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# 'A little old country school'

## Manatee County considers closing state's last one-room schoolhouse

By TIFFANY LANKES

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**DUETTE** — A weathered sign at the front of Duette Elementary's sweeping front lawn boasts its claim to fame — Florida's last remaining one-room school.

Towering oak trees that shaded generations of families line a path to its wooden frame, its trim and old southern porch painted a matching powder blue.

But the school is more than a source of historical pride in this area undefined by geographic boundaries, a post office or even a welcome sign. For many residents, Duette Elementary is this community's identity.

"That's Duette," said Pat Carlton, whose family spans eight generations in the community. "When people talk about this place that's what they mean. The school."

Despite its charm and community ties, the school, built in 1930, could itself soon be history. Rising operating costs, declining enrollment and changing education standards have administrators wondering whether it's worth keeping this piece of Florida's past alive.

"Ultimately we want to make sure we're taking care of those kids," said Tim Kolbe, the district's director of elementary schools.

The Manatee County School Board is meeting Monday to discuss the school's future.

Duette has been losing students since the district started letting children attend other schools about a decade ago. Today, about 70 children from

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Duette Elementary School second-grader Courtney Hayman runs across the lawn of the school in eastern Manatee County on Friday. The one-room school has 11 students and one teacher. Manatee County School Board meets Monday to discuss the school's future.

More photos, Page 2B and online at [heraldtribune.com](http://heraldtribune.com)

### A former teacher



Ada Bilbrey was the Duette school's only teacher for 30 years.

### Everything around Ada Bilbrey is changing.

The orange groves and Cracker houses she played in as a girl in Parrish are disappearing. Now Bilbrey may have to watch as the school she taught at for 30 years closes its doors.

As the teacher who served the longest at historic Duette Elementary, Bilbrey is an institution in the community. She's watched the school's student numbers drop in the past few years, but doesn't understand why students don't want to go to the school.

"These other schools have all the new things," she says. "But, well, I don't know. What does that really mean?"

### A former student



Silas Keen went to Duette Elementary and sent his children there.

### Silas Keen's life is full of tradition. He lives in a house his ancestors built with their bare hands when they settled in Duette about 200 years ago.

Nearly every member of his family has attended Duette Elementary, but now he's not sure whether that tradition will last.

His granddaughter will enroll in kindergarten next year, and he'd like to see her go to the family school. But his daughter is considering sending her child to a larger school. Keen says he can understand why.

"It's been a number of years since any of us went there," he said. "It hasn't changed much since then."



STAFF MAP / PETE SMITH

# School Board to consider fate of one-room school

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very viable to keep it open," said Jim Leonard, the local fire chief whose kids went to the school. "But I don't know that it needs to come down to that."

Duette's students agree there's something special about the school — and it's not just its history.

Kindergartner Dalton Dixon is the latest in a long line of relatives to attend Duette. But that's not what he likes best.

"Some schools don't have a tennis court," he said between breaths during a break from a recess game. "Or this swing set. Or all this land and all of these great big trees."

To Dalton and the others, it makes no difference there aren't many other children. The small size gives Duette a family feel.

And for the small staff, there's no question what to do with the school. They spend their days tailoring lessons to individual student's needs, balancing the skills of students who range from about 5 to 11 years old.

