



### Submission to Review to Inform a Better & Fairer Education System

The Education Equity Alliance has been established by a growing network (currently 150+) students, teachers, school and system leaders, who are passionate about seeing a more equitable education system. Our priority is empowering students and teachers to engage in dialogue and collaboration across the layers of the system utilising rigorous system change methodologies. Our initial work of the past six months (documented on our [website](#)) has provided a number of critical insights, which inform our response to the Expert Panel's Consultation Paper.

In particular, we would note our close and purposeful work with students within alternate settings (alongside students from a range of mainstream settings). We believe those most disengaged from the current system, have the most to teach us about how it can be better and fairer.

As both the Productivity Commission's report<sup>1</sup> and the Expert Panel's Consultation Paper identify with reference to extensive data, the Australian education system faces an urgent and significant challenge when it comes to equity. Despite the immense efforts of so many, and significant investment of resources, this situation has only worsened. The Alliance was established to provide a space for those who experience this inequity each day in our classrooms to be able to collaborate to achieve change.

It is clear from the data and these experiences that the inequity in our system is stuck. As a result, urgent system change is required.

#### **1. Understanding 'the problem'**

To shift the system to a more equitable one we must ensure a deep understanding of 'the problem'. The Alliance notes the Expert Panel's undertaking to consult widely. Our initial work with students, teachers and other stakeholders reveals the following themes.

##### ***a. Significant variation in the understanding of equity***

As a system, we have a rich vision of both excellence and equity for our young people, contained with the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration<sup>2</sup>. However, it has been apparent over the course of our work with students, education professionals and stakeholders, that there are significant differences of opinion on what an 'equitable' system will work towards and how it will get there.

The Alliance utilises the two-pronged definition of equity of outcomes – with regards to both individuals and social groups – put forward by Pasi Sahlberg and Trevor Cobbold<sup>3</sup>, and similar to the one adopted by both the Productivity Commission and the Expert Panel.

There is not a shared understanding of this definition across the layers of our system, and critically there is not a shared understanding of how it can and should be achieved.

##### ***b. Students not feeling seen or understood – and then not having their needs met***

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<sup>1</sup> The Productivity Commission's recent review of the National School Reform Agreement can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Sahlberg and Cobbold, 'Leadership for equity and adequacy in education', School Leadership and Management (2021). It can be accessed [here](#).



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The Alliance has been working with students to identify the key barriers that students from particular backgrounds face (including the priority cohorts identified in the NSRA). The resounding theme is critical instances of students not feeling seen and understood by their teachers or school, and subsequently not having their needs met.

*'I've been put on the spot, suspended, been given detention and misunderstood. It can feel lonely and it can feel like you have got no hope.'*

*'Most of the things I have witnessed have been to do with money problems. Students not being able to fit in or being punished for not having the correct uniform/ equipment.'*

*'Forced to hide my preferred pronouns and had to use ones that made me feel uncomfortable. Which ruined my learning and caused me nothing but trouble.'*

*'Students who don't get help with work are more likely to not pay attention during class. Then after some time those students who didn't get the help make it hard for the rest of the class.'*

Teachers shared their experiences of watching this play out for students they were attempting to support – and the long-term impacts of this.

*'The most disengaged students always have the most challenging personal circumstances. These students are constantly being punished because they are not ready to learn.'*

*'Yet, those that face barriers simultaneously feel that they are in some way deserving of this unfairness. This is reflected in the way they talk about themselves, and how they perceive their own potential.'*

### **c. *But teachers don't feel seen or understood or like they are having their needs met either***

Many teachers shared their experiences of wanting to meet the needs of their students in order for them to be successful but also the significant barriers they faced to being able to do so.

*'It's clear that we need to be able to meet the needs of our students in order for them to achieve in our school settings, but teachers won't be able to meet the needs of their students' until their own needs are being met.'*

*'Students putting so much onto teachers to fix this, but teachers feel so limited in their powers because of expectations/policies on them'.*

*'Schools need to recognise the capacity of teachers and need for support to create a culture of equity.'*

*'Not having the bare minimum for students to begin learning –not the bells and whistles but the most simple items.'*

It is clear working alongside these teachers and school leaders that these experiences are having a significant impact on their wellbeing, and critically, their sense of purpose and efficacy.

### **d. *The mental models (ie values and mindsets) holding these challenges in place are things we 'don't want to talk about'***





It has been extremely powerful engaging students, teachers and other stakeholders in dialogue about the structures and mental models underpinning the inequity they are experiencing in our education system.

