Growing teacher shortage is endangering education

By Sharon Hartin Iorio

While our presidential candidates debate other issues, two great invisible forces threaten to capsize our national education system.

The first is nationwide teacher shortage that has hit Kansas hard. Experts predict that America will need more than 2 million new teachers in the next decade to fill classrooms left vacant by teacher retirements.

An informal survey conducted by the Kansas State Department of Education last fall found nearly 500 vacancies statewide. Kansas has more openings for math and science teachers, the areas of greatest need, than there are licensed teachers to fill them. Teacher vacancies exist today in Kansas schools even though the school year is three-fourths complete.

The problem, however, is not simply providing enough teachers to fill Kansas and U.S. classrooms. Equally or more challenging is the increased demand to fill our classrooms with highly qualified teachers. Never in the history of our nation and state has this need been greater. Why? For three primary reasons:

- Higher and more complex educational goals. Research shows that more than half the workforce by the mid-21st century will be employed in careers that have not yet been imagined. To thrive in such a changing environment, students will need strong elementary and secondary preparation in all content areas.

- The rapidly growing and changing school population. Enrollments show significant growth in the number of students across the country. And greater growth is expected in students who represent diverse backgrounds and students who are new immigrants to our country.

- The need to move all children to achieve national educational goals. Federal legislation mandates that no longer can any child be left behind, and schools are charged to meet benchmarks set by federal policy.

High-ability teachers who can apply learning theory to help individual learners, teachers who can multitask a variety of learning strategies for groups of students, turnaround principals and teacher-leaders who can implement change in underachieving schools, special education teachers – all are vital if we are to realize our educational goals.

In the early 19th century, America built the largest, most efficient and most productive system of public education in the world. Today, this system is undergoing great changes and challenges.

We must address the twofold necessity of providing more teachers and, at the same time, teachers
able to provide all students in a larger, more diverse population with the tools they need to reach high academic expectations.

Each of us can help. We can help simply by talking about the importance of our children’s education. If enough of us talk enough, one day public education will become a political issue of national urgency – one that reaches the top of the agendas of our state and national candidates.

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