

# Skills, Competencies, and Contextual Factors of Interest

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Economic immobility for people experiencing poverty is a large problem that imperils the notion of the American dream and makes lives shorter and harder for many. Because of the gravity of the problem and the lack of easy solutions, several national-level initiatives have focused their efforts on bolstering economic mobility. These bodies of work approach different aspects of the challenge, but all consider the multidimensional and longitudinal drivers of economic mobility. This work, across systems, sectors, and structures and across the life course, has built a useful foundation from which the Student Upward Mobility Initiative (SUMI) and its funded projects benefit.

This list pulls specific skills and competencies from established leading frameworks—and adds some from our own listening and learning—to express our thinking about how PK–12 education can drive economic mobility. We focus on skills and competencies as potential drivers of economic mobility because our primary aim is to identify the outcomes that policymakers, educators, and researchers should target or track if their goal is to increase upward mobility. For example, we are interested in understanding which math skills students most need to achieve upward mobility. Once that is established, the field can work to understand which types of instruction or interventions, such as taking particular courses at particular points in time (e.g., algebra in eighth grade), best teach those skills.

We make this distinction while acknowledging that (1) skills and competencies are not always distinct from experiences and credentials across a person’s life course; (2) this list is not exhaustive, and we will accept studies outside this list; and (3) all relationships between skills and competencies of interest and economic mobility are part of an intricate web of students’ experiences in their environment.

We draw from three leading frameworks: the [Education-to-Workforce Indicator Framework](#), StriveTogether’s [Racial and Ethnic Equity Systems Indicators](#), and the Urban Institute’s [Upward Mobility Framework](#).<sup>1</sup> Each framework presents a valuable perspective on how an individual obtains mobility across the life course, including during their school-going years. We encourage applicants and others to peruse each of the existing frameworks as we build an education-to-economic-mobility body of work.

We pull education-related indicators from these frameworks and our own community listening sessions based on the following criteria:

- temporally aligned with the PK–12 time frame
- malleable (or potentially malleable) within the PK–12 setting
- measurable at the individual level
- falls most logically into skills or competencies versus experiences or credentials
- has a conceptual or evidence-based link to economic mobility

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<sup>1</sup> Balpreet Kaur, Delia Kimbrel, Gabriela Katz, Jennifer Blatz, Joe Munnich, Luvia Tapia, Marissa Villa, et al., *A Guide to Racial and Ethnic Equity Systems Indicators*, StriveTogether (2021): <https://www.strivetgether.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/A-guide-to-racial-and-ethnic-equity-systems-indicators.pdf>.

We bundle these outcomes when we see commonalities and organize this distilled list into five categories: academic, health and well-being, “noncognitive,” social capital, and career preparation. After sourcing from the existing frameworks, we assessed what might be missing, given that those frameworks are largely built from constructs that are currently measurable and measured in K–12 and other spaces. We also incorporated perspectives from SUMI’s community listening sessions and advisory council. Added outcome bundles are presented in the shaded cells.

## INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS

Category and bundle	Description
<b>Academic</b>	
Subject-specific academic achievement	Performance on subject-specific assessments in math, reading, science, writing, and other subjects
English proficiency for multilingual students	Achievement of English proficiency by students who are initially classified as English language learners
Preparation for postsecondary education	Performance on college entrance exams (e.g., SAT, ACT, and end-of-course exams) and on college preparatory course (e.g., Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate)
<b>Health and well-being</b>	
Mental health and social-emotional well-being	Mental, behavioral, or emotional health
Lack of experience with school discipline	Not experiencing disciplinary incidents in school or the school-based criminal justice system
Physical and overall health	Adequate nutrition, lack of experience of trauma (adverse childhood experiences or injury), diagnosis and receipt of adequate accommodation and services for any disabilities or mental or behavioral health needs
<b>“Noncognitive”</b>	
Academic behaviors	Doing homework, organizing materials, participating, studying, ability to meet deadlines, attendance
Learning strategies	Study skills, metacognitive strategies, self-regulated learning, and goal setting
Perseverance	Grit, tenacity, delayed gratification, self-discipline, self-control
Mindsets	Sense of belonging, belief in one’s ability to grow and succeed with effort, belief in the value of academic work, sense of self efficacy
Social skills	Interpersonal skills, empathy, cooperation, social awareness, communication
Higher-order skills	Problem solving, critical thinking, and decisionmaking skills
Identity development skills	Self-awareness, self-advocacy
<b>Social capital</b>	
Social capital	Network size, diversity, strength
Network mobilization skills	Ability to tap into one’s network to gather informational, material, emotional, and esteem support
Career-connected network building	Gaining connections through completion of internships, apprenticeships, and other career-connected learning
<b>Career preparation</b>	
Financial literacy	Ability to understand and apply financial concepts such as interest rates, investments, and budgeting to make effective financial decisions
Technical skills	Specialized ability related to a specific job or field (e.g., coding or plumbing)
Digital skills	General ability to use a computer, the internet, and other technology required for workforce success
Job search skills	Writing a résumé and cover letter, conducting a job search, awareness of career options and paths, interview skills

## CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Individuals are inextricably a part of their environment, and individual skills and competencies are influenced by contextual factors beyond an individual. Contextual factors are an important consideration, therefore, when identifying individual-level drivers of upward mobility. We think of contextual factors in two large, non-mutually exclusive categories: macro level and longitudinal:

- **Macro-level contextual factors** encompass the systems, structures, and social forces beyond the direct control or scale of the individual (e.g., the household, neighborhood, school system, or county, metropolitan area, or beyond). Macro-level contextual factors can also be grouped into systems categories, as many of the leading frameworks demonstrate.
- Because of SUMI’s temporal focus on PK–12, we also identify **longitudinal factors** that we categorize as contextual (despite existing at the individual level) because they occur before or after the PK–12 window.

