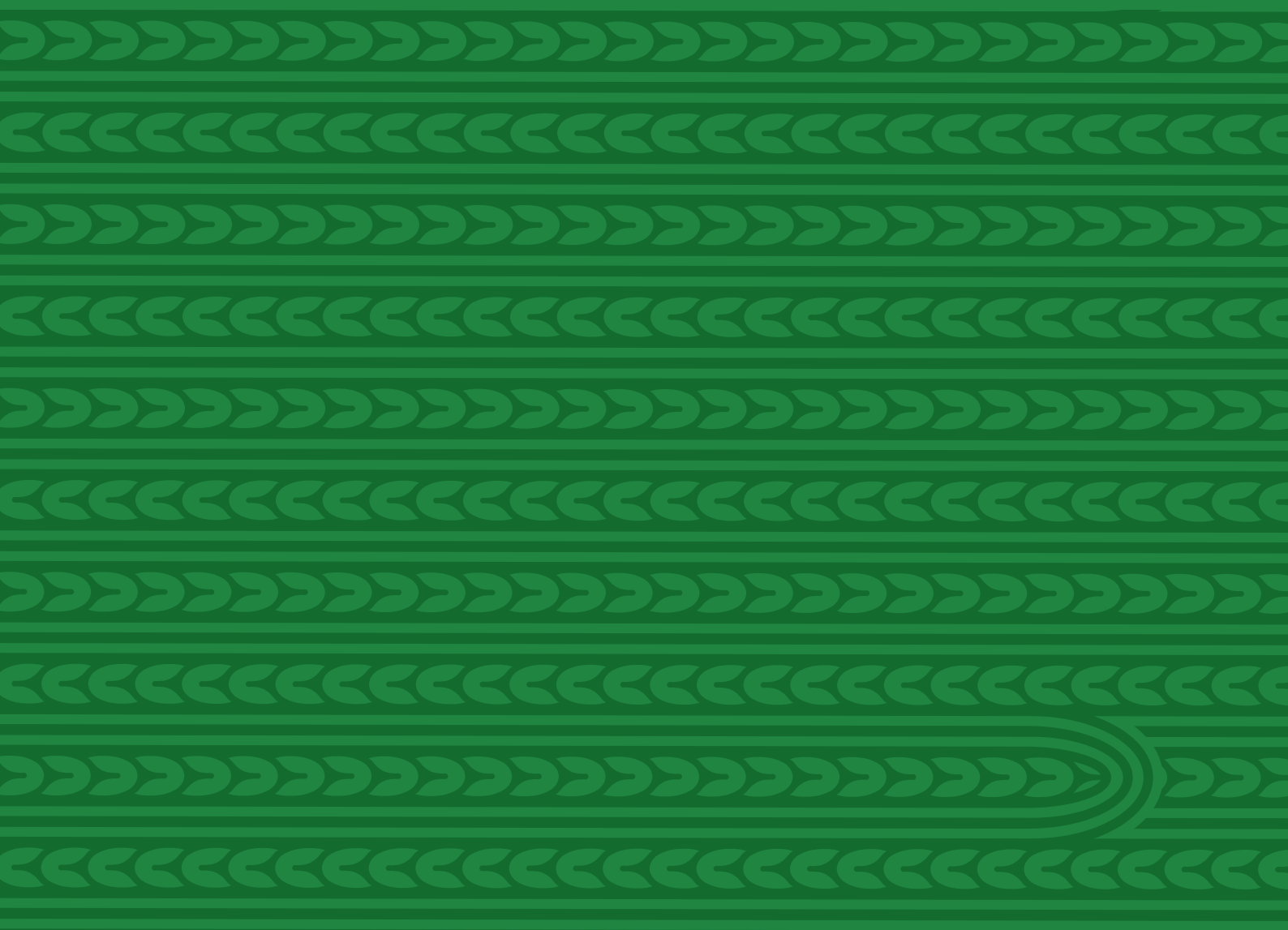


# Assessing how schools are responding to the Equity Index

Mohamed Alansari, Hana Turner-Adams, and Mengnan Li



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Rangahau Mātauranga o Aotearoa | New Zealand Council for Educational Research  
Te Pakokori  
Level 4, 10 Brandon St  
P O Box 3237  
Wellington

[www.nzcer.org.nz](http://www.nzcer.org.nz)

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2023

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We are appreciative to the Ministry of Education for funding this work, allowing us to bring to the forefront the views of those impacted most by the Equity Index changes, informing national thinking about ways to improve equity in education.

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## About the authors

**Dr Mohamed Alansari** is a senior researcher at NZCER, whose research focuses on the social psychology of classrooms, and the practices (school-wide and in-class) that impact the social and academic trajectories of student learning. He is currently leading NZCER's National Survey of Schools project and had previously led major projects focused on enhancing student motivation and engagement. He is experienced in designing exploratory and longitudinal studies in the schooling sector to better understand student journeys over time. Mohamed explores educational “puzzles of practice” from a psychological perspective, and has both experience and expertise in undertaking research at primary, secondary, and tertiary settings.

**Dr Hana Turner-Adams** (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Tamarāwaho) is a lecturer at the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education and Social Work. Hana has 20+ years of teaching experience across the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. Hana's research is primarily school-based and focuses on students' and teachers' perceptions and experiences in education. Her research interests include Māori student success, teacher expectations, and the disparities in educational achievement between Māori and non-Māori students.

**Dr Mengnan Li** is a researcher at NZCER, who is experienced in providing quality analysis and evaluation to support the development of innovative, international best-practice teaching and learning frameworks that drive equitable outcomes for all learners. Mengnan's research highlights the relations between teaching beliefs and student self-concept outcomes. Mengnan is experienced in survey design, and previously led the development of qualitative and quantitative methodologies for large-scale projects.

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# Executive summary

The Ministry of Education (hereafter, “the Ministry”) provides schools and kura with equity funding, in addition to their core funding, so they can work in different ways to help students with socioeconomic barriers reach their potential. Through Budget 2022, the Government has provided a 50% (\$75 million) increase in equity funding.

From January 2023, the Ministry has used the Equity Index (EQI) to determine a school’s level of equity funding, replacing the existing decile system.

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), on contract to the Ministry, undertook research that feeds into Objective 1 of the EQI wider evaluation plan (i.e., assessing how schools are responding to the EQI) and the associated key questions:

1. To what extent are schools/kura implementing initiatives, practices, and resources designed to address socioeconomic barriers? (baseline)
2. To what extent are schools/kura changing practices or expenditure decisions to address socioeconomic barriers in response to funding changes resulting from the EQI?

## What we did

A case study methodology was used to provide nuanced understandings of how 15 English-medium schools from across Aotearoa New Zealand support their students to achieve equitable outcomes, and how that might change with the introduction of the EQI. The report also describes schools’ initial perceptions of, and reactions to, the new EQI system. Of note is that our sample over-represents schools whose equity funding will decrease substantially over the next few years. Those schools may have felt more driven to take part in our research to share their views about the potential impacts of equity funding cuts.

## What we found

Our findings indicated that schools already engage in a wide range of equity-focused practices and initiatives, including access to resources, that are funded by multiple sources (i.e., not just via equity funding). While this is reassuring, schools also expressed how stretched they felt as they try to provide for students who face socioeconomic barriers on top of grappling with policy changes (e.g., NCEA Change Programme, changes to school planning and reporting processes), post-COVID fatigue, and increased demands for mental health and wellbeing support for students.

School principals described a range of ways they focused on equity including through localised curriculum development, building partnerships with whānau and community and culturally sustaining practices, and by increasing their focus on language, culture, and identity in the classroom. These were reflected in their strategic plans.

Schools' systems and processes for identifying individual students who face socioeconomic barriers were mostly informal, organic, and predicated on strong partnerships with the community. In schools where the community was small or well known, and in ones where staff were proactive at getting to know the community, these partnerships seemed easier to develop and more useful for understanding students' needs.

Whereas this research aimed to explore how schools rationalise their spending of the equity funding allocation, this was not how schools made expenditure decisions focused onto supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers. Instead, schools treated the various funding allocations as one funding pool, then decided on their spending priorities. The three main priorities that schools referred to when it came to spendings tied to reducing barriers for students were: increasing accessibility; meeting students' basic needs; and resourcing for learning and teaching.

The way schools respond to equity issues seemed to depend on four key leadership factors (clear vision and strategy, skilful financial management, support from board of trustees, and shared decision making with students, whānau, and staff). Effective implementation of these factors depends on development and support for new and aspiring leaders wanting to navigate, and ultimately address, educational inequities in their schools.

Overall, schools we spoke with were generally in agreement that the EQI system is a step in the right direction. They welcomed the new system and were hopeful it would provide more targeted funding to schools in line with their unique contexts and needs. We found that principals were less positive that the equity funding changes would improve equitable outcomes or that they would positively impact student achievement, engagement, and attendance.

As expected, schools whose equity funding will decrease gave more examples of what will be reduced due to equity funding cuts. Those schools were less certain about the future, perceived equity funding cuts as "punishment", and indicated that important social and cultural support roles will be most affected. On the other hand, schools whose equity funding will increase had already made plans for spending the additional amount, though most of them emphasised that the additional funds are generally not enough to keep up with the increasing demands on schools.

## Our key messages

### **There is a need for clear definitions of equity and equitable outcomes in education**

We found many examples of practices, initiatives, and resources in place to support students who face socioeconomic barriers. Every school was doing something different that aligned with their unique contexts, challenges, and needs. What we also found was that different schools had a different understanding of terms like "equity", "equality", and "inclusion". Some schools were hesitant to speak of "equity" as they perceived that to be in tension with ideas about "equality", "inclusion", and "equal opportunities" for all (e.g., schools not doing anything "special" for Māori because they perceive that to mean other students may miss out). Our analysis indicates that the way schools think about equity has a bearing on the types of supports they invest in and for whom.

## **System-wide sharing of good policies, processes, and practices to support students achieve equitable outcomes is vital**

Our study highlighted many of the practices, initiatives, and resources that have been described in previous research as effective or important for supporting student wellbeing and educational outcomes. It is important to develop ways to mobilise knowledge around “what works” to improve equitable outcomes, and for schools to support each other to achieve equitable outcomes for their learners. At the same time, we also heard of some practices and expenditure decisions that did not seem likely to lead to improved outcomes. It is equally important to have opportunities for schools to unpack these practices and learn more about alternative practices they could adopt when focusing on equity and equitable outcomes in their contexts.

## **The EQI system is complex to understand**

Participants in this research, even when they thought they understood the EQI, seemed to misunderstand some of the key features and elements of the system, including how the EQI is calculated, and how it is applied to schools. School leaders were unclear on their eligibility for initiatives (e.g., healthy lunch programme and donation scheme) under the new system. On one hand, the system has only just been implemented and its complexity reflects the complexity and depth required to accurately resource schools to support students who face socioeconomic barriers. On the other hand, this complexity introduces a risk that schools may not understand how to interpret and communicate the changes, in lay language, to their community.

## **Increasing Ministry communication and support could clarify misunderstandings about the EQI and associated changes**

Relative to the key message above, it appears to be important for the Ministry to consider releasing frequent clear communication and messaging (e.g., via online guidelines, FAQs, PLD) around the EQI and what it means for schools’ potential change in practices. Some schools we spoke with indicated the need for a central point of contact to help them navigate the changes, to ensure they are receiving appropriate and constructive advice.

## **Schools losing funding planned to cut core equity-focused actions**

An unintended negative consequence for schools whose equity funding will decrease is the likelihood that they will cut their social and cultural support roles. Such roles are important to supporting the wellbeing and educational outcomes of learners and are often positioned to foster positive identities and cultures in schools.

## **Schools are using EQI funding to address poverty**

One of the schools’ priorities for supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers was to ensure they meet their basic needs. This included funding uniforms, stationery, food, and access to health and social services for students and whānau. We are cognisant of how challenging it can be for some schools to try to address issues associated with socioeconomic barriers like poverty and suggest that systemic inequities are tackled as a cross-government funding priority so that schools do not feel they are shouldering the responsibility.

## **Teasing out EQI system changes and equity funding effects on student outcomes may prove challenging**

Assessing the unique impact of the EQI on school practices, student outcomes, and community perceptions will be difficult to achieve. School leaders in this study did not treat equity funding as a distinct source of funding. Also, schools engage in multiple initiatives a year, funded from different sources, with opportunities for improving equity outcomes central to almost all of those. Therefore, it may be difficult in the long run to attribute improvements to equity and equitable outcomes in education *solely* to the introduction of the EQI system. It may also be challenging to track system-wide shifts in perceptions and practices, with schools committing to several, simultaneous and inter-related initiatives.

## **Many equity-focused actions require school-wide PLD**

Many equity-focused practices, initiatives, and resources rely on PLD funding and effective school-wide communication and implementation processes to ensure these are ultimately embedded to support students who face socioeconomic barriers. Our findings point to varied understandings and practices that are “equitable” or “equity-focused”. PLD with an explicit focus on equity could support schools’ understanding of equity-focused practices and how these could lead to improved equitable outcomes.

## **School leaders play a critical role in navigating policy change**

The importance of leading for equity was visible across our findings. School leaders spoke about key leadership practices that enabled them to successfully enact their vision and strategy. These practices will become more vital in the years ahead, as principals continue to navigate through the EQI changes and steer the direction of their school.

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# 1. Introduction

The Ministry provides schools and kura with equity funding, in addition to their core operational funding, so that schools can make local decisions about how best to support students who face socioeconomic barriers to achievement. In 2023, the EQI replaced the decile system and uses a more sophisticated calculation to both identify need and to allocate funding.

