Boosting Upward Mobility

METRICS TO INFORM LOCAL ACTION

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Local leaders can create and bolster conditions that substantially boost upward mobility and narrow racial and ethnic inequities for children, youth, and adults. To build public will and achieve meaningful progress, communities need actionable metrics they can use to assess current conditions and monitor their progress. Based on the deliberations of a scholarly working group, this report provides a concise set of evidence-based metrics to monitor progress in the short to intermediate term on key local drivers of mobility from poverty. These metrics can help communities establish priorities, set targets, catalyze action, change policies and practices, and monitor their progress over time. The metrics will be refined through both ongoing scholarship and on-the-ground testing.

Mobility from Poverty

The promise that anyone, with talent and hard work, can advance their position in society is etched deeply into the idea of America and the opportunities it offers.[1] But recent decades have cast doubt on that promise as rates of economic mobility in the United States have stagnated. The poorest adults are unlikely to rise to the middle of the income distribution, much less to the top (Acs and Zimmerman 2008; Bradbury 2016). And children growing up in families living in poverty are far more likely to experience poverty as adults than are children raised in households not living in poverty (Acs, Elliott, and Kalish 2016; Ratcliffe and McKernan 2010; Wagmiller and Adelman 2009).

To better understand this challenge and to explore potential solutions, the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty was launched by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and hosted by the Urban Institute. The Partnership, which completed its work in spring 2018, gathered insights from research, practice, and people who have experienced poverty to answer the urgent question of what it would take to dramatically increase mobility from poverty in the US. As part of its work, the Partnership developed an expansive definition of mobility from poverty that goes beyond economic success. The Partnership argued that economic success alone "does not fully capture people's experiences with poverty" (Ellwood and Patel 2018, 2). Mobility from poverty also requires autonomy and power—the ability to exercise control over one's personal circumstances and to influence policies and practices that affect one's life—and a sense of belonging—being valued by one's community (Acs et al. 2018).
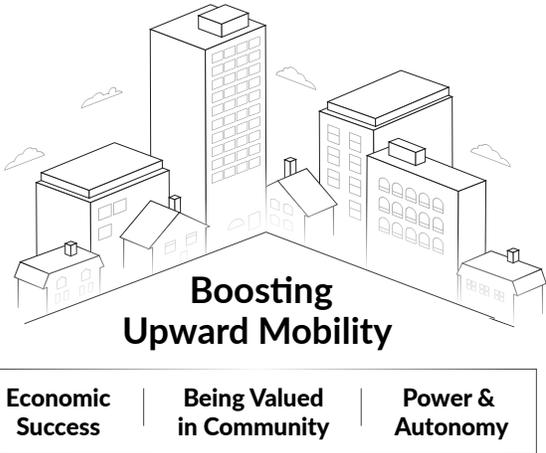
More specifically, the Partnership contends that the three dimensions "are mutually reinforcing, and progress in one domain can lead to improvements in others. For example, someone who finds a higher-paying job may experience a growing sense of autonomy and feel he or she has attained higher social status.... On the other hand, failure to make progress in one dimension could undermine progress in others. For example, a job providing little more than a paycheck with little control over how and when work is done may reduce someone's sense of control [and] create difficulties with participating in family and community life" (Acs et al. 2018, 18).

> "Poverty is not just about a lack of money. It's about a lack of power."
>
> *—john a. powell, director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society and member of the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty*

Building on this holistic definition, the Partnership offered a strategic framework and a series of concrete proposals for substantially boosting mobility from poverty. Their proposals include ambitious, evidence-based policies, programs, and initiatives that would change prevailing narratives about poverty and the people who experience poverty; create access to good jobs; ensure that the zip code where a person lives does not determine their destiny; provide support to individuals and families that empowers them; and transform the use of data to drive local, state, and federal action (Ellwood and Patel 2018).

Boosting Upward Mobility

| Economic Success | Being Valued in Community | Power & Autonomy |

Boosting Upward Mobility: Metrics to Inform Local Action

The Power of Metrics

Increasingly, communities across the country aspire to create the conditions that boost the long-term mobility of their residents, especially those experiencing poverty. Creating the conditions that boost mobility from poverty demands political will and sustained commitment to action, and metrics can play an important role in both motivating and shaping local action. They can provide an essential tool for organizing, advocacy, and implementation. They can help local leaders raise the visibility of critical barriers to mobility from poverty, bring key stakeholders to a common table, help people with

communities need metrics that assess current conditions and monitor their short- and medium-term progress across the full range of driving factors.

