Incorporating Lived Perspectives in the Student Upward Mobility Initiative

*Insights from the 2023 Community Listening Sessions*

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In fall 2023, the Urban Institute conducted listening sessions in the DC area to support the development of the Student Upward Mobility Initiative, a grants initiative supporting research to identify the PK–12 drivers of students’ economic mobility. We conducted the community listening to ensure the voices and experiences of those closest to the issues of systemic immobility and PK–12 education informed the design of our first request for proposals (RFP). We hosted listening sessions with affected community members (i.e., students and families with an experience of poverty) and the educators and support staff members who work with them to gather input on the initiative’s funding priorities. This was not research intended for a journal. Our goal was to translate what we heard to the initiative’s inaugural RFP and review criteria. This document summarizes what we did, what we heard, and how we used it.

**LISTENING SESSIONS, BY THE NUMBERS**

- 4 sessions
- 4 partner organizations
- 5 organizational cofacilitators
- 9 to 13 participants per session
- 41 total participants, including parents, educators, and parents

**WHAT WE HEARD AND HOW WE USED IT**

*Conventional measures of success in school are insufficient for thinking about what drives success beyond school.*

Academic metrics like test scores, attendance rates, and grades are important but overemphasized at the expense of other skills, experiences, and characteristics that are essential to succeeding in and beyond school.

- **How we used it.** We emphasized studies of nonacademic indicators in the RFP and expanded nonacademic categories in our list of skills, competencies, and contextual factors of interest.

*“Noncognitive” factors and skills related to social capital are the foundation for lifelong success.*

“Soft skills” like self-management, critical thinking, and social skills are essential for navigating challenges and building relationships needed to thrive. Skills related to building and using one’s network are necessary to growing and unlocking social capital.

- **How we used it.** We emphasized studies of higher-order skills and social capital in the measurement track of the RFP and added network mobilization skills to the social capital category in the list of skills, competencies, and contextual factors of interest.
Basic skills that help a person get a job and manage their finances are often overlooked.

Job acquisition skills like writing a cover letter, building a résumé, and conducting a job search are fundamental, but students from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle with them, especially because they are less likely to have the networks and support outside school that help develop those skills. Similarly, participants brought up the importance of students having basic financial literacy (e.g., the ability to set and keep a budget).

- **How we used it.** We added career preparation as a fifth category of skills and competencies (alongside academic, “noncognitive,” health and well-being, and social capital), and we added job acquisition skills and financial literacy to our list of skills, competencies, and contextual factors of interest in the career preparation category.

Job-related technical skills make students more immediately hirable into well-paying jobs.

Skills and experience related to trades like plumbing, electric, and masonry allow students to get well-paying jobs after school. Participants also pointed to technical skills related to computing, including coding and knowing how to use certain software that helped students get high-quality jobs more easily.

- **How we used it.** We added career preparation as a fifth category of skills and competencies and added job-related technical skills to our list of skills, competencies, and contextual factors of interest in the career preparation category.

Students need to know themselves to be able to make good decisions and be adaptive and responsive in their pursuit of success.

Alongside other soft skills, participants brought up the importance of students having self-awareness and knowing their strengths and areas of growth. Similarly, students need self-advocacy skills to understand themselves, their needs, and their rights, all of which are essential to students controlling their lives and responding and adapting to unexpected challenges. Participants brought up the need to be able to chart multiple paths forward after graduation.

- **How we used it.** We added self-development skills to our list of skills, competencies, and contextual factors of interest in the “noncognitive” factors category.

Contextual factors in schools, in communities, and beyond matter tremendously. Influences outside of students matter a great deal for their lifelong success.

Contextual factors affect success directly (e.g., a less-segregated labor market) and indirectly by affecting the drivers of success (e.g., underfinanced schools are less effective at helping students develop the skills and competencies that drive upward mobility). Participants discussed school-based contextual factors, like the early...
diagnosis of learning disabilities, the delivery of adequate services and accommodations, and the provision of mental and behavioral health supports. They also brought up historical and contemporary structural disadvantages.

