



Background

Over the past 6 months, the Education Equity Alliance has worked with **300+ students and teachers**, largely from low-SES settings, to both build their understanding of education equity and to utilise system-thinking tools to identify key barriers and leverage points for change.

Priority student cohorts that were identified and considered by students included low-socioeconomic students, culturally and racially diverse students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disabilities, students with mental health challenges and/or students who have experienced adverse experiences, students in out of home care, and LGBTIQ+ students.

Recently, the Alliance worked with a panel of students and teachers (**'the Panel'**) to review the input provided by participants to date and to synthesise this using system-thinking tools. This analysis produced the key takeaways set out in this paper.

1. There are significant **barriers to student wellbeing, inclusion and engagement** that are critical to education equity

While students and teachers identified a range of barriers to education equity, the barrier most consistently shared with the Alliance was that there are significant challenges to the wellbeing, inclusion and engagement of priority cohort students.

Barriers shared by students

'Not having my needs met.'

'Not being understood or seen. And feeling left behind.'

'School can feel harder and harder. It's a vicious cycle. And at some point you just give up.'

'Teachers can look down on some behaviours. Rather than the goody two shoes that everyone loves.'

'You are finding out who you are - if you are not feeling seen or valued it makes you question. Everything can start to crumble.'

'We don't have spaces where we can share how we really feel.'

Barriers shared by teachers

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

'Some kids are perceived as 'bad' - judgement around how behaviour indicates character rather than a lack of skill.'

'A student's sense that 'I'm different' is a major challenge to try and then overcome.'

'For those students that don't fit in, they feel like they can't get a win. They can also be missing some fundamental skills, whether that is with regards to their learning or regulation, and this can put them at odds with the system.'

Sadly, these experiences correlate with a range of evidence we have from across Australia's education system. For instance, not only is there on average a substantial learning gap for low-socioeconomic students ([Grattan Institute, 2023](#)), they are less likely to feel a sense of belonging ([OECD, 2018](#)) efficacy ([Lamb et al, 2020](#)) or to attend school regularly ([ACARA, 2023](#)).

2. A critical leverage point for change is to address the systemic challenges to implementation of evidence-based wellbeing policies and practices

When students and teachers identify what contributes to their success, as well as solutions to the barriers they can face, they consistently identify best-practice, evidence-based student wellbeing policies and practices. **This includes school-wide positive behaviour supports, multi-tiered systems of support and trauma-informed practices.**



To support its analysis, the Panel utilised the Victorian Education Department's High Impact Wellbeing Strategies (HIWS) as a synthesis of evidence-based wellbeing practice. The HIWS are:

'7 practical, evidence-based strategies that have demonstrated a significant and positive effect on student wellbeing. The HIWS empower teachers with the knowledge and skills to be active agents in building their students' wellbeing as part of their practice.' (Department of Education, 2023)

The HIWS cover 3 domains – 'Building Relationships', 'Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments' and 'Building Student Capability'.



Reviewing the HIWS alongside the contributions of 300+ students and teachers, the Panel came to the following **conclusions**:

- Students and teachers consistently identify **these strategies as critical to overcoming the barriers** students from priority cohorts face.
- However, it is clear that **priority cohort students do not experience these strategies - and their benefits - consistently.**
- That while many teachers are going to **significant effort** to meet the needs of their students and to implement these strategies there are **considerable systemic challenges** that **complicate and limit their implementation.**
- These **challenges are not well-understood** by the system when implementing these policies and practices - and improving this understanding so to improve implementation is **a critical leverage point for change.**

Note: within system-change literature, a leverage point is a place within a complex system where a small intervention will produce a relatively big change in practice and outcomes (Meadows, 1999).

3. Systemic challenges to the successful implementation of wellbeing policies and practices - especially for priority cohorts in complex settings

The Panel identified four critical and systemic challenges to the implementation of wellbeing strategies and supports.

Critically, it noted that **these challenges can increase significantly in settings with a greater proportion of students from priority cohorts.** These were termed 'complex settings', and include low-SES schools, regional/rural schools, and alternative education settings. This is of obvious and urgent concern, given that the students in these settings are more reliant on the successful implementation of these strategies for success.



A. Time and Resources

The Panel observed that when it comes to the time required to implement these wellbeing strategies effectively along with everything else expected of teachers - again, especially when serving a number of students in priority cohorts - that **'the math is off'**. There are not the hours in the day for teachers to perform all the tasks being asked of them across both teaching & learning and student wellbeing (and beyond).

A consequence of inadequate time can be that teachers and schools have to resort to **'ticking the box'** for the different wellbeing, inclusion and engagement initiatives they are meant to be implementing. Given the range of demands on their time, and the number of school and system priorities, they don't have time for deep implementation of these critical wellbeing strategies.

The Panel noted that a critical support to teachers implementing these strategies - for instance putting the time into getting to know their students' backgrounds, forming relationships and then implementing individualised support - is when they have **'easy and integrated access to other wellbeing and support staff'**. However, they reflected that students and teachers had reported significant variability in the access to these supports, and that even when these supports are available, them operating as a **'holistic team around the learner'** can be a further challenge.



