

Midlands Voices: Consortium elevates teacher quality

By Nancy Edick

The writer is dean of the College of Education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Nothing is more critical to our nation's future and this community's future than how we educate our children.

The Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC) is committed to ensuring that our community's children have an excellent teacher in every classroom. This is a challenging task, given our students span the spectrum of learning readiness, have a wide range of personal experiences and interests, and represent a variety of culturally shaped ways of interpreting the world around them. Two out of three educators in the Omaha metropolitan area hold a degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. There is a reason the metro schools hire our local graduates. As an education community we are committed to working together to recruit talented students who are passionate about teaching and eager to excel in the complex real world of schools and classrooms.

The preparation of teachers is a collaborative effort that includes rigorous content area coursework and admission standards for acceptance into the college, curricula that have teacher candidates working in partner schools with coaching and feedback from faculty and master teachers throughout the program, and performance assessments that indicate the candidates are ready to begin the important profession of teaching.

The collaboration between school district partners and the university continually informs and improves teacher preparation and practice, allowing for rigorous and cumulative experiences for students. This intense training is leading to a distinctive level of qualification for our graduates.

Our community partnership and commitment to teacher quality does not conclude when teachers are awarded their degrees and initial teaching licenses. Opportunities to grow professionally continue through a range of innovative, evidence-based programs such as Career Advancement and Development for Recruits and Experienced Teachers, which partners master veteran teachers and beginning teachers in a mentoring model that is recognized nationally as one of the best teacher development models in the country.

Other innovations include the Teacher Academy Project (TAP), which allows those with a bachelor's degree to participate in a fast-track teacher preparation program. TAP targets high-need areas that include mathematics, science and business, resulting in teachers new to the profession but who have had careers in fields such as technology, law or the military.

A diverse, experienced and well-educated teaching force is essential for a world-class education, and our metropolitan area school districts and UNO are working together to ensure a high level of teacher quality.

Teachers and the education profession are under intense scrutiny. According to federal estimates from the U.S. Department of Education, enrollments in university teacher preparation programs have fallen by 10 percent from 2004 to 2012. Yet UNO continues to receive strong interest in teacher education and

OWH, March 3, 2015

our enrollments are stable. We believe this is evidence of the exemplary collaborative work focused on teacher quality that has been a priority since MOEC's inception in 1988.

Also essential to teacher quality is the retention and ongoing professional development of the existing teaching force. Again, the metro area beats the national statistics. Experience and ongoing education contributes to quality, too. Metro area teachers average 11.6 years of experience and are committed to advancing their knowledge and teaching skills, resulting in approximately 62 percent of teachers having earned an advanced degree.

It's interesting to note that, nationally, teaching employs five times as many people as either medicine or law. In the metropolitan area, 8,444 educators are employed as classroom teachers and each day they are serving the needs of 129,933 students in 233 schools throughout 12 school districts.

As a profession, teaching is attacked and admired in equal proportion. Much of the national rhetoric is focusing on how to rank or fire teachers rather than how to make day-to-day teaching an attractive, challenging job that intelligent, creative and ambitious people will gravitate toward.

We believe that every child deserves a great teacher, and we embrace this challenge. The teaching profession in the metropolitan area is statistically and programmatically strong. We remain committed to continuous improvement. We believe meeting the needs of every student in a dynamic and rapidly changing community is an ongoing but noble challenge.

We are fortunate that you, our community partners, have long embraced our public schools and have been strong partners in our ongoing commitment to excellence.