Many of these factors are structural, meaning they reflect community conditions rather than the characteristics or circumstances of individual residents. For example, high levels of violence in the communities where families experiencing poverty live inflict lasting damage to children's physical and mental health, undermining their ability to succeed in school, community, and work. In

Promoting Mobility in Charlotte, NC

Comparing one community's metrics to those of other places can motivate cross-sector partnerships and galvanize action. One example specific to promoting mobility is Charlotte, NC. When Chetty, Hendren, Klein, and Saez released their groundbreaking 2014 study on communities that promote upward mobility, Charlotte ranked last among the 50 largest US cities, and Mecklenburg ranked 99th out of the 100 largest counties. This led the city and county to develop a large-scale partnership called "Leading on Opportunity" that focuses leaders across sectors on strategies to increase mobility.

widely differing perspectives agree on objective data, enable local leaders to set priorities for policy change and investment, and support accountability across sectors and actors.

Policies that increase mobility from poverty often do not bear fruit immediately; rather, they pay off over decades, through the course of people's lives or even through their children's lives. Therefore, measuring success requires patient attention to long-term trends. But local leaders need more than long-term metrics of mobility from poverty. Relying solely on measures of long-term outcomes does not provide sufficient transparency and accountability or the ability to learn and adapt in a timely manner.

Moreover, no single factor determines people's mobility over the long term. Focusing on only one or two outcomes can leave critical drivers unattended, and progress achieved through one driver can be undermined by the neglect of others. To make meaningful progress,

contrast, communities with abundant living-wage jobs support residents' economic success as well as their autonomy and sense of belonging.

People of color in particular face longstanding structural barriers that perpetuate inequities and block upward mobility. To tackle these barriers and narrow equity gaps, local leaders need metrics that reveal differences in conditions and trends for people of different races and ethnicities and for different neighborhoods.

Local leaders need metrics that reflect these structural conditions in order to assess how well their city or county supports mobility from poverty for its residents, as opposed to tracking individuals' advancement over time.

Strategies will vary, of course, in light of local circumstances. But two examples illustrate how metrics can help communities take action and achieve collective goals that would not otherwise have seemed possible.

Promoting Mobility in Louisville, KY

In 2010, political, civic, and philanthropic leaders of **Greater Louisville** established a public-private partnership called 55,000 Degrees with the explicit goal of adding 40,000 bachelor's degrees and 15,000 associate's degrees by 2020. This ambitious target emerged from analysis highlighting the central role of education in attracting new jobs and improving quality of life for residents. The partnership established a dashboard to monitor progress on a short list of community indicators, high-school indicators, college transition indicators, and postsecondary indicators. By 2019, the city had increased the number of degrees by 39,000, short of their original goal but still a substantial accomplishment.[2] Among the factors contributing to their progress, they credit the value of multiple stakeholders working together toward a common goal, crossing sectors and breaking down silos between institutions, and how data collected and shared improved the way they were able to work collectively. As they transition to the next phase of work, they acknowledge key lessons learned, including that need to tackle barriers to college success that start far earlier than high school and the courage required for policy and practice reforms that will close equity gaps.

Promoting Mobility in Kansas City, MO

Bloomberg Philanthropy's What Works Cities program awarded Kansas City gold certification for their successful efforts to use data to improve policy and program decisionmaking.[3] KCStat provides the backbone for the city's performance metrics and accountability system, tracking progress across seven city-wide goals.[4] The mayor and city manager moderate a monthly meeting where staff present current performance data as the basis for a rigorous discussion about actions needed to achieve specific objectives under each goal. For example, in 2018 the city set a target of 5 percent or less of children with elevated lead levels. Thanks to increased collaboration across city departments and a new rental inspection ordinance, as of 2020 KCStat indicates the city is achieving this goal. The data presented during monthly meetings are also published on a regularly updated dashboard, which provides additional transparency and allows residents to track progress against specific objectives.

