

The challenge we face

Vanishing Graduates & Minnesota's Future



We are in a flattening world; jobs move easily around the globe. In this highly competitive environment, the education

of our workforce is more important than ever. But Minnesota's supply of college-educated residents will soon fail to keep up with the economy's demands.

We can address this "vanishing graduates" challenge; our quality of life here depends on it. First, though, more people will need to fully understand what we face.

Six factors come together to create this situation:

1. Decline in numbers of high school students
2. Lost opportunities when education ends early
3. Education gaps for an increasingly diverse population
4. Overall student performance falling short
5. Demand for college-educated workers to exceed supply
6. More education required for future innovation

"We have a serious challenge in front of us and we ought to look at it and decide what we're going to do about it."

Jim Peterson
former president
Gustavus Adolphus College and
Science Museum of Minnesota

1. Decline in numbers of high school students

Minnesota will experience a noticeable decline in high school graduates. In fact, the number of high school graduates is forecast to drop 9 percent over the next few years. The reason is simple: many families are having fewer children.

2. Lost opportunities when education ends early

It is alarming to consider how many students fail to graduate from high school in Minnesota — let alone from college. The education levels that students reach will have a sizable impact on their futures; less education translates to lower future earnings.

Consider the 63,000 Minnesota ninth graders starting high school this fall. Based on current student performance, the projection is that:

- only 84 percent will graduate from high school
- only 55 percent will enter college, and
- only 27 percent will complete a two-year college degree within three years or a four-year degree within six years of high school graduation.

3. Education gaps for an increasingly diverse population

The share of students in Minnesota high schools who are not white will grow to one in five by 2015. The share of low-income students will grow as well. But students of color and low-income students of any race or ethnicity have gaps in academic achievement, enrollment and completion. For example, there are gaps for Minnesota students taking standardized tests starting in elementary school. And even when you look at students with the same academic ability, national research has found a sizeable gap in college enrollment for low-income students. These gaps affect the success of these students and hinder the state's ability to grow its skilled workforce.

“The groups in school who are least likely to graduate are growing: poor kids, kids of color, immigrant kids,” Bush Foundation President Peter Hutchinson said. “And if we don't get after this now, we may actually find ourselves in the position where the odds of ending up with a degree after high school aren't one in four — which isn't good enough — but it might be one in five, one in six.”

4. Overall student performance falling short

The performance of Minnesota students may exceed national averages but still fall short of what we need. Only one-third of Minnesota high school students meet college readiness benchmarks, as measured through ACT scores on math, science, reading and English.

Our performance also often lags behind our global competition. Consider 8th grade math performance: 43 percent of our students are proficient compared to 73 percent in Singapore.

5. Demand for college-educated workers to exceed supply

When the overall number of high school graduates drops, so will the number of college graduates — by about 12 percent in less than 10 years.

At the same time the need for them will be increasing. Many fields that require college-educated workers expect strong growth. Fifteen of the 30 fastest-growing jobs between 2006 and 2016 will require at minimum a bachelor's degree. Job growth is expected in industries such as architecture, engineering and applied sciences. Labor shortages already exist in some of these fields.

With the Baby Boomers beginning to retire, the numbers of college graduates leaving the workforce each year will soon almost triple. We need to plan for new job growth as well. By 2015 we'll be short almost 13,000 college graduates a year. It's basic economics; supply won't keep up with demand.

“When you find out that there are a lot of jobs where we can't find applicants, we can't find qualified candidates — that's pretty scary.”

Dorothy Richberg
president and CEO
Keystone Computer Solutions

6. More education required for future innovation

Minnesota must be fertile ground for the growing knowledge economy and the next wave of innovation. Many steps can be taken to encourage economic growth, but none is as effective long-term as expanding education. “If the U.S. is to capitalize on the benefits of globalization, investing in a more educated and a more flexible workforce is essential,” said Charles Plosser, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia CEO. “We must adapt and enhance the skills and productivity of our workforce to meet this new and challenging environment.”

Building our brain power — that's the key to Minnesota's future.

“We have to be sure that we're educating people and taking full advantage of all the potential that we have in the state if we want to continue to be the place that we think we are and that we aspire to be.”

Traci Parmenter
chief operating officer
Admission Possible

To sustain our state in these times, we must build our brain power. That means we need to do a better job of educating more students — ensuring they succeed in school and then in college.

When it comes to better educating more students, there are steps any of us can take — as parents, neighbors and communities. Consider what you can do. Visit www.learnmoremn.org for resources, including suggestions and samples of what is working.



Many quotes are from sources interviewed for the television program “Vanishing Graduates & Minnesota’s Future.” For more on the program and data used here, visit www.learnmoremn.org.

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