

Research Note: The Growth of Old Order Mennonite Schools

Mark Dewalt

Professor Emeritus
Winthrop University
cdew2383@aol.com

Abstract: Schools for horse-and buggy Old Order Mennonite students have shown steady growth in the United States and Canada. In 1966, there were 34 schools located in Pennsylvania and Ontario. At that time, the majority of them were one-teacher schools led by a female teacher with an average of 27.4 pupils per teacher. By 1980, there were 138 schools located in nine states and Ontario. The majority were one-teacher schools led by a female teacher with an average of 24.2 students per teacher. By the 2022–2023 school year, there were 427 schools with an average of 14.7 pupils per teacher located in 14 states and three provinces. The majority of teachers were female, and the two-teacher school was now the most common type of school. Other key changes by the 2022–2023 school year were the number of schools with a special education teacher—52 schools (12% of all schools)—and the use of helpers (teaching assistants) in 22% of the schools. The growth rate of Old Order Mennonite schools was approximately seven new schools per year from 1966 through 2022.

Submitted November 17, 2023; accepted September 27, 2024; published December 19, 2024
<https://doi.org/10.18061/jpac.v5i1.9713>

Keywords: Old Order Mennonites, education, Anabaptists, teachers, one-teacher schools, rural education

Introduction

Judging by the traffic one sees in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, during tourist season, one could surmise that many of those sightseers enjoy viewing the beautiful homes, barns, fields, and one-room schools in the area. Most of the visitors will assume that these country schools are for Amish students. In fact, about 20% of them are organized by the Old Order Mennonites who also live and work in the area. Further, in a few cases, Amish and Mennonite children attend the same school (Old Order Mennonite informant, Fall 1988; Kraybill & Hurd, 2006; Johnson-Weiner, 2007). Today, the horse-and-buggy-driving Old Order Mennonites, also known as Team Mennonites, are composed of six large groups with various subgroups. Schools included in this research are those sponsored by these six groups: Old Order Mennonite Church in Canada, Groffdale Mennonite Church, Midwest Mennonite Conference, Stauffer Mennonite Church, Virginia Conference Old Order Mennonites, and the very conservative Old Order Mennonite Communities, which is also known as the Noah Hoover group (Young Center, 2024; Scott, 1996; Kraybill & Bowman, 2001). Notwithstanding differences among these Old Order Mennonite groups, the Old Order Mennonites are distinct from the Amish in several ways, including the use of meetinghouses as places of worship (rather than gathering for worship in members' homes), a conference-based church polity



rather than congregational polity, different clothing and hair grooming styles, and different practices around excommunication. In addition, most Old Order Mennonite settlements have retained a greater focus on agricultural employment, while many Amish have moved into nonfarm jobs. Finally, most Old Order Mennonites farm with steel-wheeled tractors (the Stauffer and Hoover groups do not) even though they use horse-drawn transportation on the road (Burdge, personal communication, October 2024; Wesner, 2024).

For many years, students in rural areas of the United States and Canada attended public one-room country schools. The Old Order Mennonites and the Amish sent their children to these public one-room schools, which provided students with an education up to the eighth grade. That pattern began to change in the twentieth century as public education leaders encouraged the consolidation of these one-room schools into larger schools that were often located in towns. Once this happened, the Old Order Mennonites and the Amish began to think about alternatives to these consolidated schools, given that they had been quite satisfied with public, one-room country schools. Stoll (2020) documents the struggle of the Amish to have their own schools and gives a brief history of how the Amish and Old Order Mennonites of Ontario worked together to form parochial schools for their respective communities between 1964 and 1966, and beyond. Further, Hostetler (1983) notes that the Old Order Mennonite groups see education after finishing eighth grade to be unnecessary and detrimental to community life, as do the Amish. Kraybill and Hurd (2006) concur and state that many Old Order Mennonites believe that a school-based education above eighth grade will lead to too much pride in self and exposure to too many worldly ideas.

According to *Blackboard Bulletin* (an Amish monthly education journal), the first two Old Order Mennonite schools opened in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, in 1949. In 1953, an Old Order Mennonite school was formed in Snyder County, Pennsylvania, and the next year an Old Order Mennonite school began in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The first Old Order Mennonite schools appeared in the Waterloo/Perth/Wellington area of Ontario in 1966. Smith (1983) notes that, as of 1983, Pennsylvania had more Mennonite schools (including those of both Old Order and more progressive groups) than any other state. Kraybill and Hurd (2006) note that, on occasion, Old Order Mennonites bought closed public one-room schools and reopened them as Old Order Mennonite schools.

