To be successful, we must enable both college- and career-track opportunities and advancement.

Minnesota's work force is at a crossroads with an aging populace, large immigrant population, high income disparities between whites and people of color, and academic achievement gaps that are plaguing students throughout the state.

To stem the tide and be successful in the future, we must look to our schools as the conduit to build our human infrastructure for the future.

Recently I came across a statistic by state demographer Susan Brower that showed Minnesota's working-age population – 25-to-64-year olds – will hold steady over the next two years and then begin a multiyear downward slide in size. The article also discussed a labor-market tightening in the state as well as a spike in the number of senior citizens and a "swelling" of children.

http://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2015/01/focus-schools-build-minnesota's-future-work-force
To meet the slowing labor-force growth and to build a foundation for the future we must invest in human capital development. That means building an education platform that meets the needs of individuals of all ethnicities and at all parts of the economic spectrum.

**A chance to change the tide**

With Minneapolis Public Schools Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson stepping down and new leadership on the horizon in one of the state’s largest school districts – and one plagued by major gaps in academic achievement – we have an opportunity to change the tide for the future.

To be successful, we must:

- Develop sector-driven career pathways beginning at the middle and high school platform with an emphasis on building foundational STEM competencies to enable both college- and career-track opportunities and advancement. In Minneapolis, approximately 50 percent of students graduate and this is unacceptable. Systems need to be created to minimize early exiters and ensure improved graduation outcomes.
- Expand the Step-Up program to provide youth with critical exposure and career preparation for work-force entry and set on a course to reach their goals. Targeted youth placement for 2013 was 1,900, a 50-placement increase from the 2012 goal.
  - In 2012, 796 of the placements were participants from the 55411 and 55412 ZIP codes. A targeted approach to place more youth from these areas in sector-driven career training opportunities is vital to increasing high school graduation rates and closing the achievement gap between blacks and whites.
- Develop systems that bridge the gap between the aging white work force and the emerging communities of color to promote the transfer of skills and knowledge to the next generation work force.
  - Labor-organized industries should embrace this role to build these relationships and expedite training/career exposure in the high schools and middle schools.
  - Expand apprenticeship and on-the-job training opportunities for the emerging work force by including activities such as job shadowing, job rotation and mentorship.
  - Create transparent career pathways into sector-driven industries in partnership with key sector-based stakeholders such as community-based organizations, MNSCU training establishments and employers.
  - Expand career development by accredited, industry-recognized short-term skills training organizations focused on a sector-driven work-force model.
Build an intentional career pathway

To keep our region strong, we must build an intentional career pathway that begins at the K-12 education level and highlights job opportunities in a variety of industries. By building in educational opportunities in schools as well as attainable options for individuals who are in need of a career path after high school, we will strengthen our economy and our infrastructure for decades to come.

*Louis J. King* is the president of Summit Academy OIC, a nonprofit vocational training center in north Minneapolis.

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