



Priority 1 Thought Paper:

**Visions of an Equitable Education System for
Low-SES School Communities**

July 2026 (Version 1.0)

Acknowledgement of Country

The Education Equity Alliance works on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Front of mind for us as we come to this work is that First Peoples are the first educators on this Country. Through thousands of generations of community and cultural life, they have demonstrated what it means to meet the needs of young people, and to provide an education that is rich, deep, and meaningful. This guides us as we work towards an equitable education system, not only by looking to the example of the past, but that embodied by the young people and communities who we learn and work alongside now.

With Thanks

This paper would not exist without the generous contribution of time, experience, and expertise from the EEA's Collective member organisations (below) and its intergenerational Leadership Council, as well as the many young people, educators, NGOs and government who participated across the Three Horizons process. In particular, we acknowledge members ARACY, CMY, Cool.org, Learning Creates Australia, NCESE, Teach for Australia and VAEAI, for their contributions to the design of this process. We also acknowledge our wonderful funding partners on this work: Brian M Davis Charitable Foundation, PMF Foundation and The Ross Trust. Finally, a huge thanks goes to Jane Hunt of Emergent Action for her expert facilitation and guidance throughout.

About the Collective

EEA's Collective is a group of over 25 NGOs and philanthropic organisations working together to advance education equity for low-SES school communities in Victoria. They are guided by an intergenerational Leadership Council that brings together young people and educators alongside Collective member organisations — ensuring that those closest to the challenge shape the work. This paper reflects their work to date on their first shared priority.

AI Disclaimer

Claude AI was used to a limited degree by the EEA team to produced this report. The tool was used primarily to synthesise the large amount of raw output data from this process, while the vast majority of analysis of the data and other generative work was done by the (human) members of the EEA team. With responsible use of AI a prominent and contentious theme throughout the 3 Horizons visioning process, we felt it was important to be transparent about how and when we as a team are using it.



Call to Action from Young People

Call to Come Together

It gives us hope to be in spaces where people recognise that it's not just young people's responsibility to make things better for themselves. That if we all work together, it will make a better society for everyone. We come to this work from different experiences and different perspectives, but we ask you to come to it openly: it's okay to be unsure, and sitting with the discomfort of what is not working is what allows for genuine change and growth.

Call to Collaborate

If the process of visioning a more equitable education system was two lines — young people on one, the system on the other — we don't want the young people's line to stop and the process to now continue without us. Our needs will keep changing, and it's important that our voices and perspectives are included throughout, not just at the beginning.

Call for Change

This is not a finished product; it is the start of a conversation. Education equity isn't a specific goal we can reach; it's something that continuously needs to evolve and reshape as time goes on. Alongside that conversation must be action: tangible outcomes that young people can actually see being implemented.



Introduction

A year ago, the Education Equity Alliance's Collective members set out to answer a question that grows more urgent with each passing year: what does an equitable education system actually look like in practice for low-SES school communities?

Australia and Victoria's education system is marked by an entrenched inequity in outcomes for its least advantaged students. A wide range of data points to this gap growing, not shrinking — and the most recent comprehensive review by the Productivity Commission that record investment and reform had done little to improve student outcomes (Productivity Commission, 2023).. This is not a system on the cusp of breakthrough. It is a system in which the gap between intention and outcome remains a significant challenge.

We hear this in the data. We also hear it directly — from the students, teachers, and communities we work alongside across Victoria's low-SES schools. Ultimately, inequity distils down to a sentiment shared by participants that echoes across classrooms, staffrooms, and families:

“It's too late for this child.”

Once voiced, that sentiment ripples outward — too late for this class, this teacher, this school, this community. It can become a lens through which many within the system start to see themselves. And sitting beneath it can be an untold story:

“So much potential... ultimately being lost.”

The efforts of so many, including important Federal and state reforms are working to close the equity gap — and there is genuine commitment at multiple levels of the system. But without a shared, practical vision of what equity actually looks like, those efforts risk pulling in different directions. Finnish-Australian education researcher and leader Pasi Sahlberg puts the challenge plainly:

“A better and fairer education system will remain a distant dream in Australia until we agree what equitable education is in practice. An alternative way is within reach. It requires a courageous determination to transform the mistakes of the past into understanding that quality and equity go hand in hand in education.”

— Pasi Sahlberg
& Trevor Cobbold (2024)

EEA's The Collective took up this challenge: to move beyond broad statements of commitment to equity, and to establish a clear vision of what it looks like in practice — and the potential pathways to get there.

We brought together approximately 100 stakeholders to collaborate — students and young people, educators, NGOs, philanthropists, academics, and government — using the Three Horizons methodology (developed by Bill Sharpe and the International Futures Forum) to navigate complexity, consider long-term change, and identify the innovations required to get us there.

This process has brought the challenge of the current education system into stark relief. But it has also revealed a system brimming not only with bold hope, but with a clear and tangible picture of the innovations and actions required to move forward.

Many glimpses of a future equitable system can be found here and now — in some of our classrooms, schools, and communities. But these glimpses can be isolated, patchy, and poorly understood. The call to action is to shift to a system where examples of true equity are not outliers, but at the centre of what we do.

This paper takes you on a journey through the three horizons as articulated by participants so to provide a sense of the potential pathways, and your own role within them, towards a more equitable future.

Tim Warwick
Education Equity Alliance



1. Methodology

The problem

In bringing together so many different education stakeholders, a key challenge observed by EEA are the different — at times competing, at times with gaps or silences — visions of what equity can and should look like. More often, the system has a clearer picture of the inequity, and of what is being done to 'top up' or close a gap, than it does of the positive vision: what equity will actually look like if achieved.

We hear often from students and teachers about practical realities of this absence of a shared vision. For instance, it's the students whose both needs and strengths may not be seen or understood, running up into the boundaries of a system that refuses or struggles to bend. And its the teachers, support providers, families and more who look on, all with differing senses of what support they can and should deliver.

The methodology

The Three Horizons methodology was identified as the most appropriate framework for this work. Developed by Bill Sharpe and the International Futures Forum (Sharpe, 2020; Sharpe, Hodgson, Leicester, Lyon, & Fazey, 2016), it helps groups think beyond the immediate present by holding three perspectives simultaneously:

The process

Three workshops were held between March and May 2026, facilitated by Jane Hunt, Director of Emergent Action. Each brought together approximately 50 participants spanning young people, educators, school leaders, NGOs, government representatives, and philanthropy.

Workshop 1 (March 2026): Current state analysis — what to leave behind, take forward, and the stories told and untold about education equity.

Workshop 2 (April 2026): Future vision — what a more equitable education system would look like for low-SES communities in ten years.

Workshop 3 (May 2026): Transition actions — the specific stepping stones needed to move from H1 to H3.

This was supplemented by additional rounds of feedback — from Collective members, the EEA's intergenerational Leadership Council, and targeted stakeholders including First Nations peak bodies and family peak bodies — as well as additional research and analysis by the EEA team.

Horizon 1 (H1) — The current system:
What needs to change, and what is worth conserving.

Horizon 2 (H2) — The transition zone:
The innovations, experiments, and stepping stones that bridge H1 to H3. The transition is inherently messy — not all initiatives will succeed, but collectively they start the movement.

Horizon 3 (H3) — The desirable future:
A bold, long-term vision of what the system could become.

An Act of Collective Sensemaking

This paper is an act of collective sensemaking — built from the lived experience of students, educators, families, NGOs, government, and philanthropy, and triangulated with the evidence base and policy context.

The questions it raises are too complex, and the stakes too high, for any single stakeholder or perspective to hold the answer alone. The vision in this paper belongs to the people who built it — and the work of realising it will require the same collective effort.

It is also a living document. At the Achieving Education Equity Gathering (Thursday 30 July 2026, Melbourne Connect), these findings will be explored and tested by the wider sector. It will continue to evolve, especially as we turn our minds to shifting from vision to action.

