

## **One-Room Schools of Nebraska, Montana, South Dakota, California, and Wyoming**

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Since 1959 the number of one-room schools in America has declined from 24,000 to an estimated 840 today. Over 75 percent of the remaining one-room schools are in the states of Nebraska, Montana, South Dakota, California, and Wyoming. This article presents descriptive information about surviving one-room schools in these five states and reports, by state, the number of surviving one-room schools in America.

Bear Paw School, Unadilla Elementary, Emigrant Gap Elementary, Hanging Woman School, Two Dot School, Little Shasta Elementary and Crowheart School are among the one-room, one-teacher schools still operating in America. Today, for most people, the one-room school is little more than a legacy. Nevertheless, a few such schools have survived and continue to operate. Most of these schools are located in communities too remote for busing of children or too isolated for consolidation.

In America's early history, one-room schools were the standard for the nation's educational system. They were established wherever there were a few students whose parents could afford the services of a teacher. The school building generally was constructed on an unprofitable piece of land geographically centered in the area it was supposed to serve. Some schools were called "old field" schools because they were built on rocky or fallow fields [3]. Within those schools students may have huddled around pot-bellied stoves, attendance may have been infrequent due to labor needs associated with spring planting and fall harvest, and bad weather may have intermittently canceled classes, but learning continued. For tens of thousands of Americans, the one-room school house was their only formal educational experience. Thousands of others moved on from one-room schools to receive advanced education in colleges and universities, later to make contributions in business, industry, science, and other professions.

### **SURVIVING ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS**

The latest figures from the National Center for Education Statistics [6] identified a total of 921 operating one-room schools in America, scattered across 29 different states. In a 1984 study [1], Barker et al. contacted each of the 29 state offices of education listed in the NCES report in order to determine how many of the 921 one-room schools were still operational. Contact was made by telephone, questionnaire, or personal letter. Each of

the 29 state offices of education responded. It was learned that operative one-room schools had declined from 921 in 1980 to an estimated 840 in 1984 and were scattered across 28 different states, rather than 29. The 840 total was estimated, due to the fact that some of these schools open and close from year to year—and even within the school year—to accommodate population flow and need. The largest numbers of surviving one-room schools were in the states of Nebraska, 385 schools; Montana, 99; South Dakota, 87; California, 41; and Wyoming, 31. Over 75 percent (643 schools) of the country's surviving one-room schools were within the boundaries of these five states—Nebraska alone had 45 percent (385 schools) of them. The purpose of this article is to report findings from a descriptive study of one-room schools in those states.

Other states with existing one-room schools included Alaska (28), North Dakota (26), Idaho (21), Michigan (17), Oregon (15), Maine (13), Arizona (12), and Nevada (12). Ten states had fewer than 10 schools each: Vermont (9), Washington (8), Colorado (7), New Hampshire (7), Texas (4), New Mexico (3), New York (3), Utah (3), Ohio (2), and West Virginia (2). The states of Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, and Mississippi each had one such school. With the exception of a few schools in Alaska, virtually all of America's surviving one-room schools were at the elementary level.

### **DECLINE OF ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS**

The period between the turn of the century and World War I marked the "Indian Summer" for the one-room school house. In 1918, 196,037 one-room schools dotted the American landscape. Of these, 6,638 were in Nebraska, 2,793 in Montana, 4,617 in South Dakota, 2,374 in California, and 1,150 in Wyoming [2]. With improvements in transportation and communication following World War I, one-room schools began to close (at the rate of about 4,300 per year) their doors forever. By

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1959 less than 24,000 remained. At that time, one-fourth of all public elementary schools in the United States were one-room schools. In 1959 there were 2,812 one-room schools in Nebraska, 820 in Montana, 2,338 in South Dakota, 300 in California, and 287 in Wyoming [2]. Due to the massive consolidation of public school districts in the 1960s and 1970s, one-room schools now have all but vanished.

### TODAY'S ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS

As part of the 1984 study [1], state offices of education were contacted and mailing addresses obtained for 575 one-room schools in the five-state study area. A questionnaire inquiring about the teacher, students, and the community was mailed to the attention of each teacher in the study sample. A total of 305 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 53 percent. The number of questionnaires mailed in each state and number returned was as follows: Nebraska, 177 received of 317 mailed (56%); Montana, 59 of 99 (60%); South Dakota, 29 of 87 (33%); California, 23 of 41 (56%); and Wyoming, 17 and 31 (55%). The study's definition of a one-room school did not include specialty, continuation, alternative, or private schools. Some school buildings (20%) actually had two or even three classrooms; however, there was only one teacher at the school instructing one class of students. By study definition, this was deemed a one-room (one-teacher) school.