Equity funding is an important contribution to addressing equity in our education system. A key consideration for this research is the extent to which EQI system changes would enable shifts in practice consistent with the intent of equity funding allocation. We expected that, as for decile funding, schools will use equity funding based on the EQI in many different ways, in line with their unique contexts, challenges, and needs.

The current report highlights findings from across our case study schools, providing nuanced understandings of how schools perceive and react to the EQI changes. It provides a deep dive into how 15 English-medium schools from across Aotearoa New Zealand already support their students achieve equitable outcomes, and how that might change with the introduction of the EQI.

It is important to situate the report findings in the context of participating schools and the timing of this research. About half of the schools in our project are projected to lose substantial amounts of equity funding over the next few years. This does mean that parts of the report will inevitably highlight losses more than gains, in line with schools' initial reactions to the funding cuts. Where possible, we highlight initiatives, practices, and resources designed to support students who face socioeconomic barriers in those schools, including ones they plan to cut. In doing so, it allows us to examine, in future research and evaluation, whether those schools can be supported to retain those initiatives, practices, and resources, particularly when needing to make different expenditure decisions in line with their adjusted equity funding level.

This section describes the new EQI system, along with overall purpose and aspirations that sit behind the wider evaluation of the EQI. We then describe the Ministry's requirements for this research, followed by how we have addressed these. This section is organised into four sections:

1. About the EQI
2. About the Ministry's evaluation programme
3. Our approach
4. The report structure.

## About the EQI

The Ministry provides schools and kura with equity funding, in addition to their core funding, so they can work in different ways to help students with socioeconomic barriers reach their potential. Through Budget 2022, the Government has provided a 50% (\$75 million) increase in equity funding.

From January 2023, the Ministry has used the EQI to determine a school's level of equity funding, replacing the existing decile system. Each school has an EQI number ranging from 344 to 569, updated annually through Stats NZ Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI). The higher the EQI number, the more likely that students at that kura or school face greater socioeconomic barriers to achievement.

The EQI estimates the extent to which young people face socioeconomic barriers to achieving in education. The index looks at the full basket of factors in a child's life, not at single factors on their own, and it is not possible for the Ministry, schools, or services to know information on individual children. The EQI considers 37 variables that relate to achievement and is based on the circumstances of individual students, rather than the areas they live in.

According to the Ministry website<sup>1</sup>, the EQI model:

- Looks at cohorts of children from the last 20 years, who have already passed through the school system. It assesses which socioeconomic characteristics observed at different ages best predict a student's achievement in NCEA levels 1 and 2.
- It then looks at the socioeconomic characteristics of students enrolled at schools for the last 3 years and predicts how likely they are to achieve NCEA levels 1 and 2.
- Student numbers are averaged at an individual school level to produce an EQI number for each school between 344 and 569.

The shift to the EQI will change the amount of equity funding some schools receive. Although overall funding is increasing and most schools will receive more equity funding, some schools may qualify for less equity funding. This change relates to the new modelling and associated criteria for assessing the socioeconomic barriers their students face.

The Ministry will provide transition funding to allow those schools with reduced funding time to plan and adapt. In 2023, no school or kura will receive less operational funding due to the EQI changes. From 2024, any reduction in funding will be capped at 5% per annum of a school's 2022 operational grant, to ensure funding is phased out over time.

## About the Ministry's evaluation programme

The Ministry is undertaking a programme of evaluation to assess the influence of the EQI resourcing on school practices, student outcomes, and community perceptions of the EQI. The objectives and key questions for the overall evaluation are outlined in the table below.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/changes-in-education/equity-index/how-the-equity-index-works/>



TABLE 1: The Ministry's EQI evaluation objectives and key questions

Objectives	Key questions
1. Assess how schools are responding to the EQI	1. To what extent are schools/kura implementing initiatives, practices, and resources designed to address socioeconomic barriers? (baseline) 2. To what extent are schools/kura changing practices or expenditure decisions to address socioeconomic barriers in response to funding changes resulting from the EQI?
2. Assess the influence of the EQI on student outcomes	3. How well and to what extent are students who face socioeconomic barriers engaging in schools/kura? Is there evidence that this has changed in response to the impacts of the EQI? 4. How well and to what extent are students who experience socioeconomic barriers progressing in schools/kura? Is there evidence that this has changed in response to the impacts of the EQI? 5. How well and to what extent are students who experience socioeconomic barriers achieving in schools/kura? Is there evidence that this has changed in response to the impacts of the EQI?
3. Assess perceptions of the EQI	6. How has the EQI been framed by public influencers (like the media)? 7. How is public understanding of the EQI influencing perceptions of school quality and whānau preference for schools/kura?

This research study contributes to Objective 1 of the EQI wider evaluation plan (i.e., assessing how schools are responding to the EQI) and the associated key questions:

1. To what extent are schools/kura implementing initiatives, practices, and resources designed to address socioeconomic barriers? (baseline)
2. To what extent are schools/kura changing practices or expenditure decisions to address socioeconomic barriers in response to funding changes resulting from the EQI?

The Ministry asked for a case study approach in up to 20 English-medium<sup>2</sup> schools, to identify school practices that support students to achieve equitable education outcomes and understand how schools might change their practices or expenditure decisions in light of possible equity funding changes. The case studies were intended to provide a rich context to understand how schools support students with socioeconomic barriers, and how the funding from the EQI contributes to this work.

Of interest to the Ministry is the conditions present in different school contexts when students are engaged, progressing, and achieving, prompted via the following further questions:

- a. How do schools/kura identify students with socioeconomic barriers who need support?
- b. What school/kura conditions, resources, and programmes are available to support students with socioeconomic barriers reach their potential right now?
- c. What are the costs to schools/kura of funding any additional programmes or services that support students with socioeconomic barriers reach their potential?
- d. How are schools/kura understanding and responding to the EQI? What services, programmes, or practices are schools planning to keep, do more of, do less of, stop, or introduce?
- e. What helps or hinders schools/kura in supporting students with socioeconomic barriers?

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry is undertaking a separate workstream exploring Māori-Medium kura responses to the EQI.

- f. Are there differences in practices to support students reach their potential in different school/kura contexts? (school type, school location, Māori medium and English medium)
- g. To what extent are schools'/kura efforts to support students consistent with *Ka Hikitia/ Ka Hāpaitia*—the Ministry's strategy for Māori succeeding as Māori?

The Ministry anticipates these conditions will look different across settings, and is particularly interested in the following levers for supporting equitable outcomes:

- the level of community resources available to selected schools/kura (such as skills and strengths of the school community, access to other professionals; e.g., psychologists)
- school-wide/kura-wide factors that support students reach their potential (such as school/kura culture, school/kura leadership, behaviour interventions, the fit of the curriculum to the students attending the school/kura)
- in-class factors (such as pedagogy, teacher support, class size, and assessment practices)
- social supports for family and whānau (such as access to social workers, counsellors, food in schools).

## Our approach

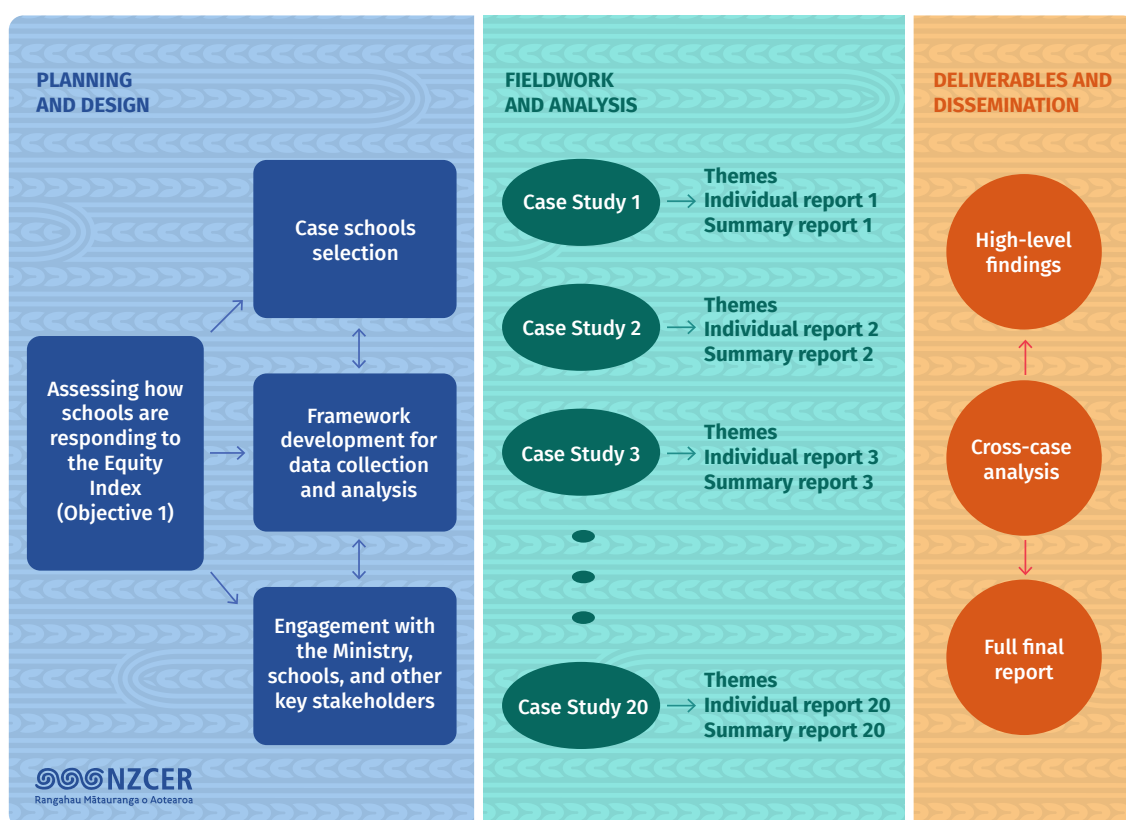
We undertook this work in three stages (planning and design, fieldwork and analysis, deliverables and dissemination), as presented in Figure 1 below.

In Stage 1, we developed a detailed plan for the project, including ways to identify case study schools, and a framework that guided data collection and analysis. The framework was informed by the Ministry's theory of change, and existing research and literature that identifies good practice and effective resourcing for supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers.

In Stage 2, we carried out and completed fieldwork, prepared all data for analysis, and developed a template for school summary reports.

In Stage 3, we completed within- and cross-case analysis, leading up to identifying key findings, writing individualised summary reports to schools, and a full report with all findings.

FIGURE 1: Overview of NZCER's approach



## The report structure

In this report, we highlight the current initiatives, programmes, and practices that schools consider are most effective in supporting students, to mobilise knowledge around “what works”, and to scale up and out good practices across schools. We then share schools’ initial perceptions of the new equity funding index, and their initial thinking of what they might do less or more of, as a result of the equity funding changes.

The report begins with Section 1 (i.e., this section) introducing the background to the EQI system, the Ministry’s wider evaluation, and our approach for undertaking the current work.

Section 2 describes the methodology we used, and how we worked with the 15 schools, to address the key questions underpinning the study.

The study findings are then reported, organised into three sections:

- Section 3: How schools are supporting students to achieve equitable outcomes
- Sections 4: School perceptions of the EQI
- Sections 5: School reactions to equity funding changes.

Last, in Section 6, we discuss the main findings in relation to the key questions and provide commentary on the extent to which school practices (both existing and new) align with or advance the policy aspirations described in *Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia*<sup>3</sup> and the *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030*<sup>4</sup>. The section concludes with a summary of key messages, caveats, and limitations.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/ka-hikitia-ka-hapaitia/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/action-plan-for-pacific-education/>

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## 2. Methodology

### Design and approach

This study used a multiple case study design (Creswell, 2014; Punch & Oancea, 2014) that utilised surveys and interviews, and drew on quantitative and qualitative approaches, to draw rich insights for addressing the key questions. Multiple case study design focuses on exploring one issue or phenomenon, by capturing evidence from multiple sites or settings (i.e., schools) to gain a fuller picture. This design enables researchers to undertake in-depth analysis within and among cases, and to examine how an issue or phenomenon manifests in different settings.

In this project, the issue or phenomenon is how schools were addressing socioeconomic barriers, and the extent to which existing practices or expenditure decisions could change in response to funding changes resulting from the EQI.

### Case study schools

A total of 15 English-medium schools agreed to take part in the project<sup>5</sup>. Table 2 below provides a demographic breakdown of the case study schools<sup>6</sup>. We spoke to participants from a range of schools' contexts including varied decile groupings (low, mid, and high), EQI numbers, isolation indices (urban and rural), authorities (state and state-integrated), school rolls (1–100, 101–300, 301–800, and 800+), and gender (co-ed, single-sex boys, and single-sex girls).

Across the 15 schools, we collected data from 63 participants (13 board of trustee members, 37 senior leaders, and 13 middle leaders). For each school, we invited up to two trustees, two senior leaders, and two middle leaders (i.e., four to six participants from each case study school, depending on school size<sup>7</sup>). With smaller schools, we anticipated that professional roles could overlap. The three participant groups were well placed to give us information on initiatives, practices, and resources to address socioeconomic barriers in their school communities and across the four layers the Ministry is interested in (community resources, school-wide factors, in-class factors, and social supports).

Where possible, we indicated our preference to have Māori and Pacific Island representatives in each participant group. Given the unit of analysis for the case study is the school, no individual demographics (e.g., staff ethnicity or gender) were gathered.