Mobility Metrics Working Group

In early 2019, the Urban Institute formed a Working Group composed of distinguished scholars representing relevant disciplines to develop a concise but comprehensive set of evidence-based metrics to track progress on mobility. Specifically, the Working Group was charged in an internal charter to

> develop a concise set of practical metrics of mobility that have wide credibility for application by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. These metrics will reflect a clear theory of change that connects longer-term mobility outcomes to measures that can be tracked in the short- and medium-term. The metrics chosen will embody the comprehensive definition of economic and social mobility developed by the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty.

The Working Group consisted of 11 scholars with expertise in economics, sociology, political science, and psychology and with diverse perspectives with respect to race, geography, policy domains, and political ideology. Urban Institute senior vice president Margery Turner chaired the Working Group with support from a team of Urban Institute staff.

The Working Group systematically reviewed various factors that influence mobility from poverty for adults, families, and children. They applied rigorous criteria to reach consensus on metrics that are supported by strong evidence of predictive relationships to mobility and that can be influenced by local and state policies. The members convened for three full-day working sessions over nine months and provided structured input between meetings to achieve consensus on the most current evidence about key drivers of mobility, about how best to reflect the Partnership's holistic definition of mobility from poverty, and about the best available metrics for monitoring short- to medium-term progress by city or county. For full details on the Working Group's criteria and evidence, see Turner et al. (2020).

In conjunction with the deliberations of the Working Group, the Urban Institute held a robust series of discussion sessions and webinars with policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. "Stakeholder vetting labs" were conducted in San Francisco, New Orleans, Chicago, and Cleveland in partnership with local organizations. And webinars reached a wide audience of stakeholders, including representatives from city and county governments and from community foundations. These sessions explored the relevance and value of a preliminary set of metrics to local changemakers. They generated important insights about how the metrics could be applied to inform local advocacy, planning, action, and accountability. These insights were incorporated into the final set of metrics and will inform future work to support communities in applying the metrics locally.

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Framework for Boosting Mobility

Because local conditions so profoundly shape opportunities for people to achieve mobility from poverty, the Working Group focused on developing a framework for local action: three interconnected dimensions of mobility, three key drivers, and 25 evidence-based predictors of mobility from poverty.

The framework begins with the **three-part definition of mobility from poverty** advanced by the Partnership. Specifically, meaningful and sustainable mobility from poverty encompasses three dimensions:

Economic success
Rising income and assets are widely recognized as essential to mobility from poverty.

Power and autonomy
Mobility also requires control over one's life, the ability to make choices, and the collective capacity to influence larger policies and actions that affect one's future.

Being Valued in Community
Feeling the respect, dignity, and sense of belonging that come from contributing to one's community is an essential element of mobility from poverty.

This constitutes a normative definition of mobility from poverty in which the three dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. To date, most research and systematic measurement have focused on economic success. Less scholarship has focused on rigorously measuring people's power and autonomy and their sense of being valued in community, and far less is known about how to advance these outcomes. Moreover, further scholarship is required to build knowledge about how the three dimensions relate to each other over the short and long term.

Mobility from poverty is often viewed as a matter of individual ability and effort. But people experiencing poverty face multiple barriers that impede their efforts to achieve economic success, power and autonomy, and belonging. For people of color, structural barriers include long-standing patterns of racism, discrimination, and disinvestment that block access to safe and healthy environments, quality education, and family-sustaining work, as well as present-day forces of economic dislocation and exclusion that undermine people's best efforts to advance and opportunities for their children to thrive.

Three key drivers propel individuals and families up and out of poverty over the course of their lives. All three contribute to a person's economic success, their power and autonomy, and their sense of belonging and value to community:

Strong and healthy families
A secure and stable home environment provides the essential foundation for children's healthy development and for the educational and economic success of children, adolescents, and adults, along with an accompanying sense of accomplishment and empowerment.

Supportive communities
Safe and inclusive communities play a central role in shaping families' well-being, their social networks and supports, and their children's chances to thrive and succeed.

Opportunities to learn and earn
Education, from pre-K through postsecondary as well as adult education and workforce development, provides a crucial avenue to economic and social mobility, and for most people in the US today, work constitutes the most important means of economic security and advancement.

