



Education  
Equity  
Alliance



# How might we shift the inequity in our schools and education system?

**A mud map of improvement priorities for equity in low-SES school communities (October 2024)**

## About the Education Equity Alliance

The **Education Equity Alliance** (EEA) is a not-for-profit led by educators. Its mission is to activate students and teachers as partners in system change for education equity.

The Alliance works to facilitate system change at both the school and system level. At the school level, it supports a network of schools to work with students and teachers to identify and pursue school improvement priorities for equity. At the system level, the Alliance facilitates a collective impact model working with community partners to strengthen collaboration to address the systemic barriers to education equity.

To date, the Alliance's work has focused on **Victoria, Australia**.

## The urgent challenge of education inequity

Across our education system there is significant inequity. This includes the significant gap in outcomes faced by students from a low-socioeconomic background. For instance:

*By Year 9, these students are three times more likely to be below proficiency in reading than their most advantaged peers (Grattan Institute, 2024).*

*These students miss twice as much school as students from a high-SES background (ACARA, 2024).*

The **Productivity Commission's** recent review of Australia's education system found that despite record investment in education these outcomes have worsened, not improved (2023).

This inequity is experienced most acutely in our low-SES school communities. Our education system increasingly concentrates students from a low-SES background within particular schools. These school communities now account for 29% of all government schools (**Department of Education (Federal), 2023**).

# Mapping improvement priorities

## Shifting the inequity

Whether as a teacher, school leader or system stakeholder (government, community organisations etc), we have a responsibility – and opportunity – to improve equity for our system’s students.

However, if we are going to seriously shift education inequity, including that experienced within low-SES school communities, **then we need to:**

1. **Better see and understand the conditions both holding the inequity in place and enabling positive change** across our classrooms, schools and system. This includes listening to the students and teachers who experience these conditions every day.
2. **Be clearer on our respective roles** for addressing these conditions. Currently we put a lot of responsibility for this onto schools, without considering the roles all system stakeholders play.
3. Work in **partnership** and in a **coherent and coordinated manner** to prioritise and shift the conditions.

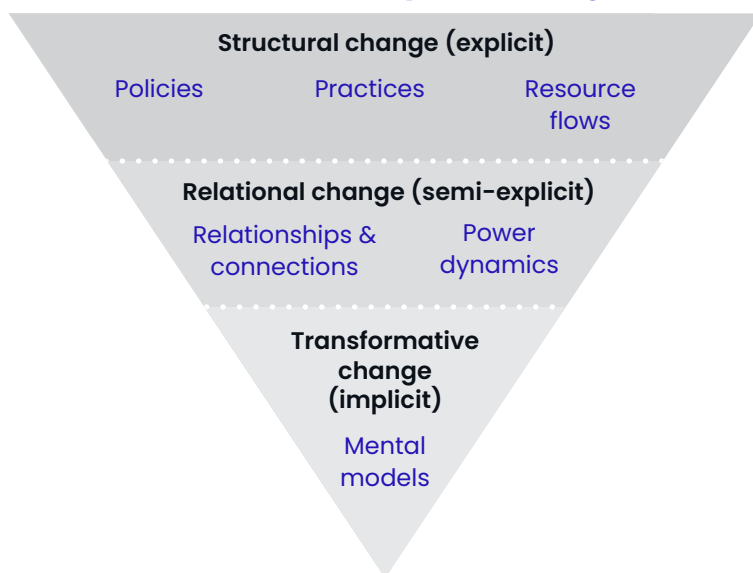
Over the past 12 months, the Education Equity Alliance has worked with over **1,000 students, teachers and system stakeholders to map their experiences of education inequity** using the ‘**Six Conditions of Systems Change**’ framework. This has provided considerable insights into both **the barriers students face** and **what helps most** to enable positive change.

## Why a ‘mud map’?

We refer to this map of priorities as a **mud map** to emphasise that it is how the Alliance sees the conditions at this point in time. It is not fixed and will change. To this end, there are **some conditions not yet fully defined or mapped** (e.g. the role of technology, the role of families) and these areas will be the focus of future work. This includes clearly **mapping the interconnections** between these conditions.