Below, we share a curated list of contextual factors, largely drawn from the leading frameworks described earlier, with our additions noted with gray shading. The list is neither comprehensive nor definitive in terms of its categorization. We provide it to help potential SUMI researchers align with and push our thinking on this front.

We sort the factors into macro-level categories based on our sense of where the lever to control them largely lies. This is sometimes different from how the factors are operationalized in the leading frameworks. For instance, multiple frameworks name food insecurity as a factor measured at the neighborhood level. We place it in the household category.

An ongoing area of needed clarification is how contextual factors exert their influence. This is an analytical question and an epistemological question that calls on us to develop more structure and discipline regarding how we think about and study context. For example, in naming violence as a community-level factor, are we considering mechanisms pertaining to the effects of exposure to a neighborhood with higher levels of violence? Do we mean individual experiences of violence, which are more likely in communities with higher rates? Are existing frameworks capturing both types of exploration in an imprecise way? Getting clear about this will be essential to conceptualizing and operationalizing contextual effects and drawing action-oriented conclusions about them.

Category and bundle	Description
<b>Macro-level factors</b>	
<i>Household</i>	
Health insurance coverage	Household members are covered by private insurance, public insurance (via Medicare, Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, or the US Department of Veterans Affairs), or other insurance programs
Family structure	Presence of two caregivers, multigenerational household, household size
Access to technology	Reliable broadband internet at home, access to a computer at home
Financial security	Family income relative to needs, housing affordability, debt, housing stability, homeownership, food security, participation in social services and programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
Family involvement with school	Parent and family connection and relationships with school, teachers, and other school staff members
Housing quality	Absence of lead, presence of air conditioning and heating, lack of mold, lack of overcrowding
Parental education	Highest level of education the parent or guardian completed
<i>Neighborhood and community</i>	
Community exposure to crime and other trauma	Neighborhood rates of trauma, including crime

<b>Category and bundle</b>	<b>Description</b>
Access to early childhood education	Availability of child care subsidies, slots, teachers
Policing levels	Neighborhood juvenile arrests relative to population
Diversity and segregation	Neighborhood racial and economic segregation by race, proportion of residents who are immigrants
Civic engagement	Voting behavior, other political involvement, volunteerism
Civic representation	Alignment between racial and ethnic identities of elected officials and the residents they serve
Environmental quality	Air quality, environmental health hazards, walkability, access to green spaces
Housing affordability and stability	Neighborhood affordability, eviction, mobility
Wealth-building opportunity availability	Distribution of housing wealth compared with racial and ethnic distribution, access to traditional banking
Transit availability	Connectivity, affordability, travel time, travel modality
<b>School and district</b>	
Funding	Per pupil funding
Diversity and segregation	Racial, ethnic, economic
Effectiveness	Growth in student achievement
Student mobility	Students who make nonpromotional school change
Availability of full-day kindergarten	Availability of full-day kindergarten
Access to postsecondary preparation	Access to college preparatory coursework, college and career advising, test prep; ratio of students to counselors
Equitable access to high-quality, rigorous courses and programs	Enrollment in Advanced Placement and other advanced courses, completion of college preparatory coursework; bias in course assignment or tracking
Cultural responsiveness	Culturally responsive curriculum, cultural awareness among teachers, staff members, and administrators
Teacher quality	Credentials, experience, scores from evaluation systems, student perceptions
School leadership quality	Effective program and school leadership
English learner supports	Services to support the educational development of students who are not native English speakers
Educator retention	Length of tenure in the field of education, length of tenure with a given school, churn rates
Appropriate and equitable disciplinary practices	Use of exclusionary discipline, restorative alternatives, trauma-informed practices; racial and ethnic differences in disciplinary practices
School climate	Perceptions of belonging, connection, inclusion, safety (physical, mental, and emotional); rates of bullying, harassment, and discrimination
Availability of health screening	Children receive early-intervention screening for any developmental, sensory, and behavioral concerns to determine whether services are needed
Availability of quality services and accommodations	Speech-language and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, occupational and physical therapy, early identification and evaluation of disabilities in children, counseling services, school health or school nurse services, social work services, and so on
Family involvement with school	Effective partnerships between schools and families, such that parents have access to school systems and are meaningfully included in school processes and student learning
<b>County, metropolitan area, and beyond</b>	
Quality job availability	Availability of jobs paying a living wage
Workforce development	Government funding dedicated to workforce development programs, including apprenticeships and job training programs
Transit availability	Connectivity, affordability, travel time, travel modality
Health care availability	Availability of primary care physicians and other health care professionals
<b>Longitudinal factors</b>	

Category and bundle	Description
Physical and overall health before and after PK-12	Neonatal health
Mental and behavioral health before and after PK-12	Psychological well-being, substance use, and other health behaviors outside the PK-12 window
Transition from high school	Successful career transition, postsecondary enrollment immediately following high school
On-track in early postsecondary education	Early college coursework completion, gateway course completion, first-year credit accumulation
Postsecondary persistence	Continued enrollment (at any two-year or four-year institution)
Postsecondary completion	Completion of an associate's degree or certificate or bachelor's degree
Graduate degree enrollment and completion	Enrollment in and completion of a graduate degree
Financial security before and after PK-12	See household-level definition above; return on postsecondary education costs

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