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5 We invited 79 schools in total (31 secondary, 48 primary) following our sampling-with-replacement strategy, of which 19 schools agreed to take part, but four schools withdrew from participation due to heavy workloads and existing burdens on their staff. Details on sampling are described in Appendix A.

6 To maintain the confidentiality of participating schools and individuals, we minimised the demographic information in Table 2 to only show schools' funding changes, types, regions, and enrolment proportions for Māori and Pacific learners. The ID numbers in that table are project allocated, and not school institution numbers.

7 We also spoke to more participants in schools where responsibilities were distributed across staff.

TABLE 2: Demographics of case study schools

ID	Modelled gain or transition	Type	Region	% Māori	% Pacific
1	Gain	Secondary	Bay of Plenty, Waiariki	High	Low
2	Transition	Contributing	Auckland	Low	Low
3	Transition	Secondary	Auckland	Low	High
4	Transition	Secondary	Auckland	Low	High
5	Gain	Contributing	Taranaki, Whanganui, Manawatu	Low	Low
6	Gain	Contributing	Wellington	Mid	Low
7	Transition	Contributing	Auckland	Low	Low
8	Gain	Full primary	Wellington	Low	Low
9	Transition	Composite	Auckland	Low	Low
10	Gain	Secondary	Auckland	Low	High
11	Gain	Full primary	Taranaki, Whanganui, Manawatu	Low	Low
12	Transition	Contributing	Auckland	Low	Low
13	Gain	Contributing	Auckland	Low	Low
14	Gain	Contributing	Bay of Plenty, Waiariki	Mid	Low
15	Transition	Full primary	Otago/Southland	Low	Low

Note 1: “Transition” refers to whether a school received transition funding in 2023 due to any projected loss in equity funding following EQI system changes.

Note 2: We use “high” to denote enrolment proportions over 70%, “mid” for those between 40% and 70%, and “low” for those under 40%.

It is worth noting that our final sample includes a 50:50 split between schools that gained equity funding and those that lost some, whereas the majority of schools in the country have gained additional equity funding. The over-representation of schools that lost equity funding in our sample is not unexpected and is exemplified in the current report by some of the concerns raised by participants from those schools. Those schools may have felt more driven to take part in our research to share their views about the potential impacts of equity funding cuts. While this could explain the negative undertone of some of the findings, there is still great value in understanding how schools that perceive themselves as severely negatively impacted by the equity funding changes are going to cope with such changes.

Whereas capturing the views of schools on the extreme positive end of the funding changes spectrum can tell us about equity-focused initiatives and practices, capturing the views of those on the other extreme end can also tell us about how schools make the most of what they receive. It also has the potential to indicate whether additional support and resourcing are needed to ensure those schools make better targeted expenditure decisions in line with their adjusted equity funding levels.

## Data collection instruments

This project employed qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect data from three sources: interviews; surveys; and school artefacts. These data sources were supplemented from existing findings from the NZCER National Survey of secondary principals.

### Interviews

The interview schedule was developed in consultation with the Ministry and informed by the rapid literature reviews conducted by NZCER and the Ministry. We also used the Ministry's seven sub-questions and four layers (see Introduction). The full list of interview questions is provided in Appendix B.

Depending on participants' preference, the interviews were conducted face to face or online. Each interview took up to 60 minutes. The interview schedule was flexible to allow for group interviews if participants preferred to be interviewed in pairs or groups.

### Surveys

One school leader or nominee from each school was asked to fill in a short online survey, which enabled us to focus on key areas during the interviews to gain in-depth understanding of those while ensuring we did not take up too much of participants' time. The survey consisted of closed and open-ended questions and took no longer than 10 minutes to complete (see Appendix C).

We specifically designed the survey to learn about the key initiatives, practices, and resources in place to address socioeconomic barriers across the four layers the Ministry was interested in (community resources, school-wide factors, in-class factors, and social supports). Like the interview schedules, the survey tool was developed in consultation with the Ministry and informed by the rapid literature reviews conducted by NZCER and the Ministry.

### Artefacts

We asked for school permission to share with us any documentation that might be relevant to our understanding of their school contexts, the socioeconomic barriers their students are facing, how they were addressing these, as well as how they documented progress against their equity-related goals.

Possible artefacts included:

- annual planning and review documents
- action plans
- school letters or communication
- achievement challenges (if part of a Kāhui Ako or school cluster)
- strategic goals and PLD plans
- Education Review Office (ERO) reports.

### Data from NZCER's National Survey of secondary principals

We drew on data from NZCER's 3-yearly National Survey of Schools<sup>8</sup> to complement the insights we got from the other data sources above. This survey provided a broader perspective from more secondary school leaders.

Our latest National Survey of secondary principals in 2022 included questions about the EQI. Specifically, we asked close-ended questions about principals' attitudes towards the new EQI system, and the equity funding changes. We also asked one open-ended question about any comments they might have about the new EQI system or funding changes, including their effects on student outcomes.

### Data collection

Recruiting schools took 6–8 weeks, with 79 schools in total being contacted. Our final sample consisted of 15 participating English-medium schools. Additional information on data collection can be found in Appendix A.

School principals were asked to consent for their school to take part in the research, and to nominate a key liaison who would forward the relevant information sheets and consent forms to trustees, senior leaders, and middle leaders. School principals were invited to complete a survey online and take part in an interview. Other participants were invited to take part in an interview only. All participants were welcome to share any artefacts they thought would be useful or relevant to our research.

Fieldwork took place in Term 1 and early Term 2, 2023. We used the first two schools (one primary, one secondary) as pilot schools and strengthened our measures and procedures based on their feedback, before proceeding with further case study schools.

The research team met after each school visit to debrief, cross-check notes, and share insights. Data from each case study were entered into a template that we developed prior to data collection and finalised after the pilot. The template ensured a consistent approach for recording data and documenting themes and researcher insights, which facilitated cross-case analysis.

A summary of the main project activities between November 2022 and August 2023 can be found in Appendix D.

### Data analysis plan

Following fieldwork and once all data were recorded into templates, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Terry & Hayfield, 2020) was used to analyse data within and across case study schools to develop a coding framework. The framework included the main codes and themes against each area of interest and addressed the key question and sub-questions.

We also used pattern spotting tools to assist us to define coding themes and make meaning from the data (Capper & Williams, 2004), across cases and across data sources. This approach is focused around five questions that enable groups to see patterns in complexity:

- Generalisations: In general, what are these data telling us: what themes do we see?
- Exceptions: What are the exceptions to our generalisations?

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/national-survey-schools>

- Contradictions: On the one hand we see this, but on the other hand we see ...?
- Surprises: What are we surprised by, or surprised that it is missing?
- Puzzles: Are we still puzzled about anything?

NVivo, Excel, and SurveyMonkey were used to collect and organise qualitative and quantitative data for analysis.

## A quick guide to reading descriptive data

This report draws on quantitative and qualitative data from surveys and interviews to gain in-depth understandings about each case study school. It enables the reader to understand the prevalence of certain findings or insights across the case study schools. Our case study methodology does not utilise inferential statistics, meaning any numerical data we report on (e.g., frequencies and percentages) should only be taken to better understand the perspectives and experiences of participating schools *in situ*. The collection of detailed, nuanced information from a range of data sources, including quantitative data, is done to develop a comprehensive view of a phenomenon in its real-life context (Hammersley, 1989).

Where perspectives or practices are common across the majority of schools, or sub-groups of interviewees (such as principals), we use terms such as “nearly all”, “most”, or “many” interviewees or survey respondents. We use the term “around half” when around 50% of respondents shared a perspective or practice. When referring to a smaller group of respondents (around one-quarter to less than a half), we use the term “some”. If a perspective or suggestion is unique to a small number of respondents, we use terms such as “a few” or “a couple”.



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## 3. How schools are supporting students to achieve equitable outcomes

Section 3 introduces findings related to the question: “To what extent are schools/kura implementing initiatives, practices, and resources designed to address socioeconomic barriers?” First, we focus on how schools are already supporting students to achieve equitable outcomes, irrespective of the EQI system changes, before we delve into how these might change in response to the new EQI system and associated funding changes.

Findings in this section are organised into the following sections:

1. School leaders’ views of most effective initiatives, practices, and resources
2. Identifying students who face socioeconomic barriers is an organic process, underpinned by strong partnerships
3. Spending priorities are tied to implicit checklists and focused on reducing barriers to learning
4. Schools have variable practices to support Māori learners.

### School leaders’ views of most effective initiatives, practices, and resources

Of 15 school leaders in our study, 13<sup>9</sup> responded to the survey to tell us about the initiatives, practices, and resources they considered most effective to support students in their schools (Figure 2). These are organised into five areas (school-wide factors, curriculum or assessment approaches, community resources, social supports, and teaching pedagogies and/or approaches), and listed from most selected to least selected.

Across the five areas, we examined senior leaders’ top two responses and perspectives about what is most effective for supporting students in their schools. These offer key priorities for concerted action:

- school values and strategic/action plans that explicitly focus on equitable outcomes and describe how they can be achieved
- localised curriculum and curriculum planning that prioritises student languages, cultures, and identities
- prioritising funding opportunities and building strong and reciprocal relationships with whānau
- emphasis on removing barriers to participation by offering direct support to families to access resources, and to students by offering healthy school lunches
- teaching pedagogies that are collaborative and culturally sustaining<sup>10</sup>.

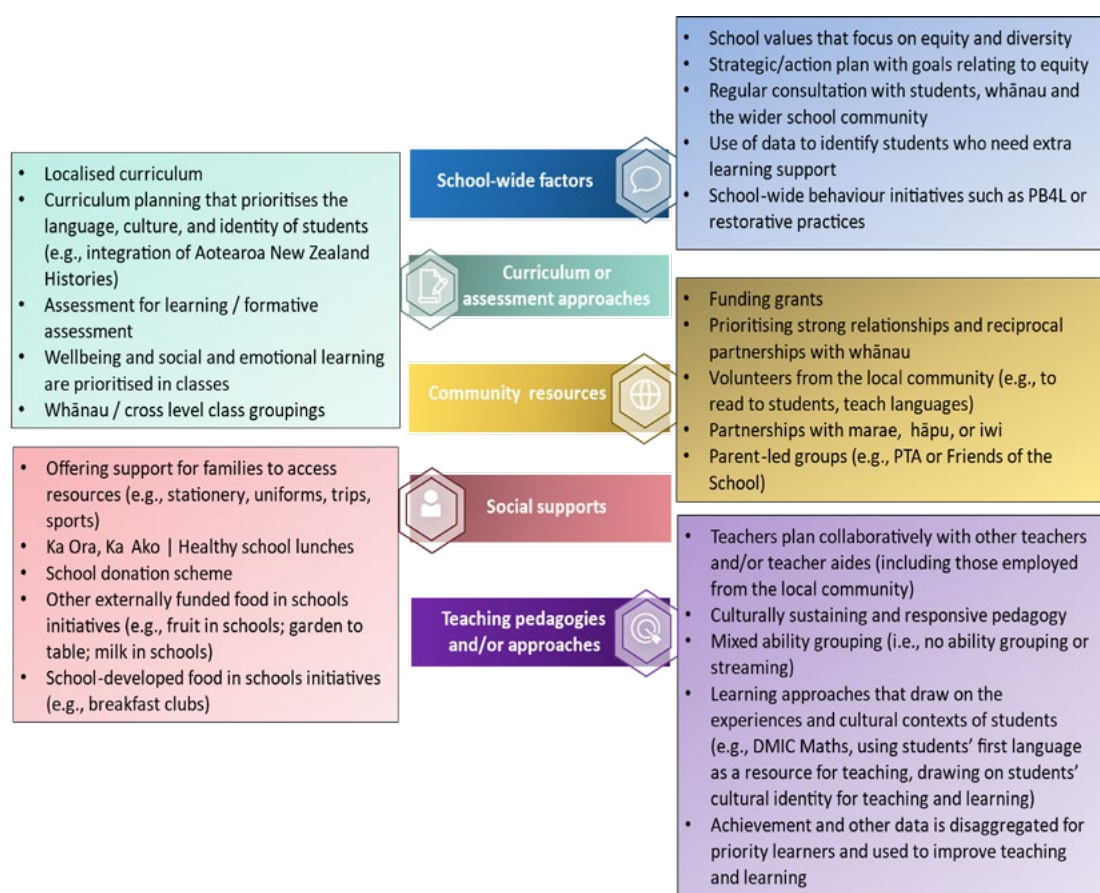
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<sup>9</sup> Due to high workloads, two out of the 15 principals opted out of completing the survey.

<sup>10</sup> A recent literature overview by NZCER also identified collaborative and culturally sustaining practices as key pedagogies that underpin effective teaching in literacy, communication, and maths: Developing a common practice model for literacy & communication and maths: An overview of the literature | New Zealand Council for Educational Research (nzcer.org.nz)

From these data, it appears that schools are increasingly seen as (or acting as) social services agencies, and this highlights the increasing demands on schools and the need for system-wide, co-ordinated, and inter-agency action to support schools to support their students and whānau. The above initiatives, practices, and resources were also mentioned by interviewees from many schools, possibly indicating alignment in views between school staff and leaders in those schools. Ensuring alignment across all levels of the school, and what that entails, is described later in this section as a key practice to achieving equitable outcomes.

