

HIDDEN behind a magnificent stand of 100-year-old trees on a little-used road, tiny Mandurang South must have seemed an easy target for closure. Who would miss it?

And when the State Government released its "quality program" guidelines which schools had to meet to survive, No. 1628's fate was surely sealed. According to head teacher Wayne Matthews, the Directorate of School Education said Mandurang South had "no hope" of complying

except that this tiny school, still running in its grey-painted 70-year-old weatherboard building, boasted an excellent curriculum, and in Mr Matthews a head teacher of wide experience.

Over 40 hours one weekend, Mr Matthews, co-teacher Brigid John and parents poured over their submission to the taskforce enquiring into the future of seven schools in their Emu Creek cluster.

"The final document was a beauty," Mr Matthews said. "We wisely demonstrated a quality curriculum." As far as the school could see, it would survive on the government's own criteria . . .

Until last week's bombshell —reshadowed staffing cuts.

Its 32 pupils are currently taught by two teachers plus shared time from specialist teachers. But under the new measures, Mandurang South would be allocated just 1.4 teachers for children next year.

On three days a week, Mr Matthews would be left alone to teach 31 children in seven different grades in one classroom. Anyone would find that difficult," he admitted in understatement.

And so Mandurang South becomes a test case for the

our school



with Owen Davies

"rationalisation" of education under the Kennett administration. Parent John Murdoch summed up the dilemma it faces:-

"The Government is saying, 'okay, you can stay open, but this is how many staff you get'. In other words, if you want an inferior education for your kids, then go ahead and keep your school open."

Mr Murdoch and brother Brian, who both attended 1628, want the school to stay open — but not at any cost.

"I'd like to see the school stay open, but if my kid is not getting the same education then he goes to Mandurang. There's no way Wayne can look after 31 kids — it's just not viable."

Not all parents share this view and the school was last night voting in a referendum to decide what tact it will take at the next taskforce meeting.

The obvious option is to merge with Mandurang Primary, five kilometres down the road.

For No. 1628, this would represent the ultimate irony, since both schools were born of a "split" 118 years ago.

Before 1875, all district children attended a non-vested Mandurang school No. 403. According to district inspectors,

however, sufficient children lived far enough away from 403 that "it might give way to two new schools, one at Sibley's Tannery . . . the other beyond Mr Veitch's farm, 3½ miles from Sibley's". For good measure, he included in his report a listing of 83 children and the respective distances of their homes from 403.

The argument won the day. In 1875, builder Mr Z. Button, of Sandhurst, erected the wooden school — "with accommodation for 60 children" — much as it stands today. Instruction began under head teacher Robert Balmer on September 6, 1875.

Mr Balmer soon discovered a big problem: residents were logging timber on the school block. He acted swiftly to stop the nonsense and the current magnificent stand of eucalypts — conifers is probably attributed to his determination in the matter.

The result is a school which only has the ubiquitous of concrete parking, toilets, shelter, rebo wall, courts, and so on, but it boasts a rare beauty which has on more than one occasion attracted Melbourne schools to visit a "model country school".



● ABOVE: The class of 1903.

● LEFT: Brothers Brian.