There is a very limited number of recent books and articles that focus on Old Order Mennonite schools or, for that matter, Old Order Mennonites in general. A Google search in November 2023 resulted in two academic references to Old Order Mennonite schools. Each of the two has a distinct focus. Dewalt and Troxell (1987) published a case study of an Old Order Mennonite school in central Pennsylvania. The article focuses on the curriculum, students, teacher, teaching strategies, and other educational characteristics of the school. Kraybill and Hurd (2006) wrote the seminal work on Old Order Mennonites, and they discuss education in a portion of chapter 6 of their book. Chapter 7 of Johnson-Weiner's 2007 book, *Train Up a Child: Old Order Amish and Mennonite Schools*, details Old Order Mennonite schools in Lancaster County, and chapter 8 discusses curriculum, including the Old Order Mennonite Schoolaid Publishers. Other works that appeared in that search, such as Dewalt (2006) and Stoll (2020), are focused on the Amish. In addition,

Johnson-Weiner (2008) describes schools in a car-driving Old Order Mennonite group, a group that is beyond the scope of this study of horse-and-buggy Old Order Mennonites.

Method

Data for this project was obtained from *Blackboard Bulletin*. Staff at the periodical first published a listing of Amish and Old Order Mennonite teachers and schools in its November 1966 issue. *Blackboard Bulletin* stopped collecting school data in 2004 since the very large number of Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools in existence by that time made the issue of the magazine unwieldy.¹ Data for the 2022–2023 school year was obtained from *School Directory 2022–2023*, a publication produced by Edwin Lambright. Edsel Burdge at the Young Center at Elizabethtown College was contacted in August 2023 for a list of Old Order Mennonite communities in North America to confirm the representation of Old Order Mennonite communities in *School Directory*. Eighty-five percent of the Old Order Mennonite communities were represented. Settlements not included were usually composed of only one church district. Data from both sources was then entered and analyzed using SPSS. Data for this project is limited to North America.

Results

Table 1 shows the number of Old Order Mennonite schools per state or province. As one can see, there were 34 Old Order Mennonite schools, all in Pennsylvania and Ontario, in 1966. By 1970, the number had grown to 65, and by 1980, the number had more than doubled to 138 schools. By 1987, there were 164 Old Order Mennonite schools in North America, the large majority of which were located in Pennsylvania and Ontario. In 2004, there were 300 Old Order Mennonite schools located in 15 different states and provinces. Finally, by the 2022–2023 school year, the number of Old Order Mennonite schools had grown to 427 and they were located in 17 states and provinces. Pennsylvania and Ontario are still home to the largest number of schools. Clearly, as Old Order Mennonites move to new settlements, they build, staff, and maintain new schools. This pattern demonstrates their commitment to their approach to education, which does not reflect opposition to learning but shows their preference for small schools located near their homes, with a traditional curriculum focused on reading, writing, and mathematics, and that ends at eighth grade so that adolescents can learn important manual skills from adults in their community.

¹ It is not possible to know with certainty whether the earliest issues of *Blackboard Bulletin* included schools from all Old Order Mennonite groups, although the geographic places represented in the list suggest they did. As the years went on, the Old Order Mennonite schools listed became comprehensive of all groups.

Table 1*Old Order Mennonite Schools by Year and State/Province*

State/Province	1966	1970	1980	1987	2004	2022
Alabama						1
Illinois					1	2
Indiana			4	5	9	10
Iowa					4	12
Kentucky			3	4	18	29
Manitoba						1
Maryland		1	1	1	3	5
Michigan					2	3
Minnesota					1	
Missouri		1	12	13	26	34
New York			5	7	31	45
Ohio			3	4	14	23
Ontario	7	15	28	29	43	59
Pennsylvania	27	47	75	92	120	148
Prince Edward Island						1
Tennessee				1	1	7
Virginia		1	5	5	8	6
Wisconsin			2	3	19	41
Total	34	65	138	164	300	427

Note. The years used for this table were selected based on the availability of data and to illustrate growth over time spans.

Old Order Mennonite schools have had steady growth since their inception. The growth rate for schools from 1966–2022 was an average of seven new schools per year. The growth across time has been fairly stable, too (see Table 2).

Table 2*Growth Rate of Old Order Mennonite Schools by Time Interval*

Time interval	New schools	Growth rate, new schools per year
1966–1970	31	7.7
1970–1980	73	7.3
1980–1987	26	4.3
1987–2004	136	7.5
2004–2022	127	7.1

Table 3 shows the characteristics of Old Order Mennonite schools by time period, and it illustrates several interesting aspects of these schools. First, at the beginning, the large majority of

Old Order Mennonite schools were one-teacher schools (97% in 1966), but by 2022, the percentage of one-teacher schools had declined to 21%. This is an important shift and illustrates the fact that the Old Order Mennonites are modifying their schools and personnel to meet the needs of their teachers and pupils. While the average number of pupils per school has remained relatively constant, the average number of pupils per teacher has declined over time (from 27.4 in 1966 to 14.7 in the 2022–2023 school year).

In 1966, most Old Order Mennonite schools were one-teacher schools with a female teacher and an average of 27.4 pupils. All were located in Pennsylvania and Ontario. By 1987, Old Order Mennonite schools had an average of 31 pupils per school and 23 pupils per teacher, given that some schools had more than one teacher. The schools were located in ten states and in the province of Ontario. Sixty-five percent of the schools had one teacher, 31% had two teachers, and 4% had more than two teachers. Ninety-four percent of schools were served by female teachers, while 2% were served by a male teacher, and 4% had a male and a female teacher. Three schools had a helper to assist the teachers, and two schools identified a teacher assigned to special education.