FIGURE 2: **School leader views of the most effective initiatives, practices, and resources in place to support their students (n = 13)**



## Identifying students who face socioeconomic barriers is an organic process, underpinned by strong partnerships

Overall, we noticed that in schools where the community was small or well known to each other— as was the case in rural and faith-based schools in our sample—identifying student socio-economic needs or barriers seemed easier, or at least more efficient. It is possible that larger schools may not have developed efficient systems to identify student needs and, therefore, might find this process more time-consuming or difficult to achieve.

When we asked about the ways schools identified individual students who face socioeconomic barriers and how they supported them, most participants told us that their processes were informal, without written policies or systems. Instead, the process was organic, with different staff playing a contributing

role in sharing information about students' circumstances and needs. We found that the extent to which schools were able to effectively do this could be attributed to three factors: the strength of relationships within and across layers in school; clarity and frequency of communication with students and their families; and having a holistic, community approach to pastoral and academic support.

It is about knowing your community, having the relationships; there is nothing much on paper. (School 1)

That's one of the challenges of our approach is that it relies on someone acknowledging that they need help, which people don't like doing. So, I think the principal is quite adapted, kind of making those conversations really comfortable. (School 8)

We listen pretty carefully to what whānau talk about with us, and in our pods, we really encourage the teachers in the pods to form good strong relationships with whānau. I mean, it works well in both ways, doesn't it? We have a good strong relationship with the child, and we make the effort to have that relationship with the whānau, and it benefits us as a school. (School 12)

The receptionist has strong connections with the community and parents go to them and can have a quiet chat. (School 2)

Of note, the above facets have been described in previous research as foundational to establishing strong home-school partnerships (see, for example, Hindle et al., 2016).

## Spending priorities are tied to implicit checklists and focused on reducing barriers to learning

Most of the case study schools did not have a formal process for prioritising their spending of equity funds. Schools told us they did not see their EQI funds as distinct sources or "buckets" of money. Instead, they treat the various funding allocations as one funding pool. This may explain why most schools told us they did not have a formal process for rationalising expenditure decisions from the equity fund in particular. Therefore, this subsection focuses on how schools prioritise their spending of the total funding they receive.

It was evident that schools had three main priorities for funding when it came to reducing barriers for students:

1. accessibility
2. meeting students' basic needs
3. learning and teaching.

### Accessibility

Prioritising accessibility meant removing barriers so that all students had equitable access to all learning programmes, resources, support services, and activities in the school. This removed the stigma for students who needed to access support by making everything available to everyone.

At the heart of meeting needs is an unwritten ethos that no student will miss out. (School 11)

Everyone can go on camp (who wants to attend). We have some families that will pay for the child and also pay for another child, so no child will ever miss out ... We have never said, 'Oh, this child can't do something or go somewhere because they haven't paid.' (School 3)

It comes from the old decile system—a basic belief that our kids should have the same opportunities, the same access to materials, to programmes, to tuition as decile 10 children. Children don't choose where they're at, and so it's our job as educators to actually seek ways to make sure that that gap isn't broadened and that we're actively closing that gap all the time. (School 12)

## Meeting students' basic needs

Schools that prioritised meeting students' basic needs provided necessities to ensure their students were fed, clothed, warm, and healthy. These schools believed that learning could not happen until these basic needs were met. They funded breakfast and lunch for students and provided school uniforms, jackets, shoes, and socks.

The school places hauora first before learning; the pastoral side needs to be right before learning happens at our school. (School 1)

I guess we prioritise those that make a difference to their learning ... so fed, clothed, and dry. That's probably the best way of looking at it because you can't learn if any of those 3 things are missing. (School 3)

30% of our new entrants had not had hearing checks or immunisations so we contacted the health services and arranged for them to take place at school, with parent permission. (School 12)

For some schools, meeting students' basic needs also meant supporting their wider whānau. Some schools provided laundry facilities, paid rent and power bills for their families, picked up and dropped off students at home or school, and supported families going to court. Another school had a hardship fund to help whānau. Sometimes the hardship fund was used to help with school expenses, but it also supported whānau to pay bills. We acknowledge that the extended support that some schools are providing highlights broader issues, including poverty, within the whānau and wider communities they serve. Although these types of support are the responsibility of multiple agencies, schools appeared to be cognisant that supporting whānau aligns with meeting students' basic needs and reducing barriers to learning.

## Learning and teaching

Schools prioritising learning and teaching ensured that students could access resources and support they needed to learn. In some cases, this included providing students free stationery; in others, digital devices were provided.

When kids get to a certain level, we supply them with a Chromebook to use at school, so they don't have to bring their own device, which can cause a barrier for some kids. So, everyone's got the devices at school to use. (School 8)

Education outside the classroom (EOTC) was also a learning priority for many schools, that viewed these types of experiences as enriching students' lives.

That's really the thing that I would say is the important thing for us. They raise their sights, you know? They're able to see what's possible for people in the world. (School 7)

Some schools took learning outside the classroom a step further and funded job-related training. For example, one school offered driver's licence and forklift driving courses.

With the Lions Foundation, we bought a car. We employ a driving instructor, and we attempt to give most of our senior students the opportunity to get either their learners, restricted, or their full licence prior to leaving school. Additionally, we have four boys who are doing a forklift driving course. Now, getting that ticket will get them a job down the road. But it's about employment, because when he has a job, or she because I think there's a girl this time, they can put money on the table, which will buy food. (School 1)

Teacher aides were also a high priority for supporting learning and teaching, with most schools employing additional aides beyond their Ministry-funded allocation. Some schools also employed

additional teachers to help keep class sizes small or to support a specialist area, such as literacy or te reo Māori. For example, one school had a dedicated staff member (kaiarahi) who ran kapa haka and a leadership programme for Māori students. She also teaches staff and students tikanga and te reo Māori and engages with the Māori community via regular hui.

... my whole focus has always been about children, and giving our teachers the best support that we can ... We fund additional teachers, you know, to bring down class sizes ... [That] should be the job of the Ministry of Education. (School 13)

It was a school decision to enhance numeracy and literacy by employing a fully trained literacy teacher and two teacher aides. These are board-funded and over their staff funding. (School 4)

## Schools have variable practices to support Māori learners

Equity funding is an important contribution to addressing inequities in our education system. For Māori, who are under-served by the education system, facing socio-economic barriers is a compounding disadvantage.

We asked all case study schools what they did to support Māori learners to achieve equitable outcomes. Survey findings suggested that many schools prioritised language, culture, and identity as this was the second most selected option in schools' curricular or assessment approaches. While all schools offered opportunities for students to learn aspects of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga Māori, not all had programmes or practices that were specifically for or exclusive to Māori learners. Instead, some schools asserted that they supported "all learners" and did not focus on any specific ethnic groups.

Nothing that is just for Māori. (School 2)

We don't have a programme targeted just for Māori. We have everything open for everybody ... We do have a special kapa haka group. But yeah, it's not just for Māori people. It's for anybody who wants to be in the kapa haka group. Everybody ... When we're learning waiata or anything like that, everybody does it. It's not just a group of people. (School 8)

We noted that schools that said they supported all learners often offered an "equality" rather than an "equity" response, which may reflect their understanding of these terms. An exception was in one school where almost all students were Māori; therefore, all practices in the school were focused on supporting Māori learners to achieve. For example: "Whatever we do, we do for all. Everyone is the same in the school [and] is treated the same" (School 1).

Other schools referred to the tracking and reporting of Māori achievement, which is a mandatory requirement, or the inclusion of Māori words, phrases, or symbolism in school signage or documentation. For example: "[Our] school values are three Māori words" (School 2).

Limited references to Te Tiriti o Waitangi across the interviewees indicates that some schools are not yet confident about acknowledging the special place that Māori, as tāngata whenua, hold in Aotearoa. Section 127 of the Education and Training Act (2020) states that a primary objective for school boards is to give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi by "achieving equitable outcomes for Māori students", but our findings indicate that some schools might need further support to embed this objective in their policies and practices.

This finding is not surprising as the recent ERO (2023) report, *Preparing and Supporting New Principals*, found that one area in which they felt the least prepared was working in partnership with Māori. Those who had 4 or 5 years in their role reported their confidence had grown in some areas, but they still felt unconfident in many equity-focused areas. As one example, less than half were

confident about giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The findings from this study and the ERO report highlight a need for more equity focused PLD and support for school leaders.

Schools that identified specific supports for Māori to achieve equitable outcomes reported practices such as:

- Māori transition and graduation programmes
- whānau hui
- celebration/commemoration of Matariki
- Māori student leadership programmes
- Māori cultural leader (staff member) and/or Māori language specialist teacher
- relationships with local iwi and hapū
- place-based learning
- membership of MAC—the Māori Achievement Collaborative
- culturally responsive training for boards of trustees; PLD related to mātauranga Māori and tikanga Māori
- te reo Māori language learning for students and staff, including rūmaki classes (Māori immersion)
- kapa haka.

## **Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia**

Most schools were aware of *Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia*, but the level of integration varied across the case study schools, from those yet to unpack it to schools that viewed it as central to their school culture and teaching practices. Some schools appeared to be more familiar with earlier versions of the strategy as they referred to “success as Māori”, but not the outcome domains that are a feature of the latest iteration.

Māori success as Māori is a focus of the school. Māori students in the school achieve as well as students of other ethnicities. (School 13)

*Ka Hikitia* was used as a founding document when the school was started. A lot of the teaching philosophy aligns with Te Kotahitanga and what works for Māori works for everyone. (School 1)

It's part of the culture of the school and who we are; everything just ties in nicely. (School 3)

A closer analysis of how schools' practices align with *Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia* is provided in the discussion section of this report.

## **Leadership makes a difference to how schools respond to equity issues**

How schools respond to equity issues appears to depend on four key leadership factors:

1. A clear vision and strategy
2. Skilful financial management
3. A supportive board of trustees
4. Shared decision making with students, whānau and staff.

### **A clear vision and strategy**

Interview and survey data told us that a clear vision and strategy in their school's strategic plan guided their decision-making processes and helped leaders to focus on what was most critical in meeting the needs of their students and the school community. One school explained this as a “clear



vision of what's in versus out of scope for resourcing" (School 5). It was evident in another school that staff and management were driven by a strong, structured set of principles that operated at all levels of the school: that no child will miss out. The core purpose permeated all decision making and was cited by middle leaders and boards of trustees. The senior leadership team was instrumental in maintaining the focus, strategic planning against the focus, recruiting for the focus, and ensuring the supports were in place to help teachers implement the focus.

#### **Skilful financial management**

Aligned with a school's vision and strategy was the second key leadership factor: skilful financial management. School leaders told us they were careful about how they managed the school budget and aimed to make the most of the funding they received. School leaders primarily viewed all funding they received as one big pot, with equity funding contributing to their total budget, rather than a separate source. Principals were continually on the look-out for additional sources of funding and ways they could cut costs, but it was evident that financial management went hand in hand with a school's vision and strategy. As one principal said, "Money does not solve all problems; you need to have a clear plan first" (School 7).

[The principal] is very systematic in terms of these things. She has a system of identifying specific needs at different times. Does not waste money; when money is spent, it is critical for that student to experience success. (School 3)

Balancing the budget is a priority—I don't tend to spend money I don't have. (School 11)

#### **A supportive board of trustees**

Principals told us that a high trust relationship with a supportive board of trustees was critical to responding effectively to equity issues. They also talked about the board of trustees "being on the same page" as the principal and senior leadership team and having a clear understanding of the school context and community in which they served. Alongside the strategic plan, school and community knowledge enabled boards of trustees to prioritise funding in the areas of highest need.

The principal is primarily the mover and shaker. When [principal] comes to the Board, the BOT is very supportive of what the principal asks for. (School 1)

A supportive Board of Trustees who understand the severity of the socioeconomic barriers and realities that students are facing. (School 10)

BOT are generally on the same page as the school in terms of values and priorities. (School 5)

#### **Shared decision making with students, whānau, and staff**

In most schools, there was evidence that students, whānau, staff, and the wider community were included in discussions about funding priorities. In these schools, principals, senior leaders, and middle leaders' interview responses were more closely aligned, and staff had a shared understanding of their school's priorities and the rationale behind them.

The pastoral care team meet every Tuesday morning, and they discuss cases ... actual children and families. They identify what is the need in that home. [The] DP (deputy principal) then comes and meets with me as part of our senior leadership team. (School 1)

Regular SLT meetings help to identify students of concern. We always have time for children of concern. And that's not just academically; that's to do with, you know, social-emotional and physical wellbeing of the kids to ensure that we are aware of children who are struggling. (School 13)

We have our consultation with our staff or with those that are within our community to feed back on what we need to be doing for our students and in our school. (School 1)

Notwithstanding, a few schools identified that whānau engagement was challenging. Furthermore, consultation with whānau and the wider community, when it occurs, may be more focused on responding to issues as they arise rather than deciding on the school priorities. For some schools, further work and development were needed to engage whānau, beyond those who were already engaged with the school (e.g., Board of Trustees members) to ensure that whānau with the highest needs had opportunities to contribute to school funding decisions.



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## 4. School perceptions of the EQI

Sections 4 and 5 present findings related to the question: “To what extent are schools/kura changing practices or expenditure decisions to address socioeconomic barriers in response to funding changes resulting from the EQI?” Section 4 focuses on school perceptions and initial reactions of the EQI system, and addresses two main findings:

1. The EQI—generally a step in the right direction
2. Principals are less positive that the EQI funding will improve equitable outcomes.

