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For many decades, pupils like this youngster have shared one classroom for all the grades at Duette Elementary School in northeast Manatee County.

# Duette Elementary again faces budget-cutting peril

## DUETTE FROM 1B

the district has offered up for elimination to save money next year.

The Manatee school system, like others across the state, including in Sarasota, is looking at major budget cuts as a result of reduced state-wide school funding caused by slowed population growth, higher fuel costs, a poor economy and the class-size reduction amendment.

In Manatee, administrators say they must cut \$21 million from next year's budget, a 7 percent reduction.

For supporters of the Duette school and its state-wide historical significance, that means fighting harder than ever to keep it open.

Closing Duette Elementary and transferring its 13 pupils to other schools would save at least \$109,000, district officials say. Its pupils could be bused to and taught at other schools at almost no extra cost.

"We are reviewing every cost, every program, every line item in the budget," said Tim McGonegal, assistant superintendent for business services. "We don't want to do any of this, but we are forced to."

The school's supporters say the move would mean some pupils as young as 5 would have to spend two hours a day on a school bus. Some parents say it would also deprive their children of the close bond they say the school creates between student and teacher.

"In town, they're numbers, they're not kids that have names," said Gena Groover, whose 6-year-old son Dawson attends Duette Elementary. "The teachers have so many in a classroom that if a child has a little bit of a problem,



STAFF MAP / JENNIFER F. A. BORRESEN

they're forgotten."

In a community that has no post office and is unacknowledged by road signs, Duette Elementary has long been a source of pride for locals.

The school was built during an era when children were needed to help pick strawberries. At that time, a school year that began in May and ended in December was built around the picking season.

As many as five generations of a family have attended the school, teacher King said.

The school sits among mature oak trees on a small plot of land on State Road 62. A narrow shell road leads up to the front porch.

Inside, the school still has its original pine floors and wooden-slat walls. The school's medical clinic is the middle drawer of a filing cabinet full of first-aid supplies.

Although described as a one-room schoolhouse, the building actually has two adjoining classrooms, a kitchen and an auditorium with rows of seats bolted to the floor. But, like many country schoolhouses of nearly a century ago, almost all the teaching takes place in a single classroom with just one teacher and an assistant.

"I think what students get by being here far outweighs what they miss," King said.

To reach its goal, the district has asked each school to trim 4 percent from its budget. That includes Duette, which must cut \$4,200 from its annual budget if it is not closed.

That is not a problem for King, who has become expert at equipping the school on a low budget.

Most of the furniture at the school is surplus that was donated. Local businesses, parents and former pupils all chip in to buy supplies for the school, she said.

While Duette residents have to use satellite dishes to get a high-speed Internet connection, King successfully fought for an underground hookup so her pupils would have the same opportunities as children in other schools.

But despite her efforts, Duette has been losing enrollment since the district started letting children attend other schools through its school choice program about a decade ago.

Last year, the district abolished Duette's attendance zone, meaning it is no longer the default school for Duette children. Instead, only children whose parents pursue a school choice option attend the school.

About 80 elementary-age children in the Duette area attend other schools.

King, whose granddaughter Abby Tran attends the school, would like the district to build a new school alongside the existing school big enough for all the local children.

"I will stay here as long as there are students to teach," King said. "Thirteen is not a big number, but eight of them are in kindergarten or first grade."