in the same proportion as student enrollment. Improved pupil-teacher ratios are being achieved, but it is still becoming necessary to reduce the number of professional staff members significantly. Staff reduction policies and affirmative action programs are being affected negatively.
2. The relationship between declining enrollments and finance is a very complex one. The forces of inflation and the improvement of pupil-teacher ratio is creating a nonlinear relationship between enrollment and cost trends. In fact, projections indicate a continued increase in spending while enrollments will decline until 1980.
3. The interrelatedness of all of the issues--staff, finance, and facilities--must be realized to understand the relationship of declining enrollments to programs. People produce programs. The availability of those people depends on finance. Thus, programs cannot prosper in the absence of either or both of the other two factors.
4. Declining enrollments can produce positive results in the availability of facilities. As enrollments decline,

pressures on facilities are relieved, but too large a decrease can create the anxieties of partial or total closing of a building with all of its attendant problems.

Recommendations

"Recommendations for Action" complete this paper. Because of the nature of the topic, several recommendations are very general in nature with the remaining ones exhibiting a bit more specificity. In addition, many of the recommendations are interrelated.

Recommendation No. 1 - Statewide task forces should be established to deal with the problems of declining enrollments. The purposes and functions of such task forces should be:

1. To create an awareness and perception level among many groups of people - professional educators, lay people, legislators, etc. - that the country is in an enrollment decline mode.
2. To convene meetings of interested organizations, both education related and non-education connected, for the purpose of informing their members on the general dynamics of the situation and to "brain storm" solutions.
3. To develop strategies that local school districts may use to deal with declining enrollments and all the attendant issues.
4. To work with legislative groups charged with developing new delivery systems (reorganization of local school districts) for education.

Recommendation No. 2 - Create within the state departments of education the capability to apply a systems analysis approach to the declining enrollment problem. Such capability should make it possible for state education departments:

1. To identify and analyze statewide enrollment trends.
2. To cooperate with other statewide agencies - health, welfare, planning, and economic development - in short and long-range planning activities.
3. To involve all segments of education in a continuing dialogue on how to improve educational opportunities for all of the state's citizens.

Recommendation No. 3 - Launch a program to persuade the public and state and national legislative bodies that education should be given a higher priority. If education is given a higher priority in the allocation of the states' and nation's resources, it should be possible:

1. To continue to lower the pupil-teacher ratio.

2. To take advantage of the pool of trained manpower available in education.
3. To expand educational programming at both ends of the traditional spectrum - early childhood and continuing education.

Recommendation No. 4 - Efforts should be made to repeal state school finance laws that are based on a one-to-one relationship between enrollment and budget limitations.

Recommendation No. 5 - Local school districts should be urged to involve staff and the general public in the development of plans to utilize excess space in school buildings. Such plans should give priority thinking:

1. To adult and continuing education possibilities.
2. To early childhood and other child development programs.
3. To community programs, recreation, senior citizen activities, and other "people" programs.

Recommendation No. 6 - Launch a major effort at all levels that will address itself to the general areas of staff utilization and development. Several suggested areas of attention are:

- a. Differentiated staffing.
- b. Pre-service and inservice training.
- c. Staff performance and accountability.

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