To contextualise the findings in this section, it is important to note that many participants told us they had not yet fully engaged with the EQI changes and what these mean for their practice. As part of the fieldwork, we provided information about the EQI to schools and answered questions about how the EQI was calculated. One school assumed we were the point of contact for queries on eligibility for social supports, given we have been contracted to do this work. Another school leader told us they are navigating too many changes, so they decided to tackle “one policy at a time”.

Common reasons for not fully engaging included lack of time to do so, not knowing where to access information about the EQI, and the belief that EQI changes are not “important enough” to consider when put up against other changes schools need to navigate. Navigating the NCEA Change Programme was frequently mentioned as a competing priority. Therefore, we anticipate school perceptions of the EQI system changes to be more nuanced in future studies, once more schools have engaged with these changes.

### The EQI—generally a step in the right direction

There was general agreement from all interviewees that the new EQI funding model is fairer than the previous decile system. Schools thought the decile system was inaccurate and that schools were unfairly judged on their decile rating, which some members of the wider community equated with school quality.

We enrolled a family who said to us not long ago: ‘My friends told me I need to go to a school with a better number.’ (School 2)

In contrast, the EQI was premised on the needs of individual students, reviewed regularly, and more accurately reflected the families at each school.

The funding better reflects our community, and we’re surprised that the Ministry actually listened. (School 11)

I think the system’s good ... The Board of Trustees has discretion, you know, on where the money should be spent ... I think parents do know the best for the kids in this school, so I hope they never change that ... The BOTs get to do the best we can to make sure everyone gets a fair chance. Parents are probably the best to do that, really, because they know the situation more than, you know, a government. (School 11)

Unsurprisingly, the schools facing funding reductions were unhappy with the EQI, despite thinking it is fairer than the decile system. Whereas those schools with increased funding viewed it more positively, schools where the funding had stayed the same or had only increased marginally had mixed views of the EQI.

In our survey, we asked principals what they thought of the new EQI system, and compared their views with those in our national sample of principals who were asked the same set of questions. As Table 3 below shows, principals of the case study schools were less positive about the new EQI system compared to principals in our national survey sample. Again, this is not unexpected, given about half of schools in our case studies were recently informed of the equity funding cuts affecting them.

TABLE 3: Principals' perceptions of the EQI

Overall ...	EQI case studies (n = 13)			NZCER's National Survey (n = 42)		
	Disagreement	Neutral	Agreement	Disagreement	Neutral	Agreement
I support the new Equity Index system.	23%	31%	46%	2%	31%	67%
The new Equity Index system will result in more accurate targeting of equity funding and resources.	31%	15%	54%	7%	33%	60%
Compared to the school decile system, I prefer the new Equity Index system.	31%	23%	46%	5%	22%	73%

Many interviewees wanted the system to be mindful of what the EQI does and does not represent, in fear of the EQI slowly becoming a decile system disguised under a new name. They spoke about the EQI telling “one” story of many about each school’s context, challenges, needs, and aspirations. Participants also reiterated the importance of not treating schools the same, even when they are assigned identical EQI numbers. This sentiment was also conveyed by most principals in the survey, who challenged whether the EQI measures “the things that matter”.

A number does not tell the whole story—what story ‘should’ the EQI tell about school journeys?  
(School 8)

Does that data actually tell the full story? Because, you know, it depends how you interpret the data. I could see situations where you’re just worried about family wealth ... and okay, the girls in our families, you know, they might come from very stable families who are well-incomed. But in our particular situation, it might not just be that ...” (School 3)

Any change is negative here with the new Equity Index, although, as I said at the beginning, I actually feel it’s a better model, but it’s one where people have forgotten to look at the story behind the data, and there needs to be some sort of oversight. Somebody in government is sitting there going, ‘Okay, yeah, even though the model says that the school shouldn’t be getting as much funding ... what they have been doing with the community means they really shouldn’t be losing any funds here.’ (School 3)

I understand it was research-based and there was a method behind it, but I don’t think it encapsulates individual schools and what they’re facing. Research will tell you one thing, but what’s actually happening is another. I don’t think you’re getting the full picture. (School 7)

The criteria should not focus on what the schools consist of but rather more of what can be delivered by them, and how to grow this. (School 10)

## Principals are less positive that the EQI funding will improve equitable outcomes

We also asked principals whether they thought the EQI funding would improve equitable outcomes. We compared their responses to data from our national surveys to get a sense of how similar the two sample responses were. Table 4 shows that just over half of the principals of the case study schools did not agree that the new EQI system would reduce the stigma associated with socioeconomic status, compared with only a quarter of principals who said so in our national surveys. This finding aligns with what we found from the qualitative analysis, where more negative views were reported by interviewees from schools that lost equity funding.

TABLE 4: Principals' perceptions of the EQI

Overall ...	EQI case studies (n = 13)			NZCER's National Survey (n = 42)		
	Disagreement	Neutral	Agreement	Disagreement	Neutral	Agreement
The new Equity Index system will reduce stigma associated with socioeconomic status.	54%	31%	15%	26%	33%	40%
Our current equity funding is enough to meet our needs.	77%	0%	23%	n/a	n/a	n/a

Note: The second item was not asked in our national surveys.

Table 5 below presents principal perceptions of the equity funding changes, and whether change is likely to occur because of these. Again, we compared these with our national survey data.

Principals of the case study schools were not favourable on the potential impact of equity funding changes on student outcomes. Table 5 shows negative-to-neutral ratings with most items, with half of principals disagreeing. Whereas principals who completed our national surveys reported neutral-to-positive ratings of the potential impact of the equity funding changes on student outcomes, approximately three-quarters of principals indicated neutrality or agreement.

TABLE 5: Principals' perceptions of the equity funding changes

As a result of the equity funding changes, we will be able to ...	EQI case studies (n = 13)			NZCER's National Survey (n = 42)		
	Disagreement	Neutral	Agreement	Disagreement	Neutral	Agreement
increase the academic achievement of students who face socioeconomic barriers.	46%	15%	39%	24%	43%	33%
better resource programmes and initiatives that support students who face socioeconomic barriers.	54%	8%	39%	24%	33%	43%
increase the engagement of students (who face socioeconomic barriers) with school.	54%	23%	23%	24%	45%	31%
have more adequate operational funding consistent with the levels of socioeconomic barriers our students and their families face.	62%	8%	31%	29%	19%	52%

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## 5. School reactions to equity funding changes

Similar to Section 4, this section presents additional findings related to the second key question, “To what extent are schools/kura changing practices or expenditure decisions to address socioeconomic barriers in response to funding changes resulting from the Equity Index?”

Section 5 focuses on schools’ reactions to the equity funding changes, and some of their initial thinking about possible changes in practice. The section addresses five main findings:

1. Schools that gained funding had plans for spending it
2. Schools that lost funding were less certain about the future
3. Loss of funding is perceived as “punishment”
4. Social and cultural support roles will be most affected by the equity funding cuts
5. School leaders thought government funding is insufficient.

Where possible, we included examples of initiatives, practices, and resources that participants told us they will spend more/less on due to equity funding changes. But, overall, schools gave more examples of what will be reduced due to equity funding cuts, as opposed to what will be gained due to equity funding increases.

### Schools that gained funding had plans for spending it

The schools that had gained more money as a result of the EQI planned to direct their additional funding into one or more of the key priorities identified in Section 4 (i.e., accessibility; meeting students’ basic needs; learning and teaching).

Some examples of how schools planned to use additional funding to meet their students’ basic needs included:

- uniform vouchers to reduce the cost to families of buying the school uniform
- breakfast club.

Schools that prioritised students’ access to all school activities primarily planned to use their additional funding for school trips and “life experiences” or to offer extracurricular activities such as a chess club or waka ama.

The schools that wanted to direct their EQI funding gain towards supporting teaching and learning planned to:

- employ a primary teacher to support NCEA Level 1 literacy and numeracy requirements
- purchase teaching resources
- employ more teacher aides
- increase teacher PLD
- sustain current initiatives and programmes
- expand education outside of the classroom (EOTC; e.g., trips to learn about local whenua)
- embed Aotearoa New Zealand Histories in relation to the students in the community and their heritage/culture groups.

A few schools had plans for their additional funding that were not related to accessibility, meeting students' basic needs, or learning and teaching. These schools planned to use EQI monies for:

- classroom release for the school principal
- employing a school caretaker
- a pay increase for the school's office manager.

## Schools that lost funding were less certain about the future

Schools facing funding cuts were less certain about the changes that would occur as a result. Some principals thought it was too early to comment, as the cuts were not immediate. Other principals were still in shock at the prospect of losing so much money.

I wasn't expecting we would be so impacted ... I was shocked it was so different from our decile rating. (School 2)

No decisions have been made yet as the school is in a dilemma about what they can do to provide the most equitable outcomes for students with such a large loss of funding. (School 4)

Schools were determined to maintain their current programmes, supports, and initiatives, but knew that losses were imminent. Schools that had previously been "low decile" were particularly concerned about the losses that might occur because of their changed status to "more well off". Schools were fearful that they would no longer be eligible for:

- charitable support (e.g., KidsCan)
- school donation scheme<sup>11</sup>
- the Ka Ora, Ka Ako | Healthy School Lunches programme<sup>12,13</sup>
- swimming lessons/water safety
- funding from gaming trusts and philanthropic funders.

The main areas where schools planned to make cuts once their EQI funding was finalised were:

1. staffing
2. teaching and learning resources
3. EOTC and extracurricular activities.

## Staffing

Most schools planned to reduce board-funded positions, which were staff who were not funded out of the staffing budget (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants/teacher aides, sports coaches, and additional counsellors).

I think the money that we've lost ... we think is about \$120,000 ... Saving here and there's not going to provide that; we're going to let staff go with that sort of money. (School 7)

Interviewees expressed concerns that fewer teachers employed in a school would have a flow-on effect and lead to:

- a reduction in non-contact time for teachers and deans
- increased class sizes

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11 <https://www.education.govt.nz/school/funding-and-financials/fees-charges-and-donations/donations-scheme-faqs/>

12 <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/wellbeing-in-education/free-and-healthy-school-lunches/#The-2019-EQI>

13 We note here that the Ministry has policies for grandparenting the school donation scheme and eligibility for Ka Ora, Ka Ako. That is, no schools will lose funding because of the change to the EQI. Other agencies will make their own decisions about applying the EQI to help with funding eligibility.

- multi-level teaching (e.g., combined courses for Years 12 and 13)
- reduced subject offerings—some students will need to take courses through Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (formerly known as The Correspondence School) or schools would stop offering some subjects.

### Teaching and learning resources

A reduction in spending on resources meant that schools' planned cuts included:

- purchasing fewer NCEA resources
- reduced funding for maintaining and updating resources (e.g., laptops)
- suspending all subscriptions for online/magazine resources
- no longer providing or subsidising school stationery for students
- reduced funding for vocational programmes and trades-based courses. For example: "Running technology courses in foods and trades but are not able to fund the technological demands of these courses" (School 4).

### EOTC and extracurricular activities

Schools were planning to reduce/stop trips outside their town or city and reduce or remove the subsidies provided to whānau for transport, trips, camps, etc.

Children may not have the opportunity to travel to the beach or pool. (School 7)

Already having difficult conversations with staff about cutting field trips (e.g., cannot afford to go to the [local] mines. (School 3)

### Loss of funding is perceived as “punishment”

As expected, schools that lost equity funding expressed dissatisfaction, as they perceive their schools to be already under-resourced and will become even more so over the next few years. They expressed negative sentiments around the lack of support, and how these funding losses make it even harder to support students who face socioeconomic barriers. Several interviewees expressed concerns about the long-term effects of equity funding changes.

Obviously, students are at the heart of what we're doing. But in order to be able to do the best education we can, we also need to look after our staff ... if our staff, you know, suddenly lose a bunch of teacher aides at the same time that we've got this like historically high level of need in the special needs area, that's a massive concern and it will definitely have a flow on with retention and replacement. (School 12)

I think, with the EQI funding, my one message back to the Government would be, don't let it take funding away from any of the schools ... I mean, the detrimental effects .... I think you'll be seeing them starting in 5 years, and then in 20 years' time you're really going to be feeling it as a country ... If we lose the ability to create these role models within the community, then what effect is that going to have long term? Boy oh, boy, I think we'll see it in 20 years' time if we get this wrong. (School 3)

Nearly all schools shared concerning stories about the impacts of equity funding cuts that are unique to their school contexts. Unexpectedly, they all used the notion of “punishment” when describing how they felt when they learnt of the funding loss. Participants who thought they understood how the EQI was developed, and how it relates to achievement, immediately attributed their loss of funding to the fact that their students achieve well in NCEA Levels 2 and 3.

I was ironically amused, because when I was thinking about the questions and doing a bit of research about it, I look at the TKI [Te Kete Ipurangi] site, and it said that students who experience poverty, abuse, and trauma need more resources to be successful at school. And I thought, 'Our kids have'. We have a huge proportion of kids who've experienced poverty, abuse, or trauma. And yet our resources are being, you know, significantly impacted, so while, I think, it's supposed to be a fair system, it just hasn't worked that way for us for whatever reason. (School 12)

My general view is that our community here has been punished for staying together. (School 3)

One of the recommendations should be that the schools who have been doing well are supported, and better resources to support other schools to do well. Not punishing us. (School 11)

A few interviewees expressed distress that the EQI formula might not have taken into account the current effort needed to sustain high levels of achievement, including "what goes on in the background" to ensure that happens. They commented on the current teaching staff and learning materials in place to support academic learning, and the additional support offered to parents, both of which they attribute high student achievement to, and how they might no longer be able to resource these because of the equity funding cuts.