**Ongoing effort is required** to see the conditions contributing to equity and to respond strategically, whether as a school leader overseeing school improvement or a system stakeholder supporting schools and students. At the end of this guide, you will find some **opportunities to work with the Education Equity Alliance on these efforts.**

### Six conditions of systems change



To develop this map, we have prioritised teachers and students from low-SES school communities, with a particular focus on priority student cohorts. Students have consistently fed back that these workshops are often the first explicit and purposeful conversation they have had about how fair the education system is.

*When considered altogether, these contributions provide a map of potential priorities for addressing education equity for both schools AND the system.*

You should not see this map of priorities as ‘a recipe but as an invitation’ (McKenzie, 2023) to think about:

1. The conditions that may be impacting on your work to achieve equity;
2. What you are prioritising, the trade offs you are making and the potential gaps; and
3. Your role in the system, both as an individual and collectively, to shift these conditions towards greater equity.

**We won’t be able to shift the inequity on our own. It will require us to work together.**

# Mud map: Improvement priorities for equity in low-SES school communities

## What we will see...



### Students

are engaged and accessing the opportunities and supports required to achieve their aspirations.



### Teachers

have a strengthened sense of collective efficacy and wellbeing.



### Schools

and the education system work in partnership to respond coherently to the whole child.



## Enabling policies & practices

### Academic



### Wellbeing



### Engagement

Separate but interconnected priorities underpinned by evidence-based, whole school approaches and strong day-to-day classroom practice.

- Evidence-based teaching
- A high-quality, rigorous whole school curriculum
- Multi-tiered system of intervention - including a focus on differentiation and scaffolding at Tier 1 (for all students)

- A whole school approach to behaviour and wellbeing
- Access to an appropriate range of tiered supports
- Prioritising Tier 1 supports (including positive behaviours, social emotional learning and inclusive practices)
- Clear processes for coordinating supports (ie case management)

- Enrichment
- Student agency
- Broader, more inclusive assessment/measures of success
- Integrated careers and pathways education and support
- Purposefully building social capital



## Enabling resource flows

**School funding**  
(incl. structures)

**Access to material basics**  
(incl. digital)

**Coordination of supports in and around schools**

**Teacher time & cognitive load**

**Leadership capacity**



## Enabling relationships & power

**Student - Student**

Understanding & supporting difference

**Student - Teacher**

High expectations & mutual respect.

**School - Family**

Shared aspirations & trust.

**School - System**

Alignment & shared understanding.

Actively sharing power across **all** of these relationships to address historic power imbalances



## Enabling mental models

A belief that a student's education will help them achieve their **aspirations for the future**

All students, no matter their background, are held in **unconditional positive regard**

An aspiration of excellence for all students and communities, built upon a **shared vision for equity**

A clear, shared understanding of **the role we want both teachers and schools to be performing**



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# Enabling Policies & Practices

## What did we learn?

### Academic

“*The classroom should be a safe place to express when you don't understand something during class.*”

- Students want to be both challenged with their learning but also supported to engage at their point of need, emphasising the importance of Tier 1 (whole class) interventions such as differentiation and scaffolding.
- Students report not being able to access the curriculum, or alternatively it being ‘dumbed-down’, as key drivers of their disengagement.
- Students also reflect on the benefits of additional supports, like small group tutoring, when they need to catch up.
- Teachers emphasise the significant benefits of having access to a high-quality curriculum – but also the time to collaboratively plan use of this curriculum for their students and context.
- The system is increasingly focused on evidence-based teaching and high-quality, knowledge rich curriculum as key drivers of improved outcomes, including for priority cohorts.

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- Department of Education’s **Victorian Teaching & Learning Model 2.0**
- Australian Education Research Organisation’s (AERO) **Multi-Tiered System of Support** materials for Literacy and Numeracy
- Ochre Education’s **curriculum resources**
- **TNTP’s** work on raising curriculum standards for low-SES students
- Work of teacher associations (e.g. **Primary English Teachers Association Australia, Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers**) to support evidence-based practice and curriculum.

