

Minnesota Vikings 53. Minnesota residents 5.3 million

BY [PAUL MATTESSICH](#), [THINK FORWARD](#)

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The Minnesota Vikings have an active roster limit of 53 players. Meanwhile, the state of Minnesota has a 100,000 times larger “active roster” of residents: 5.3 million.

I like the Vikings; I hope they stay in Minnesota. However, does retaining one sports franchise and saving the jobs of approximately 53 athletes seem as important as preserving thousands of jobs and businesses in Minnesota for employers and workers of all types? No matter what the outcome of the stadium controversy, how can we shift our attention toward a topic that even former Vikings quarterback Fran Tarkenton contends is far more important: the education of our population and the implications it has for our future workforce.

Do sports facilities help regions and their businesses to compete economically? Absolutely no evidence suggests that they do; in fact, some studies suggest the opposite. Does an educated population increase economic competitiveness? Most certainly yes.

Legislators who have read the materials assembled by their own Minnesota Legislative Reference Library have seen the evidence that new sports facilities will not help their constituents economically.

A Brookings Institution publication concludes, “A new sports facility has an extremely small (perhaps even negative) effect on overall economic activity and employment.” Economists at the University of Maryland assert that “economists have found no evidence of positive economic impact of professional sports teams and facilities on urban economies.” The Cato Institute, which views research through the lens of “limited government, free markets, individual liberty, and peace,” states a similar conclusion after its analysis of the effects of sports facilities: “Claims of large tangible economic benefits do not withstand scrutiny.”

If we the taxpayers want to subsidize teams and pay for new buildings – because we want sports here in our state – that’s great. We should promote that amenity. However, we cannot delude ourselves regarding economic impact.

In contrast, evidence does demonstrate the significant economic returns of strong educational performance among our students and of a well-prepared workforce. A 2010 report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) explains how increases in cognitive skills, resulting from increasing the effectiveness of educational systems, enhance economic growth. This falls into line with what economists have come to accept over the past two decades: that better educational attainment for a nation’s population results in greater economic growth for that nation.

How does an educated labor force produce better economic results? A Brookings analysis, which also documented the positive impacts of preschool education, suggests: “A more educated labor force is more mobile and adaptable, can learn new tasks and new skills more easily, and can use a wider range of technologies and sophisticated equipment (including newly emerging ones). It is also more autonomous and thus needs less supervision, and is more creative in thinking about how to improve the management of work.”

Better education has other benefits as well. It is associated with better health and with greater lifetime earnings for individuals. Both of these translate into positive societal outcomes for all of us.

So, what about Minnesota? We face a demographic challenge. About 25 percent of the children in our state are children of color; this percentage will grow substantially. That means, in the not-too-distant future, at least 25 percent of our work force, parents, and community leaders will be people of color. As you know, the

educational achievement gap between white students and students of color jeopardizes that future. For example, about 85 percent of white third-graders meet state reading standards, while only 60 percent of third-graders of color perform at that level. About 83% of white students graduate from high school on time; only about 53% of students of color do so. (See [Minnesota Compass](#).)

The achievement gap leaves our future work force short on the cognitive skills critical for economic well-being. McKinsey and Company contend that the existence of the achievement gap imposes the equivalent of a “permanent national recession” on our economy. McKinsey estimates that closing this gap could have a positive impact on the nation’s economy of \$1.3 to 2.3 **trillion** dollars.

Let’s do more long-term thinking about what will maintain the quality of life for Minnesotans and retain our competitiveness. Long range thinking that will lead to meaningful improvements in the skills of our young people in Minnesota requires boldness and risk-taking. Public officials often avoid it, because they feel that long term promises do not win elections. As the OECD notes, “Because the benefits of educational investments are seen only in the future, it is possible to underestimate the value and the importance of improvements.”

No comment from me on whether and where to build a football facility. However, for the future of our state, we must change the front page conversation from “stadium yes or no” to “education and workforce yes or no.”