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Editors' Message: Happy 2026… Please enjoy the latest read on dispositions of leadership

Steering into the Wind: An Internal Normative Critique of School Improvement and its Potential Relationship to the Social Determinants of Learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of socio-economic factors, termed Social Determinants of Learning (SDOL), on student achievement and school improvement efforts in Ontario, Canada. In the form of what Zuidervaart (2022) calls an "internal normative critique" (p. 91), it examines the existing School Effectiveness Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) and its reliance on standards-based scores and school rankings, which often reflect socio-economic disparities rather than teaching quality. The paper highlights how middle-class parents use "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011) to secure advantages for their children, leading to demographic silos in schools that exacerbate inequities. Using Ontario as a case study, it argues that current school improvement frameworks narrowly focus on instructional practices, ignoring broader social factors like poverty, housing, and food insecurity that significantly affect learning outcomes. The paper calls for educators to advocate for systemic change by collaborating with other sectors, such as healthcare and urban planning, to address these inequities, proposing that current practices are not irreversible; "that people and institutions can change; and that educators . . . can make a difference in how society is organized and the direction society heads" (Zuidervaart, 2022, p. 96). It concludes that genuine school improvement requires acknowledging the role of SDOL and expanding the focus beyond classroom practices to include structural interventions that improve students' overall living conditions.

Keywords: social determinants of learning (SDOL), school rankings, socioeconomic inequities, standards, concerted cultivation, school improvement framework

I spent 20 years working in the public education sector in Ontario, Canada. This paper is born from my frustration during those years, watching as the system became more and more focused on less and less until the administrative lens narrowed to only valuing the scores that students received on provincial standards-based tests. Simultaneously, many students, impacted by a number of factors including technology use (Bal et al., 2024; Gath et al., 2025), the COVID-19 pandemic (González et al., 2022; Zuniga-Montanez et al., 2025), and the differential impact of growing income inequality, were coming to school less prepared for the demands of a classroom. As a classroom teacher, a teacher of specialty arts subjects rotating through many schools, a curriculum coordinator, and a school administrator before becoming a professor, I witnessed these changes in real time. Through all of those roles, there was one question that I came to dread. It is a question I have been asked on playgrounds, in dance studio waiting rooms, at doctor's offices, and in coffee shops. I have been asked this question so many times that I can now anticipate it. Like a train, I can feel the vibrations before it rounds the corner. I will be talking about my job, and as someone overhears, their ears perk up, and they decide that now is the time to inquire, "Is that a good school?"

My stomach turns when I hear this question because I know what the questioner is *not* asking. They are not asking, "Is that a school where the teachers are working hard?" They are not asking, "Is that a school where teachers are implementing the best pedagogy to help students improve every day?" They are also not asking, "Is that a school where students are treated with respect and given many diverse opportunities to learn and grow?" What I have come to realize is that what parents really want to know is whether the school in question will be good *for* their children. Will the school provide them with friends whose homes and families are similar to their own? Will it provide them with varied sports, clubs, and recreation opportunities? Will the school prepare them for competitive secondary and post-secondary programs? Will they be able to learn in a calm and focused classroom environment (Buck, 2025)? Will they experience violence in the classroom and the hallways of the school (Ervasti et al., 2025)?

Parents want to know where the good schools are and, by extension, what schools they should avoid. There is a whisper network for that information, and parents who have the resources to make strategic real estate purchases, organize before- and after-school care with an eye to busing boundaries, and use enrollment in specialty programs (often called magnet programs) to provide advantages to their children are doing so. As an educator who was present in many schools, I used my knowledge of the system to make strategic choices for my own children; we moved into a different neighbourhood when our youngest child was starting kindergarten, partly to facilitate access to particular elementary schools. Many teachers that I know, in their own parenting, make similar decisions. While educators might disagree with using standards-based assessment scores and school rankings (like those published by the Fraser Institute in Canada) as proof of anything, the reality is that parents are using whatever data is available to them in an attempt to provide advantages to their children (Holme, 2000). And, beyond my fumbling answers in the playground, the doctor's office, and the dance studio waiting room, school rankings are a primary source of that data.