A summary of research findings obtained from this study include (see Table 1):

1. The average student enrollment in the schools by states ranged from a low of 8 in Montana and South Dakota to a high of almost 17 in California. Average student enrollments in the states of Nebraska and Wyoming were between 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> to 10.
2. It is probable that two or more of the students in most schools were siblings. The average numbers of families sending students to the schools were: 11.0 in California, 6.8 in Wyoming, 5.8 in Nebraska, and 5.1 in Montana and South Dakota.
3. Most students who attended one-room schools lived close to the school building. The longest average one-way distance traveled to attend school was reported to be 13.3 miles in Wyoming. Montana reported 11.3 miles; California, 10.6; South Dakota, 6.7; and Nebraska, 5.4.
4. Students who attended one-room schools appeared to be highly involved in time-on-task learning activities. According to teachers, actual instructional time averaged almost six hours in all of the states surveyed.
5. As expected, students in these schools received considerable individualized help and attention from teachers. The percentages of teachers reporting regular use of individualized instruction were 100 in both California and Wyoming, 91.5 in both Nebraska and Montana, and 86.2 in South Dakota. Regular use of peer-tutoring as an instructional technique was reported as follows: California, 78.2 percent; Montana, 66.1; Wyoming, 58.8; Nebraska, 42.3; and South Dakota, 34.4.
6. The degree to which computers were available for instructional use in the schools varied considerably. In California 95.6 percent of the schools had at least one computer; Wyoming, 35.3 percent; Montana, 25.4; South Dakota, 20.7; and Nebraska, 14.7. The availability of television in the classrooms for instructional purposes did not seem to be closely-correlated with having computers. In Nebraska 44.1 percent had a TV; 37.9 percent in South Dakota, 26.1 percent in California, 3.4 percent in Montana; no TV's were reported in Wyoming.
7. From the perspective of teachers, a high percentage of their students were about average achievers. In Wyoming 44.6 percent of students were identified as high achievers; South Dakota, 39.2; Montana, 38.2; Nebraska, 36.4; and California, 29.3.
8. The vast majority of teachers in all the states were female, and the average ages ranged between 36 and 40. Few teachers were inexperienced. The average number of years of teaching experience ranged from 8.4 (Wyoming) to 13.1 (Nebraska). Furthermore, most teachers had been teaching at that school for between two and five years.
9. Over 75 percent of teachers in the five states held bachelor's degrees. Only in the states of South Dakota, Nebraska, and Montana were there teachers who held either emergency certificates or two-year degrees. The percentages of these teachers were, respectively, 10.3, 10.2, and 3.4. In California over 23 percent of the teachers held master's degrees.
10. The typical teacher in a one-room school was isolated geographically. Those who appeared most isolated were in Wyoming where, on the average, they were over 39 miles (one-way) from the nearest hospital, 50 miles from shopping facilities, 47 miles from the county seat, and 220 miles from the nearest university. Teachers in Montana appeared to be the next most isolated.
11. Many teachers were provided housing or teacherages as part of their employment package. This was evident in every state, but it was most pronounced in Montana (61.0 percent) and Wyoming (52.9 percent).
12. Teachers in every state reported typical work days of eight to nine hours. This included about six hours of classroom instruction, between one-third and one hour of extra curricular activities and/or contacting parents, and one to two and one-half hours of grading papers and/or preparing lessons.
13. Except for teachers in California, over 75 percent of the teachers were responsible for school custo-