Both scholars and practitioners recognize the importance of these three drivers. And they align with the US Partnership's focus on strategies that provide support that empowers individuals and families, ensure that zip code does not determine a person's destiny, and expand access to family-sustaining jobs.

For each of the three mobility drivers, the Working Group identified key predictors that collectively are strongly associated with long-term economic success, power and autonomy, and belonging and that can be influenced by state and local policies. (See Turner et al. 2020 for details about the alternatives considered by the Working Group and the research evidence upon which the selection of predictors was based.) Ongoing scholarship is needed to systematically quantify the magnitude of each predictor's impact on long-term outcomes (within and across generations), to fully understand the causal mechanisms through which predictors affect outcomes, to explore how these mechanisms may differ for different groups of people or in different community contexts, and to assess the effectiveness of policy levers through which communities can influence these predictors.

Local efforts to boost mobility from poverty must recognize that people move into and out of homes, neighborhoods, cities, and counties. Individuals and families experiencing poverty sometimes choose to move when they achieve economic success, and they can sometimes be displaced because of changes in local policy and market conditions. Local strategies aimed at boosting mobility from poverty should focus on actions that improve outcomes and options for all residents experiencing poverty (newcomers as well as long-term members of the community) rather than actions that replace those residents with more affluent people.

For each predictor, the Working Group selected a metric that can be used to compare and monitor a community's performance over time. See Turner et al. (2020) for details about the criteria used to select metrics and the strengths and weaknesses of those selected.

Disparities between racial and ethnic groups and between neighborhoods within a city or county are critical to understanding and addressing barriers to mobility. Therefore, the Working Group prioritized metrics that can help pinpoint disparities that warrant priority for intervention.
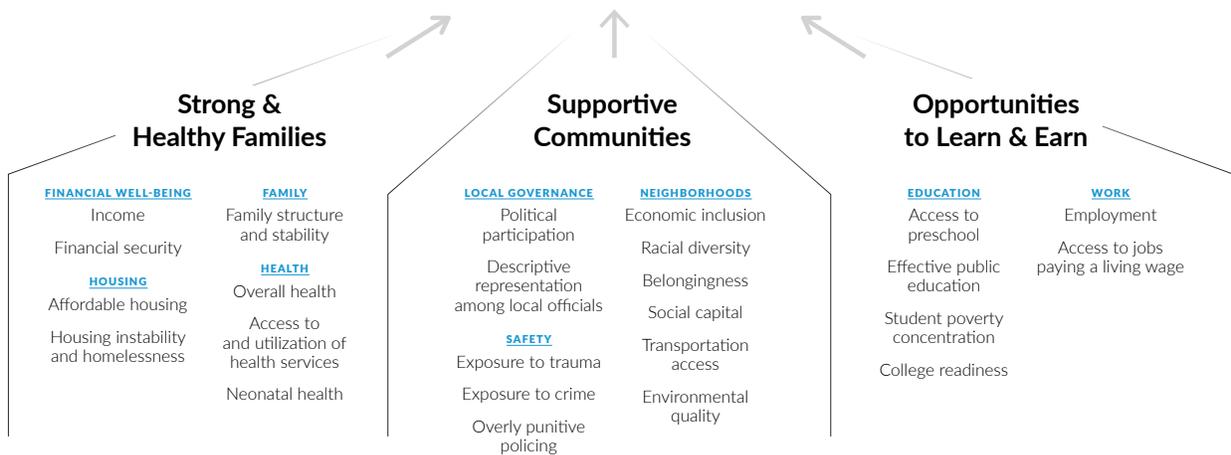
Criteria for Recommending Metrics

- Valid measures of the predictors

- Repeated at regular intervals

- Available for cities and counties nationwide

- Consistently collected and calculated

- Available for important subgroups and subareas

- Not overly sensitive to residential moves in and out of jurisdictions

The optimal data for measuring key predictors are not always available for the relevant geographic units; at the needed frequency, recency, and reliability; or with sufficient coverage of demographic groups, and they are not always properly adjusted for changes over time in jurisdictions' demographic compositions. To the greatest extent possible, the Working Group selected well-established metrics that can be constructed from national data sources or from widely available state and local administrative data. But for some predictors, new data collection will be required to produce useful metrics because potentially powerful predictors are not currently reflected in widely available data sources.