Concerted Cultivation and School Silos

The phenomenon of parenting becoming progressively more oriented towards optimizing and maximizing advantages for children has been well documented in the research (Dubow, Boxer & Huesmann, 2009; Eizadirad, 2019; Kempf, 2016) as has the significant overlap between socioeconomics and student achievement on standards-based assessments (specifically those

administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office in Ontario, known colloquially as EQAO tests) and academic assessments more broadly (Agustin, et al., 1999; Anisef et al., 2017; Davis-Kean, 2005; Freeman et al., 2023; Galler et al., 2012; Janus, 2002; Johnson, 2005; Kohen et al., 1999; Sohr-Preston et al., 2013; Waber et al., 2014). Every time you open a real estate listing for certain neighbourhoods and read about the proximity of a house to 'top-ranked schools,' you know that my least favorite question is at work.

Parents are using what author Annette Lareau in her book *Unequal Childhoods* calls "concerted cultivation" (2011, p. 1) to provide their children with advantages. They are looking for information that can help them to make strategic school choices, and they use the social networks available to them to gather that information. "Middle-class parents are more likely to have informal access to valuable information and advice from professionals and experts than are working-class and poor parents" (Lareau, 2011, p. 171). The questions parents ask, like the question at the heart of this paper, and the strategic choices they make based on the answers to those questions are part of the culture of middle-class parenting. Lareau (2011) notes that,

> concerted cultivation is neither "the only" way nor "the right" way to raise children. However, it is the way that contemporary powerful professionals such as child development specialists assert as the most appropriate and helpful approach to child rearing. In large part because of that endorsement, it is the method favored by the middle classes (p. 173).

The collective result of these individual choices is schools whose demographics are very different from each other, even within the same publicly funded school system. In Ontario, teachers frequently move between schools, as do principals and vice-principals. Not only do they *not* suddenly start to do their jobs better when they arrive in a higher-ranked school, their jobs often get easier because there is less violence (Ervast et al., 2025) and fewer special education needs (Ferguson et al., 2007; Janus et al., 2024). Schools in Ontario are funded per enrolled pupil, and so, fundraising aside (McGinn, 2025), they receive similar levels of base funding. Their teachers have similar pre-service training, and they receive similar, if not identical, professional development during their careers. It is almost redundant to state that a difference in pedagogical practices cannot explain the difference in performance between the highest and lowest performing schools in the same publicly funded school board. It is obvious that other factors are influencing these achievement differences.

The Impact of School Rankings

During the five years that I worked as a school administrator in Ontario, I was the vice-principal of a school ranked by the Fraser Institute in the top 3% of elementary schools in the province and another school that is ranked in the bottom 13% (Fraser Institute, 2025). I can assure the reader that the difference in the academic achievement between students in those two schools was not due to a difference in the quality of the teaching. These two schools were demographic mirror images of each other. The students in the first school were almost all from families with middle- and upper-middle-class socioeconomics whereas the students in the second school were almost all living below the poverty line. While both schools had excellent staff, the teachers in the lower-ranked school were working literal miracles every day, supporting students who were living through extraordinary trauma and grinding, often intergenerational, poverty. In many ways it was not just a good school, it was a great school, but its greatness will likely never be captured by the type of data that the Fraser Institute uses to rank schools, primarily provincial test scores, and it will not impact the school's reputation (Holme, 2000).

While there has been research into the impact of these rankings on real estate markets and enrollment in the highest-ranked schools (Figlio et al., 2004; Friday & Smith, 2023; Kempf, 2016; Mathur, 2016; Merrall et al., 2024), there has been little attention paid to what this ranking system is doing to the lowest-ranked schools. If wealthier parents are doing whatever they can to enroll their children in a highly ranked school, creating demographic silos in those buildings, it follows that lower-ranked schools are becoming siloed too. Even John Hattie, promoter of the instructional effect size, notes that socioeconomic status has more impact at the school level than it does at the individual level, meaning that poor students in schools whose populations are socioeconomically siloed are more vulnerable than those in schools with mixed populations (Hattie, 2009). A widely lauded expert in the topic, Hattie cautions against school improvement efforts that are "not acknowledging the increased level of problems and issues faced by schools teaching students from poorer backgrounds" (2009, p. 63).

The ranking system "has penalized countless low-ranking, low-SES schools whose high-scoring students flee" (Raptis, 2012, p. 197). Schools that used to enroll students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds are now enrolling primarily students from working class families and families living in poverty, making it harder and harder to change the patterns of achievement (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Hanushek et al., 2003; Hermann et al., 2024; Reardon et al., 2024). Some families that live in the neighbourhoods around those lower-ranked schools are driving their children out of the area to attend schools with better rankings or enrolling them in magnet programs (specialty programs with entrance requirements that draw students from across a community) that will allow them to be bused out of the area; people are using the tools at their disposal to provide their children with the greatest possible advantages (Holme, 2000). Each of these families is making an individual choice, but the consequences of their cumulative choices to the schools they are avoiding are profound. The schools they are driving past need more than tweaks to their pedagogy or assessment practices to help improve their effectiveness.