### Wellbeing

“*A student’s sense that ‘I’m different’ is a major challenge to try and then overcome.*”

- Students and teachers consistently identify that it is critical to meet student wellbeing needs to enable readiness for learning.
- Students can typically identify a range of supports available for their wellbeing, including supports available for specific cohorts of students. However, these supports are not always consistently available to the students who need them when they need them and there can be gaps in the type of supports available.
- Students emphasise the importance of Tier 1 behaviour and wellbeing supports – the things they want all teachers to do.
- This includes a range of ‘best-practice’ practice (including inclusive education culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed practice, positive behaviour supports) – both students and teachers can stress the intersection of these practices.
- Students report significant challenges when there is inconsistency from classroom to classroom – highlighting the importance of a whole-school approach.
- At the same time, teachers emphasise the challenge of implementing Tier 1 wellbeing supports (e.g. social emotional curriculum) consistently – including that it is not always prioritised.

## Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- Department of Education's **Student Mental Health Fund Menu**
- AERO's guidance on **whole school approaches** to student behaviour.
- DE's **School-Wide Positive Behaviour Supports** tiered approach to student behaviour.
- A wide range of wellbeing and behaviour supports are available from Department of Education and community organisations (e.g. The Smith Family's **Learning for Life program**, Alannah & Madeline Foundation's **eSmart programs**, or Minus18's support of **LGBTIQ+ students**)
- The Commission for Children and Young People's **inquiry and recommendations** on supporting students in out of home care and the work of **YDAS** and **CYDA** to support inclusion of students with a disability.

## Engagement

“*There can be stereotyping and negative or low expectations from teachers or even your peers.*”

“*What we are learning can sometimes not be relevant or inclusive of students.*”

- Both students and teachers repeatedly emphasise that student engagement is its own priority – and an enabler of academic and wellbeing outcomes and priorities.
- Students outline an interconnected web of drivers of disengagement – not feeling seen, valued or understood; the work being too challenging or students not seeing its relevance or importance. Students describe how this disengagement can escalate or spiral to the point of not attending or ‘giving up’.
- Students identify a number of practices & opportunities that can boost engagement – excursions/incursions that make links between learning and the ‘real world’, assessment practices that allow them to demonstrate their strengths, learning linked to their interests and passions, including opportunities to exercise agency over what and how they are learning.
- Teachers highlight the power of drawing clear links between the curriculum and careers and pathways.

## Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- DE's **Senior Secondary Pathways** suite of reforms, including enhanced careers education.
- **Learning Creates** – an alliance of individuals and organisations working towards broader and more equitable recognition of learning.
- **Cool.org's** extensive range of enrichment and real world- focused curriculum resources.
- **Our School** supports schools to build their students' social capital through alumni networks.
- Targeted support for particular cohorts (e.g. CFECFW's **Raising Expectations** program for students in out of home care, **Ganbina's** education and career support of First Nations students).
- Place-based models of enrichment activities (e.g. **Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Foundation**).

## Interconnection of academic, wellbeing & engagement

- While it can be understood that academics, wellbeing & engagement can reinforce one another, students and teachers often report them being siloed from each other in the day-to-day of school. This can result in missed opportunities to reinforce the benefits or even particular priorities being in conflict.
- For example, a student who is participating in a learning or wellbeing intervention that their classroom teacher is unaware of. They can't reinforce the learning or skills the student is learning or alternatively may take a conflicting approach.
- This siloing can be impacted by team structures, curriculum planning & design, and the timetabling of different opportunities.

## Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- Frameworks that emphasise the interconnections include Turnaround for **Children's Whole-Child Design Blueprint**, TNTP's **Paths of Opportunity**, and here in Victoria the **Northern Centre for Excellence in Student Engagement's** Building Blocks for Engagement.





# Enabling Resource Flows

## What did we learn?

### School Funding (incl. structures)

- The range of policies and practices required for low-SES school communities and priority cohort students emphasises the need for government schools to be funded to the full student resource standard (which is still yet to occur).
- The structure of our school sectors (including the emphasis on choice, the flow of funding, limited regulation around enrolment practices) leads to significant concentrations of disadvantage in predominantly low-SES government schools.
- Implementing the critical policies and practices at the scale these communities require places significant pressure on both these schools and the system as a whole.
- There are multiple funding streams going to schools to support priority cohort students - there is an opportunity for both clarity and strategy about ensuring they are having the best possible impact.