It's a lot of money ... If you think that we spend three-quarters of our money on people, it's people that we need to say goodbye to. (School 2)

It's the unexpected consequences. This is going to affect a wide, wide community because it is going to affect our students' outcomes if we can't provide those extra bits so they can come and just focus on studying ... if they're worried about where they're going to get fed from, where they're getting their laptops from and all of that ... they're not going to get the results they're capable of. (School 3)

## **Social and cultural support roles will be most affected by the equity funding cuts**

Staff in cultural support roles, cultural programmes, and language learning classes were often at the top of the list when schools discussed the likely impact of the equity funding cuts. This was evident across schools irrespective of how much or little cultural programmes or activities were in place. Worryingly, it appeared that most schools viewed their cultural programmes and associated staff as "nice to have" but not essential. Some schools planned to cut te reo Māori classes and bilingual language programmes. One school planned to cut their after-school programme focused on cultural integration and support for students and families from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. In another school, the specialist teacher of te reo and tikanga Māori, who also provided pastoral support to Māori students and their whānau, was at risk of having their role disestablished. Schools often explained these cuts as a "back to basics" approach, where literacy and numeracy programmes had a higher priority over arts, languages, and culture.

... when funding is cut, these [cultural and language programmes] are likely to compete with decisions about maintaining the literacy centre and where the biggest number of students can benefit. (School 4)

We will do less of most of our cultural programmes or activities that support students' cultural identities ... we cannot afford the staffing and resourcing for that anymore. (School 9)



## School leaders thought government funding is insufficient

Even though we focused our attention in this research on the EQI system and equity funding, schools often spoke about their *total school funding* instead, and how insufficient they perceive that to be. This is not surprising, given most school leaders told us that they view their funding as one “bucket” or budget that rolls over from one financial year to the next.

Of the participants from schools that have gained additional funding, only one school leader expressed relief that they will now be able to invest in additional programmes, resources, or initiatives that they could not access or invest in before. That school leader plans on using the additional funding to employ a teacher for literacy and numeracy.

The EQI, it is levelling the playing field. So, our poverty-stricken families will still get the same education, but I can give them more. And the children will not have barriers to things and not afford to do it, because we'll do it for them and pay for it ... I am very passionate about the change as from our perspective, as we developed the new criteria, I thought 'That is just about all the kids in our school!' (School 1)

All other participants from schools that gained additional equity funding emphasised that the additional amount is generally not enough to keep up with the increasing demands of school life, the increasing wellbeing concerns for students needing specialist support, as well as the increasing demands for learning needs support and teacher aides to account for existing class ratios.

When they said they were taking away the deciles—I thought it was awesome. I was told it was individual; each student gets an amount each. I thought we could go on LEOTC [learning experiences outside the classroom]. Then I found out it was lump sum funding. This is really hard. (School 1)

Kids are coming into school at 5 years old with trauma, with deep baggage—they're coming in with deficits. How can just one teacher be expected to teach 20 children in a new entrants class to read, write, and do maths when these kids are traumatised? (School 14)

School leaders told us that their staff are becoming particularly resourceful and careful about spending every amount of money, no matter how small, with principals describing how the roles of their associate/deputy principals had morphed into those of campaign/fundraising managers. School leaders were concerned about those staff.

Balancing the budget is a priority—I don't tend to spend money I don't have. If you've got extra, you'd tend to push it into more specific things. (School 2)

The DP, he's like an event manager. You know, he needs to raise \$150,000 a year through fundraising ... His role is in education. He shouldn't be an event manager, we shouldn't have to raise 150k to keep the school running ... You know, two of his [school] terms are pretty much generating cash flow for the school. (School 13)

While some indicated “losing faith” in the current system, others remain hopeful that the Government and the Ministry will listen and act on their concerns, citing previous positive experiences and how they were supported.

The funding better reflects our community, and we're surprised that the Ministry actually listened ... I hope this [evaluation] in itself has a purpose. That the Ministry will accept this research, develop recommendations, and engage with these genuinely for the betterment of school outcomes ... We hope they will not let us down. They have been great allies and advocates for us and for [our community of] schools. (School 11)

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## 6. Discussion

In this final section, we provide commentary and overall insights from undertaking this research that could be useful for the Ministry’s programme of evaluation, specifically for their thinking about “how” and “why” we might anticipate system-wide shifts in school practices, student outcomes, and community perceptions associated with the EQI system and accompanying equity funding changes. This section is organised into the following:

1. Responding to the research questions
2. Point of interest: impact of EQI changes on policy
3. Key messages
4. Caveats and limitations
5. A concluding comment.

### Responding to the key questions

The purpose of this research was to explore how schools support students who face socioeconomic barriers, their perceptions of the newly introduced EQI system, and initial reactions to what they might do differently in light of changes to their equity funding levels. This research feeds into Objective 1 of the Ministry’s programme of evaluation, which is to “assess how schools are responding to the Equity Index” in its early days.

Section 3 presented findings in relation to the first key question, “To what extent are schools/kura implementing initiatives, practices, and resources designed to address socioeconomic barriers?” We found that schools already engage in a wide range of equity-focused practices and initiatives, including access to resources, that are funded by multiple sources (i.e., not just via equity funding). While this is reassuring, schools also told us how stretched they felt as they try to provide for students who face socioeconomic barriers on top of grappling with policy changes (e.g., NCEA Change Programme, changes to school planning and reporting processes), post-COVID fatigue, and increased demands for mental health and wellbeing support for students.

At a school level, principals told us about a range of ways they focused on equity, including through localised curriculum development, building partnerships with whānau and community and culturally responsive practices, and by increasing their focus on language, culture, and identity in the classroom. These focuses were reflected in their strategic plans.

Given schools are needing to grapple with multiple competing demands at any given time, it was somewhat unsurprising that their systems and processes for identifying individual students who face socioeconomic barriers were mostly informal, organic, and predicated on strong partnerships with the community. This meant that these can be done “anytime, anywhere”. In schools where the community was small or well known, and in ones where staff were proactive at getting to know the community, these partnerships seemed easier to develop and more helpful in understanding students’ needs.

Interestingly, whereas this research aimed to explore how schools rationalise their spending of the equity funding allocation, this was not how schools made expenditure decisions focused on

supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers. Instead, schools told us they treat the various funding allocations as one funding pool, and then decide on their spending priorities. Principals told us that these priorities were informed by school values and strategic/action plans. We also found that these spending priorities were tied to implicit and informal systems and processes, in line with schools' unique contexts and needs. The informal nature of these makes it easy for schools to involve students and the community and consult with them. At the same time, this makes it difficult to scale up or share learnings about how different schools can develop criteria for priority setting when needing to make equity-focused expenditure decisions. However, we did find three main priorities that schools referred to when it came to spending tied to reducing barriers for students: increasing accessibility; meeting students' basic needs; and resourcing for learning and teaching.

We also found that the way schools respond to equity issues seemed to depend on four key leadership factors (clear vision and strategy; skilful financial management; support from their board of trustees; and shared decision making with students, whānau, and staff). Effective implementation of these factors depends on development and support for principals. However, recent ERO (2023) findings suggest that new principals do not feel well prepared for all aspects of their role. In the same report, ERO found that new Māori principals felt even less prepared for their role and less likely to have had prior leadership experience. This poses significant challenges for new and aspiring leaders wanting to navigate and ultimately address educational inequities in their schools.

Sections 4 and 5 presented findings in relation to the second key question, "To what extent are schools/kura changing practices or expenditure decisions to address socioeconomic barriers in response to funding changes resulting from the Equity Index?" Overall, the schools we spoke with generally agreed that the EQI system is a step in the right direction. They thought the decile system was inaccurate, outdated, and encouraged deficit labelling of schools. They welcomed the new system and were hopeful it would provide more targeted funding to schools in line with their unique contexts and needs. We found that principals were less positive that the equity funding changes would improve equitable outcomes or that they would positively impact student achievement, engagement, and attendance. Perhaps, principals were merely being realistic that impacting student outcomes takes considerable time, and is predicated on quality teaching and leadership, as well as systemic structural changes in the system and society surrounding schools. These factors are not necessarily easy to influence through an equity funding allocation.

As expected, schools whose equity funding will decrease gave more examples of what will be reduced due to equity funding cuts, as opposed to what will be gained due to equity funding increases. Those schools were less certain about the future, perceived their equity funding cuts as "punishment", and indicated that important social and cultural support roles will be most affected. On the other hand, schools whose equity funding will increase had already made plans for spending the additional amount, though most of them emphasised that the additional funds are generally not enough to keep up with the increasing demands on schools.

### **Point of interest: impact of EQI changes on policy**

The Ministry is interested in identifying examples of school equity actions that align with policy expectations as set out in *Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia* and the *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030*. The current study did not focus on these plans from the outset. However, in looking through the data we found some evidence of practices that align with both policies' outcome domains and key system shifts. We describe these below, and suggest future research pays closer attention to how schools deliberately engage in practices that advance particular policy aspirations.

## Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia outcome domains

In Section 3, we reported on case study schools’ programmes/initiatives targeted towards supporting Māori students that appeared to align with the intent of *Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia*<sup>14</sup>, the Ministry’s strategy for Māori succeeding as Māori. In this section, we show the extent to which equity practices (both existing and new) across the sample align with or advance *Ka Hikitia*’s five outcome domains:

1. **Te Whānau:** Education provision responds to learners within the context of their whānau
2. **Te Tangata:** Māori are free from racism, discrimination and stigma in education
3. **Te Kanorautanga:** Māori are diverse and need to be understood in the context of their diverse aspirations and lived experiences
4. **Te Tuakiritanga:** Identity, language, and culture matter for Māori learners
5. **Te Rangatiratanga:** Māori exercise their authority and agency in education.

Figure 3 displays some examples of school practices that connected with four of the five outcome domains and were directly and deliberately put in place to support Māori. We did not identify evidence in our findings that showed if or how schools were addressing racism, discrimination, and stigma in education (Te Tangata). Future research studies could look more closely at how schools are enacting Te Tangata and the other outcome domains of *Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia*.

Of note is the Government’s current investment in Te Hurihanganui<sup>15</sup>, a system-wide kaupapa designed to support communities to specifically address racism and inequities. It is possible that evidence for the outcome domain Te Tangata resides more explicitly with initiatives and kaupapa like Te Hurihanganui compared with the equity funding (which is a relatively small proportion of the total funding schools receive). This is to say, the genesis of the EQI system was to replace the decile system and contribute to more accurate targeting of resourcing (including better support for students who face socioeconomic barriers), but not necessarily to address systemic racism and discrimination. Schools may be accessing other funding pools to implement supports for Māori.

FIGURE 3: Examples of school implementations mapped against Ka Hikitia’s five outcome domains

Te Tuakiritanga	Te Rangatiratanga	Te Whānau	Te Kanorautanga	Te Tangata
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mātauranga Māori integrated into the curriculum</li> <li>• Aotearoa NZ Histories</li> <li>• Te reo Māori learning for staff and students</li> <li>• Kaumātua teach marae tikanga</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Māori whānau in governance roles</li> <li>• Tumuaki and kaiako Māori in leadership roles</li> <li>• Māori student leadership programme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition and graduation programme</li> <li>• Regular whānau hui and breakfasts – older siblings and wider whānau attend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success as Māori is a focus of the school. Māori students in the school achieve as well as students of other ethnicities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not evident</li> </ul>

14 <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/ka-hikitia-ka-hapaitia/>

15 <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/te-hurihanganui/>

### Action Plan for Pacific Education – key system shifts

The *Action Plan for Pacific Education*<sup>16</sup> sets out Government’s commitment to transforming outcomes for Pacific learners and families, through five key system shifts:

1. Work reciprocally with diverse Pacific communities to respond to unmet needs.
2. Confront systemic racism and discrimination in education.
3. Enable every teacher, leader and educational professional to take coordinated action to become culturally competent with diverse Pacific learners.
4. Partner with families to design education opportunities together with teachers, leaders and educational professionals so that aspirations for learning and employment can be met.
5. Grow, retain and value highly competent teachers, leaders and educational professionals of diverse Pacific heritages.

Figure 4 presents some examples of school practices, initiatives, and resources that showed alignment with three of the five key system shifts. We did not identify evidence that connects the EQI system and equity funding directly (and deliberately) with schooling efforts to confront systematic racism and discrimination, nor did we find that for growing, retaining, and valuing highly competent practitioners of diverse Pacific heritages.

As was the case with our discussion of enacting Te Tangata in the previous subsection, it is possible that schools may be accessing other funding pools to implement supports for Pacific learners and their families, in line with Key System Shift 2, to address systemic racism and discrimination. The equity funding is also not typically intended to be used for paying staffing and teacher salaries, which might explain why we found no evidence aligning with Key System Shift 5.

FIGURE 4: Examples of school implementations mapped against the Action Plan for Pacific Education’s key system shifts

<p>Work reciprocally with diverse Pacific communities to respond to unmet needs</p>	<p>Confront systemic racism and discrimination in education</p>	<p>Enable every teacher, leader and educational professional to take coordinated action to become culturally competent with diverse Pacific learners</p>	<p>Partner with families to design education opportunities together with teachers, leaders and educational professionals so that aspirations for learning and employment can be met</p>	<p>Grow, retain and value highly competent teachers, leaders and educational professionals of diverse Pacific heritages</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong relationships and engagement with families</li> <li>• Reducing barriers to participation as a guiding principle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not evident</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pacific languages learning</li> <li>• Bi/multilingual Pacific learners as a resource to teaching</li> <li>• Synergies between school leaders and the Board of Trustees</li> <li>• Emphasis on Pacific worldviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holistic approach to teaching and learning</li> <li>• Adoption of Pacific philosophies as guiding ethos</li> <li>• Navigating NCEA pathways</li> <li>• Careers and transitions to work programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not evident</li> </ul>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/action-plan-for-pacific-education/>

## Key messages

In this section, we describe the key messages from this study, which could be used to reflect on the Ministry's programme of evaluation. We framed our pondering of implications and future directions as discussion questions for the reader to think about when considering improvements to the EQI system and supporting students to achieve equitable outcomes.