School Improvement?

The problems these forsaken schools are facing require a set of tools that teachers alone do not have. While it is true that changing the way reading or math is taught may improve academic outcomes, it will improve those outcomes in *all* schools; it will be the rising tide that lifts *all* boats. We will not, through pedagogical improvements alone, see the lowest-ranked schools achieve test scores on par with the highest-ranked schools, and, within our own whisper networks, we acknowledge that (Holme, 2000; Madrigal-Garcia, 2022).

As Rogova et al. (2016) state, "if we continue to examine educational inequality as if it is not the logical consequence of economic inequality, but somehow a facet of society that can be bracketed out and 'fixed,' then we are bound to fall short of our laudable goals in this country" (Rogova et al., 2016, para. 26). In Ontario, every fall, schools attempt to do exactly that; they try to bracket out student achievement and find ways to improve it without addressing the social factors that persist and often worsen year after year. In Ontario, the School Improvement Process follows the *School Effectiveness Framework* published by the Ministry of Education (2013). This framework is organized into six domains: 1. Assessment *for*, *as* and *of* learning [italics original], 2. Curriculum and Teaching, 3. School and Classroom Leadership, 4. Student Engagement, 5. Planning, Pathways and Programming, and 6. Home, School, and Community Partnerships. It is in this final domain that one might expect that a broader engagement with social inequities might occur but the examples provided include only one that might open the door to that type of engagement: "the

school and community build partnerships to enhance learning opportunities and well-being for students" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 2). This expectation could easily be met without ever engaging with social factors like poverty, housing, food insecurity, and violence that directly impact the functioning of schools and the effectiveness of learning.

Unlike health care professionals who regularly speak about the impact that the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) have on patient outcomes, educators, particularly those leading schools and school systems, have been nearly allergic, as a profession, to speaking publicly about the analogous Social Determinants of Learning (SDOL) (Levinson & Cohen, 2023). While some school boards publish socioeconomic data like the Learning Opportunities Index in the Toronto District School Board (2023), school and school board leadership often shy away from addressing the elephant in the room: that rankings and test scores can often be predicted by the social circumstances of the students in their respective schools.

Levinson & Cohen (2023) define SDOL as the "social and structural factors outside the individual learner, often beyond the traditional reach of teachers and schools, that can affect learning" (Levinson & Cohen, 2023, p. 2). Health care researchers and professionals have, over the past 20 years, successfully argued that "social conditions [such as housing, education, and poverty] are fundamental causes of disease" (Levinson & Cohen, p. 2) while educators continue to pursue narrowly defined accountability goals, primarily related to reading and mathematics achievement.

While these narrow priorities are often prescribed by governments, the education sector has been an active supporter of the reductionist pretense that all they need to do to improve student achievement is make the teaching better, but only in the specific content areas that are being tested (Wrigley, 2008). Through school boards, the provincial government pours money into underperforming schools to try and close achievement gaps by providing more professional development to teachers and more academic support to students. None of these supports are, in themselves, misguided. They are, however, woefully incomplete, and educational leaders are complicit in the ongoing fiction that this or that shiny pedagogical improvement will, suddenly, accomplish what its predecessors could not (Wrigley, 2008).

Being honest about the many other factors that impact student achievement does not mean that we have to abdicate the pursuit of improved instructional practices; two things can be true at the same time. Rather, bringing SDOL into the school improvement conversation invites educators to consider how they can contribute to structural engagement that could improve students' quality of life *and* learning. "Reframing well-known disparities in terms of SDOL puts the onus on every researcher, policymaker, and educator to recognize disparities in learning as active social constructions that are open to intervention and change rather than as fixed features of the educational landscape" (Cohen & Levinson, 2023, p. 4).

