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SPEECH

*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

**ADDRESS TO THE
NATIONAL CENTRE AGAINST BULLYING CONFERENCE**

9 APRIL 2010

MELBOURNE

Thank you for welcoming me here today and for participating in this hugely important conference, run by the National Centre Against Bullying – an initiative of the extraordinary Alannah and Madeline Foundation. It's one of Australia's great community organisations.

Each of here us is part of a sometimes difficult but always rewarding and genuinely important journey to create better schools for the sake of our nation's children and our nation's future.

Good progress is being made, thanks to the input of literally millions of principals, teachers, parents, students and community members of good will.

New facilities are being created through our Building the Education Revolution program.

More computers are available through our Digital Education Revolution investment.

Vocational training is improving through our Trade Training Centres Program.

A new National Curriculum is giving us the best of traditional and modern subject matter.

We are improving teacher quality, investing in literacy and numeracy and providing significant new help for low-socio-economic school communities.

And, of course, we have created history by providing transparency and accountability through the MySchool website.

We are enriching the learning experience and challenging every child in every school to aim higher and achieve more. It involves a huge Rudd Government investment – with an increase of 87 per cent in school funding in this four-year funding cycle alone.

All these investments, programs and test scores matter to students today and to making sure they have the skills they need for work and life in the future.

Improving achievement is crucial – and I'll never relent from challenging students and schools to have high expectations.

But to reach our highest expectations, we need to understand one simple proposition: happier and safer schools are better schools; and happier and safer students are more successful students.

The benefits of increased student wellbeing are well known. It has a direct impact on academic achievement through greater levels of engagement with schooling, better classroom behaviour and a greater sense of classroom ethos and togetherness. The higher the level of a student's wellbeing, the higher their retention levels and year-12 results tend to be and this has very positive effects on economic goals like productivity, social inclusion and the building of social capital.

So improving wellbeing and eliminating bullying aren't side issues, they are major educational goals for the nation.

A NEW FOCUS ON BULLYING

Indeed few things endanger the learning experience of our children more than bullying. It has been linked to aggression, depression and, in the most tragic cases, suicide. In recent weeks there have also been disturbing stories about cyber bullying, especially by predatory adults.

Conversely, we know that few things damage children more than being the perpetrators of bullying. Our leading researchers tell us that children who bully at age 14 are likely to behave aggressively at age 32, putting them into conflict with the law. They also are more likely to have children who are bullies.

These facts make bullying a crucial issue for our schools; one that some studies suggest is increasing and taking on new dimensions as students up their use of information and communications technologies. There is certainly growing parental concern.

Around 1-in-4 students regularly face overt and covert forms of bullying, including 1-in-10 who are victims of cyber bullying. It can range from physical violence to repeated abuse, name calling, taunting, blackmailing, rumour mongering and exclusion. It can happen at school, outside the school, over mobile phones and online. It can lead to absenteeism, loneliness, fear, anger, hurt, stress and the feelings of helplessness that

can damage self-esteem and make it difficult for young people to develop the social skills needed to succeed in life.

It's never going to be an easy problem to solve. We all know that. We can't prevent our children from inheriting the flaws that come from being members of the human race. All of us make mistakes. But we *can* teach children to distinguish between right and wrong and to put themselves in the place of others.

We can't expect our children to achieve moral perfection, but we can aspire to make them well-rounded and fully-developed adults, equipped with empathy and compassion and an understanding of the right way to behave towards others.

And we can make a powerful start in this by making it clear—abundantly and totally clear, no ifs, no buts—that bullying others is *not* natural human behaviour and can *never* be condoned.

WE ARE ALL ACCOUNTABLE FOR BULLYING

As everyone here will know, this isn't a job for government alone. It's the responsibility of every one of us. For national education policy; for state and territory education departments; for schools, their principals and teachers; for parents; for students; for bullied and bullies alike.

Like most moral responsibilities, tackling bullying requires accountability. Each of us has to answer some important questions:

- Are we alert to what's happening?
- Can we read the signs of bullying?
- Do we know how best to respond?

Our research suggests that, so far, as a community we haven't got our responses right. Too often children feel let down, and in some instances believe that the bullying they experience is condoned and that *they* are to blame. Sometimes the bullying is not acted upon and, as this conference will be hearing, in around 50 per cent of cases, schools' responses to bullying have no effect.

The hurt and humiliation this produces can have profound effects on a child's experience of school and we must do more to understand it and address it.