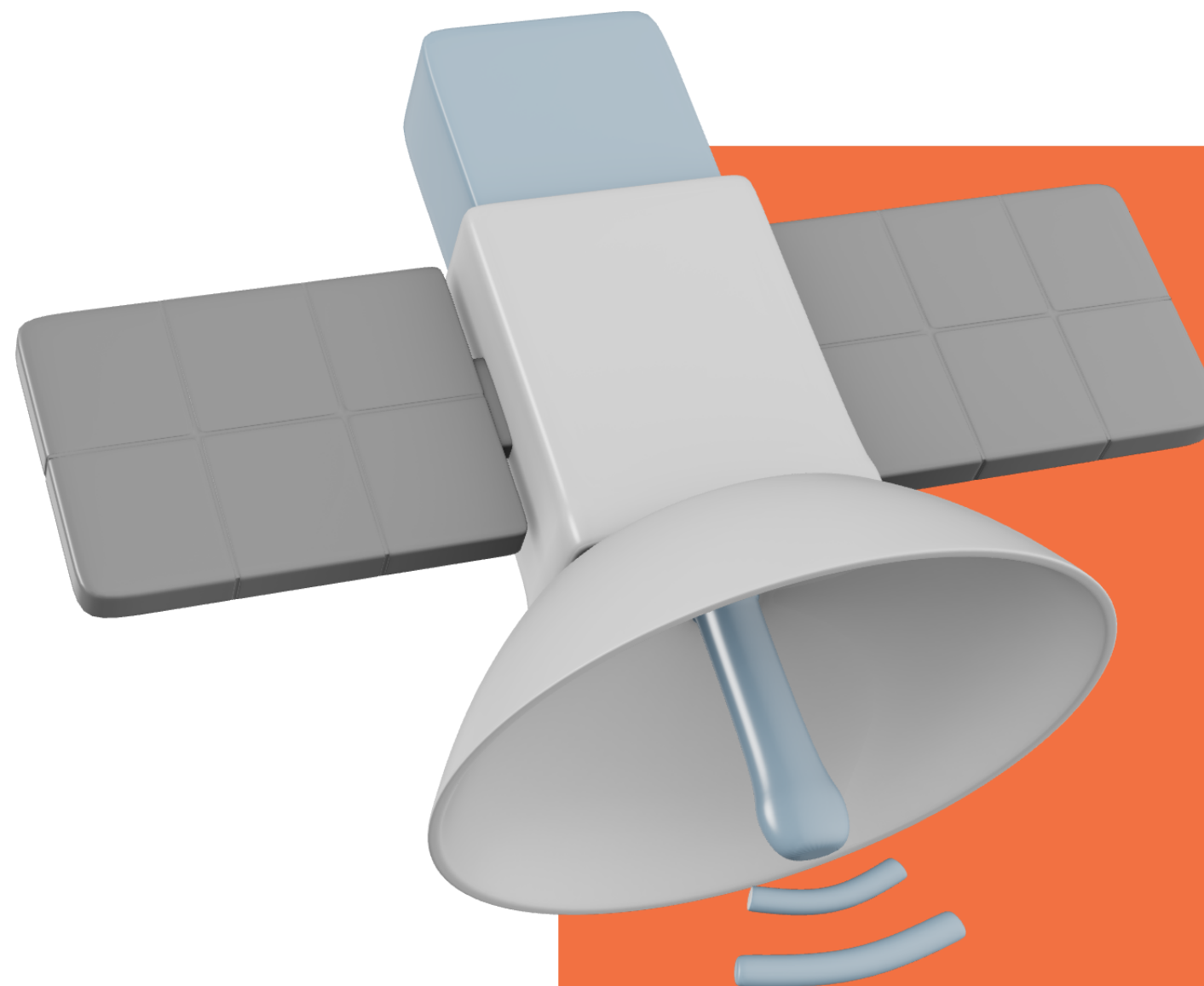


2. The Current Horizon: Students and Communities Drifting Away

In surveying the current educational landscape alongside the lived experiences of students, teachers and practitioners, what was readily apparent was that describing inequity purely as a 'gap' — as the distance between data points — is not sufficient.

It does not capture the movement, the momentum, of what is occurring. What so many across the system are observing is students, whether individuals, specific cohorts or in some cases whole communities, drifting further and further away from the standard education we are endeavouring to provide.

Viewed at the level of individual students or communities, this drift may feel slow or gradual. But through deep consideration of the landscape and the wide range of signals participants have seen, its significance becomes clear. It is like a tidal wave carrying more and more young people and communities away from the education system as we know it.



Signals across the system

Across the workshops, participants described a consistent set of signals — observable, lived indicators that the current system is not working for these communities:

- **Students talking with their feet.** Escalating disengagement — physical and emotional. The 'school can't' phenomenon. Students increasingly moving out of mainstream settings, some feeling 'forced out'. Behaviour that practitioners consistently read as a communication of unmet need, not a character flaw.

- **An educator workforce under strain.** Persistent shortages in the communities that need stability most. Teachers feeling overburdened and under-supported. A profession that too often feels neither respected nor valued — and where the toll is felt most acutely in low-SES schools.
- **Families drifting further from school.** Deepening poverty, where unmet needs in families trigger unmet needs in children. An intergenerational disconnect — families who themselves had poor experiences of school, now raising children in a system that has not fundamentally changed.
- **Technology as an unresolved pressure.** A signal that the system has not yet found its footing — intersecting with wellbeing, learning, and equity in ways that demand urgent, coordinated attention.

These signals are not limited to low-SES communities — but participants consistently experience them as more acute, more compounded, and less resourced to address within these communities.

This drift is set out on the diagram on the next page.



The Drift Within The System

The stories and the data can form a **self-perpetuating cycle** with the potential for students and communities to **drift further and further away from education as it is**. When viewed as individual examples, this drift may feel slow, gradual or isolated...

...But examining the landscape as a whole provides a sense of the significance and momentum of the drift: **the churn of the tidal wave can feel as though more and more students and communities are being pulled out to sea.**



Stories we tell

"That student is not academic."

"It is too late for that child."

"That must be a tough school to work in."

"Students just need to toughen up."

"This school has a bad reputation so we expect less of their students."

Stories the Data Tells us

3 in 10 children from the most disadvantaged communities are developmentally vulnerable

28% of low-SES students report low hopefulness compared to 19.6% of advantaged students

5x increase in enrollments in Independent Special Assistance Schools since 2016

+30% rise in suspensions between 2019 and 2023

34 days missed, on average, by Victorian low-SES students in 2025

6 year learning gap between low and high-SES students by year 9

61% of low-SES students complete year 12 nationally by age 19 compared to 89% of the most advantaged

72% of principals in disadvantaged Australian schools reported teaching was hindered by a lack of staff (as compared to 50% of advantaged schools)

We have a choice.

We maintain the status quo.
And the drift will continue.

Or we can act.
And make the conscious choice to step and to shift towards equity.

The data

These data points are alarming individually, but taken cumulatively they present a load that demands our collective response.

Where possible we have cited Victorian data, as this was our focus through the 3 Horizons process, but otherwise have used national data. We have specifically focused here with both this data and this process (to the extent possible) on the experiences of low-SES students and communities.

We acknowledge the significant intersections of many of these points of data – and ultimately these communities – with other priority cohorts (e.g. First Nations students, culturally and linguistically diverse students, students in out-of-home care). In some cases, these cohorts buck these trends. In others, the data compounds.

