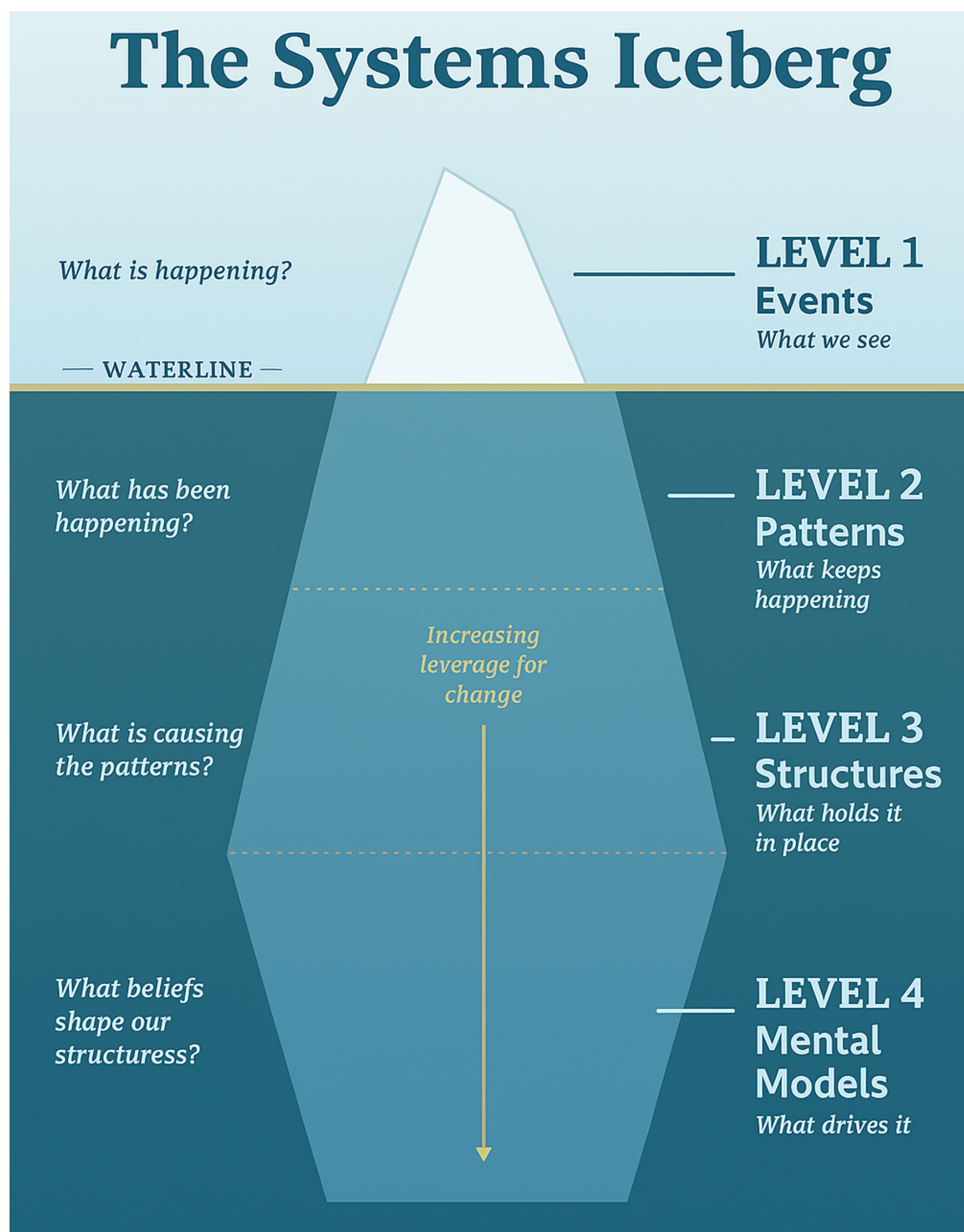


Wellbeing in Context: A Systems Reflection Tool using the Systems Iceberg

A diagnostic tool for looking beneath the surface of wellbeing in your learning community.

Why look beneath the surface?

Visible events - a student disengaging, a teacher burning out, a spike in absenteeism - are only the tip of what is actually happening in our learning communities.



Below the waterline sit the patterns that repeat, the structures that reinforce them, and the beliefs that quietly shape both. Short-term programs can ease what we see, but if we don't engage with what lies beneath, the same problems return in new forms.

The systems iceberg (also known as the analytical or compassionate systems iceberg) is a diagnostic tool. It doesn't tell you what to do. It helps you **notice** what's actually happening and at which **level** you might most usefully respond.



How to use this resource

- Choose a specific wellbeing issue or challenge you are noticing in your community. It’s easier to work with something concrete than a general topic.
- Work through the four levels in order - top to bottom. Don’t skip ahead to solutions.
- Notice what changes as you move deeper. The same issue often looks very different at Level 4 than it did at Level 1.
- Work in pairs or small groups if you can. The best insights usually come from comparing perspectives.
- Expect discomfort at Levels 3 and 4. That’s a signal you’re asking the right questions.



Before You Begin

What wellbeing issue or challenge will you hold in mind as you work through this tool? Be specific. For example: “Year 9 student disengagement in Term 3” is more useful than “student wellbeing”.

Level 1: What is happening?

The visible tip of the iceberg. These are the specific incidents, reactions and reports you can point to. Events are what typically prompt a wellbeing response in the first place.
Responses at this level: crisis management, incident reports, one-off interventions.