*“The underlying mental models are things we don’t want to be told. They go against our [society’s] narrative’.*

Across our work to date with students, teachers and stakeholders, a range of conflicting values and mindsets have emerged that underpin our system’s ability to meet the needs of both its students and teachers. For instance, students and teachers repeatedly identified that they feel there is a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach towards both curriculum and behaviour expectations, and that it is perceived to be the responsibility of students to conform to this. Ultimately these mental models pose critical questions that must be resolved:

*What is a ‘good’ student?*

*What is success?*

*What is the role of a teacher?*

*What is the purpose of school?*

The Alliance is continuing to engage students, teachers and stakeholders to develop a deep, documented understanding of these structures and mindsets.

***e. The result: there is a significant disconnect between policy and ‘best-practice’ and the experiences in some classrooms – and this has critical implications for equity***

The Australian education system is extremely fortunate. It has a high level of expertise amongst both its teachers and its policy-makers (whether that is Education Departments, peak bodies such as AERO, and academics). We have access to a deep and rich research and policy-base. Take as one example, the work of AERO, AITSL and Evidence of Learning<sup>4</sup> over the past year around student behaviour and wellbeing.

And it has tens of thousands of individuals and organisations across all layers of the system who are working incredibly hard to make the system more equitable.

But what is clear is that despite this knowledge and these efforts and intentions, there are still many classrooms and schools where these policies and practices struggle to be implemented as designed or to achieve the desired outcomes. Ultimately both students and teachers are underachieving and disengaging as a result.

This is not a criticism of the efforts in these schools. It is a reflection of critical barriers to this work that were identified by the students and teachers we engaged with (in addition to those already raised in this submission).

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<sup>4</sup> AERO’s work on wellbeing and belonging can be accessed [here](#). AITL’s spotlight on wellbeing in Australian schools can be accessed [here](#). And Evidence for Learning’s work on effective behaviour support in schools can be accessed [here](#).



### i. Conflicting priorities

For teachers and school leaders, they reflected on the challenge of implementing policy priorities that have seemingly conflicting objectives, values and mental models. For instance, there were repeated mentions of the increasing focus on trauma-informed practice and policy - and the conflict points that arise when attempting to implement this within the existing system. As one school leader reflected,

*'The system is not designed to be supportive of children and young people who have experienced trauma, and this is heavily noted in relevant research. This is seen through exclusion policies, environments that are not trauma informed, a lack of training in trauma informed practice, a lack of support from leaders and policies that are often inhibiting a child's ability to engage.'*

### ii. The impact of different contexts on equity

A key insight of the work so far, summarised by one participant, is that 'inequity can look different in each school, year level and classroom'. Or as another participant put it:

*'I'm shocked to begin to realise how our system 'hides' students in different ways. On the surface making it seem equitable. But it isn't.'*

What has become apparent across our work is that the 'barriers' to equity are more acutely felt by some students, in some classrooms and in some schools. The barriers are layered upon one another, compounding the challenge faced.

The Consultation Paper recognises the significant impact of the intersectional and compounding disadvantage some students face on their outcomes. Similarly, it recognises the impact of the extremely significant segregation within the Australian school system on these outcomes also. We note the most recent data provided by the OECD on the 'double disadvantage' that disadvantaged students face when in a disadvantaged school (one where the majority of students are disadvantaged)<sup>5</sup>. In Australia, just over 50% of disadvantaged students face these challenges, one of the highest proportions in the OECD. There is a significant gap in the outcomes of these students and their disadvantaged peers in more integrated schools.

However, it is clear from engaging students, teachers and school leaders that the day-to-day reality of these impacts and challenges is far from being recognised – or responded to – by the system. Instead, system structures and policies can feel disconnected from this reality.

To address this disconnect, the work of teaching and leading in these contexts must be recognised as highly context-specific and technical – and policy and system settings must be accommodating of this. We must move beyond generalised policy responses to ones that respond to and reflect the specific needs of these school communities doing such critical work.

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<sup>5</sup> The OECD's Report, Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility, can be accessed [here](#).



### **2. How we can work together to achieve change**

Question 2 of the Consultation Paper enquires as to evidence-based practices that will improve student outcomes, particularly for those falling behind. Question 9 asks about evidence-based wellbeing approaches that will best support student mental health. As previously noted, the Alliance recognises the significant work being done across schools and stakeholders in response to these questions. For instance, the work of the Grattan Institute on small group tuition and whole-school curriculum planning<sup>6</sup>, AERO on tiered interventions<sup>7</sup>, and Evidence of Learning on whole-school approaches to behaviour<sup>8</sup>.

All of these approaches pose significant potential to achieving improved equity for students.

However, the barriers – and ‘the problem’ - we have outlined in this submission, should give us pause as we seek to ensure these efforts, good intentions, and the resources that would underpin them, achieve the change they are designed to.

Critically, we must consider **how** we 1) determine the evidence-based practices to prioritise, and 2) go about their implementation. If we do not, there is significant risk that the inequity in our system will remain stuck. The Alliance makes five recommendations in this regards.