Headline	Key Data	Significance for low-SES communities
Persistent challenges that grow throughout schooling		
The gap begins before school	Nationally, 52.9% of children are developmentally on track across all five domains at school entry – down from 54.8% in 2021. For children in the most disadvantaged communities (SEIFA Quintile 1), approximately 3 in 10 are developmentally vulnerable on one domain and 1 in 5 on two or more. The gap in developmental vulnerability between the most and least disadvantaged communities has widened from 6.9 percentage points in 2009 to 8.9 percentage points in 2024 (AEDC, 2024).	Low-SES children are disproportionately likely to arrive at school already behind developmentally – and that gap is growing, not closing. This shapes how children engage with learning from day one and compounds the work their teachers must do to meet their needs.
Low-SES students feel less hopeful and less belonging	27.8% of low-SES students report low hopefulness, compared to 19.6% of their more advantaged peers (Resilient Youth Australia, 2023). PISA 2022 data shows a strong relationship between SES and sense of belonging: Australian students in the lowest SES quartile reported a sense of belonging 13 percentage points below those in the highest quartile (ACER, 2024).	Hope and belonging are powerful lead indicators of engagement and learning readiness. If these students are not feeling connected, safe or as if education holds purpose for them, the work of improving outcomes will be harder.
Attendance is declining – most acutely for low-SES students	Only 62.1% of Australian students attended school at least 90% of the time in 2024, down from 73.1% in 2019. The gap by disadvantage is stark: Victorian low-SES students miss twice as much school as the most advantaged students, with an average attendance rate of 83% in 2025 (ACARA, 2026).	The learning gap is greatest for those least likely to be at school to close it. Consistent attendance is a key enabler of the important work of schools to close learning and wellbeing gaps.
Escalating signals of unmet need	This unmet need shows up in multiple ways. Nationally, students with a recorded disability-related adjustment to their learning (NCCD) have increased from 18% (2015) to 27% (2025) (ACARA, 2026). Regarding behaviour: approximately 150 students are suspended per school day in Victorian government schools – up from approximately 90 per day in 2023 (The Age, 2026).	Participants reported these unmet needs as most acute in low-SES school communities – where schools are simultaneously addressing poverty, housing instability, trauma, escalating behaviour, and learning needs. The layering of complexity is not incidental; it is a key feature of what equity demands of these schools.

Headline	Key Data	Significance for low-SES communities
Growing achievement and retention gaps		
The learning gap widens throughout school	By Year 9, the gap between advantaged and low-SES students is six years of learning. The gap is already 2 years and 7 months at Year 3, and grows steadily from there (Mitchell Institute, 2025).	This is not an anomaly – 17 years of data demonstrates an entrenched and growing academic achievement gap within our system.
A stubborn gap in school completion	ABS Schools Australia 2025 shows a 23.7 percentage point gap in Year 7/8–12 full-time apparent retention between government schools (75.4%) and independent schools (99.1%). Nationally, Lamb et al. (Mitchell Institute, 2020) confirmed only 61% of the most disadvantaged students complete Year 12 by age 19, compared to 89% of the most advantaged – a gap unchanged since 2015.	Lamb et al. (2020) confirms that early school leaving drives poorer employment, income and life outcomes – at an estimated cost of \$12.6 billion per cohort. The Smith Family's 2024 PET research sharpens the urgency: 92% of low-income students who left before completing Year 12 had intended to finish. With 90% of future jobs requiring post-school qualifications (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024), and Year 12 completion rates declining for disadvantaged students, this is critical gap to close.
Growing numbers leaving mainstream school entirely	Fivefold increase in Independent Special Assistance Schools (alternate settings) since 2016 (Independent Schools Australia, 2025). Home schooling in Victoria up 7% year on year between 2023 and 2024 (VRQA, 2025).	Further signs of students seeking alternatives to what standard education settings can provide.
A system entrenching disadvantage		
Disadvantage is increasingly concentrated	82% of low-SES students attend government schools (Productivity Commission, 2026). 31.5% of government school students come from a low socio-educational background, compared with 13.7% of non-government students. Australia's school system is among the most socioeconomically segregated in the OECD, increasing at the second-fastest rate globally (O'Brien et al., 2023).	Segregation compounds every other pressure in this data set. A low-SES student in a low-SES school is twice as unlikely to achieve minimum NAPLAN benchmarks as the same student in a high-SES school (Sciffer et al., 2025).
These schools are hardest to staff – yet need skilled teachers most	The rate of principals in disadvantaged schools reporting teaching hindered by a lack of staff increased from 26% (2018) to 72% (2022), compared to 50% in more advantaged schools (OECD, 2022).	Workforce stability is foundational to shifting outcomes. A significant deterioration in workforce access in these communities poses substantial risks to the continuity of relationships, quality instruction, and leadership needed to close the gap.

The cumulative and compounding nature of this data is important. It manifests in a feeling of crisis and overwhelm – and how we respond to that feeling matters.

Crisis responses can encourage siloed efforts and short-term solutions, which in turn can fragment the system and further concentrate disadvantage rather than addressing root causes and ultimately ensuring all students have access to the learning they deserve.

The choice before us

Participants were clear: we are presented with a choice. We can continue to do more of the same, and continue to drift. Or we can make the conscious decision to step towards equity. As one participant put it:

“Realising this scenario requires choices — about funding, about how we support students and those who teach and lead alongside them, about whose voices shape education policy and about what we are willing to change.”

Equity will not occur through the status quo. We must actively choose to pursue it.

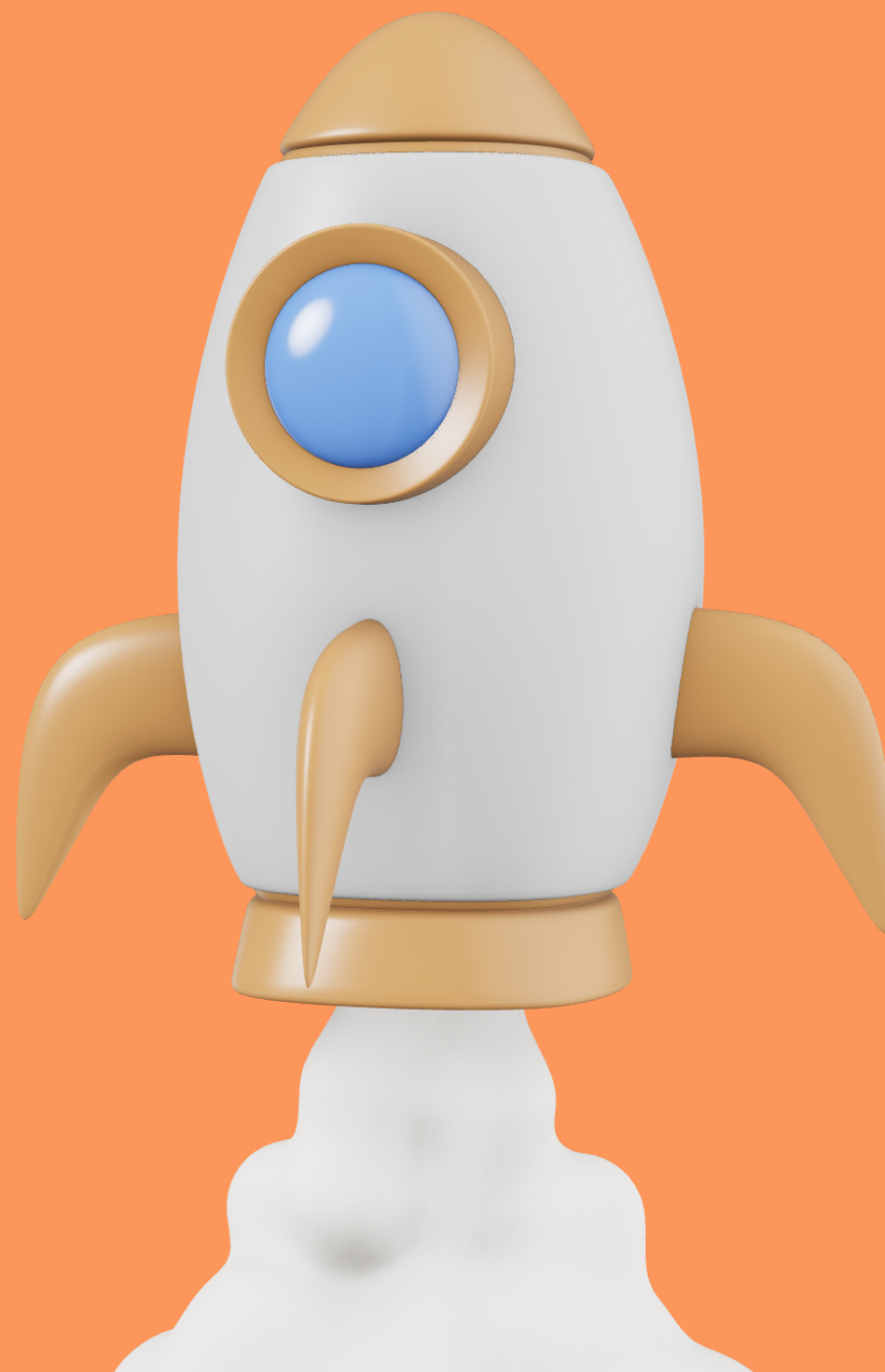
Looking from the current to the future horizon

While the challenges participants identified are significant, this is far from the whole story. There are numerous 'glimpses' of a more equitable future system occurring in patches right now. These glimpses demand more attention and wider adoption. Participants pointed to a wide range of practices, programs and policies that are already showing real benefit — and which need to be carried forward.