The gap in school readiness between children growing up in families at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum has been further exacerbated by recent technological and social changes (Bal et al., 2024; Gath et al., 2025; González et al., 2022; Zuniga-Montanez et al., 2025), making an already wide chasm into a canyon. School and system leaders need to stop pretending that the gap, both in rankings and in the test scores on which they are based, is entirely due to teachers' professional practice because when they uphold this myth, they remove educators from effective advocacy on behalf of students and families, and worse, they devalue the work of the teachers who are practicing, often by choice, in the most challenging school environments. 'Must try harder' is not

motivational feedback for professionals who are already working as hard as they can. Focusing school improvement narrowly on instructional practices means removing educators from a wider conversation about the social change that would be required to improve the living and learning conditions of their students.

The school improvement process as it currently exists is building what Cohen Lissman et al. (2024) call a "moral trap" (2024, p. 519) both for teachers and for principals. Administrators are, inadvertently, participating in the creation of these moral traps, which Cohen Lissman et al. (2024) define as "structural conditions that often contribute to teachers' unmet and *individually unmeetable* moral obligations" (Cohen Lissman et al., 2024, p. 539). These conditions are more common in high-poverty schools (Sugrue, 2020) leading to higher rates of burnout, "deep teacher frustration" (Kempf, 2016, p. 108) and plans to leave the profession (Mallory et al., 2025). The moral trap of school improvement asks teachers and administrators to identify factors *within* the school that impact student achievement when, in schools with a high number of students living in poverty, the factors that most influence student achievement are *outside* of the school environment and are often structural. For instance, the current rate for a single parent with two children living on the Ontario Disability Support Program is $1,324.82 per month (Income Security Advocacy Centre, 2024) while the average monthly rental rate for a two-bedroom apartment in the Toronto area is $1,958 (settlement.org, 2026). Any single parent receiving disability support through the provincial government (which also funds public education) cannot therefore afford the necessities of life unless they are able to access subsidized housing. In Ontario, the *School Effectiveness Framework* (part of the annual school improvement process) asks educators to "accept accountability for student learning and achievement and engage in continuous improvement" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p.5) in achievement data, implying that the most effective strategy to improve student learning is to modify educational practices.

Educators have a responsibility to speak out about structural issues, not because they are making excuses but because they understand that we cannot begin to address problems whose existence we will not even acknowledge. We must change the hierarchical dynamic in education that restricts professionals from speaking frankly about their working conditions if we hope to marshal the public support required to actually redress these social inequities. Programs that might actually support gap closing, like the Circles Initiative (Public Health Sudbury & Districts, 2020) and the Flaxmere Project (Clinton et al., 2007) should be a natural fit for schools, but they exist, unfortunately, within their own silos. The right hand and the left hand need to start talking to each other. Education leaders need to start reaching past disciplinary boundaries to health care professionals, urban planners, public health agencies, and social service providers to create school improvement plans that address the entirety of students' lived experiences.

Conceptual Framework: Building a Better Boat or Calming the Waters

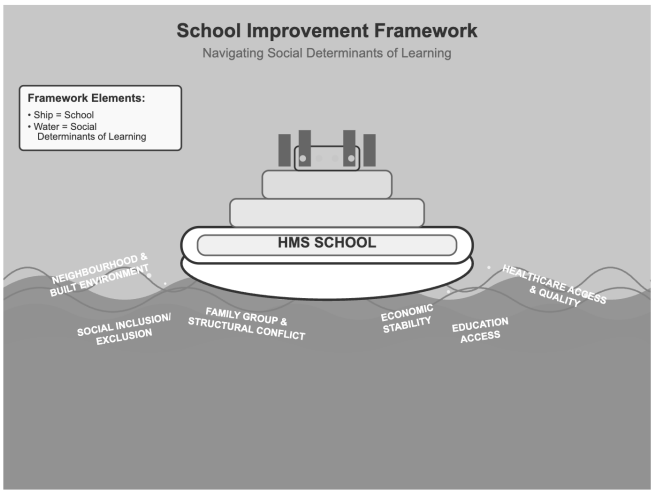
I suggest that school leaders begin to think about school improvement beyond the school's walls in the way we would think about piloting a ship through different kinds of weather. The ships in this metaphor are all very similar; they are maintained to the same standard, they have similar navigational technology, and their crews have similar levels of training. This metaphor addresses the homogeneity in funding and teacher training between schools in Ontario and other similarly funded districts. There may be some differences in programming and recreational opportunities between the ships (analogous to the differences in schools' playground equipment and field trips that are paid for by fundraising) but these differences are not significant to their core function, namely

the education of students according to the government-mandated curriculum.