#### ***a. Activate students for equity***

Students want to talk about equity in education. They are navigating it every day, and yet don’t have the spaces to reflect upon it, discuss it with their peers and teachers, and to take action to address it. As one student reflected following our initial workshop:

*‘We got to talk about the things that go unsaid.’*

100% of the students we have worked with believe all students should be learning about how equitable our education system is. And critically, 80% wish to take action to make it more equitable.

It is important to note that this work with students must focus explicitly on equity. While there is an increasing focus across our system on student voice and agency, it is uncommon for equity to be at the centre of this work. It can go unacknowledged and unexplored.

The Alliance has established a Student Network to guide this work. And the Alliance’s curriculum provides the tools to engage and empower even more students.

#### ***b. Activate teachers and school leaders for equity as well***

Similar to students, teachers and school leaders have demonstrated a high-level of engagement and a significant desire to be part of efforts and initiatives to achieve change. They have identified a range of benefits to engagement in dialogue and collaboration to address education equity:

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<sup>6</sup> Grattan Institute reports: Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools (2022) (Access [here](#)), Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools (2023) (Access [here](#))

<sup>7</sup> AERO’s work on tiered interventions can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Evidence for Learning’s work on effective behaviour support in schools can be accessed [here](#).



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- Building their understanding of equity, including making sense of their experience and those of their students.
- Connecting with peers and exploring shared experiences.
- Engaging their sense of purpose.
- Engaging in system-thinking enables teachers and school leaders to see a path forward rather than just an overwhelming challenge (which are key components of building collective efficacy).

We must ensure our teachers and school leaders have an understanding of education equity so they can effectively respond to it. The Alliance has developed professional learning that builds this understanding and supports engagement in system-thinking.

### ***c. Gain a better understanding of what is occurring in classrooms that impacts equity***

With both students and teachers identifying significant challenges with having their needs met, and this demonstrating a significant disconnect between so much policy and practice that schools are being encouraged and supported to implement, we must better understand what is going on in Australian classrooms. An example of this work is The Opportunity Myth study of TNTP in the US<sup>9</sup>. It measured belonging, purpose and the level of expectations (among other things) across thousands of classrooms and produced critical insights into the work of achieving equity (and what can stand in its way).

We must also build a stronger understanding of the work of achieving equity in our most disadvantaged contexts. Despite the significant segregation of our school system, not enough is known about how some of these schools manage to achieve significantly improved outcomes, especially from a system-thinking perspective. The Alliance plans to examine the critical actions that schools in these communities take, as well as the outcomes framework they are working towards.

Accordingly, a wider range of outcome measures should be included within the NSRA (Consultation Paper Questions 1 and 10, among others). At the very least, these should include attendance, as well as student survey measures such as belonging and safety.

### ***d. Engage in co-design with students and teachers to address equity***

When we convened a cross-section of stakeholders (students, teachers and system leaders) to examine education inequity, one student concluded that there was a simple solution:

*‘All parts of the system just need to communicate with each other’.*

Another participant put it more bluntly:

*‘Who is creating a system that is not working? [The biggest stakeholders] students and teachers have the least power and the least say.’*

Given the range of barriers identified to successful implementation of current policies and practices, all layers of the system – but particularly students and teachers – must be involved in co-designing the next policy responses, with a particular focus on determining what will ensure successful implementation.

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<sup>9</sup> TNTP’s Opportunity Myth study can be accessed [here](#).



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Much can be learned from existing efforts in both Australia (NT Learning Commission<sup>10</sup>) and overseas (Transformative Student Voice<sup>11</sup>).

The Alliance will be trialing co-design processes, including participatory action research, to respond to the critical structures and mental models underpinning the inequity in our system.

***e. Acknowledge the mental models underpinning the system's inequity – and create the space for crafting a new narrative for a more equitable education system***

Given the extent of the challenges our education system faces, we must not ignore the mental models that appear to be holding it in place. These mental models point to critical questions that must be resolved, including ‘what is a good student?’, ‘what is the role of a teacher?’, ‘what is success?’, and ‘what is the purpose of school?’.

We must engage all layers of the system, as well as the wider community, in the process of developing a shared understanding of these critical matters.

We can learn from overseas examples of the spaces that can be created to support the crafting of a new narrative, for example, Big Change’s Big Education Conversation<sup>12</sup> in the UK, and the development of a set of transformative scenarios for education<sup>13</sup> in Brazil.

The Alliance is continuing to engage stakeholders in identifying these mental models, and will subsequently develop a comprehensive system map, that can support the crafting of this new narrative.

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<sup>10</sup> An overview of the work of the NT Learning Commission can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> More information on the Transformative Student Voice project, led by academics Ben Kirschner, Shelley Zion and Carlos Hipolito-Delgado, can be found [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Information on the Big Education Conversation can be found [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> More information on the development of these scenarios can be found [here](#).