Some of the early findings of Australian and overseas research suggest ways forward.

These include empowering students about how to become part of the solution to bullying by teaching them how to respond to bullying behaviour, how to intervene when they witness bullying rather than just be a bystander and how to report it.

We also need to teach them how to develop the sorts of inner strengths that can help them overcome the attention of bullies.

This research also includes new methodologies to confront and reduce bullying in schools and online, including the Method of Shared Concern and more effective disciplinary measures.

THE ROLE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

This is where the Australian Government's major role lies.

We've funded research of national significance, like:

- The *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study*;
- The *Evaluative Study into Method of Shared Concern*;
- Scoping studies into *Approaches to Wellbeing* and *Social and Emotional Learning*; and
- The *Approach to Cyber Safety Pilot*.

These studies demonstrate just how much concern there is in the community about bullying and the high degree of parental desire that now exists for more positive action.

As a government we are responding. The Minister for Housing, Tanya Plibersek is implementing the Respectful Relationships program. This is a primary prevention strategy that seeks to prevent domestic and family violence through education. The strategy focuses on preventing violent behaviour by educating and facilitating young people to develop skills and knowledge on how to behave in positive and respectful ways in intimate relationships.

Senator Conroy, the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy is particularly focused on the new and emerging form of bullying, cyber bullying. Through the \$125.8 million Cyber Safety Plan, more than 70,000 teachers, students and parents have attended Internet Safety awareness presentations. More than 1 million Cyber Smart brochures have been distributed to schools and community groups. Thousands of teachers have already attended the Outreach Professional Development Program for Educators and several thousand are already registered for the 2010 workshops.

One of the most innovative aspects to Senator Conroy's program is the establishment of the Youth Advisory Group, which includes around 600 children aged 8-17 who provide advice to the government on issues that affect young people online. With all respect to those here today who are not in that age group, it has been very powerful for the Rudd Government to hear directly from those who live and breathe the issue of cyber bullying.

Recently the government established a Joint Select Committee on Cyber Safety. This committee, made of representatives from both the Senate and House and across all political parties, has been tasked, amongst other things, to find ways to support schools to change their culture to reduce the incidence and harmful effects of cyber-bullying

Back in 2003 the Australian Government and the States and Territories cooperated to produce the National Safe Schools Framework. It put Australia at the forefront of tackling the issue of bullying. It remains a useful tool, but it needs updating to take into account new developments, including cyber bullying, new advances in our understanding of the problem, and new approaches being taken by the States and territories. The results of the Review of the Framework will be released after consideration by Ministerial Council for Education Ministers. (MCEECDYA)

I am determined that the new Framework have a more visible profile and stronger impact than its predecessor. I want school leaders, teachers, students and parents to be strongly aware of it and to adhere to its principles. I was shocked that in a survey of schools, as part of the review process, around 70% of schools were unaware of the current National Safe Schools Framework.

I am announcing today that the revised Framework will be linked to an intensive education campaign with schools to ensure they all have detailed safe schools plans.

This work will build on the results of the \$3 million National Pilot to Address Cyber Safety currently being undertaken by the Alannah and Madeline Foundation.

It will also build on the publication on My School of a parent satisfaction survey data which will cover issues like approaches to bullying and safety.

As you can see, the Rudd Government is taking the issue of bullying very seriously.

We've discovered that while bullying in all its forms is a problem of significant dimensions it's a problem that *can* be effectively addressed. There's no need to despair.

To do so, we need to engage the whole community. It will require changes in school culture. This can only occur when parents, students, teachers, the wider community, researchers, teacher educators and education departments actively engage with each other to seek change. There is no quick-fix band-aid solution, and no tabloid 'bring back the strap' headline that will make the problem go away. Retribution is not the answer. Violence in any form has no place in a 21st century school system.

The Rudd Government is determined to provide leadership to tackle the bullying problem but it needs the whole community to come on board as well.

CONCLUSION

Much is being achieved already but much more remains to be done to reduce bullying and increase the wellbeing of Australian students.

It's my conviction that through sustained efforts we can make a difference that will be seen in better behaviour, rising levels of school engagement and, ultimately, improved academic achievement.

Further progress will require not only ongoing research and policy development of this kind, but a commitment to hear from experts and share best practise to make the results a central part of what our schools and their communities do.

This conference is making a major contribution to that effort and I will be looking forward to hearing your views on the way to improve wellbeing in Australia's schools.

Thank you.