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BRADENTON HERALD

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MANATEE COUNTY'S NEWSPAPER SINCE 1922

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Last bell to ring at Duette Elementary

Duette Education Foundation won't seek renewal of contract to operate historic school

By MEGHIN DELANEY
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BRADENTON — The last remaining one-room schoolhouse in the state of Florida — located in Manatee County on State Road 62 — will most likely cease operation next year.

Donna King, the head of the Duette Education Foundation and longtime principal and teacher at the school, is retiring and will not ask the

Manatee County School District to renew the school's contract, which ends June 30.

"As we are now, the school will close," King, 68, said Friday. For the 2015-16 year, the school has 11 students, three of whom live in Manatee County.

The school opened in 1930 as a "strawberry school" and has struggled to keep enough students in the building to make it financially viable. In the early years, stu-

dents were dismissed from the school around the harvest schedule. The district has been covering a chunk of the school's operating costs as the population has contracted.

Community members concerned with the state of the school met Thursday evening to discuss a few options for the site. That could potentially include: the Manatee County School District taking over and running

the school, repurposing the school as a community center or preserving the school as a museum. None of the options have been worked out and discussions are in the early stages.

Manatee County School

DUETTE TO 15A

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Teacher Donna King works with a third-grader at Duette Elementary School in 2005. HERALD FILE PHOTO



Duette Elementary School, the last one-room schoolhouse in the Florida, is set to close because of dwindling student numbers. HERALD FILE PHOTO

DUETTE FROM 1A

Board member Bob Gause attended the meeting. The school board as a whole has not had any discussion on the site yet, and Gause said he attended and spoke for himself.

"They're not sustainable," he said. "It's a great little facility."

Although the board hasn't discussed it, Gause said it's unlikely the district would take the school back as a regular site. Gause said he thinks the community will

adopt the center.

"It's not an easy task but it's not necessarily an undoable task either," he said.

With a drop in school enrollment, the Duette Education foundation opened in 2009 and took over the day-to-day operations, through a yearly charter. Money still flows to the school from the state, and the foundation helps raise money for supplies. For years, King operated as the principal and the teacher, with a teacher's aide.

Cancer forced King to hire another teacher to help her with day-to-day duties and

at the worst of her illness, two teachers helped run the school.

King said she had hoped someone in the foundation or a teacher would want to step up and keep the school going for next year, but she hasn't seen that interest, leading to her decision to cancel the contract with the school district after the school year ends.

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