What is different, however, is the weather that the ships are navigating through. Some ships are cruising through calm waters; the waves are gentle, the sun is shining, and the forecast is for more predictable weather ahead. Other ships, however, are being "tossed upon cloudy seas" (Noyes, 1947, Part 1). With the same tools, training, and maintenance, their crews are navigating through a constant storm; the weather is unpredictable, the waves are towering over the bridge, and sometimes it feels pretty scary to be onboard.

Figure 1

Conceptualizing School Improvement through Metaphor



Developed with support from Claude 4 (Anthropic, May 27, 2025) based on the work of Levinson & Cohen (2023).

If educational leaders want to improve the performance of these ships, they can approach that process in two ways. They can create a super ship for the stormy waters; they can enhance the navigation system, provide the crew with extra training, and install a state-of-the-art ship stabilization system. All of that investment may or may not improve the performance of the ship and, if the weather gets worse, system leaders will need to continue pouring resources into improving the ship, one expensive and time-consuming iteration at a time. Teacher crew members may not want to continue working in such a demanding environment, especially when they see their colleagues achieving better results without having to wear a life jacket and waterproof pants to work every day. At a time when teacher recruitment is in crisis (McIntyre, 2025), the quality of working conditions matters more than ever; assuming that your crew are willing to work in a state of perpetual siege would be a tragic error for ship's captains, the school, and the system leadership.

While no one can actually control the weather, we *can* change the social environment within which schools are functioning. Poverty, housing, food insecurity, and mental health care access are all products of human decision-making; they can be influenced by changes in policy. The Social Determinants of Learning are more like the wave pool at an amusement park than the impersonal forces of nature; *people* are in control of the wave pool. The amplitude of these waves *can* be turned down, allowing the crew to do their jobs without the stress and fear that have become all too common on some ships. Teachers want to be able to focus on teaching but it is hard to do that when you are being tossed around by forces outside of your control (Buck, 2025). Leaders of schools and school systems need to step forward and speak candidly about the inequalities facing their schools; they need to advocate for better policies that consider not only the needs of students for the 30 hours per week that they are in a school but also take into account the 138 hours per week that they are at home and in the community.

Conclusion

Standards-based assessments and school rankings exist; those facts are unlikely to change. Forcing parents to enroll their children in schools that are poorly ranked will not solve the problem of socio-economic siloing in schools. It will merely lead to the growth of private schools and to increased demographic stratification of students through whatever means parents have at their disposal. I am advocating in this paper that the response systems and leaders should be having to

the social phenomenon of demographic streaming is to start having an honest public conversation about the impact of the Social Determinants of Learning and what role educators can play in mediating the impact of those inequities while also working to enact meaningful social change to ensure children are growing up in safety and care. Educators need to make it clear to the public that they cannot solve this problem without help from other sectors of society: healthcare, housing, government, civil society, and others. When educators are forced to assume the blame for every social ill, it does not support public trust in schools and teachers; it is a trap that leads to teachers feeling demoralized and defeated as every social problem comes to rest at the doorstep of school and student achievement.

Just as physicians alone cannot close health outcome gaps for people living in precarious housing and who are food insecure, educators alone cannot close education gaps for the children in those families. Physicians are very honest about this limitation, as are hospital CEOs (Boozary & Laupacis, 2020; Dufour, 2024; Rutherford, 2026); what will it take for educators at all levels to be just as honest and to widen the focus of school improvement beyond lesson planning and achievement data analysis? "Seven in ten Canadians report having trust and confidence in school teachers" (Narrative Research, 2021), but teachers and school administrators are limited to speaking out only through their unions and professional organizations (Ontario Principals' Council, 2024; 2025). They are unable to speak frankly and directly to parents and the public in their communities about the realities they are facing because they are constrained by the very systems they serve. They are also less likely to engage with researchers and civil society if they are being discouraged from engaging in an "internal normative critique" (Zuidervaart, 2022, p. 91) or if they assume that the current system is completely closed and therefore cannot "be normatively redirected by human beings who act in concert via protest movements, enlightened government regulations, and new ways of doing business" (Zuidervaart, 2022, p. 91).

If leaders at the school and system levels want the situation to improve, they will need to unpack that assumption with the help of sectors beyond their own. Educators cannot fix unequal schools; they keep trying, and it just keeps getting worse. The first step to genuine school improvement will be acknowledging, publicly and loudly (not in whispers), the nature of the problem while reaching out to every other sector of society for help, sectors represented by Levinson & Cohen's (2023) Social Determinants of Learning. School systems cannot do that while they are pretending not to notice that the problem exists.

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