“Some schools evolve, but the system does not.”

But participants were also clear: this is not an endorsement of more of the same. They want to see what is working strengthened, built upon, and more consistently implemented at scale.

Moving towards the future system is also an act of collectively catching up — to see the innovative and evidence-based advancements already happening across our classrooms, NGOs and policy, and to learn from and leverage these for a more equitable future.



3. The Future Horizon: A Vision of Hope and an Architecture for Equity

If we are prepared to see clearly the extent of inequity in the current system, we must also be prepared to imagine something new. Not entirely new — the vision set has strong ties to what is already working. But it also consciously lets go of what is not working, in recognition that the status quo will only produce more of the same.

Through the visioning process, participants were enabled to sit in a space of imagining something different — both the concrete features of a more equitable education system, and the 'how': what the work of education equity asks of all of us as we show up for it. This is captured in the vision statement from one group of participants:

“We envision a future that involves a bravery and openness to confronting the challenges identified in 2026. Communities and stakeholders connect and rise to their responsibility to future generations and provide a more equitable education. An education where learning and wellbeing are inextricably linked, student agency and choice is fundamental to engagement. Schools are fairly resourced to meet the needs of their communities and realise their potential.”

Through this vision and the architecture that follow runs relationships – between student peers, students & their educators, schools & families and schools & the system. When it comes to families, Parents Victoria provide an important provocation:

“Families are an essential part of the education infrastructure—not simply stakeholders to engage, but partners whose capability, wellbeing and agency directly influence educational outcomes.”

The Architecture for a More Equitable Education System

The nine pieces of architecture below are not independent — they are interconnected cogs that affect and influence one another. They have been organised from the nine areas of most consistent participant focus across the three workshops.

Note that Architecture 9 was not an area of focus in the first 2 workshops, but was considered important by the EEA facilitation team and endorsed by the participants at the final workshop.



1. Integrated Learning and Wellbeing

A future where learning and wellbeing are deeply entwined and enmeshed with one another — not just sitting side by side. This architecture sits across both the overall objectives and day-to-day practice of our system — genuinely placing learning and wellbeing (and ultimately the needs of the whole-child) as of equal importance, and then effectively and deeply integrating this into practice. It is shifting past wellbeing being an add-on, to ultimately a fundamental reorientation of what schools are for.

Importance for low-SES communities:

Young people in low-SES communities carry a disproportionate load of unmet need into school — from the realities of poverty and housing instability to escalating behaviour that participants across this process consistently identified as a communication of need.

Meeting these needs effectively needs to be core-business of these schools and the system, not as a nice-to-have or as a second order priority.

2. Increasing Student Voice and Agency

A future where students have a much greater say over the shape of their education and the decisions that affect them. Where they are not just consulted but are genuine agents of change across all layers of the system.

Importance for low-SES communities:

Persistently, participants observed that low-SES students are the least likely to be consulted while also being the most likely to be underestimated — and all of this despite them carrying enormous social and cultural capital that can help us ultimately shift outcomes, whether at the individual student, school or system level.



3. Broadening Learning and Pathways

A future where both the day-to-day learning opportunities and the range of pathways through education are broader, richer and available to all students. Critical to this is challenging assumptions and stereotypes about what types of learning and pathways are suitable or of interest to students from low-SES communities — and accordingly students not being limited to those pathways considered 'appropriate' by the system. There is also appetite for less reliance on the ATAR and a broadening of the definition of success.

Importance for low-SES communities:

Participants reflected on a persistent and damaging narrative — that students in low-SES schools have lower aspirations and are suited to narrower pathways. This narrative shapes the expectations set by schools, families and the students themselves. And it limits the range of learning and pathways students are presented with — actively limiting the potential of young people who, with genuine support, could follow hopes and dreams through multiple routes.



4. Enabling Conditions for Thriving Educators and School Leaders

A future where the educators and school leaders essential for delivering the work of equity are both empowered and thriving. Built upon a recognition that we have a workforce of significant skill, knowledge and commitment, but that we must shift the conditions within which these educators and leaders are currently working to ensure they are valued and respected, have genuine professional autonomy, and are receiving meaningful development. It was important to participants that we think of workforce broadly – not just teachers and principals, but also the significant education support workforce working across a significant range of important roles, especially in low-SES schools.

Importance for low-SES communities:

Low-SES schools face the sharpest end of a workforce crisis – persistent difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers, educators under considerable strain, and principals experiencing high burnout – and participants were clear that an overburdened teacher leads to a strained education system, making conditions for thriving educators not a workforce issue but an equity issue.

5. Flexibility in Learning Settings

A future where flexibility is built into how all learning settings operate – not just a subset of them – to ensure the needs of all students are seen and met. Participants identified two potential pathways: a stronger, better-resourced flexible sector alongside a more flexible mainstream. But a remaining tension is whether these things are seen in competition or as complementary responses to the same underlying need. What the best flexible settings and the best mainstream schools share – relational learning, student agency, genuine wellbeing integration – is a future that all settings should be moving toward.

Importance for low-SES communities:

There is significant stress around student engagement in the current system, including an increasing flow of students out of mainstream schools into non-traditional pathways (or out of education entirely), with signals that this disproportionately impacts students from low-SES communities. Participants highlighted considerable risks if this shift continues without purposeful design. Without rigorous design and intentional, manageable transitions out of mainstream, these young people could find themselves in circumstances of potentially narrower curriculum access and diminished pathways forward. At the same time, many of these settings are providing important ‘lifelines’, ensuring these students not only receive the support they deserve but the protection of their right to an education.

6. Place-Based and Authentic Community Engagement

A future where schooling is a whole-of-community endeavour with schools oriented outward, genuinely partnering with families and communities, and community playing an active role in shaping educational direction. Community must be defined broadly – inclusive of families, support organisations, young people, local government, and more. Critical to this work is a prioritisation: this outward-facing role of schools and educators towards family and community being seen as core business to not only the work of education, but specifically to the work of equity. Families and community as genuine partners in what education equity requires of us.

Importance for low-SES communities:

This reorientation to deep engagement with families and communities as partners was seen by participants as particularly important in low-SES communities – communities where there are numerous complexities and barriers to such engagement (e.g. intergenerational trauma and distrust of government; language barriers; varying levels of understanding and expectation of educational pathways). The integration of services within schools, including the hub model, was seen as a potential key lever in shifting these relationships. There was recognition that many schools in low-SES communities are already acting as fully formed or de facto community hubs. But there was also clarity that genuine community engagement requires not just co-location of services but real integration, sustained investment, and the appropriate resources.



7. Responsible Use of Technology and AI

A future that responsibly leverages technology and AI while maintaining strong guardrails around what young people value most from education. This was the most contested area: one path sees technology as a potential equaliser – expanding access and personalising learning; the other sees significant limits needed to protect learning and the relationships it depends on. The common ground: the technology is moving faster than the system, and we urgently need the frameworks and learning opportunities to make informed decisions.

Importance for low-SES communities:

For young people in low-SES communities the stakes in the advancement of technology and AI as an educational tool are potentially the greatest. If technology becomes even more critical to the delivery of learning, they have the potential to be left behind – whether due to a lack of access to the technology itself or the knowledge required to use it effectively. At the same time, this shift could also deplete access to, or undermine, the positive student-teacher relationships which we consistently hear – most of all from young people themselves – are critical to achieving equity.