These metrics are not perfect. But together, they provide valuable information about how well conditions in a community support residents' upward mobility. Over time, as data sources improve and as new research identifies more precisely the linkage between various predictors and mobility from poverty, they can be refined to more effectively guide policy.

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Boosting
Upward Mobility

Economic Success	Being Valued in Community	Power & Autonomy

Strong & Healthy Families

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING
Income

Financial security

HOUSING
Affordable housing

Housing instability and homelessness

FAMILY
Family structure and stability

HEALTH
Overall health

Access to and utilization of health services

Neonatal health

Supportive Communities

LOCAL GOVERNANCE
Political participation

Descriptive representation among local officials

SAFETY
Exposure to trauma

Exposure to crime

Overly punitive policing

NEIGHBORHOODS
Economic inclusion

Racial diversity

Belongingness

Social capital

Transportation access

Environmental quality

Opportunities to Learn & Earn

EDUCATION
Access to preschool

Effective public education

Student poverty concentration

College readiness

WORK
Employment

Access to jobs paying a living wage

Boosting Upward Mobility: Metrics to Inform Local Action

Predictors		Metrics
Driver: Strong and Healthy Families		
Financial well-being	Income	Household income at 20th, 50th, and 80th percentiles
	Financial security	Share of households with debt in collections
Housing	Affordable housing	Ratio of affordable and available housing units to households with low- and very low-income levels
	Housing instability and homelessness	Number of public-school children who are ever homeless during the school year
Family	Family structure and stability	Share of children in various family living arrangements
Health	Overall health	Share of adults who rate their own and their children's health as good or excellent[a]
	Access to and utilization of health services	Health Professional Shortage Area ranking for primary care providers
	Neonatal health	Share of low-weight births
Driver: Supportive Communities		
Local governance	Political participation	Share of the voting-eligible population who turn out to vote
	Descriptive representation among local officials	Ratio of the share of local elected officials of a racial or ethnic group to the share of residents of the same racial or ethnic group
Neighborhoods	Economic inclusion	Share of residents experiencing poverty living in high-poverty neighborhoods
	Racial diversity	Neighborhood exposure index, or share of a person's neighbors who are people of other races and ethnicities
	Belongingness	Inclusion of Other in the Self scale[a]
	Social capital	Selected questions from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey[a]
	Transportation access	Transit trips index and low transportation cost index
	Environmental quality	Air quality index
Safety	Exposure to trauma	Adverse Childhood Experiences scale[a]
	Exposure to crime	Rates of reported violent crime and property crime
	Overly punitive policing	Rate of juvenile justice arrests
Driver: Opportunities to Learn and Earn		
Education	Access to preschool	Share of children enrolled in nursery school or preschool
	Effective public education	Average per-grade change in English Language Arts achievement, between third and eighth grades
	Student poverty concentration	Share of students attending high-poverty schools, by student race or ethnicity
	College readiness	Share of 19- and 20-year-olds with a high-school degree
Work	Employment	Employment-to-population ratio for adults ages 25 to 54
	Access to jobs paying a living wage	Ratio of pay on the average job to the cost of living

[a] Metric for the predictor requires new data collection at the local level.

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Using Metrics to Boost Mobility from Poverty

Communities can use these metrics to catalyze and guide actions to increase mobility from poverty among residents. Civic and community leaders, policymakers, and on-the-ground practitioners can

compare their community's metrics to peer communities to assess the extent of the local mobility challenge and build public support for tackling it;

prioritize those metrics where the community's focused attention and action will have the greatest impact;

highlight interconnections among predictors from multiple policy domains to recruit partners and identify the roles different local (and state) actors can play;

set targets for improving local mobility metrics and narrowing racial and ethnic disparities as part of a strategy for meaningful changes in local (and state) investments, policies, and practices; and

monitor the metrics over time to assess their community's progress and hold local stakeholders accountable.

