

Duette Elementary's financial future cloudy

\$50,482 Revenue from the state for Duette Elementary School, 2005-06 school budget

\$184,913 Expenses include administration, teacher, teacher assistant, custodian, supplies and instructional materials, telephone, electricity, Internet and transportation

\$134,431 Shortfall between revenues and expenditures



GRANT JEFFERIES/The Herald

Duette Elementary first opened in 1930 as a consolidation of three one-teacher schools.

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and **LAURA FIGUEROA**
Herald Staff Writer

EAST MANATEE — Florida's last one-teacher schoolhouse, steadily losing money and many of its children to other schools, appears to be facing the biggest challenge to its survival yet.

This year, Duette Elementary will lose almost \$135,000, according to a Manatee County School District budget analysis released Friday.

There are 90 elementary

school children who live in Duette's attendance zone, but 83 attend other schools, Superintendent Roger Dearing said.

Duette currently has 11 students, said Duette's teacher, Donna King.

Although district officials aren't recommending closing the school immediately or taking any drastic steps right now, they are going to take a hard look at Duette Elementary during a workshop prior to Monday's regularly scheduled board meeting, Dearing

said.

While the workshop is open to the public, it is not a public hearing, Dearing said. Questions or comments from the public will be not be heard.

King is scheduled to speak to school board members. District staff will lay out Duette's financial picture and other aspects of the school, Dearing said.

Duette Elementary first opened in 1930 as a consolidation of three one-teacher

DUETTE TO 15A

DUETTE FROM 1A

schools, including Albritton, Bunker Hill and Duette.

King became Duette's teacher in 1993 after former teacher-principal Ada Bilbrey retired. Bilbrey was teacher-principal from 1958 until 1993.

Farm fields and phosphate operations still border State Road 62 all the way to the school site, some 20 miles east of Parrish.

Although there has been talk about closing the school to save money many times in the past few decades, it seems the community has rallied around its school each time.

On Friday, King said she plans on speaking about the uniqueness of Duette at the school board workshop.

"The purpose of the school is to serve the children in the community," King said. "Which is not happening because so many of the children are going to other schools. But the program that's there at Duette is good. I just wish that we could get other parents to see that."

King said she was unaware of the exact figures cited in the school board's financial analysis of the school.

"I haven't been told those figures," King said. "We all know what we read in the paper about the budgets. I think the school has always been in the red, but not to that amount."

King said she would like to "investigate ways to cut costs" in the school and propose those ideas to the school board.

Her final hope is that the school remains open. King

If you go

What: Workshop on Duette Elementary School

When: 5:15 p.m. Monday

Where: First floor chamber, School Board

Administration Building,
215 Manatee Ave. W.

Who: Open to the public

Information: 708-8770

to see more support from the school district to provide more services to the school.

"The bottom line is that the school is not used because there's not all the services there that are in all the other district schools," Tappan said. "I'm sure enrollment would be larger if they had more of the services that kids need, like speech therapy. The school would probably have 80 students."

Tappan boasts that her daughter Amanda, who attended the school from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade, is now an honors student at Lakewood Ranch High School.

"It more like family," Tappan said of the environment at the school. "It's our community and it's our school, that's why I'd like to not just keep it open, but for the school board to actually support it as any other district school."

Dearing is not ready to say if this will be Duette's last year, but it seems he is leaning that way.

"The one-teacher schoolhouse was a wonderful model and many remember it with fondness," Dearing said Friday. "But it's today's teachers

Years ago, it was a long bus ride to get students from Duette to another school, but that is not the case now, Dearing said.

"Virgil Mills is not that far away now," Dearing said, speaking of a new elementary school in Parrish. "It may be that those families want a level of closeness. It's something we will have to see if the school board wants to operate that school for 11 students."

The benefits of Duette students attending a school like Gene Witt or Virgil Mills with a "multifaceted, multi-talented faculty" and the social interaction that a 20-student classroom offers over 11 students, is something to seriously consider, Dearing said.

"I will have to hear some pretty strong arguments in order to recommend keeping that school operating as we are now," Dearing said.

School board member Barbara Harvey said her mind was on how to provide the most successful environment for the 11 students.

"The bottom line with me is what is best for those children and what is best for that community," said Harvey, who was the principal of Duette Elementary for one school year, 1996-1997.

"There are several parents who feel that it is time their students become part of the mainstream and go directly to Gene Witt Elementary," Harvey added. "And there are a few that still feel they should remain in a small environment."

Harvey said she was aware of the financial losses Duette