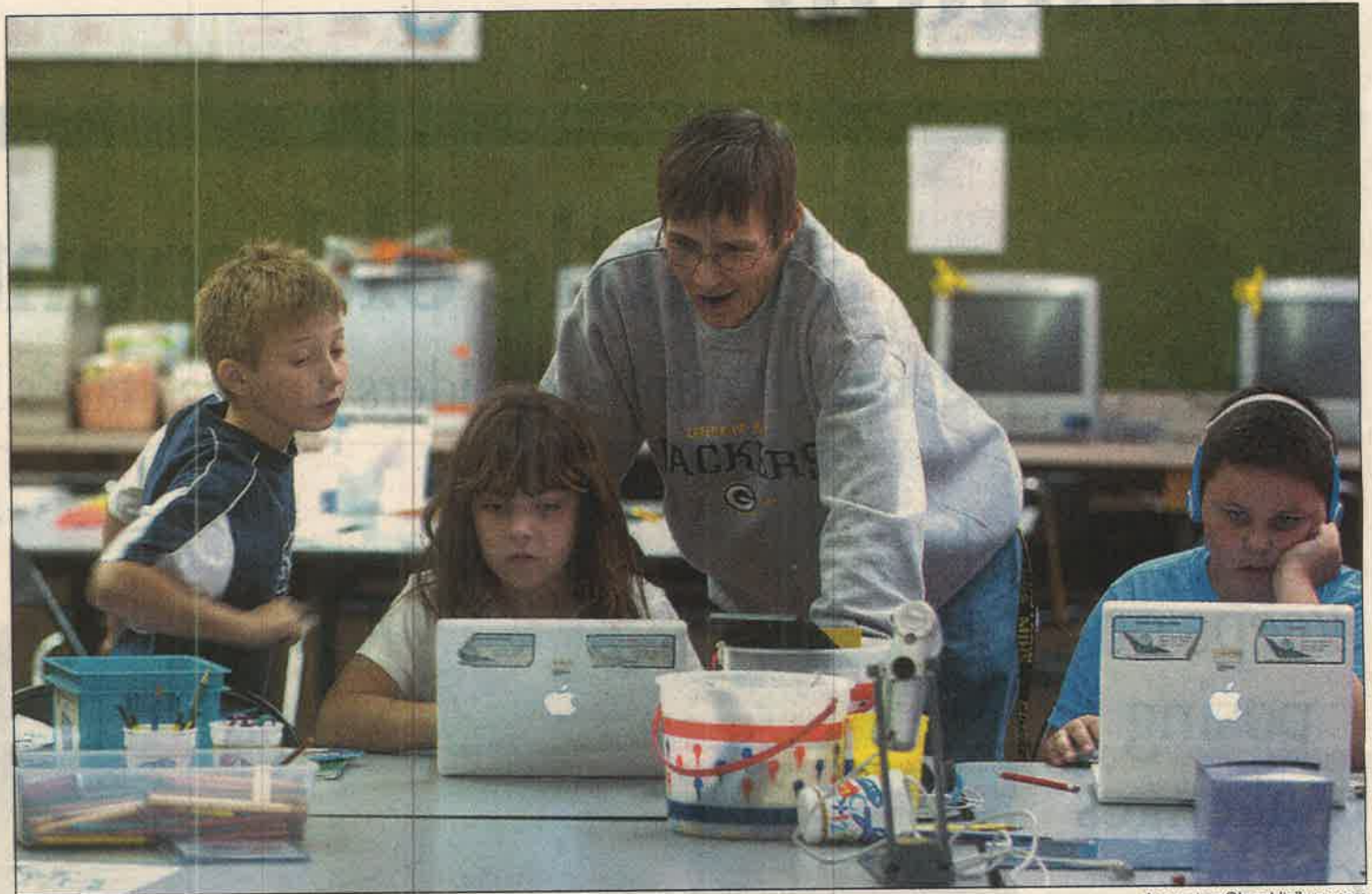
On a typical day teacher Donna King picks a topic and gives students assignments based on their abilities. Some students work on laptop computers while their peers do worksheets or read books.

"There's a perception that it's not that good because it's a little old country school," Leonard said. "But the way they teach is unique, and it works well."

Duette's current students and their parents say they like the individualized teaching methods, but there's no easy way to measure whether they work.

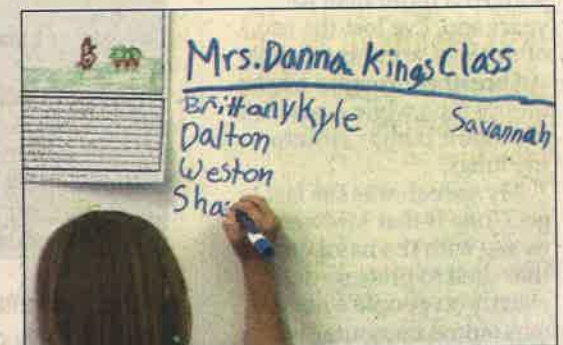
Some former students say they struggled when they went to bigger, more traditional schools.

And there are so few students that Duette doesn't get ratings from the federal government or the state.



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Teacher's assistant Elyn Jack helps Duette Elementary School students Matthew Johnson, left, Brittany Cook and Logan McCormack with their assignments Friday in East Manatee. Duette is the last one-room schoolhouse in the state.



Students, at left, warm up while listening to music Friday morning at Duette Elementary School. The school has only one teacher, Donna King. The school's 11 students sign in, above. The Manatee County School Board will consider whether to close the school, built in 1930, at its Monday meeting. Rising costs and falling enrollment leave the school's future in doubt.