- **How we used it.** We emphasized the interplay of individual and contextual factors throughout the RFP, provided prospective applicants additional explanations about how the initiative considers context and multiple supporting resources, and included a contextual lens in the initiative’s values and proposal review criteria.

**WHAT WE DID**

We designed, hosted, and learned from four listening sessions over three months by following this process:

**Early planning drew on existing Urban Institute expertise.** We met with leadership of the Community Engagement Resource Center, and we invited additional support from the DC Education Resource Collaborative.

**We partnered with community organizations in the DC K–12 education ecosystem.** Organizations had established trust and relationships with their members. We contacted 17 organizations.

**We codesigned the session format.** We identified one or more cofacilitators from the organization and designed the format so it would resonate with their members. Organizations were offered a $1,000 honorarium, and cofacilitators were offered a $400 honorarium.

**We hosted four community listening sessions.** Urban team members took notes and prepared summary memos to identify deductive themes based on the discussion prompts and goals and reflexive observations. Participants were offered $100 Walmart, Amazon, or Visa gift cards.

**We identified actionable insights within and across listening sessions.** Two Urban team members organized participants’ thoughts in the conceptual categories at the time (i.e., academic and noncognitive factors, health and well-being, and social capital). The coding process illuminated gaps in the initiative’s conceptual categories.

**Sample Session Format**

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<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Introductions:</strong> name, teaching experience, one thing they got from school or childhood that has allowed them to be successful or economically mobile</td>
<td>10 to 15 mins.</td>
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<td><strong>2.</strong></td>
<td><strong>SUMI introduction and purpose of session</strong></td>
<td>5 mins.</td>
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<td><strong>3.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Facilitated question 1. How can school support student success and mobility after high school, especially students furthest from opportunity?</strong></td>
<td>20 mins.</td>
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<td><strong>4.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Facilitated question 2. How can researchers and decisionmakers measure and understand these things?</strong></td>
<td>20 mins.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Closing</strong></td>
<td>2 mins.</td>
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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLANS MOVING FORWARD
We think of community input as an informal component of our governance structure and plan to conduct future rounds with different stakeholder profiles (e.g., in rural and suburban areas, with immigrants, and beyond DC) as the initiative continues to develop and navigate strategic decision points. In 2024–25, we anticipate seeking additional input from communities with lived experience of immobility beyond Washington, DC, as research findings come in and we consider questions related to synthesis, translation, and dissemination; when we design future RFPs; and when we engage in sustainability planning for the initiative.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Information about partner organizations

EmpowerEd: Advocacy group focused on improving teacher retention and well-being in DC. Members are teachers.

Senior High Alliance for Parents, Principals, and Educators (SHAPPE): Advocacy group focused on improving outcomes for children in DC public schools. It focuses on equitable school funding, student health and safety, and improving civic engagement. Members are parents and educators.

Education Forward DC: Organization that provides grantmaking, technical assistance, and citywide coordination to improve outcomes for all DC students. Members of the listening session were advocates, parents, and educators.

Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE): Parent advocacy organization focused on shifting the dynamic to include parents and communities in their children's education. Members are parents.

Information about Urban Institute resources

DC Education Research Collaborative: Led by the Urban Institute, the Collaborative’s mission is to provide everyone who has a stake in the success of DC’s public education community with robust, meaningful, and actionable information to support decisions that improve outcomes and advance equity.

Community Engagement Resource Center: The center specializes in community engagement and participatory methods. It provides training, tools, and technical assistance to researchers, funders, policymakers, community members, and participatory practitioners to develop capacity and create systems-level change to center communities and people with lived experience in their work.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Karishma Furtado is a senior research associate in the Office of Race and Equity Research and a former equity scholar at the Urban Institute. Victoria Nelson is a policy analyst in the Center on Education Data and Policy at the Urban Institute.

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