**TABLE 1**  
 Descriptive Findings of Existing One-Room Schools in Five Selected States  
 Reported by Teachers, 1984

Variable	Nebraska	Montana	So. Dakota	California	Wyoming
<b>GENERAL INFORMATION</b>					
Number of existing schools	385	99	87	41	31
Mean percent of schools used for evening/ weekend activities by the community	32.2	57.6	35.7	87.0	64.7
Mean percent of schools having computers	14.7	25.4	20.7	95.6	35.3
Mean percent of schools having televisions	44.1	3.4	37.9	26.1	-0-
<b>STUDENT INFORMATION</b>					
Mean student enrollment per school	9.5	8.1	8.3	16.6	9.4
Average number of families sending students to the school	5.8	5.1	5.1	11.0	6.8
Percent of students viewed as high achievers	36.4	38.2	39.2	29.3	44.5
<b>TEACHER INFORMATION</b>					
Percent female teachers	95.5	84.7	100	65.2	88.2
Average age of teachers	39.7	37.9	36.6	37.8	37.0
Mean total years teaching	13.1	8.6	11.6	12.3	8.4
Mean years taught in present school	4.6	3.5	3.9	6.7	2.4
Average number of hours spent per day in:					
Classroom instruction	5.9	6.0	5.7	5.5	6.0
Extra curricular activities	.4	.4	.3	.6	.3
Grading papers/preparing lessons	2.5	2.6	2.3	1.7	1.9
Contacting parents	.2	.4	.3	.5	.5
Percent provided "teacherage"	10.1	61.0	20.6	30.4	52.9
Average distance to nearest facilities one- way (miles):					
Hospital	17.5	43.2	30.5	26.1	39.4
Shopping	19.7	48.2	30.1	23.9	50.7
University	80.1	149.0	110.3	82.4	220.4
County seat	18.8	38.8	22.8	52.5	47.6
Additional responsibilities of teachers:					
Percent perform custodial work	86.4	74.6	82.7	21.7	76.5
Percent receive compensation	3.4	5.0	17.2	4.3	29.4
Percent perform grounds maintenance	29.9	40.7	31.0	13.0	41.2
Percent receive compensation	1.1	3.4	-0-	-0-	-0-
Highest college degree of teacher:					
Percent with emergency certificate or two-year degree only	10.2	3.4	10.3	-0-	-0-
Percent with Bachelor's only	83.6	93.2	82.8	76.9	94.1
Percent with Master's	6.2	3.4	6.9	23.1	5.9

dial work in addition to teaching responsibilities. Few received added salary compensation. In addition (California excepted), about one-third of the teachers reporting also were responsible for maintaining the school grounds.

#### STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS

No effort was made in this study to empirically measure student performance. However, in a follow-up study by

Muse [4], administrators and 204 students were contacted in nine Nebraska, Montana, and South Dakota high schools serviced, in part, by one-room elementary schools. The purpose was to determine how well students who graduated from one-room elementary schools performed at the high school level. Muse concluded that pupils from one-room elementary schools tended to have a difficult time adjusting to their first year of high school, but thereafter appeared to be no different in their behavior than other students. Most were clustered near

the average of all students in terms of academic performance, although a number of senior students did score well above average on the ACT exam. Interestingly, administrators reported that very few students from one-room elementary schools were discipline problems in the classroom or dropped out of high school. These students seemed to be as effective in high school as other students.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

What is to become of America's remaining one-room schools? More are likely to close. This is especially true in Nebraska, where enactment of Legislative Bill 662 by the 1985 Nebraska Legislature [6] requires the merger of all independent K-8 schools with a K-12 district no later than September 1, 1989. However, many of Nebraska's rural citizens opposed Legislative Bill 662 and conducted a petition drive which obtained 70,000 signatures, enough to force a referendum vote scheduled for November 1986 [7]. Voter approval of the previously enacted legislation will force consolidation of numerous Nebraska one-teacher elementary schools.

Although they are an endangered species, America's one-room schools will never become totally extinct. Simply put, many of those which remain are in areas too remote for long distance busing of students or too isolated for consolidation.

The one-room schools of yesteryear were most often viewed as centers of learning, as well as a source of community pride. Generally, consolidation of the school was opposed, but the citizenry also realized the advantages of larger schools. Compared to the small one-teacher school, larger schools could offer better trained teachers and a greater variety of curricula and extra curricular activities. Students attending one-room schools learned independently and progressed at their own rate. It was not unusual for a grade to have only one or two students, hence the pressure of competition was minimal. Yet, students received personalized encouragement to achieve. Cross-age and peer tutoring, individualized instruction,

high student expectations, a positive school environment, parental involvement, and emphasis of time on task all were common practices in these schools. Americans will never return to the days of the one-room schoolhouse, nor is it advocated here that they do so. Yet, a review of the educational philosophy of that era may have meaning. Learning, living, assuming personal responsibility—these were the essence of the one-room, one-teacher country school. Our nation's few remaining one-room schools help perpetuate this legacy and perhaps hold insights that still have implications for education in general.

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