8. Equitable Funding and Resourcing

A future where low-SES communities receive the resourcing they need and deserve. This includes recognition that public schooling is not free in practice. The hidden costs — materials, camps, excursions, extracurricular activities — are a significant and underacknowledged barrier for low-SES families, with children at risk of being 'othered' when they cannot participate. Two paths were identified: a universal uplift to an adequate baseline for all schools, or targeted redistribution toward those with greatest need. Both start from the same recognition: the current model falls short, which needs to be transparently and deeply understood across the system.

Importance for low-SES communities:

Low-SES school communities are responding to both the greatest degree of need and carrying the significant work of equity as outlined through this architecture. However, government low-SES schools both do not receive their full entitlement of funding under the current school funding model and face the biggest gap when it comes to parental contributions. Participants consistently observed significant gaps in the resources available — whether that's materials, funding, people or supports — to do this essential work.

9. High-Quality Teaching and Learning

A future where all students access high-quality teaching and learning that genuinely meets their needs. This requires relationships first — the student-teacher relationship is the foundation, not a precondition. It then requires an evidence-informed model, rigorously contextualised for each community — trauma-informed, culturally affirming, and set to high expectations. And it requires the instructional expertise to deliver it — which must be valued, built, and sustained. All of which must be ensured, no matter the community you come from.

Importance for low-SES communities:

Low-SES communities face the greatest variation in student readiness and need, making high-quality, contextualised teaching and learning most essential here — and yet workforce pressures can mean these communities are the least likely to have consistent access to the instructional expertise required to deliver it.



Self-Determination for First Nations Communities: A Foundation for Education Equity



EEA and the participants in the 3 Horizons process recognise that strong, self-determined First Nations education is not a separate concern to education equity — it is foundational to it. Any vision for a more equitable education system in Victoria that does not centre self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will be incomplete.

We sought the specific input of peak First Nations education organisations, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and Koorie Youth Council (KYC) on where they see the most important connections between self-determination and the architecture in this paper. The following points reflect those intersections.

Increasing Student Voice and Agency

Self-determination is not a concept that operates only at the community or system level — it includes First Nations young people having genuine say over what their education looks like. Empowering First Nations students to understand the system they are part of, to exercise agency within it, and to shape it, is consistent with how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities view the work of self-determination. And it must be understood as operating at every layer simultaneously: the individual learner, the family, the community, and the collective.

Place-Based and Authentic Community Engagement

Genuine community engagement means First Nations families, young people, and communities are active partners in determining what their schools need and how they operate — not recipients of decisions made elsewhere. Structures such as Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs) exist precisely for this purpose and should be effectively utilised and genuinely empowered as part of this architecture.

Integrating Learning and Wellbeing

Holistic models of wellbeing — where the physical, social, and cultural dimensions of a person's life are understood as deeply connected — are not new concepts for First Nations communities. The architecture for integrating learning and wellbeing reflects a view of the whole child that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have long held. Cultural safety is an essential foundation, but the aspiration goes further: First Nations young people deserve schools that actively support their growth and potential at every level, not just their safety.

Broadening Learning and Pathways

Broadening definitions of success — to recognise growth across the full range of a young person's capabilities, not only through narrow academic measures — has the potential to be particularly significant for First Nations students. A learner profile approach that tracks a student's progress against their own prior self, across both academic and non-academic skills, would help ensure First Nations students see themselves in their learning and the outcomes they are working towards.

Self-determination in education is not a new aspiration — it is what First Nations communities have been working toward for generations. A number of organisations and communities are currently leading significant work to give that aspiration practical shape, and we encourage readers to engage directly with it.

This includes the Victorian Department of Education's strengthening Aboriginal self-determination in education report; Marrung, Victoria's Aboriginal Education Plan; and the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition's (NIYEC) Dream Design work, which supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to collectively reimagine their own learning systems from the ground up.

Warning Signals: Possible Alternate Futures

While hope was the dominant tone of the visioning process, participants also named what they feared: the futures that emerge if the challenges of today are left unaddressed.

These are not just predictions. They are rooted in signals being seen right now.

One particular alternate vision, put forward by a young person stands out:

“We envisioned a series of futures that involved a tech crisis due to a reliance on A.I. leading to compromised humanity, depersonalisation, isolation, and loss of community & emotional regulation.”



Drifting hardening into division. Low-SES schools carry a visible stigma. Families who can, leave. The students who remain are increasingly concentrated, increasingly complex, and decreasingly served by a system built for someone else.



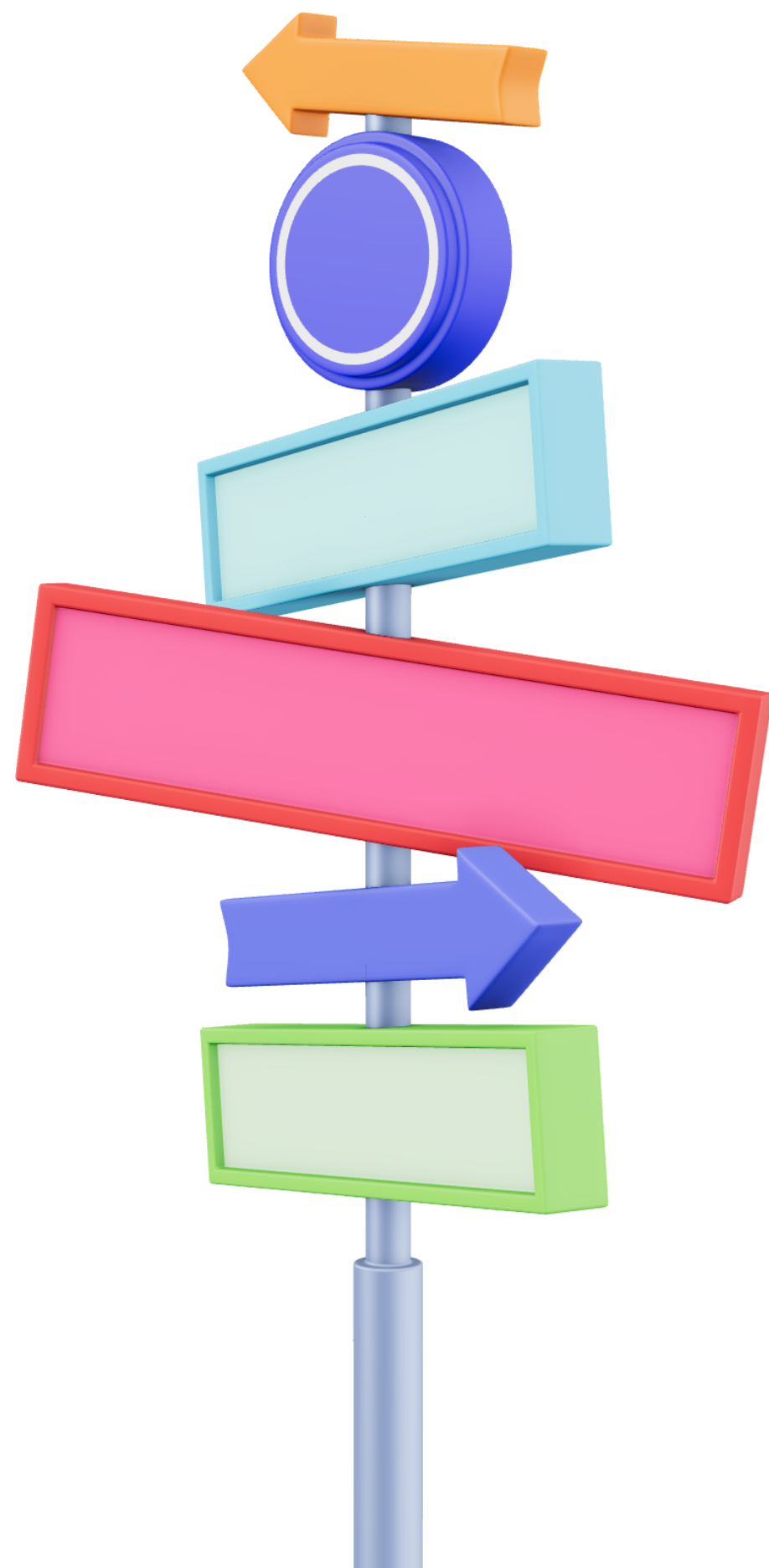
A generation that cannot sustain attention or regulate emotion. A decade of unchecked technology use has produced young people whose 'literacy and relational skills [are] reduced due to lack of practice.' The relational core of education — what young people consistently say matters most — has been quietly eroded.