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- The **For Every Child** campaign, led by the Australian Education Union.
- Recent Nour Report on **Review of Policy Interventions to Increase Socio-Economic Diversity and Improve Learning Outcomes**.
- Australian Learning Lecture's report **Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for all Australian schools**.

### Access to material basics (incl. digital)

“Not being able to afford the prescribed textbooks. There was a sort of ‘shame’ like you didn’t take school seriously.”

- A key contributor to readiness to learning is access to the material basics required - think **Maslow’s hierarchy of needs**.
- This includes access to food (like breakfast programs, free school lunches, food hampers to home), but also uniforms and learning materials.
- There is increasing emphasis on schools meeting these needs (and subsequent flows of some of the resources) - without clear agreement that this is the role of the school.
- Students living in poverty do not have consistent access to these supports OR are not consistently accessing these supports. Students report there can be a feeling of othering and self-consciousness about accessing supports.
- Having access to necessary learning technology - including laptops and internet - is increasingly essential, but similarly there is inconsistent access.

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- The Department of Education provides a number of **assistance programs**, including Camps, Sports and Excursions Fun and State Schools’ Relief for uniforms and materials.
- Additionally, assistance is provided by charities such as The Smith Family’s **Learning for Life** program.
- Note also The Smith Family’s important work on **digital access**.

## Coordination of support in and around schools

“The support of us and our students feels fragmented, whether that’s across services or government’.

- At the school level, teachers identify the benefits of structures for coordination of supports for students (typically well-documented multi-tiered supports, with case management and team structures to support their implementation).
- There is a large range of supports available from both DE and community stakeholders, which means the interface between these stakeholders and schools is critical.
- While there are many examples of this interface working effectively, we also heard repeatedly from both schools and system stakeholders, that it could be under significant pressure. There could be a logjam, with supports having limited entry points into schools, which could be stressed and stretched. There could be a lack of coordination of the supports, with duplication or conflicting approaches.

## Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- Models of supporting schools to engage community, including **Our Place** and **Community Hubs Australia**.
- Place-based models of supporting schools, like **Morning Peninsula Foundation**.

## Teacher time & cognitive load

“Teachers are feeling swamped because they are being marked as the custodians of the issue of equity..’

“Meeting the needs of your students, and doing all you are meant to is pressure after pressure after pressure’.

- Students are very attuned to the pressure being felt by teachers – and can recognise when it impacts upon a teacher’s capacity to provide them with what they need.
- Teachers regularly reflect on the significant ask of being an ‘excellent teacher’ for priority cohort students and low-SES communities – the range of policies and practices they must endeavour to implement to fidelity and both the time and cognitive load this required.
- Effective whole-school approaches and systems that take pressure off individual teachers were identified as critical.
- Additionally, a whole-school vision that unites the school community with shared purpose, along with strong staff culture and leadership support, were seen as protective factors.
- The teachers in these communities are doing incredible work, day after day – it is critical that we get these conditions right to strengthen both teacher attraction and retention in these school communities.

## Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- Initiatives to attract workforce to low-SES schools such as **Teach for Australia** and DE’s **Teach Rural Program and Teacher Financial Incentives** (among others)
- DE’s **independent review into administrative and compliance activities** in Victorian government schools
- The Federal Government’s proposed **Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034** (which is yet to be signed by Victoria) includes as a National Reform Direction: ‘Initiatives to develop, recognise, reward and/or deploy highly expert teachers, particularly in schools which need additional support’.



## Leadership capacity

- We heard frequently from students and teachers that school leadership is critical – including the culture that is created, the priorities set and the resources allocated.
- Ultimately, when considering the range of essential work identified for our school leaders in low-SES communities, questions were consistently raised about the system's expectations of the breath of the role and how we are providing support and building capacity to perform it.
- School leaders recount the highly thoughtful, and at times instinctive work of responding to the needs of their school community – there is an opportunity to support leaders to see the context/conditions they are working in (like those outlined on the Alliance's mud map) and to respond strategically.

## Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- Leadership development programs specific to low-SES school communities (**The Connection, Australian Schools Plus, Fogarty EDvance**) or rural/regional (Teach for Australia's **Future Leaders Program**)
- Department of Education's **Victorian Academy of Teaching & Leadership**
- The Alliance's **school improvement network** is supporting leaders to work with their students and teachers to identify the conditions required for improved equity in their school.