Prompting questions:

- What specific behaviours or events are you noticing right now in your community?
- Who is involved - which students, staff, families, or groups?
- When and where is it happening? What times of day, days of the week, terms of the year?
- What has prompted your concern? What made this issue visible to you?
- What data or observations do you have so far - surveys, attendance, referrals, informal reports?
- Whose attention has this captured? Whose hasn’t it?

Capture what you are seeing:



Watch For

The temptation to jump straight to solutions at this level. Events feel urgent, and urgency pulls us toward quick fixes. Staying at Level 1 produces reactive wellbeing programs that address symptoms but rarely change underlying conditions.





Level 2: What has been happening over time?

Just below the waterline sit the patterns and trends - the recurring themes that connect individual events across time. Patterns reveal whether an event is a one-off or part of something larger.

Responses at this level: anticipation, pattern-breaking interventions, early-warning signals.

Prompting questions:

- How long has this issue been present? Is it new, or has it been recurring?
- When does it peak? When does it ease? e.g. end of term, before assessments, around transitions.
- Which groups are disproportionately affected - and which aren't?
- What other trends are showing up alongside it? e.g. lower staff wellbeing, changes in family engagement, rising absenteeism.
- If you looked back three years, would this pattern have looked similar, or is it shifting?
- What are your students or staff telling you - not just through surveys, but through behaviour, stories and informal conversations?
- What feedback loops do you notice? e.g. tired staff → reactive responses → student disengagement → more tired staff.

Capture the patterns you notice:

A Useful Lens

If events are dots, patterns are the lines that connect them. Ask: “What’s the shape of this over time?” A steady drift is different from a sudden spike, and each calls for a different response.



“Unless we are also addressing systemic structures and mental models, we are unlikely to get effective, sustainable, long-term change.”

*Dr Tan Chyuan-Chin, Senior Lecturer in Wellbeing Science
University of Melbourne*

Level 3: What is causing the patterns?

Structures are the policies, routines, roles, resource allocations and physical arrangements that produce the patterns above. They are often invisible precisely because they feel normal - “that’s just how we do things here.”

Responses at this level: structural redesign, policy change, resource reallocation. This is where leverage for sustainable change begins to grow significantly.

Prompting questions:

- What policies influence this pattern - formally written or informally enforced?
- How is time structured in your community? What does the timetable, the staff meeting schedule, or the pastoral care rhythm demand?
- Where are resources (time, money, attention, people) currently being directed - and where are they not?
- What roles or responsibilities shape how wellbeing gets addressed? Who owns it? Who doesn’t?
- What physical spaces or environments may be reinforcing the pattern?
- What incentives (formal or informal) shape staff and student behaviour? What gets rewarded, recognised, or penalised?
- What information flows exist - and what doesn’t get communicated to whom?
- Which structures were designed on purpose, and which have just accumulated over time?

Capture the structures at play:



A Confronting Question

If you removed the current program or initiative addressing this issue, would the structures that produced it still be in place? If yes, the structures are doing more of the shaping than the program is.



Level 4: What beliefs shape our structures?

At the deepest level sit the assumptions, beliefs and mental models that shape why our structures exist in the first place. These are usually unspoken and often unconscious - the “water we swim in.”

Responses at this level: reframing, paradigm shifts, identity and culture work. This is where the highest leverage for transformative change sits - and also where the work is hardest.

Prompting questions:

- What core beliefs about wellbeing in education are driving decision-making in your community?
- What assumptions about students underpin how you respond to this issue? e.g. are students seen as worthy humans to be honoured, or as objects to be managed?
- What assumptions about staff are at play? What is assumed about their capacity, their needs, their wellbeing?
- How is success defined? What does “a good school” or “a successful student” mean here - and who decided?
- What is the prevailing belief about whose responsibility wellbeing is? The individual’s? The school’s? The system’s?
- What is considered “the way things are” that might, on examination, be a choice?
- What stories does your community tell about itself - and how do those stories shape what becomes possible?
- What would someone from outside your context find strange or surprising about your assumptions?



A Reflection from the Compassionate Systems Tradition

Mental models are rarely changed by argument. They shift through experience, relationship, and the slow accumulation of new stories. Identifying a mental model is rarely the end of the work. It’s usually the beginning.

Capture the beliefs and assumptions:





Synthesis: Connecting the levels

Now that you've worked through all four levels, look back across your responses. The goal of this final step is to connect what you've noticed into something you can act on - at the right level.

1.What surprised you?

Where did your thinking change as you moved deeper into the iceberg? Which level felt most uncomfortable to name?

2.Where have past responses been focused?

Which levels have previous wellbeing initiatives addressed? Which levels have been left untouched?

3. Where is the leverage?

Which level, if you engaged with it honestly, might produce the most sustainable change? What would be involved?

4. Your next step

Identify one small, specific action at the level you've chosen. Who do you need to have a conversation with? What needs to be surfaced, examined or redesigned?



A Final Thought

Working at Levels 3 and 4 is slower, harder and less visibly rewarding than working at Levels 1 and 2. But it is also where sustainable change becomes possible. The discomfort of honest examination is the price of change that actually lasts.



Quick Reference

Use this summary as a reminder when applying the systems iceberg in everyday conversations, team meetings and planning sessions.

Level	Name	Core question	Type of response
1	Events	What is happening?	React, respond, manage
2	Patterns	What has been happening over time?	Anticipate, predict, interrupt patterns
3	Structures	What is causing the patterns?	Redesign policies, time, roles, resources
4	Mental Models	What beliefs shape our structures?	Surface assumptions, shift paradigms, build new shared stories