Low-SES schools that cannot hold a workforce. Principal churn so normalised that community trust in local schools has collapsed. Teachers cycling through. The continuity of relationships — the foundation of everything — gone. A 'broken system, tired, too much pressure on good competent humans.'



Young people disconnected from civic life. One participant described it plainly: 'a dystopic increase in policing and the prison-industrial complex' — the endpoint of a generation cut off from education, from pathways, and from the political processes that shape their futures. 'In 10 years time we have political polarisation' if we do not build civic literacy now.



4. The Transition Horizon: Possible Pathways to Greater Equity

Closing the gap in outcomes for low-SES students and communities will require something different of a system that has persistently produced more of the same.

This will require learning from the classrooms, programs and policies that have managed to shift the dial — but also a genuine willingness to innovate. As UK education leader Liz Robinson has reminded us when providing input into the process through EEA's podcast, amongst countries like England and Australia with diverse, multiethnic populations, including significant communities of intergenerational poverty, few examples exist of systems that have achieved education equity at scale. There is no rulebook to follow. **We must, as Robinson puts it, 'learn our way forward together'.**

Accordingly, the transition horizon is not a fixed set of steps toward the future, but a range of possible pathways. The system and those within it will endeavour to take multiple possible paths simultaneously — through which we can all learn. As the Three Horizons framework describes it, the transition zone is inherently messy — it is where 'new ways of doing things are appearing that are responding to the limitations of the first horizon and the opportunity of the third'. Only some of these efforts will be carried forward into the future. This requires comfort with 'equifinality': the understanding that in an open, living system, a shared goal can be reached through multiple different paths, starting points and methods.

What follows are the stepping stones — the big ideas — that participants identified as most critical to enabling movement toward each piece of the architecture. They are accompanied by example actions: the specific policies, practices and approaches that can help move us forward.

These are not exhaustive, and they will differ from context to context and community to community. They are a starting point — a reflection for considering your own possible pathways toward greater equity for the children, young people and communities you serve.

The Architecture For A More Equitable Education System

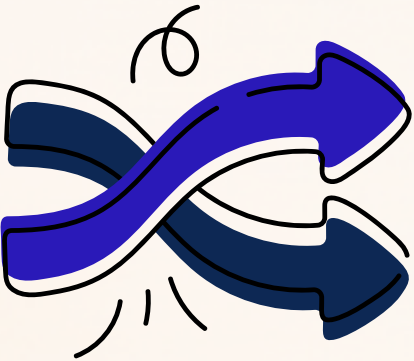
What we want to leave behind...

We want to leave behind an education system that disengages students, narrows success to a single definition, distributes funding inequitably, and applies a one-size-fits-all curriculum regardless of individual need.

We want to leave behind a system that uses technology irresponsibly, strains and undervalues its workforce, excludes families and communities from the learning journey, and mismanages student wellbeing and behaviour.

In short, we want to leave behind a system that is no longer fit for purpose.

Stepping stones

Wellbeing integrated as foundational — not an add-on	Relationships and school culture as wellbeing infrastructure	Inclusive, trauma-informed and culturally affirming environments
Student system literacy	Accountable processes for student voice	Enabling power sharing with students
Early awareness and understanding of learning and pathways	Wellbeing approach to pathway navigation	Industry and employers as active partners
Elevating and spreading innovative school models		Shifting workload conditions for low-SES contexts
Flexibility built into mainstream settings		Destigmatising flexible learning settings
Spreading integrated support models		A connected, place-specific support web
Living labs for AI in education	Technology and AI literacy	Equity-focused infrastructure and access
Transparency around funding and equity	Targeted equitable funding built on a clear definition	Equitable sharing of funds within schools
Relationships & readiness for learning embedded in the model	Evidence-based instruction, rigorously contextualised	High expectations and access to challenging curriculum

The architecture

Integrating Learning and Wellbeing
Increasing Student Voice and Agency
Broadening Learning and Pathways
Enabling Conditions for Thriving Educators and Leaders
Flexibility in Learning Settings
Place-Based and Authentic Community Engagement
Responsible Use of Technology and AI
Equitable Funding and Resourcing
High-Quality Teaching and Learning

A future vision of hope

“We envision a future that involves a bravery and openness to confronting the challenges identified in 2026. Communities and stakeholders connect and rise to their responsibility to future generations and provide a more equitable education. An education where learning and wellbeing are inextricably linked, student agency and choice is fundamental to engagement. Schools are fairly resourced to meet the needs of their communities and realise their potential.”

Architecture 1

Integrating Learning and Wellbeing

Stepping Stones

Wellbeing integrated as foundational — not an add-on
While there is growing acceptance that wellbeing and learning are closely related, a gap persists between understanding what integration should look like and how to work collaboratively to get there — across school communities and the sector. Critical to this is determining how to integrate evidence-based wellbeing practices within teaching and learning in a way that doesn't further burden an already stretched system.

Relationships and school culture as wellbeing infrastructure
Quality relationships — between students, teachers, and the wider support staff — are foundational to wellbeing. This means making relational quality a priority for schools, and putting in place the structures to support it: practices such as circle time, timetabling that ensures continuity of relationships, and opportunities for teachers to connect with students beyond the day-to-day classroom.

Inclusive, trauma-informed and culturally affirming environments
Recognising the diversity of student needs within low-SES communities and ensuring that the core practices best suited to meeting those needs — trauma-informed, strengths-based, culturally affirming — are well integrated and consistently implemented across school communities.

Supported transitions — no young person falls through the cracks
Recognising key transition points, and periods of complexity and pressure in young people's lives, and ensuring robust systems are in place so that warm, supported handovers occur — for both young people and the adults around them.

Enrichment opportunities as an enabler of wellbeing and learning
A broader view of where and how learning can occur — through enrichment opportunities that allow students to engage with the world around them, whether on the school grounds or beyond, as well as a richer range of extracurricular activities available to all young people.

Example actions

- Curriculum redesigned to embed social emotional learning and wellbeing practices as core components
- Evidence-based wellbeing programs integrated into non-teaching time (e.g. school lunch programs)
- Trauma-informed and inclusive education built into teacher degrees and curriculum — not only available as supplementary professional development
- Review school structures and practices to enable and prioritise relational engagement between students and teachers — including morning rituals, teacher continuity in secondary schooling, and opportunities for connection outside the standard classroom
- An enrichment standard (the expected level of access of students to both enriched curricular and extracurricular activities) be set and monitored by government (see the UK's enrichment benchmarks)

Architecture 2

Increasing Student Voice and Agency

Stepping Stones

Student system literacy
Students taught their rights and how the system works — beginning with their rights within education, and extending to civic and global citizenship and engagement. This literacy should be woven throughout all stages of schooling and built from a young age.

Accountable processes for student voice
A bottom-up, student-led voice framework — flexible for place and context — to enable schools and system stakeholders to be accountable for both how they gain and what they do with student input. This should enable voice at all layers of the system: classrooms, schools, communities, and the system as a whole. And it should include a shift from survey-based consultation to living, breathing conversation and dialogue.

Enabling power sharing with students
A shift from managing student voice to genuinely sharing power — at the system level and within individual student-educator relationships. Purposeful work must be done at all layers to build 'power literacy' — an understanding of the types of power we hold and how we use them — and to establish the conditions in which genuine power sharing can occur.

Equitable student voice participation
Actively working to ensure we are hearing a wide and diverse range of voices — including those of students who are most marginalised and most disengaged from the system as it currently operates. Voice opportunities should not be concentrated in a few; they must reach all.

