

# Introducing the Social Determinants of Learning

## Objective

To introduce the Social Determinants of Learning (SDL) and describe the social factors that influence learning and thus impact educational outcomes.

## Practice Points

1. As defined by the World Health Organization, the social determinants of health (SDH) are the “non-medical factors that influence health outcomes”. Education is a key SDH and higher levels of education are associated with improved health outcomes. Like the SDH, education is impacted by additional factors.
2. The SDL are defined as the “social and structural factors outside the individual learner, often beyond the traditional reach of teachers and schools, that can affect learning.”<sup>1</sup>
3. These include factors like experiences of racism, misogyny, and classism, the impacts of access to resources like housing, food, and quality health care, and exposure to economic stability, social inclusion and quality education.
4. An understanding of the SDL aims to enable teachers, schools, and school systems to appropriately prepare for and develop strategies to intervene on and mitigate the impacts of the SDL on their students.

## Background

Many of the SDL are factors that lie outside of the education system, therefore collaborations with other fields such as infrastructure, housing, and public health, are needed to support initiatives to address the SDL<sup>1</sup>. Some examples of how the SDL may affect students include:

- Students living in low-income families may have more difficulty accessing resources to support their learning like reliable high-speed internet, extracurricular tutoring or camps/classes.
- Students experiencing food insecurity may have difficulty focusing in class if they are hungry.

- Students experiencing housing or familial instability may have higher rates of absenteeism than other students.
- Students experiencing discrimination may be less likely to participate and ask questions in class.

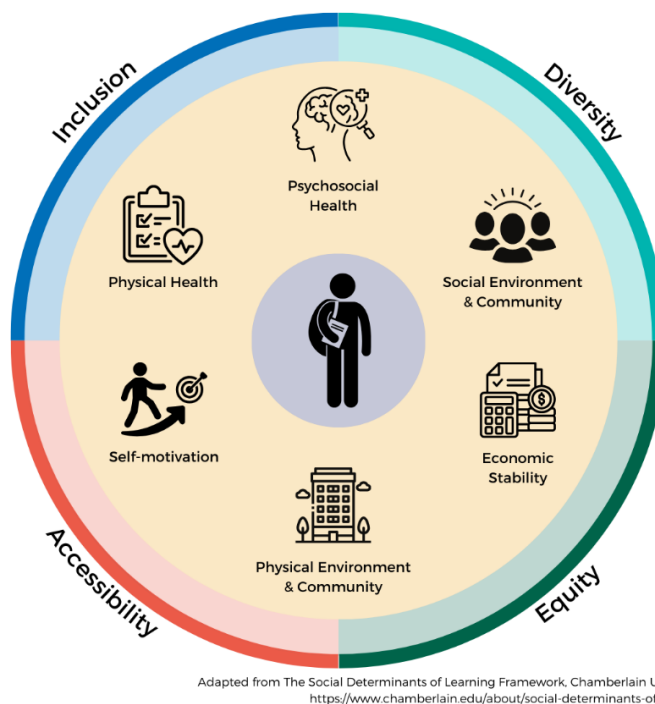


Figure 1: Social Determinants of Learning

A proposed framework outlines six broad areas considered to make up the SDL<sup>2,3</sup>.

**Table 1: Proposed Social Determinants of Learning Framework**

<b>Physical Health</b>	impact of disabilities and/or health concerns, access to health care, health beliefs, quality of life related to physical health
<b>Psychosocial Health</b>	resilience, self-confidence, perceived stress, goal setting ability, engagement in academics
<b>Social Environment and Community</b>	social supports, family support, perceptions of discrimination, cultural background (particularly students who are not native English speakers)
<b>Economic Stability</b>	financial situation, economic stability of region student lives in, working/need to work while in school
<b>Physical Environment and Community</b>	homelessness, generational poverty, safety of neighbourhood and community (to expand this framework to be inclusive of primary and secondary school, we suggest educational access and quality are important considerations within this area)
<b>Self-motivation</b>	motivation to learn, ability to focus, lifestyle impacts (e.g. adequate nutrition, physical activity)

## Sources

1. Levinson M, Cohen AK. Social Determinants of Learning: Implications for research, policy, and Practice. AERA Open. 2023 Jan;9. doi:10.1177/23328584231206087
2. Sanderson CD, Hollinger-Smith LM, Cox K. Developing a Social Determinants of Learning TM Framework: A case study. Nursing Education Perspectives. 2021 May 3;42(4):205–11. doi:10.1097/01.nep.0000000000000810
3. Social Determinants of Learning (SDOL) [Internet]. Chamberlain University; 2025 [cited 2025 Apr 8]. Available from: <https://www.chamberlain.edu/about/social-determinants-of-learning>

## Conclusions

1. The SDL impact the experience and educational outcomes of students from primary school to post-secondary education.
2. Educational staff and decision makers can create supportive environments for academic success by understanding and addressing the SDL.
3. A SDL framework may be a useful tool for educators in integrating this concept in their work.
4. Like, the SDH, the SDL are often clustered in how they affect families and individual learners. This requires a systematic approach to maximize educational success.