# Enabling Relationships & Power Sharing

## What did we learn?

### Relationships

“*Making teachers understand that connecting is good.*”

“*I just wanted my teacher to expect the same of me. There are different expectations for students from different backgrounds.*”

“*Kids not understanding each others differences. We should be told why some students get [treated differently]*”

Time after time we heard that the path to improved equity - to the policies and practices that would enable improved outcomes for priority cohort students - were the relationships these young people held with all parts of the school community. Where these relationships break down, or are not of the quality necessary, then engagement with the available opportunities and supports can be compromised.

Students identify a number of critical characteristics of these relationships:

#### Student - Teacher

- That there is two-way respect, often demonstrated through mutual sharing of their passions and interests.
- That the teacher both meets the student where they are at AND maintains high expectations of them.
- The students often report the benefit of having a key adult in the school who has the time to build this relationship and then use it to strengthen the student's relationships with other staff.

#### Peer-to-Peer

- Students are very aware of each others differences - but don't necessarily have the language or spaces to talk about it. They are also not supported to understand its implications for engagement in education.
- This lack of understanding can be a driver of conflict, of a feeling of otherness and being on the outside, and ultimately not accessing some supports available to them. The reverse was also reported as true - that recognising and supporting each others differences, say as a friendship group, could enable engagement, including with supports available.

#### School - Family

- A critical enabler of strong student engagement, was a strong relationship between the family and school.
- We frequently heard that this must be built upon a feeling of trust, as well as shared aspirations for the young person (which could be assumed, rather than purposefully built).

Another critical relationship is between the **school (and its staff) and the system** (including both government and supporting stakeholders). We heard of many instances of these relationships being a true partnership but also instances where there could be challenges - there could be misaligned priorities, or school staff feeling like their work is not understood.

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- Stronger Smarter's work on **high expectation relationships**.
- Social emotional curriculum and programs to support peer relationships, including understanding difference (e.g. DE's **Respectful Relationships** curriculum, **Project Rokit Foundation's** support for low-SES schools).
- Centre for Multicultural Youth's **Refugee Education Support Program** whole-of-school approach
- AERO's guide and resources on **family engagement**.

## Power sharing

“Who is creating a system that is not working? Those with the least power have the least say’.

“Students put so much onto teachers to fix this, but teachers feel so limited because of expectations and policies upon them’.

“There can be conflict between school expectations and community expectations. Like when it comes to faith or family’.

### With students

- Students would repeatedly stress that they want to be able to provide feedback to their teachers on what they need (both in terms of learning and supports) - and for this to then be clearly and visibly acted upon.
- They would also reiterate that they wanted genuine and regular opportunities to exercise agency over what and how they are learning.

### With the school community (students, teachers, families)

- Significant attention (and resources) is being placed on improving low-SES schools. Teachers and school leaders share that this can be both supportive and also feel top down and accountability-driven. Student, teachers and families seek models of improvement that meaningfully engage the whole community in driving improvement.
- A key manifestation of power in a school community is the behaviour expectations set for students - while students regularly describe the need for high expectations, they also want to have a say over what is expected of them.
- There is an important focus of the system on ensuring First Nations communities, including students and families, have much greater say over their education.

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- **VicsRC**'s work to support improved student voice and agency across both schools and the education system.
- **Accountable Futures Collective** to increase accountability of systems to young people
- The Alliance's **school improvement program** provides strong opportunities for student feedback and for students, teachers and families to co-design improvement priorities for education equity.
- Approaches to co-constructing behaviour expectations, including **school-wide positive behaviour supports**.
- The work to support power-sharing with First Nations communities, including that of **VAEAI**, the **Koorie Youth Council**, the **National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition** and the Department of Education's **self-determination** initiative.



# Enabling Mental Models

## What did we learn?

### A belief that a student's education will help them achieve their aspirations for the future

“There can be a disconnection of the education system from some young people.”

- Students want to see a clear link between their experience of school and education and their hopes and aspirations for the future. Unfortunately we heard from students across a range of contexts that this is not always the case.
- This could be impacted upon by their sense of belonging to school.
- It could also be impacted by the extent to which the students saw and understood the relevance of what they were learning to these aspirations for the future.
- Relatedly, teachers and system stakeholders could also raise questions about particular forms of education - such as that provided by mainstream schools - and its capacity to help some students achieve their aspirations for the future.