Example actions

- Establishing curriculum and learning opportunities for students on how to gain voice, exercise agency, and be empowered — built from a young age
- School accountability to student voice via student-led audits
- Living, breathing dialogue replacing point-in-time surveys (e.g. ATOSS) as the primary mechanism for student voice
- Students on educator interview panels
- Student voice enabled at the policy level — including student advisory groups such as the VicSRC on policy

Architecture 3

Broadening Learning and Pathways

Stepping Stones

Awareness and understanding of learning and pathways — starting early
Students and families need to understand the full range of options — vocational, university, and otherwise — early, and not only at times of 'decision-making pressure'. Clear links must be drawn between what students are learning and the pathways that learning can enable, so that all students are fully aware of the opportunities available to them.

Wellbeing approach to pathway navigation
The process of choosing and transitioning into post-school pathways is a significant stress point. A student-centred design approach — breaking down silos between institutions — is needed to effectively support students through these transitions, rather than each institution managing its own piece. These processes should be designed to actively support student wellbeing throughout.

Industry and employers as active partners
Employers and industry sectors as genuine partners in the pathways and transitions process — not just work experience providers, but co-designers — enabling young people to see the clear links between their learning and the opportunities available to them.

Destigmatising alternate pathways
A societal and institutional mindset shift: there is no single 'right' pathway. VCE VM, TAFE, and vocational routes are legitimate choices, not fallbacks — and the stigma that attaches to them actively harms young people from low-SES communities.

Example actions

- Drawing clear connections between school subjects and careers as a means of weaving pathways knowledge and understanding across schooling
- A single resource putting all pathways, entry requirements and scholarships in one place — removing the burden of navigating individual university and TAFE websites
- Transition support (inclusive of wellbeing support) from school through to employment — no cliff edge where responsibility is simply handed over
- Campaigns to promote acceptance and enthusiasm for choosing alternate pathways — addressing stigma at a societal level
- Transition support professionals in schools are trained to navigate both competing expectations (of the young person, families and themselves) as well as bias around what constitutes a 'good' pathway
- Piloting alternatives to ATAR-focused credential systems, such as learner profiles

Architecture 4

Enabling Conditions for Thriving Educators and School Leaders

Stepping Stones

Elevating and spreading innovative school models
Distilling and spreading knowledge of what high-performing, innovative schools in low-SES contexts are doing to effectively resource their teachers and leaders (including the wider complement of staff required). And then ensuring schools have the genuine agency to either adapt or innovate for their own context.

Collaboration as a professional norm for teachers
Teachers working within professional learning communities and collaborative planning structures as a key enabler of professional capacity and efficacy — not as an add-on, but built into timetables and school design.

Coaching and mentoring oriented to learning, not accountability
Investing in coaching and mentoring — including instructional coaching — that is genuinely oriented toward teacher growth and learning, distinct from accountability and compliance frameworks.

Shifting workload conditions for low-SES contexts
Examining the breadth and distribution of responsibilities within low-SES schools — with a clear perspective on the true nature of improving outcomes for some of our most complex students and communities — and whether this aligns with current EBA conditions, including workload and teaching ratios.

Investing in and recognising the education support workforce
Education support staff represent a significant and underutilised asset — particularly in low-SES schools, where they carry a substantial share of the wellbeing, inclusion, and relational work. This means clearer role definition, genuine investment in professional learning and development, stronger career pathways, and recognition of the expertise education support staff already bring.

Example actions

- A policy framework regarding school staffing that distinguishes what is tightly held system-wide and what is held loosely — allowing genuine school-level agency over staffing structures
- Collaborative planning structures built into timetables and school design — not as an add-on
- AI and technology tools to reduce teacher workload — with adequate training and support
- Trauma-informed practice applied to the educator workforce — not just students (e.g. consistent debriefing and supervision practices; a multi-tiered wellbeing strategy)
- Grow 'homegrown educators' — pathways for locally based education support staff to move into teaching roles over time

Architecture 5

Flexibility in Learning Settings

Stepping Stones

Recognising the legitimacy of and destigmatising flexible learning settings

Shifting views of flexible settings away from the perception that attending one signals being 'not very smart' or 'having problems' toward seeing flexibility as normalised and flexible settings as the legitimate, valuable learning environments that they are.

Flexibility built into mainstream settings

Strengthening both policy and practice around how flexibility can be appropriately built into mainstream settings — including clearer guidance around flexible programs running alongside standard timetables, greater flexibility in physical environments, and greater access to supports integrated as part of the school setting so students don't have to go elsewhere to access these supports. This should be deliberate design, rather than ad hoc responses that risk stigmatising young people further.

Fluid movement and shared information between settings

Easy, supported movement between mainstream and flexible settings — not a cliff edge. Student profiles that begin early and are carried across all schools, reducing information loss each time a student moves.

A two-way learning relationship between mainstream and flexible learning settings

This is based on a recognition that recognising that the pedagogical approaches that make flexible settings work (relational, agency-driven, wellbeing-centred) are the same approaches all schools should be building toward. This learning relationship should be at the heart of how we empower school leaders and teachers to enhance their settings.

Example actions

- Data and research showing how flexible settings work, long-term outcomes, and which students benefit — used to inform government policy and raise the reputation of flexible settings
- A baseline of allied health services connected into every school — so that a student needing mental health support does not need to move to a flexible setting to access it
- Flexible physical learning environments within schools — quiet spaces, outdoor spaces, varied settings
- Student profiles that begin early and are carried across all schools
- Revised attendance, enrolment, and suspension/expulsion policies — reviewing whether current measures inadvertently push students out of mainstream

Architecture 6

Place-Based and Authentic Community Engagement

Stepping Stones

Spreading integrated support models

Widespread adoption of local health, wellbeing and support services based at school and accessible to students and families — such as hub models. It is critical that these are not just co-located but genuinely integrated into how teachers and schools work with students and families.

A connected, place-specific support web

Building a web of supports that is genuinely responsive to place and community including services and organisations that exist specifically in and for each community.

Community-led community engagement

Families, young people, and community members as active partners not just recipients. This should include communities determining what supports are needed and how they should be integrated. It should also include students from multicultural communities who wish to act as leaders in engaging their communities with the school.

Building the capacity of families as partners in equity

Engaging families is not enough. They should be partners in the work of equity, as captured across these architecture. This requires genuine empowerment, including ensuring families have the knowledge, resources, time & opportunities to work shoulder to shoulder.

Example actions

- Co-design processes for young people and families to design and prioritise community supports
- Dedicated resourcing for family liaison officers and community engagement officers within schools, including to actively build the capacity of families to partner
- Community registries and data platforms that give teams genuine knowledge of the community — its needs, strengths, and what supports are available
- Young people engaged as cultural leaders, for instance helping at community hubs, running cultural days, enabling people of similar backgrounds to engage

Architecture 7

Responsible Use of Technology and AI

Stepping Stones

Australian data sovereignty and living labs for AI in education and beyond

Developing Australian-owned AI tools and platforms for schools — enabling data sovereignty and clear protections — rather than ceding this territory to offshore commercial providers. To respond to the emergent and evolving use of this technology, participants called for living labs (in education and beyond) to enable us to learn from use of this technology as we go.

Technology and AI literacy

Ensuring all students and educators have the knowledge and skills to engage critically and effectively with technology and AI. This capacity must be purposefully and deliberately built not assumed.

Equity-focused infrastructure and access

Ensuring all students have access to the devices, connectivity and support needed to engage equitably with technology so to actively close the digital divide rather than allowing it to deepen.

Protecting against cognitive offloading

Significant risks have been raised about the impact of over-utilisation of technology on critical thinking and the integrity of learning, as well as critically the human and relational core of education. Purposeful research and learning must be done to understand these risks and place responsible limits and guardrails on the use of this technology.

