

THE DOUBLE DISADVANTAGE

Issues of Equity in Ontario's Schools

By **Christine Corso Schandl**

Gaps at school entry

There is a large body of research that indicates children coming to school from low-socio-economic backgrounds (SES) begin their learning journey at a disadvantage.

Children raised in lower SES homes are more likely to be identified as “not ready for school” based on the Early Development Instrument, a survey of five-year-olds carried out by teachers and parents across Ontario. This means that these children are behind their peers in areas such as emotional maturity, social competence, language and cognitive development.

The correlation is easy enough to picture: families with more financial and social resources can provide their children with more enrichment opportunities, meaning their children can develop many competencies before they even step foot in a classroom. Enrolling children in high-quality early childhood education programs, exposing them to age-appropriate cultural activities and accessing parenting resources is easier for families with more economic and social capital.

A question of equitable opportunities

Although some students are already disadvantaged at school entry, this should not seal their fate. These gaps can be closed. Social-emotional learning, creativity and other competencies are teachable and learnable, and even the structure of an individual's brain can change in response to the right environment. The key lies in the opportunities for learning that are afforded to each child. And with the vast majority of Ontario's children enrolled in publicly-funded schools, local elementary and

secondary schools are the perfect venue for providing rich learning opportunities to develop these skills and habits.

Unfortunately, children are not able to access the same learning opportunities in each school across the province.

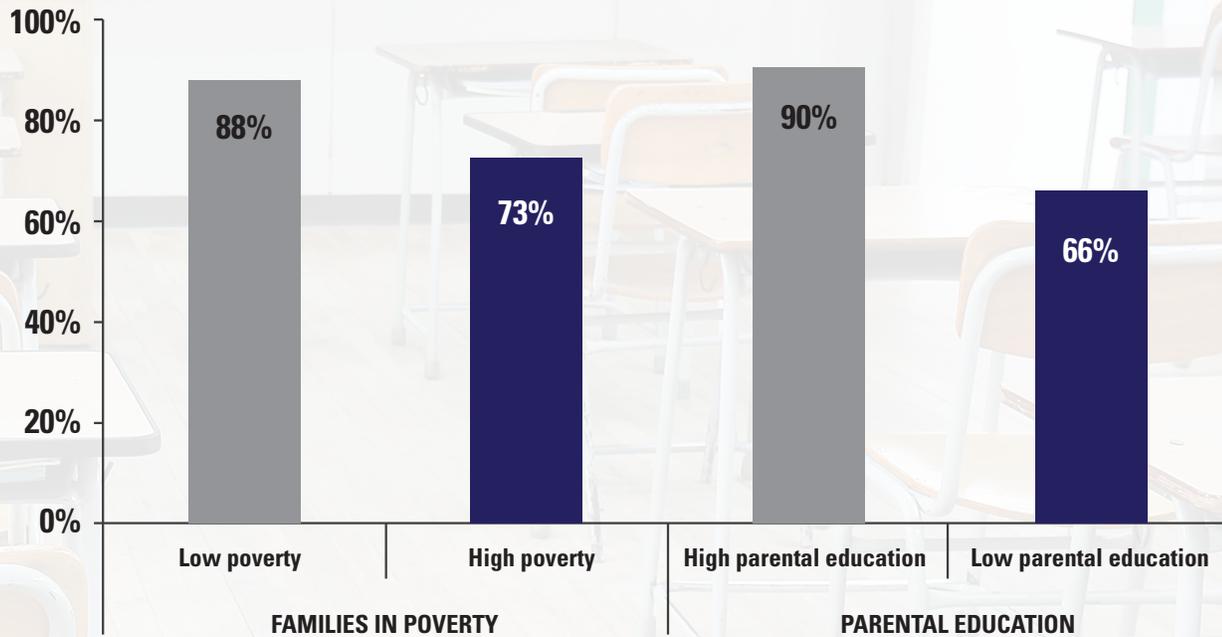
Tracking resources across Ontario

Every year, People for Education surveys Ontario's publicly-funded schools in order to keep track of essential resources and programs and understand how they are affected by changes to policy and funding. In 2018, 1244 schools responded to our survey, representing 22 per cent of Ontario's schools from almost all of its publicly-funded school boards.