B. Conflicting expectations about behaviour

Across so many of the contributions that the Alliance has heard, there was significant variety and tension in students, teachers, and families' expectations about behaviour. This led the Panel to reflect that the task of 'clearly and consistently communicating and reinforcing classroom expectations' (HIWS #3) is **'much more complex and challenging than is understood'**. This can especially be the case when supporting young people who may be experiencing significant challenges outside of school that impact on their school readiness and behaviours. Students and teachers reflected on the multiple directions that teachers can be pulled in, including but by no means limited to: effectively meeting the needs of all students; students frustrated by their peers and what is or isn't expected of them; families expecting to see certain behaviours 'punished'; and the system's expectation of a 'sense of order' that can hang over you as you face considerable challenges. As the Panel reflected you **'can't be too soft or too hard'** and **'you can't be their best friend but you must be friendly'**. Finding the right balance requires purposeful, skilled and collaborative work.

An additional layer to this balancing act is the **'intersection between academic and wellbeing priorities'**. The Victorian Department's recently revised Framework for Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0) explicitly links academic and wellbeing outcomes for students, placing them alongside one another as priorities. The Panel reflected that when it comes to addressing the barriers that some priority cohort students face, meeting their wellbeing needs can take significant time and become the focus, but this can feel in conflict with both school and system-level expectations, for instance over the curriculum to be delivered or the assessment to be undertaken. Navigating this dynamic can be a source of significant tension.

What can be seen through the experiences that have been shared with the Alliance, is that when the balance of these expectations and priorities is not right, this can be a substantial source of stress and conflict for both the students and the teachers, and ultimately a significant barrier to their wellbeing and engagement.



C. Stress

The Panel recognised that for teachers to successfully implement strategies to meet the wellbeing needs of their students, their own wellbeing needs must be met: **'calm and regulated students and classrooms require calm and regulated teachers'**. While there is currently a significant focus on teacher wellbeing, the Panel noted that these efforts tend to focus on additional supports to assist with managing the stress rather than addressing the root causes of the stress itself.

To this end, the significant challenges outlined here in terms of the adequate time and resources to implement wellbeing strategies and support, and the conflicting behavioural and wellbeing expectations that can complicate these efforts, are key stressors. This stress can significantly impact on how teachers see their students and how they see themselves, the expectations they hold and the efficacy they feel.

Critically, the Panel reflected that we have consistently heard from participants the significant and **'disproportionate impact'** that the current workforce crisis is having on low-SES schools supporting significant numbers of priority cohort students. It can be a **'vicious cycle'** as stress in these settings motivates attrition while discouraging attraction.

A key 'antidote' to this stress identified by students and teachers is strong school culture, including a collective sense of purpose and **'the belief that progress is possible'**.



D. The complex nature of critical mindsets

The Panel reflected that underpinning the high-impact wellbeing strategies are student-centred and strengths-based mindsets, and that holding these is critical to their implementation. However, the Panel noted that **'these mindsets can often be assumed'** to be held by teachers, without recognising the complex task of both developing these mindsets and then consistently holding and acting upon them.

The other challenges identified here can also be significant barriers to this work. As an example, the Panel considered the approach of 'unconditional positive regard', a mindset underpinning student-centred and trauma-informed practices. It involves separating the student from their behaviour, seeing the whole child, and approaching them with love and care. As a student panel member reflected, **'Geez that must be stressful'**. The Panel went on to discuss that being available and genuine in the manner this approach requires, and doing this consistently in the face of considerable barriers, requires complex and ongoing work that must be clearly understood.



4. Recommended priority actions to improve the implementation of wellbeing policies and practices for priority cohort students

Utilising system-thinking tools, the Panel identified a number of priority actions that would remove key barriers to the successful implementation of wellbeing, inclusion and engagement strategies for priority cohort students.

These recommendations should be implemented **at both the school and system level**.

Critically, students and teachers should be engaged in the **co-design of their implementation**. This must include students from priority cohorts.



Reconcile the time required for 'effective teaching', including for deep implementation of wellbeing strategies when serving significant numbers of students from priority cohorts.

- Co-designing strategies to improve efficiency for both teaching & learning and wellbeing implementation.
- Prioritising approaches that enable efficient and effective delivery of wellbeing strategies (e.g. multi-tiered systems of supports).
- Ensuring adequate resources - and that they work in an integrated manner.



Prioritise ongoing processes for **collectively establishing** and monitoring **school-wide behaviour expectations**.

- Co-construct behaviour expectations with the active engagement of a diverse range of students, teachers, families and community members.
- Utilise a team of students and teachers to monitor implementation of expectations - and to address pressure points as they arise.



Co-design initiatives that explicitly **address key stressors** for both students & teachers.

- For example, building an explicit and shared sense of purpose (e.g. whole-school vision) or engaging students and teachers in school improvement processes to build collective efficacy.



Provide **training in the critical mindsets** underpinning key wellbeing strategies.

- Co-designing indicators of success (ie what the mindsets look like and feel like for students, teachers, schools and the system)
- Facilitate a culture of reflective practice to support resilience and fidelity of implementation.

Get Involved

The Education Equity Alliance is a not-for-profit organisation led by experienced teachers and school leaders.

The Alliance is currently working with both schools and system stakeholders to engage students, teachers and families to identify key barriers to equity and to co-design solutions. We prioritise engaging students from priority cohorts in these activities, as well as the teachers and staff directly supporting them, as an intervention to build their wellbeing and efficacy.

When working with schools, we align and incorporate these processes with their existing school improvement processes, and can also provide additional supports such as professional learning and school leadership coaching and de-briefing.

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