

Reform may mean school's out forever

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LA MONTE — Pettis County R-1 School, one of Missouri's smallest districts, has been warned by the state for 20 years that it would have to close. But this year's warning might be more serious.

Principal and Superintendent Mary Edwards is concerned that the Legislature's new \$310 million education tax and reform package — also known as the Outstanding Schools Act — could spell doom for the tiny district in northwest Pettis County.

The new law requires school districts to implement numerous reforms. Among them is the stipulation that schools gain an accredited classification within two years of the 1993-94 school year or face the likely possibility of losing their state funding and dissolving.

The R-1 district is not, never has been and probably never will be classified, Edwards said.

The consolidated district, which usually has less than 25 kindergarten through eighth-grade students a year, has not been classified since it formed in the 1950s. That's primarily because it's too small and doesn't serve high school students, she said.

With only two full-time teachers — including Edwards — an aide, two part-time teachers and a cook, the district falls far short of accreditation standards, Edwards said.

However, it offers French, music and art courses, maintains a library and two computers, and its students consistently score within the 90th percentile on the Missouri Mastery Achievement Test, she said.

"The really ironic part is the Outstanding Schools Act," Edwards said. "I think most people would agree we're an outstanding school ... and we're being closed."

Well, not yet, she admitted. But chances are good that the school's doors will be locked permanently since it doesn't have the money or resources to meet the state's classification standards.

"Some of the things we would have to do to be accredited would not be practical for our district," such as hiring a librarian, a counselor, a nurse or a special education teacher, she said.

Right now, it handles special problems as best it can. Its teacher's aide has a degree in counseling. If the school gets a special-needs student, it contracts with the nearby Sweet Springs School District for help.

Although the district has been financially stable on a \$148,000 budget, the state's mandated reforms would be too costly for it to carry out, despite its property tax levy of \$3.42, she said.

Janet Zimmerschied, treasurer of the R-1 Board of Education, said the bulk of the district's revenue is from local tax dollars, and most of that goes toward high school tuition to other area schools like Sweet Springs and La Monte.

"Tuition is a big, big part of our expenses," Zimmerschied said. "For the last five years we have not had many graduates," so the school has managed to maintain a positive balance.

If the district can't afford to attain classification and loses its state funding, it might not be able to function, she said.

"I'm concerned about it, but (the state has) been telling us for years that we would close, and that hasn't materialized, yet," she said.

In the past, the district has had to petition the state Board of Education for permission to stay open when its enrollment dropped below the required 15 students, she said.

Board President Frank Higgins said the school will stay open as long as possible.

"From our perspective, we've been here long enough to see these things come and go," Higgins said. "(The law) will affect many schools, and I feel that within the two years' time the representatives in Jefferson City will have to respond to the patrons' concerns and will have to make some changes."

But if that doesn't happen, the R-1 school might have to close, he conceded.

Edwards said she thinks legislators just "walked all over the little schools to get (the law) passed," and have stripped schools of their autonomy.

"There's always lots and lots of paperwork when dealing with the state," she said. "I wish they would just let us do what we do best, and that's educating the kids."