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- OECD research demonstrates the importance of both **belonging** and students seeing the **relevance of their education** to their future career aspirations. Of concern, this research also demonstrates that low-SES students are more likely not to feel either.

### All students, no matter their background, are held in unconditional positive regard

“Remove blame and replace with understanding or education.”

- When considering the mindsets that are critical to working within low-SES school communities, teachers would frequently raise unconditional positive regard.
- Teachers talk of the need to be empathetic towards students, especially in the face of challenges.
- Students would ultimately describe something similar. They want their teachers to see them as individuals - to understand them and their background, what motivates them and how to meet their needs.
- Both students and teachers would report feelings of the system putting students into boxes - including the box of a 'good student' (or not so good).

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- The Berry Street Education Model's work on **unconditional positive regard** in the context of trauma-informed education.
- Turnaround for Children's **Whole-Child Design Blueprint** provides a framework through which classrooms and schools can coherently see the whole student and meet their needs.

## An aspiration of excellence for all students and communities, built upon a shared vision for equity

“ I feel that there are a lot of schools and teachers working hard on a classroom level, but they are competing against a bigger system that has conflicting academic and behavioural expectations.”

- Different parts of the system would share different visions for equity – while these would generally centre on meeting the needs of all young people, there was not necessarily agreement on what this requires or should look like or the extent we should go to.
- Teachers and leaders could also talk about the need to balance equity and excellence, like they were pulling in different directions. For instance, building a school culture that embraces difference and diversity could be seen as softening of high expectations for excellence – rather than as a path to excellence. They would reflect on the differing perspectives of this across the wider community and system, and the pressure that could be placed on schools to resolve this.
- At the classroom level, this can play out as a daily balancing act of setting and upholding expectations – of teachers figuring out whether they can bend to meet the needs of their students, and students having their needs met or feeling left behind. These reflections emphasised the need for a shared vision for equity and that can provide the foundation for an aspiration of excellence that is inclusive of all students and communities.

### Examples of practice/ supporting resources

- OECD work on the [relationship between excellence and equity](#).
- Pasi Sahlberg’s work on [defining equity](#).

## A clear, shared understanding of the role we want both teachers and schools to be performing

“ We need our teachers to be like doctors. They need to understand our background (incl. trauma) and treat each patient differently meeting both their wellbeing and learning needs”

- Working with stakeholders across the system, it is clear that the roles of both teachers and schools have been expanding, and this has escalated most recently with the pandemic and the increased wellbeing and behaviour needs of students. Due to the cohort they serve, this been particularly acute for teachers in low-SES school communities.
- What also becomes clear when working with teachers is that there isn’t clear line on sight on this – more and more is being asked by a range of stakeholders (government, school leadership, families) without everyone having a clear, shared understanding of the role or the ask.
- There can also be conflict over the role, dragging teachers in different directions. For instance, the prioritisation of time to administer learning and wellbeing supports.
- This expansion of roles also extends more wholistically to the role of schools to support students, families and community.
- Some schools work to resolve these roles for themselves, drawing clear lines around what is expected – but there is a need to make sure these are consistent with the wider system and community.

## What now?

“ What do you see as the enabling conditions for change in your context and work? Are you engaging student, teacher and family perspectives in order to see this clearly?

“ Where are you currently putting your effort?

“ What are the possible gaps in these efforts?

The **Education Equity Alliance (EEA)** is supporting both schools and community stakeholders to understand the key enablers and priorities in their context for improved equity and to work together to act upon these.

Critically, we support these schools and organisations to get students, teachers and families involved and having a say over these improvement efforts.

We **support schools** to partner with students and teachers to identify the key improvement priorities for equity in their context - more information on our school improvement program, including upcoming workshops and network opportunities can be found [here](#).

We are also working with a number of peak education equity stakeholders to take a **collective impact response** to prioritise and then action these enabling conditions. If your organisation is interested in being part of these collective efforts, please contact us using the details below.

### For more information, please contact:

**Tim Warwick**  
**Founder & CEO**  
[tim@equityalliance.com.au](mailto:tim@equityalliance.com.au)