Table 3

Old Order Mennonite School Characteristics, 1966–2022

Characteristic	1966	1970	1980	1987	2004	2022
Number of schools	34	65	138	164	300	427
Average number of pupils per school	27.4	29.4	30.8	31.3	30.0	27.6
Range of pupils per school	10–41	9–54	8–136	7–141	1–170	5–57
Average number of pupils per teacher	27.4	27.8	24.2	22.9	19.3	14.7
Percentage of one-teacher schools	97%	91%	72%	65%	48%	21%
Percentage of female teachers	85%	91%	96%	96%	95%	97%
Number of schools with a special education teacher	0	0	1	2	26	52
Number of schools with helpers (assistant teachers)	0	0	1	3	83	95

The advent of special education teachers in Old Order Mennonite schools occurred by 1980 and has been a major change over the years. The number of schools with a special education teacher has increased from none in 1970 to 52 by 2022. The number of schools with helpers has shown rapid growth as well, increasing from zero to 95 schools. Currently, 52 of the 427 schools (12%) have a special education teacher, 95 (22%) have a helper, and 20 list a tutor on staff. One aspect of Old Order Mennonite education that has remained fairly constant is that the majority of Old Order Mennonite teachers are female and that the percentage of female teachers has risen over time.

As of the 2022–2023 school year, the Old Order Mennonite schools are located in 15 states and two provinces. Most of these schools are in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, area (58); the Penn Yan, New York, area (41); central Wisconsin (36); and the Versailles, Missouri, settlement (22),

as shown in Table 4. The majority—258 or 60%—of Old Order Mennonite schools now have two teachers, while 90 (21%) have one teacher and 60 (14%) have three teachers (unreported: 5%).

Table 4

Old Order Mennonite Schools in Larger Settlements, 2022–2023 School Year

Settlement	State	Number of schools
Lancaster	Pennsylvania	58
Penn Yan	New York	41
Central (Colby, Thorp, Curtis, etc.)	Wisconsin	36
Versailles	Missouri	22
Mount Forest	Ontario	20
Waterloo/Wellington/Perth	Ontario	19
Shippensburg	Pennsylvania	19
Lebanon/West Berks	Pennsylvania	18
Shiloh	Ohio	15
Mifflinburg	Pennsylvania	14
Snyder County	Pennsylvania	11
Blair/Bedford	Pennsylvania	9
Kutztown	Pennsylvania	8

Discussion

Based on the steady growth of Old Order Mennonite schools, one would predict that this growth will continue into the near future. This is especially true given the purpose of Old Order Mennonite schools and the fact that, as an Amish informant (personal communication, November 2023) noted, the Old Order Mennonites are perceived as being a bit more serious than the Amish about education. Kraybill and Hurd (2006) state that Old Order Mennonite schools are designed to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, and to instill basic religious values such as hard work, honesty, love, cooperation, order, and obedience. However, these schools do not teach religion, which is the purview of the home and church. It is clear that Old Order Mennonite parents value an eighth-grade education based in a small school, which is usually within walking distance of students' homes. After completing eighth grade, Old Order Mennonite parents want their adolescents to learn important manual skills from adults in their community. As the Old Order Mennonite population continues to increase and to move to new settlements, the number of Old Order Mennonite schools will increase. It will be interesting to see if the percentage of one-teacher schools will continue to decline and if the percentage of schools with a special education teacher and/or a helper (teaching assistant) will continue to rise.

References

- Dewalt, M. W. (2006). *Amish education in the United States and Canada*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Dewalt, M. W., & Troxell, B. K. (1989). Old Order Mennonite one-room school: A case study. *Anthropology and Educational Quarterly*, 20(4), 308–325.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1989.20.4.04x0457o>
- Hostetler, J. A. (1983). *Mennonite life*. Herald Press.
- Johnson-Weiner, K. M. (2007). *Train up a child: Old Order Amish and Mennonite schools*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.3328>
- Johnson-Weiner, K. M. (2008). The Weaverland Mennonite schools and the negotiation of an Old Order identity. *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 82(2), 249–279.
- Kraybill, D. B., & Bowman, C. D. (2001). *On the backroad to heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801865657>
- Kraybill, D. B., & Hurd, J. P. (2006). *Horse-and-buggy Mennonites: Hoofbeats of humility in a postmodern world*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Scott, S. E. (1996). *An introduction to Old Order and conservative Mennonite groups*. Good Books.
- Smith, E. L. (1983). *Meet the Mennonites*. Applied Arts Publishers.
- Stoll, J. (2020). *Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools: A concise history*. Pathway Publishers.
- Wesner, E. (2024, July 3). Mennonite vs. Amish: What's the difference? *Amish America*.
<https://amishamerica.com/whats-the-difference-between-amish-and-mennonites/#old-order-mennonites>
- Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies. (2024). *Old Order Mennonites (horse-and-buggy)*. Amish Studies. https://groups.etown.edu/amishstudies/files/2024/11/OOMs_horse-and-buggy_VA_updated_11-2024.pdf