Example actions

- Explicit skills classes on appropriate and effective technology use — including critical literacy around AI
- States and jurisdictions developing their own AI tools for schools to enable data sovereignty and clear protections (for example, the NSW and SA Department tools)
- A co-designed policy framework on effective and appropriate use of technology in education — developed with young people, educators, and communities
- Dedicated investment in device access, connectivity, and digital literacy in low-SES school communities (including maintaining a consistent standard of device access across schools)

Architecture 8

Equitable Funding and Resourcing

Stepping Stones

Transparency around funding and equity

The disparity between more advantaged schools and low-SES schools needs to be transparent — both to the system and the wider public — in an accessible and appropriately detailed manner. Centralised and accessible publication of detailed school budgets across all sectors.

Targeted equitable funding linked to a definition of equitable education

Funding needs to be needs-based and tied to an agreed definition of what equitable education requires. This should prompt review of existing funding mechanisms — including the data points used to calculate funding, and the role and impact of parental contributions.

Equitable sharing of funds within schools

Greater clarity and transparency about the use of funds and budget decisions at the school level and meaningful input and agency of student leadership bodies into decisions specifically related to equity.

Timely and collective advocacy for funding change

A concerted push to ensure equity of funding is achieved — both in line with Gonski entitlements but also beyond.

Example actions

- Centralised and accessible publication of detailed school budgets across all sectors
- Education stakeholders and the wider community advocating collectively for funding, ensuring low-SES schools receive the funding they are entitled to
- Review of how current school funding arrangements, including localised decision-making, are or are not enabling key drivers of equity (for instance, the decline in access to camps and excursions)
- Mechanisms for student bodies and student leadership groups to contribute to budget decisions specifically related to equity

High-Quality Teaching and Learning

Stepping Stones

Relationships first — and readiness for learning embedded within the model

Effective teaching and learning begins with relationships and readiness for learning but these are not a precondition to be resolved before teaching starts, but something the teaching & learning model itself must build and sustain. For instance, check-in processes, responsive instructional routines, and multi-tiered systems of support are potential mechanisms for embedding this within a single coherent approach.

Evidence-based instruction, rigorously contextualised for equity

The evidence base on effective teaching provides the foundation — but approaches that work in advantaged contexts cannot simply be transposed. The model must be built for the cohort: taking the evidence on effective instruction and applying it with rigour to the specific cultural, social and learning needs of each community.

High expectations and access to challenging curriculum — for every student

Students from low-SES communities deserve challenging, engaging curriculum — not a limited version offered in the name of meeting them where they are. The tension is real: pitching too high does harm, but underestimating potential does too. The system must hold both — high expectations alongside the scaffolding and readiness conditions to make them achievable.

Universal access to high-quality curriculum materials

In addition to ensuring easy access to these resources, critical is teachers having the time and resources to adapt curriculum for their context — and to ensure all students feel seen and valued through the curriculum materials they engage with, including cultural and socioeconomic diversity.

Valuing teacher expertise — and effectively attracting, building and retaining it

Purposeful approaches to building instructional expertise across all stages of the profession — in ways that do not overburden teachers — and shifting perceptions of teaching to reflect the significant expertise it requires. This expertise is most needed in low-SES communities, but there can be significant pressures on building and retaining it within these contexts, which must be addressed.

Example actions

- Investment in instructional coaching and mentoring programs — particularly in low-SES school communities
- Effective implementation of multi-tiered systems of support to ensure the learning needs of all students are effectively being met
- Curriculum materials that reflect both cultural and socioeconomic diversity — developed in partnership with communities
- A specific policy framework for building, attracting and retaining instructional expertise in low-SES school communities
- Commission dedicated research into the interplay between trauma-informed practice and explicit teaching — to build a shared, evidence-based understanding of how these approaches complement each other in low-SES school contexts

From Vision to Action

Across this process, participants offered something remarkable: not just a clear-eyed account of the scale of the challenge, but a coherent, grounded vision of what a more equitable education system can look like — and credible, practical ideas about how to get there.

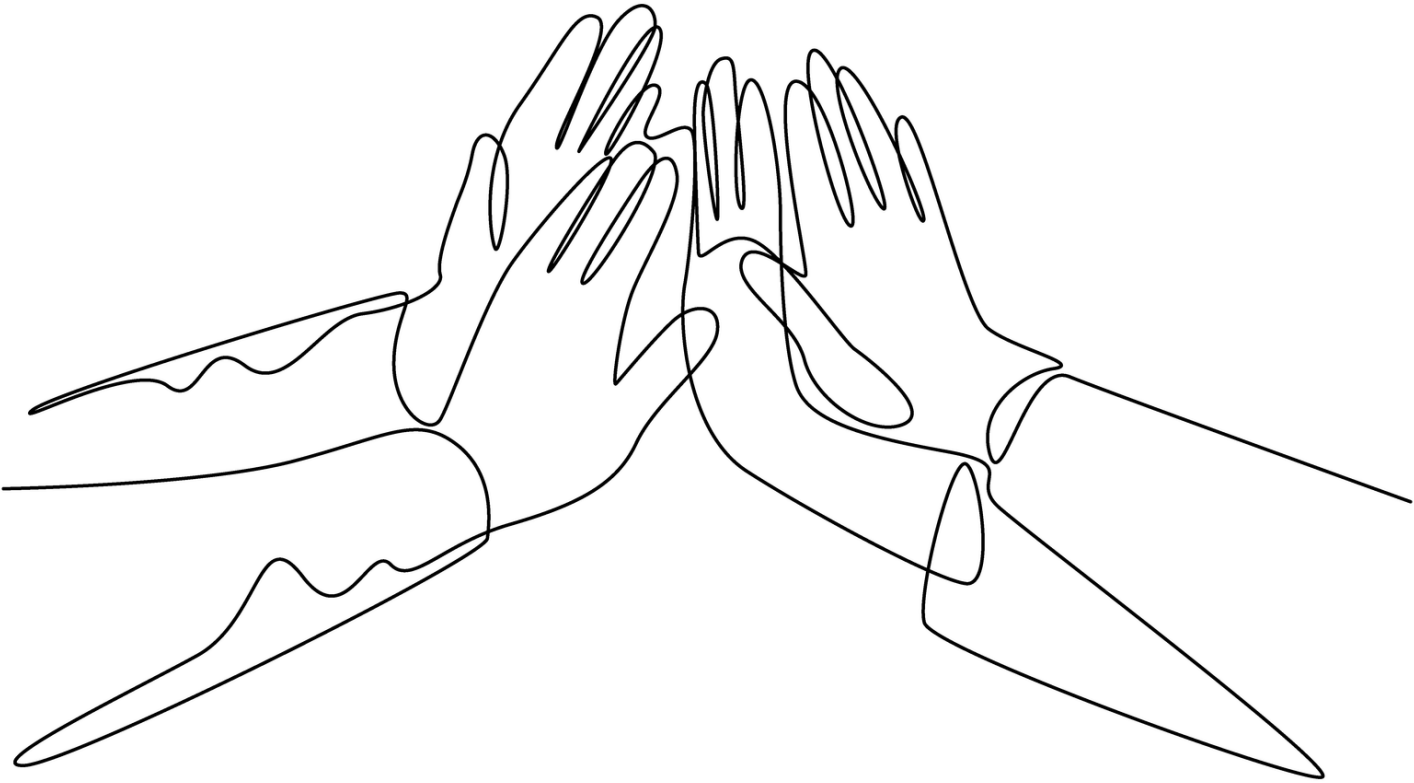
The work ahead is to move from possibility to action. This means:

- Making the conscious choice to pursue equity — recognising that it will not happen through the status quo.
- Acting on the stepping stones and example actions in this paper — identifying where your own organisation, school, or community can move.
- Staying connected to the communities, students, and educators at the centre of this work — allowing their experience and expertise to shape what we do.
- Coming together at The Gathering (30 July 2026, Melbourne Connect) — to go deeper on priorities, surface what is already underway, and build the collaborations needed to move forward.

With this clear, shared message on the architecture for a more equitable system, a key priority for EEA and The Collective will be to examine and build where needed the evidence-base required to move us forward.

“Realising this scenario requires choices — about funding, about how we support students and those who teach and lead alongside them, about whose voices shape education policy and about what we are willing to change.”

The participants in this process have told us what they believe those choices need to look like. The question is whether, collectively, we are prepared to make them.



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