### There is a need for clear definitions of equity and equitable outcomes in education

We found many examples of practices, initiatives, and resources in place to support students who face socioeconomic barriers. Every school was doing something different that aligned with their unique contexts, challenges, and needs. What we also found was that different schools had a different understanding of terms like “equity”, “equality”, and “inclusion”. Some schools were hesitant to speak of “equity” as they perceived that to be in tension with ideas about “equality”, “inclusion”, and “equal opportunities” for all (e.g., schools not doing anything “special” for Māori because they perceive that to mean other students may miss out). Our analysis indicates that the way schools think about equity has a bearing on the types of supports they invest in and for whom.



#### Discussion questions:

How can the EQI contribute to deepening schools' understandings of the meaning of equity and equitable outcomes in education?

How do schools define and think of “equity” in relation to “equality and inclusion”? Can both be achieved in the same context?

How can we, as a system, cultivate a shared understanding of equity and equitable outcomes in education?

In what ways does the following OECD (2018) definition of “equity in education” resonate with schools and kura in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Equity does not mean that all students obtain equal education outcomes, but rather that differences in students' outcomes are unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which students have no control. (OECD, 2018, p.22)

### System-wide sharing of good policies, processes, and practices to support students achieve equitable outcomes is vital

Our study highlighted many of the practices, initiatives, and resources that have been described in previous research as effective or important for supporting student wellbeing and educational outcomes. It is important to develop ways to mobilise knowledge around “what works” to improve equitable outcomes, and for schools to support each other to achieve equitable outcomes for their learners. At the same time, we also heard of some practices and expenditure decisions that did not seem likely to lead to improved outcomes. It is equally important to have opportunities for schools to unpack these practices and learn more about alternative practices they could adopt when focusing on equity and equitable outcomes in their contexts.



**? Discussion questions:**

What practice, initiatives, and resources are worth sharing across the sector?

How do schools know their current practices, initiatives, and resources are effective at supporting students achieve equitable outcomes? What evidence do they gather that tells them so?

What system-level information could be shared about the links between practices, initiatives, and resources and supporting students to achieve equitable outcomes?

How do we, as a system, ensure alignment between EQI funding intent and school practices?

**The EQI system is complex to understand**

Participants in this research, even when they thought they understood the EQI, seemed to misunderstand some of the key features and elements of the system, including how the EQI is calculated<sup>17</sup>, and how it is applied to schools. School leaders were unclear on their eligibility for initiatives (e.g., healthy lunch programme and donation scheme) under the new system. On one hand, the system has only just been implemented and its complexity reflects the complexity and depth required to accurately resource schools to support students who face socioeconomic barriers. On the other hand, this complexity introduces a risk that schools may not understand how to interpret and communicate the changes, in lay language, to their community.

**? Discussion questions:**

How can we, as a system, best share information to ensure the school sector understands the new EQI system?

What is the best way schools could explain to parents and whānau the differences between the EQI and decile systems, including how funding is calculated?

**Increasing Ministry communication and support could clarify misunderstandings about the EQI and associated changes**

Relative to the key message above, it appears to be important for the Ministry to consider releasing frequent clear communication and messaging (e.g., via online guidelines, FAQs, PLD) around the EQI and what it means for schools' potential change in practices. Some schools we spoke with indicated the need for a central point of contact to help them navigate the changes, to ensure they are receiving appropriate and constructive advice.

**? Discussion question:**

In what forms could information about the EQI be presented to schools (e.g., short video snippets, online interactives, easy-to-read fact sheets)?

<sup>17</sup> For more information, see: <https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Documents/our-work/changes-in-education/Introduction-to-the-new-Equity-Funding-system-for-schools-and-kura.pdf>

## Schools losing funding planned to cut core equity-focused actions

An unintended negative consequence for schools whose equity funding will decrease is the likelihood that they will cut their social and cultural support roles. Such roles are important to supporting the wellbeing and educational outcomes of learners and are often positioned to foster positive identities and cultures in schools.

### Discussion questions:

How could schools be supported to retain core equity-focused practices, initiatives, and resources designed to foster positive identities and inclusive cultures?

What criteria do schools use to set up, and resource, priorities focused on equitable practices and wellbeing outcomes for students who face socioeconomic barriers?

How could we, as a system, work with schools to support them to make spending decisions that work well, particularly those whose equity funding will be cut?

## Schools are using EQI funding to address poverty

One of the schools' priorities for supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers was to ensure they meet their basic needs. This included funding uniforms, stationery, food, and access to health and social services for students and whānau. We are cognisant of how challenging it can be for some schools to try to address issues associated with socioeconomic barriers like poverty and suggest that systemic inequities are tackled as a cross-government funding priority so that schools do not feel they are shouldering the responsibility.

### Discussion questions:

How can we, as a system, develop a more co-ordinated and cross-agency response to addressing systemic inequities that students face?

How can we develop an easy-to-navigate system that connects students and their families to the right supports consistent with their needs?

## Teasing out EQI system changes and equity funding effects on student outcomes may prove challenging

Assessing the unique impact of the EQI on school practices, student outcomes, and community perceptions will be difficult to achieve. School leaders in this study did not treat equity funding as a distinct source of funding. Also, schools engage in multiple initiatives a year, funded from different sources, with opportunities for improving equity outcomes central to almost all of those. Therefore, it may be difficult in the long run to attribute improvements to equity and equitable outcomes in education *solely* to the introduction of the EQI system. It may also be challenging to track system-wide shifts in perceptions and practices, with schools committing to several, simultaneous and inter-related initiatives.



**? Discussion questions:**

Are there ways to model or show the holistic contribution of the range of equity-focused practices, initiatives, and resources in schools on student outcomes?

What system-wide data can be used to model “the things that matter” to schools and their communities, when showing the positive impacts of the EQI system? How can this be communicated?

**Many equity-focused actions require school-wide PLD**

Many equity-focused practices, initiatives, and resources rely on PLD funding and effective school-wide communication and implementation processes to ensure these are ultimately embedded to support students who face socioeconomic barriers. Our findings point to varied understandings and practices that are “equitable” or “equity-focused”. PLD with an explicit focus on equity could support schools’ understanding of equity-focused practices and how these could lead to improved equitable outcomes.

**? Discussion questions:**

As many equity-focused actions rely on PLD funding, is there a need to align EQI and PLD funding decisions? Could the equity focus of PLD funding be strengthened?

What research evidence is available to schools about the positive impact of a range of equity-focused practices, initiatives, and resources on student outcomes?

What information is available to schools about the type(s) of PLD associated with supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers?

**School leaders play a critical role in navigating policy change**

The importance of leading for equity was visible across our findings. School leaders spoke about key leadership practices that enabled them to successfully enact their vision and strategy. These practices will become more vital in the years ahead, as principals continue to navigate through the EQI changes and steer the direction of their school.

**? Discussion questions:**

What PLD and leadership support do school leaders (both current and aspiring) need to effectively implement strategies aimed at supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers in their schools?

## Caveats and limitations

It is important to situate these findings in the context of the EQI being a newly introduced system. Some schools were more vocal about the additional stresses equity funding cuts could add on their capacity to support their students to achieve equitable outcomes. Also, as described earlier, many participants had not yet fully engaged with the changes and what these mean for potential changes in their practice. Therefore, we suggest longitudinal and system-wide tracking of school perceptions of the EQI to capture system-wide perceptions. Longitudinal studies could also investigate whether these perceptions would change over time, as schools get used to the new system and implement changes in line with equity funding changes.

Equity funding is an important contribution to addressing equity in our education system, and to support students facing socioeconomic barriers. The current study provides in-depth understandings and insights into the initiatives, practices, and resources that schools use to support those students, as well as the ways these may change in light of the new EQI system. This work will inform subsequent phases of the wider EQI evaluation.

However, the School Case Studies project on its own should not be used to make system-level judgements or generalisations. We caution against attributing causality. Findings will need to be interpreted with the following caveats in mind:

- The length of the study and level of resourcing meant we only visited schools and/or talked to participants once about their views and experiences, and did not return to schools once they received their adjusted funding and made expenditure decisions.
- The highly contextualised nature of equity challenges, coupled with the complexity of schooling, poses difficulties when generalising what these might look like across schools at a system level.
- Schools engage in numerous initiatives, programmes, and practices simultaneously. This poses challenges when attributing changes in equity-related practices to the new EQI system.
- The exploratory nature of the study design means that there might be other factors creating positive or negative patterns that we may not have captured. Conversely, some of the factors we identify as likely to be associated with positive patterns may also be present in other schools with different trajectories.
- Accessing system-wide data on good practices to support students facing socioeconomic barriers, including schools that are leaders in this space, was out of scope for this project. Therefore, we need to be cautious when examining school practices and the extent to which they can be described as effective.

## A concluding comment

We reiterate here the importance of the EQI system, as another significant step in improving equity outcomes for learners and their communities. Our research suggests that, while there is no silver bullet for addressing educational inequities, equity funding serves as one funding mechanism that allows mobilisation of knowledge and practices aimed at supporting students who face socioeconomic barriers.

Our findings also point to the challenges of focusing on addressing systemic inequities in a stretched system and highlight the importance of co-ordinated efforts (both within and across sectors) and the sharing of information about how schools could navigate contextually unique challenges and inequities in a rapidly changing environment.

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# Appendices

## APPENDIX A: Additional details on project methodology

### Sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to determine the schools to be invited to take part in this project. This is a non-probability sampling method, used when researchers rely on clear parameters to determine who is “in-scope” for taking part in the research. Through this strategy, deliberate criteria are developed to determine the overall target population, from which potential participants can be drawn.

The next two subsections describe our rationale and method for a purposive sampling strategy with replacement, followed by the criteria we used for selecting schools.

### Purposive sampling with replacement

We opted for a purposive sampling strategy to select information-rich case study schools that represent different school contexts and experiences. Of interest to the project is building knowledge around what “effective” equity-focused practice looks like in schools with different contexts. Purposive sampling allows us to examine that across a range of contexts by considering a range of demographics and school-context factors.

In addition, our experience working with schools, particularly post-COVID-19, suggests a declining response rate for school-based research. We are finding it harder to access and recruit schools for taking part in research. Therefore, it was important to create a shortlist of schools that we would prioritise inviting, followed by a longer list that we could draw on to replace schools that may decline taking part, withdraw participation, or not respond to our email invitations.

The Ministry provided us with a long list of a possible 109 schools with associated data, based on the demographics and criteria we suggested, as well as the Ministry’s available data sources (ERO reports, achievement, and attendance data). We then shortlisted 67 schools based on our criteria and knowledge of schools and sought the Ministry’s regional offices’ local input into the list given their existing relationships with the schools. Following discussion with the Ministry and the regional offices, we prioritised 23 schools (10 secondary, 13 primary) that we then invited to take part in the project.

Schools from the priority list of 23 schools that did not agree to take part, withdrew participation, or did not respond were then replaced by selecting a school from the shortlist of 67 schools or, if needed, from the long list of 109 schools. Overall, this process saw us contacting up to 79 schools.

### Criteria for shortlisting schools

We included schools from the top, middle, and bottom of the EQI range. We over-sampled schools with the most barriers, as these schools are likely to have developed a wider range of ways of

supporting students with high equity needs. In addition, a range of demographics were considered when selecting the case study schools:

- School type: primary/intermediate and secondary (including area and composite) schools
- Region: we over-represented schools from the Auckland region given the number of students and schools in this region
- School size
- School definition: state, state-integrated, and special character schools
- North and South Island schools.

Within the final sample, we ensured there were schools with high Māori and Pacific enrolment, as well as a range of urban and rural schools.

When shortlisting schools, we focused on schools in the highest two categories for four or five of the data sources below:

- Attendance data, 2021 (categories: top 10%, top 11–20%, other)
- Attendance data, 2022 (categories: top 10%, top 11–20%, other)
- For secondary schools only: Proportion of students attempting NCEA, 2021 (categories: top 10%, other)
- For secondary schools only: NCEA achievement, 2021 (categories: top 10%, top 11–20%, other)
- For secondary schools only: NCEA achievement trends, 2016–21 (categories: positive trend, other).

In terms of achievement trends for secondary schools, we mostly selected schools with positive trajectories. For primary schools, we focused on upward and stable attendance trajectories, as well as ERO data which included information on reported issues around student behaviour or governance. We also consulted with the Ministry's regional offices about school contexts and initiatives to consider when short-listing schools.

In summary, we used the four data sources below for selecting primary schools:

- NZCER's demographics and knowledge of schools
- EQI range
- ERO reports
- Attendance data, 2018–22 (categories: top 10%, top 11–20%, other).

For selecting secondary schools, we used the seven data sources below:

- NZCER's demographics and knowledge of schools
- EQI range
- ERO reports
- Attendance data, 2021–22 (categories: top 10%, top 11–20%, other)
- Proportion of students attempting NCEA, 2021
- NCEA achievement, 2021
- NCEA achievement trends, 2016–21.