Local leaders have the capacity to "move the needle" on all the metrics if they make mobility from poverty a priority. Specific solutions will of course vary depending upon local context, institutional capacities, and political constraints. The focus here on local strategies is not intended to suggest that all barriers to mobility from poverty can be overcome locally. Federal policies such as the earned income tax credit and economic policies that expand employment play essential roles. But locally controlled policies and investments can create conditions that boost rather than block residents' upward mobility. For example, communities can

expand affordable housing by reforming zoning and building regulations so the private sector can build more housing at lower costs, establishing housing trust funds and using the proceeds to help finance affordable housing production and preservation, enacting rent stabilization or property tax abatements that moderate housing costs for current residents, and maximizing the effectiveness of federal housing subsidies that are managed locally;

increase people's sense of belonging by using human-centered design principles for programs delivering services to people experiencing poverty; prioritizing equity roles in government and inclusivity in resident engagement processes; and training government staff to engage with service recipients in ways that respect their dignity, counter stereotypes and stigma, and foster inclusion rather than exclusion;

reduce overly punitive policing by investing in community-driven safety interventions that do not rely on policing, reducing the intensity of enforcement and sanctioning for low-level offenses, minimizing the use of stop and frisk, reforming school discipline policies to reduce the possibility that students are arrested, and eliminating or reducing fees and fines;

increase political participation by scheduling local elections during state or national elections to raise turnout, improving the information on ballots, electing district-level representatives instead of city-wide ones to strengthen representativeness, and improving access to political participation and understanding about local policies and elected officials; and

increase access to living-wage jobs by recognizing and rewarding "high-road" employers, implementing workforce development strategies to help residents build skills and qualify for higher-paying jobs, raising the local minimum wage or passing living-wage ordinances that apply to firms doing business with local government, and taking actions to reduce the cost of living for lower-income residents.

Rigorous research demonstrates that programs and policies being implemented across the US can "move the needle" on mobility from poverty. For example, the Nurse-Family Partnership home-visiting program and the Educare early childhood learning program boost outcomes of both young children and their parents. The positive youth development program, YouthBuild, provides older teens and young adults with career training that helps them get and keep jobs, while the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs helps young adults complete community college degree programs quickly and qualify for careers. Neighborhood mobility programs like Moving to Opportunity and its present-day successors enable families to live in safe, well-resourced neighborhoods that support their children's life chances. And conditional cash transfer programs such as Family Rewards have provided flexible cash resources that adults and families use to chart their course out of poverty (Bogle et al. 2020). These examples demonstrate the potential of interventions that attend to all three dimensions of mobility from poverty: economic success, autonomy and power, and belonging and being valued.

Communities that use these metrics to develop and monitor local strategies are likely to be more successful than those not guided by metrics or guided by a plethora of metrics unsupported by evidence. Local policymakers and practitioners who have learned about the mobility metrics through vetting labs and webinars have expressed enthusiasm for applying them locally, engaging with community members about their interpretation and implications for action, developing locally relevant implementation strategies, and capitalizing on the metrics to drive collaborative action.

Next Steps

Much remains to be learned about the mobility metrics, how well they capture the range of factors that influence long-term mobility, and how communities can effectively apply them to catalyze action and drive change. We welcome informed debate about the framework introduced here and anticipate that over the coming years, ongoing scholarship will strengthen the selection of key predictors and metrics. Further, a next phase of the work will "beta test" the mobility metrics with a small number of cities and counties across the US. This on-the-ground experience will yield additional insights about how the metrics can be strengthened, how they can help build public will, and what institutional infrastructure is needed to effectively implement them and integrate them into local government decisionmaking so they help drive the changes necessary to boost mobility from poverty over the long haul.

Notes

[1] Lawrence R. Samuel, "The Psychology of the American Dream: Why Do We Believe So Fervently in the American Dream?" *Psychology Today* (blog), October 7, 2016, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychology-yesterday/201610/the-psychology-the-american-dream.

[2] Mary Gwen Wheeler, "A Look Back and a Look Ahead: Lessons Learned from an Education Movement," 55,000 Degrees, accessed January 27, 2020, http://www.55000degrees.org/a-look-back-and-a-look-ahead-lessons-learned-from-an-education-movement/.

[3] "Kansas City, Louisville, and Washington DC, Level UP," What Works Cities Certification, accessed January 27, 2020, https://medium.com/what-works-cities-certification/kansas-city-louisville-and-washington-dc-level-up-cef847c62a6f.

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