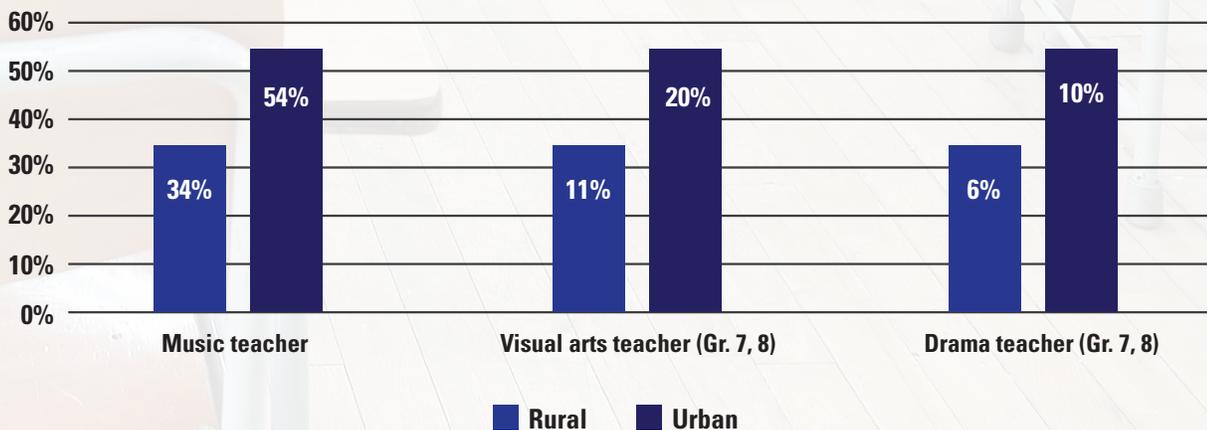
An analysis of information from Statistics Canada and Ontario's Ministry of Education, alongside the survey results, shows that access to things like childcare and arts enrichment is affected by where a student lives, their family's income and the education level of their parents. Therefore, students who come from lower SES homes may be attending schools that also lack vital resources.

In high poverty schools in 2018¹, the median amount fundraised was half that of low poverty schools (\$6,000 compared to \$12,000 per school). The amount fundraised per pupil also differed considerably: the average was \$27 per student in high poverty schools compared to \$44 per student in low poverty schools. These funds can be used to support charities, but also to fund arts programs, busing for school trips, purchase new technology, establish student bursaries and scholarships, or add outdoor learning spaces.

Childcare is also related to parents' income and education. Research has demonstrated the importance of high-quality pre-school programs, linking them to greater economic outcomes, lower incidence of crime and better family relations, yet Ontario schools with high levels of poverty and lower levels of parental education are less likely to have in-school childcare programs.



Researchers also agree that arts education provides students with crucial opportunities to develop competencies in the domains of creativity, social-emotional learning and citizenship. However, in 2018, we found that arts budgets and the likelihood of having specialty arts teachers differs among schools with high vs. low parental education, as well as regionally. Elementary schools in urban areas are more likely to have specialist drama, visual arts and music teachers than those in rural areas.



The double disadvantage

Gaps at school entry *could* be closed through an exposure to high-quality learning opportunities in elementary and secondary school. But instead, students at schools in low-SES areas may be facing a double disadvantage:

- Many may be starting school with a “competency gap” compared to their peers, and come from families that cannot afford enrichment opportunities outside of school.
- The schools they are entering are likely to raise less money, and are less able to provide the resources and enriched learning opportunities that can help close that gap.

So, while schools might be able to level the playing field for young people, this is not the always case.

Why does access to rich learning opportunities matter?

Resources such as librarians, arts supplies and outdoor play spaces may strike some as “extras,” but they are pivotal in developing competencies in areas such as creativity, citizenship, physical and mental health, and social-emotional learning. These competencies go by many names – soft skills, non-cognitive skills, transferable skills or non-academic skills. Whatever you call them, there is widespread agreement that they are necessary for success after graduation.

Students can develop these competencies through learning opportunities both in and outside of classrooms and school. Tackling real-world problems, exploring others’ perspectives and reflecting on individual goals are some of the ways that teachers can foster these competencies within their classes. However, having access to enrichment such as arts specialists, sports teams, field trips and quality childcare can contribute to the rich learning opportunities in schools that stretch beyond the limits of the classroom.

Outcomes for all?

Ontario boasts a world-class education system. Ontario educated alumni have gone on to lead sports teams, social movements and even our nation. However, despite its excellence, SES remains a predictor for not just academic achievement, but also longer-term outcomes. Metrics such as secondary school graduation, post-secondary attendance, employment status and long-term health continue to be correlated with certain aspects of SES during childhood.

We like to think that our public education system is an equalizer, but as it currently stands, some of Ontario’s most disadvantaged students are being hit with a double disadvantage at school and at home. And as the world changes (and the importance of developing competencies beyond reading, writing and math grows), the gaps show no signs of closing. [CP](#)

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¹ We defined “high” and “low poverty schools” as the top and bottom quarter of elementary schools from our survey sample, respectively, based on the estimated percentage of students for each school whose families’ incomes are below the Low Income Measure. Schools with “high” and “low parental education” are the top and bottom quarter of elementary schools from our survey sample, respectively, based on the average per cent of students per school whose parents have graduated from university.



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