Need for teachers not new in nation’s history

By Sharon Hartin Iorio

Our nation is facing a shortage of teachers trained to prepare students for 21st-century careers and to help high-needs students. Interestingly, these challenges are really not so different from those faced throughout our nation’s history.

In colonial New England, struggling villages had difficulty keeping their schools open, and when settlement moved west, it was often not easy to find teachers for the one-room schoolhouses that dotted the prairie.

Nevertheless, as early as 1647, Massachusetts law mandated that every town of 50 or more families support an elementary school, and by 1918 compulsory education for elementary school became law in all states. Today children in America enjoy 12 years of free public education. However, overall population increases have contributed to severe teacher shortages in urban and rural schools.

In the mid-20th century, when the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite, Congress passed the National Defense Act. It provided scientific equipment for schools and emphasized the study of math, science and foreign languages. But as baby boomers reach retirement age, our schools are not producing enough graduates to fill vacancies in science-based fields such as engineering, nursing and pharmacy.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s opened doors to equality in education and a better life for millions. Yet our nation’s schools currently are not prepared to teach children growing up in poverty or the growing number of children for whom English is not their first language.

Throughout the history of our nation, the need for strong teachers to reach all students and prepare them for work and life on the horizon of their expectations has not changed. What changes is the intensity and shifting priorities of the needs.

Fortunately, to help address our current challenges, Congress recently passed the Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education grant legislation: TEACH grants provide $4,000 of tuition assistance each academic year (for a total of $16,000) to high-achieving undergraduate and graduate students who want to go into the teaching profession. Recipients must commit to teaching a high-need subject in a high-need school (such as Wichita’s public schools) for a minimum of four years.

Among the designated subjects are mathematics, science, foreign language, special education, English-language acquisition and reading specialist. Recipients may study at accredited colleges and
universities nationwide that are part of the program. TEACH grants are a landmark investment in American education. Those who are interested in teaching careers and want to develop skills for working with children can find more information about TEACH grants at the Web site http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/English/TEACH.jsp.

Sharon Hartin Iorio is a professor and dean at the College of Education at Wichita State University.