

RURAL ROOTS

Most of the small elementary school district's success depends upon community support. Many of its students are from farming families. Discipline is hardly a problem and because many of the students are related, they have a healthy rapport with one another.



Sheri Halpin enjoys her lunch in the all-purpose room.



Krysti Maberry uses an abacus while doing her math problems in one of the school's two classrooms.

Sticking up from the flat rural landscape about 10 miles north of La Monte on Route 127 is Pettis County R-I school. It's a small brick building with a tree in front and a row of swingsets in back.

The gravel parking lot has three cars in it, and, as one walks to the front door, the tap of a rope against the aluminum flagpole instills a sense of distance and seclusion.

With two classrooms, a gymnasium/cafeteria, two full-time teachers, a full-time aide, a cook and 20 students, the school is one of the smallest in the state.

It may be small in size, but it's big on fun and smiles.

During a morning recess, first-grader Krysti Maberry, 6, drilled kindergartener Sheri Halpin, 5, on subtraction flashcards amid the din of children running relays in the cafeteria.

For Mary Edwards, La Monte, the principal and fifth-through-eighth grade teacher, working at the school the last six years has been nothing shy of paradise.

A former fourth-grade teacher in Smithton, Edwards said she accepted the district's administrative position with the understanding that she'd stay a year.

"I've been here ever since. It's become something of a joke with the school board," she said. "Every year they ask me, 'Can we offer you one more year?' And I always say, 'Oh, I suppose.'"

Edwards, a calm, complacent woman, rules with a firm, yet friendly hand, and she loves the school.

She has 11 students in her classroom, and

'We're not in the financial bind that other districts are in partly because we're not trying to meet the same requirements that other districts have heaped on them to get AA or AAA ratings.'

Principal Mary Edwards

Carol Tempel, a first-year teacher, has nine students in kindergarten to fourth grade.

Having more than one grade in her classroom was not what Tempel had expected on her first job. The 1991 graduate of Central Missouri State University who lives in Higginsville didn't even know Pettis County R-I existed until it contacted her for an interview, she said.

"I have a lot of lesson plans to write up, but only nine papers to grade," she said. "It's a lot of fun, but it's a challenge."

Most of the children come from farming families.

Discipline is hardly a problem and because many of the students are related, they have a healthy rapport with one another, Edwards said. Being in the company of older and younger students seems to boost the children's social confidence — some of them are very outgoing and rather precocious, she said.

Smaller class sizes enable Edwards' staff to develop a close relationship with the students and give individual attention, she said.

"It helps that we have these students year to year," she said. "I know what I can expect from them and what their weaknesses are."

In spite of their fewer number of students,

Tempel and Edwards often find themselves swamped and needing help.

Phyllis Sturkey, a full-time aide with a master's degree in English, is always on the go as she tutors, passes out milk at lunch, monitors recess and teaches French.

Two other part-time aides teach music and art once a week.

"We're doing quite well," Edwards said. "We're not in the financial bind that other districts are in partly because we're not trying to meet the same requirements that other districts have heaped on them to get AA or AAA ratings."

She said the district, which consolidated in the early 1950s, is not state classified. It prides itself, however, on its French lessons, two computers, its reading corner and library.

It also takes pride in the quality of its students, who consistently score within the top 10 percent on the Missouri Mastery Achievement Test sample, she said.

Most of the district's success depends upon community support, Edwards said.

School Board President Frank Higgins said the majority of Pettis County R-I's revenue is from local tax dollars. Most of its expenses are from tuition for its students to at-

tend high school in Sweet Springs or La Monte.

Lately, though, the district's been oddly lucky.

"In the last few years, we haven't had as many students attending high school," Higgins said, noting that the eighth-grade graduating classes have been comparatively small with only one or two students.

However, with six students currently in the seventh grade, tuition costs likely will jump by 1993, he said.

"We've tried to look ahead and budget, not just for next year but several years ahead," Higgins said. "Right now we're financially sound. I think we do a good job with the funds available to us."

The district rides on a balanced budget of \$142,505, said board treasurer Janet Zimmerschied. Two state withholdings of appropriations this year that nearly buried some school districts had little effect on Pettis County R-I.

"We did lose some money through that," she said, adding that she didn't know exactly how much. "But a bigger percentage of our money comes from local money anyway, so we aren't hurting from it."

Although next year's budget has not been solidified, the board expects it to be slightly larger and relies on the community to hold its end.

Every fall, the district sponsors a lucrative chili supper and carnival, and this spring, it will host its first celebration of the arts.

"It's a small community. ... Everybody works together to keep the district running," Zimmerschied said.



First-year teacher Carol Tempel gives second graders Steven Brandt, center, and Alex Schroeder a math lesson, far left. Children prepare to go inside after recess, left.

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