

Officials battle teacher shortage

By Ann Lowe
Staff Reporter

Experts predict a national teacher shortage in elementary and secondary schools and it may affect Nebraska, they say.

Enrollment is down in the country's teachers colleges, and fewer graduates seek careers in education.

UNL Teachers College enrollment increased some this year, but a teacher shortage already has hit some parts of Nebraska, officials say.

Marilyn Moore, administrative assistant for personnel, said Lincoln Public Schools hires about 100 new teachers a year. The district received 1,304 applications for 92 teaching positions in 1984-85, Moore said. In 1973-74, 2,319 certified teachers applied for about 100 jobs, she said.

UNL Teachers College enrollment also has declined, said Ron Joekel, associate dean. In 1971-72, about 5,000 UNL undergraduates were enrolled in Teachers College, Joekel said. In fall 1984, there were 2,300, he said.

The number of Teachers College students peaked in 1971-72, Joekel said. Since then, he said, enrollment has dropped by as much as 40 to 50 students a semester. The number has increased slightly this year. Joekel said, but he has "no doubt" that the state will run short of teachers in the next few years.

Both Moore and Joekel cited low teacher pay, growing career opportunities for women and formerly tight teacher job markets as reasons for the move away from education.

Teachers' salaries used to be competitive with pay for other professions requiring the same amount of education, Moore said. Now, the LPS starting salary of \$13,750 a year lags behind average pay in other professions, she said.

New opportunity in other fields has drawn many women away from teaching, Joekel said. Ten or 15 years ago, "education was the place for females to go," he said. But women now have more fields open to them, and many who might have entered teaching 15 years ago now are pursuing other careers, he said.

Students also have turned away from teachers college because of previous low demand for teachers.

"For a long time, there was a well-publicized teacher surplus," she said. "A lot of teachers were not finding jobs."

The surplus has since disappeared, but many students still hesitate to major in education, she said.

Joekel said this "cycle of supply and demand" is natural in most fields.

"Business is tight right now," he said. "In 1971-72, business college was crying for students."

Teaching jobs are opening fast now — too fast in some cities, Joekel said. Moore said, she doesn't predict a teacher shortage in Lincoln.

"Lincoln is a very desirable place to live and a desirable place to teach," she said. "A lot of good people want to teach here."

But, Joekel said, job seekers are less attracted to rural areas, especially in western Nebraska.

"Some students will say they don't want to live in rural areas," he said. "They don't always want to go where the jobs are."

Some subject areas are more likely than other to be hit with teacher shortages, Joekel said. In May 1984, the UNL Teachers College graduated 200 elementary education majors, but only

four in special education, he said. Twenty received math and science endorsements — a third of the number a few years ago, he said.

And not all teachers college graduates go on to teach, Joekel said. Some women get married and start families before or soon after graduation, he said. Other graduates get jobs in other fields, Joekel said. Insurance companies often hire teachers college graduates because they have "good people skills," he said.

Officials now are looking for ways to recruit new teachers in Nebraska. The UNL Teachers College has sent a promotional videotape to Nebraska high schools, and representatives are making extra efforts to meet with high school students.

The state legislature also has authorized special loans for student seeking teaching endorsements in math and science.

State Science Consultant Don Woodburn said students may borrow up to \$3,000 — \$500 a semester — interest free, while they are in school. Then, for each semester they teach math or science in Nebraska, \$500 of their loans are forgiven, he said. Students who change their majors, fail to graduate or teach less than the time required to cancel their loans must pay the money back at 8 percent interest, he said.

About 135 students from UNL and other Nebraska teachers colleges now have these math and science loans,

Wooburn said. Officials hope the loans will help prevent a serious shortage of math and science teachers in the state. Already half the math classes in U.S. secondary schools are being taught by people without the proper endorsements, Joekel said.

Despite the need for more teachers, Joekel said he hopes hiring standards will not drop in the state's public schools. He said entrance and graduation requirements at UNL's Teachers College are not likely to change.

"We're not going to drop our standards, just because there might be shortages," he said.

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Graduate exam...

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More older students now are returning to graduate school after years on the job, Ewing said. Nobody knows the effect of their scores on the national averages, he said.

Both Irby and Ewing think more testing should be done before concluding that all U.S. college students are missing something in their education.

"The students who take these exams are not a representative sample of American students," Ewing said.



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