## Data collection

Following ethics approval from NZCER's Ethics Committee, email invitations to principals were sent out to the shortlist of 23 schools, followed by the longer lists of schools, to ensure we recruited up to 20 schools to take part in the research. Recruiting schools took 6–8 weeks, with 79 schools in total being contacted. Of those, 19 principals agreed to participate, but four of those subsequently withdrew their participation during the process, leading to a final sample of 15 participating schools.

School principals were asked to consent for their school to take part in the research, and to nominate a key liaison who would forward the relevant information sheets and consent forms to trustees, senior leaders, and middle leaders. School principals were invited to complete a survey online and take part in an interview. Other participants were invited to take part in an interview only. All participants were welcome to share any artefacts they thought would be useful or relevant to our research.

Fieldwork took place in Term 1 and early Term 2, 2023. We used the first two schools (one primary, one secondary) as pilot schools and strengthened our measures and procedures based on their feedback, before proceeding with further case study schools.

The research team met after each school visit to debrief, cross-check notes, and share insights. Data from each case study were entered into a template that we developed prior to data collection and finalised after the pilot. The template ensured a consistent approach for recording data, and documenting themes and researcher insights, which facilitated cross-case analysis.

### **Ethical considerations and reciprocity**

Ethics approval from NZCER's Ethics Committee was obtained prior to contacting shortlisted schools. All participants were fully informed about the nature of the project and that their involvement was completely voluntary. They were also informed that the main findings across schools would be presented in a full report where no individual schools or staff would be identified. In addition, a dataset that includes the survey responses will be shared with the Ministry and principals could choose to have their school names released or removed.

We recognised schools' time and effort to contribute to the project by paying for teacher release time and producing an individualised school summary report that schools can share with their community.

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# APPENDIX B:

## EQI interview schedule

### EQI Case Studies – Interview Schedule

**School name:**

**Interviewee names and roles:**

**Interviewers:**

**Time and date:**

#### Introductions, overview, and purpose

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. This interview will take approximately 45–55 minutes to complete and will be recorded. Is that okay? Please let me/us know if you need to finish by a certain time. The questions I/we will be asking you today relate to the newly introduced Equity Index (EQI) and supporting students in your school who face socio-economic barriers. Do you have any questions for me/us before we get started?

#### School context and challenges

1. Could you tell me about your main roles at this school and how long have you worked at this school and in education?
2. Could you tell me about the context of your school including the main challenges and barriers faced by your school, students, and whānau/community?
3. What are the key processes (like leadership approaches, community consultations, or PLD) currently in place to create a shared focus on equity at your school?

#### Identifying and resourcing needs

4. How does your school identify students and/or whānau who face socio-economic barriers? Is there a school process or system in place?
5. What are the key supports you have in place for students facing socio-economic barriers, and how does your school access these?
6. How do you decide or prioritise the initiatives or supports you will fund to support students who face socio-economic barriers? What helps or hinders your school in supporting students with socio-economic barriers?

### **Alignment between resourcing and support provision**

[Question below is for schools who have lost or did not gain additional equity funding]

7. Given your school has lost [or did not gain] funding as a result of the EQI changes, in what ways has supporting students at your school and meeting their needs been impacted?

[Question below is for schools who gained additional equity funding]

8. Are the new changes in equity funding substantial enough to make a difference for supporting students at your school and meeting their needs?
9. How do you currently manage the resources to maximise the support for students, especially if it's not enough? Have you found any innovations, strategies, or extra sources of funding that are particularly useful?

### **Support for Māori**

10. What programmes/initiatives in your school are targeted towards supporting Māori students? Are these consistent with the intent of Ka Hikitia | Ka Hāpaitia – the Ministry's strategy for Māori succeeding as Māori?

### **The EQI and planning for changes in expenditure decisions: what to start, stop, keep**

11. How much do you know about the new EQI system, and what are your general views about it?
12. What are you hoping the new EQI funding system will achieve? Do you think it will achieve this?
13. What services, programmes, or practices are you planning to keep, do more of, do less of, stop or introduce as a result of the new Equity Index funding?

[Optional] What would your ideal EQI system look like? What would it achieve?

### **Anything else you want to say?**

[Optional] Any ideas for improving the EQI system?



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## APPENDIX C:

# EQI survey for school leaders

Kia ora school leader

This survey is about the main approaches your school has in place to support students to achieve equitable education outcomes.

These approaches may be targeted specifically towards students who face socio-economic barriers, or they may be aimed at all students.

The survey asks about these approaches across four layers of school life:

- **school-wide factors** (like school culture, leadership, whole school PLD or initiatives)
- **in-class factors** (like curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, teacher support)
- **social supports for students and whānau** (like food programmes, access to social workers)
- **community resources** (like partnerships with community groups).

This survey also asks about your views on the new EQI system of funding.

You may want to do this survey yourself or with other staff, or forward it to another teacher/leader at your school. We are happy for multiple staff to complete this survey.

### About you and your school

1. School name:
2. Your role at school (e.g., principal, SLT member, SENCO, curriculum leader):

## School-wide factors

3a) At your school, which school-wide factors help you to successfully support students to achieve equitable outcomes? *(Select all that apply)*

- Culturally sustaining protocols/tikanga for welcoming students and whānau
- Use of te reo Māori across the school
- Kapa haka, mau rākau, Ngā Manu Kōrero, toi whakairo, weaving or other mātauranga Māori programmes
- Regular consultation with students, whānau and the wider school community
- Implementation of school-wide practices that are consistent with Ka Hikitia|Ka Hāpaitia or other strategies/programmes that support Māori achieving educational success as Māori
- School values that focus on equity and diversity
- Recent PLD addressing structural racism (such as Poutama Pounamu, Te Tiriti o Waitangi; Unteach Racism)
- School-wide behaviour initiatives such as PB4L or restorative practices
- Strategic/action plan with goals relating to equity
- Use of data to identify students who need extra wellbeing support
- Use of data to identify students who need extra learning support
- Kāhui Ako support or strategies that focuses on equity
- SENCO support for students with additional wellbeing needs
- Other: LIST \_\_\_\_\_

3b) **Of the school-wide factors you've selected**, please select **up to 5** factors you consider are **most effective** at supporting equitable outcomes at your school.

3c) At your school, which student learning supports do you have in place?

- Academic counselling (e.g., for NCEA pathways)
- Individual or group tutoring programmes (e.g., Reading Recovery, Reading Together)
- Student access to a study support centre or homework club
- Student access to summer programmes (e.g., reading programmes)
- Other: LIST \_\_\_\_\_

## In-class factors *(like curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy)*

4a) At your school, which **curriculum** or **assessment** approaches support students to achieve equitable education outcomes? *(Select all that apply)*

- Localised curriculum
- Curriculum planning that prioritises the language, culture, and identity of students (e.g., integration of Aotearoa New Zealand Histories)
- A progression in te reo Māori learning has been developed for all classes
- Wellbeing and social and emotional learning are prioritised in classes
- Assessment for learning / formative assessment

- Whānau / cross level class groupings
- Opportunities for students to use their first language (alongside English) for learning
- Other: LIST \_\_\_\_\_

4b) **Of the approaches you've selected**, please select **up to 5** approaches you consider are **most effective** in supporting students to achieve equitable education outcomes.

4c) At your school, which **teaching pedagogies and/or practices** help you to successfully support students to achieve equitable education outcomes? (*Select all that apply*)

- Mixed ability grouping (i.e., no ability grouping or streaming)
- Culturally sustaining and responsive pedagogy
- Learning approaches that draw on the experiences and cultural contexts of students (e.g., DMIC Maths, using students' first language as a resource for teaching, drawing on students' cultural identity for teaching and learning)
- Collaborative learning and inquiry (e.g., project-based learning, play-based learning)
- Achievement and other data is disaggregated for priority learners and used to improve teaching and learning
- Student leadership that includes students from different social or cultural groups
- Tuakana-teina learning
- Student-centred planning practices
- Teachers plan collaboratively with other teachers and/or teacher aides (including those employed from the local community)
- Team teaching
- Small class sizes
- Other: LIST \_\_\_\_\_

4d) **Of the pedagogies or practices you've selected**, please select **up to 5** pedagogies or practices you consider are **most effective** in supporting students to achieve equitable education outcomes

## Social supports (like food in schools, tailored support)

5a) At your school, which social supports help you to successfully support students who face socio-economic barriers?

- Ka Ora, Ka Ako | Healthy school lunches
- Other externally funded food in schools initiatives (e.g., fruit in schools; garden to table; milk in schools)
- School-developed food in schools initiatives (e.g., breakfast clubs)
- School-based or visiting social workers
- School-based or visiting counsellors
- School-based or visiting youth workers
- School-based or visiting health services
- School-based or visiting dental services
- Access to external professionals (e.g., psychologists, speech language specialists)
- Initiatives that offer students resources like clothing (e.g., Kids Can)
- Initiatives that offer learning resources (e.g., Duffy Books)
- Support for home ICT devices or internet connections
- Offering support for families to access resources (e.g., stationery, uniforms, trips, sports)
- School donation scheme
- Programmes tailored to small groups of students (e.g., dealing with grief and loss)
- Health and wellbeing support for students or whānau from local providers
- Health and wellbeing support for students or whānau from Māori health trusts/providers
- iMOKO (a health and prescription app)
- Other: LIST \_\_\_\_\_

5b. **Of the social supports you've selected**, please select **up to 5** social supports you consider are **most effective** in supporting students who face socio-economic barriers.

## Community resources (like partnerships with community)

6a) At your school, are any of these community resources helping you to successfully support students who face socio-economic barriers?

- Prioritising strong relationships and reciprocal partnerships with whānau
- Parent-led groups (e.g., PTA or Friends of the School)
- Sharing school resources with the community (e.g., school library access, whānau-led classes)
- Place-based education that involves local whānau, marae, hāpu, or iwi
- Partnerships with marae, hāpu, or iwi
- Sponsorship from local businesses
- Volunteers from the local community (e.g., to read to students, teach languages)
- Funding grants
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6b) **Of the community resources you've selected**, please select **up to 5** community resources you consider are **most effective** to support students who face socio-economic barriers.

## Perceptions of the new Equity Index system

Please rate your agreement with the following statements about the new Equity Index system.

Overall ...	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1) Compared to the school decile system, I prefer the new Equity Index system.	1	2	3	4	5
2) The new Equity Index system will reduce stigma associated with socio-economic status.	1	2	3	4	5
3) The new Equity Index system will result in more accurate targeting of equity funding and resources.	1	2	3	4	5
4) I support the new Equity Index system.	1	2	3	4	5
5) Our current equity funding is enough to meet our needs	1	2	3	4	5

Please rate your agreement with the following statements about the equity funding changes.

As a result of the equity funding changes, we will be able to...	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1) better resource programmes and initiatives that support students who face socio-economic barriers.	1	2	3	4	5
2) increase the engagement of students (who face socio-economic barriers) with school.	1	2	3	4	5
3) increase the academic achievement of students who face socio-economic barriers.	1	2	3	4	5
4) have more adequate operational funding consistent with the levels of socio-economic barriers our students and their families face.	1	2	3	4	5

## Summing up

7) What has been the main impact of the changes to the EQI for your school?

8) Is there anything else you want to say about the EQI or supporting students who face socio-economic barriers to achieve equitable education outcomes?

*Ngā mihi maioha – thank you very much for your time.*

**Press 'Done' to submit the form.**

## Appendix D:

# Project timeline

TABLE D1: Project time frame and main activities


Time frame	Main activities
<b>Nov–Dec 2022</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage with the Ministry to better understand their needs, and cross-fertilise ideas and approaches for undertaking the case studies</li> <li>• Identify key stakeholders and their information needs</li> <li>• Brainstorm and develop a detailed plan for fieldwork and analysis</li> <li>• Undertake a rapid literature review and use that, alongside the Ministry’s literature review, to inform the development of a data collection and analysis framework</li> <li>• Work with the Ministry to identify up to 20 case study schools</li> <li>• Complete NZCER’s internal processes for ethics committee approval</li> </ul>
<b>Jan–Mar 2023</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite schools formally to take part in the project</li> <li>• Assign researchers to case study schools</li> <li>• Train fieldwork team to ensure a consistent approach for data collection</li> <li>• Whakawhanaungatanga with participating case study schools</li> <li>• Work with each school to identify appropriate times for site visits, data collection, and preference for face-to-face versus online and individual versus pair/group interviews</li> <li>• Complete pilot and finalise data collection tools</li> <li>• Team debriefs and recording data into templates for analysis</li> <li>• Write up individual case study findings</li> <li>• Develop a 2-page template for the summary reports</li> <li>• Draft 2-page summary reports and incorporate feedback from schools</li> </ul>
<b>Apr–Jun 2023</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undertake cross-case analysis to identify commonalities, differences, and highlights, and use these when addressing the project’s high-level questions</li> <li>• Facilitate a sense-making session with the Ministry and other key stakeholders, and incorporate your feedback into our high-level findings</li> <li>• Participate in a meeting with the providers of Māori-medium case studies to discuss and share emerging findings</li> <li>• Submit 2-page summary reports for schools</li> <li>• Submit draft report with high-level findings to the Ministry</li> </ul>
<b>Jul–Aug 2023</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submit draft report to the Ministry</li> <li>• Incorporate feedback and submit a full report to the Ministry</li> <li>• Copy-edit the full report and format using Indesign</li> <li>• Finalise and submit dataset of school-level findings</li> </ul>



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