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SPEECH

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you for that warm welcome.

Let me start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal people.

It's a great pleasure to be here to meet with representatives of the more than 1,000 schools affiliated with Independent Schools Council of Australia – schools that are working so hard to educate over 450,000 of the nation's students.

Let me say that your timing is impeccable, having chosen National Literacy and Numeracy Week and less than a week after the Prime Minister's landmark statement on school reform, to hold this event. School reform is front and centre of the national debate and the Government intends to strike while the iron is hot and accelerate the reform process. So there's never been a better time to be here in Canberra with your constructive views on how we can lift standards for every Australian school.

CERTAINTY FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Many of Australia's independent schools are achieving excellence and in some cases simply stunning academic results. I want to thank you for your great contribution to the nation's future.

This is a Government committed to learning excellence and there is much to learn from the schools, including so many independent schools, which are examples of high standards, academic rigor, pastoral care and innovative use of information and communications technology.

I want your great work to continue.

And to support you in that work the Government has committed itself to providing your schools with the security and certainty you need as you join us in the task of national school reform. This includes retaining existing Commonwealth funding arrangements, including the SES funding model and current indexation arrangements, for independent schools between 2009 and 2012.

And with regard to the longer term, an open and transparent review of the funding arrangements for non government schools beyond 2012 will be held to establish an approach that is fair for all schools. Consultation will be extensive. And we aim to have that review complete in 2011.

The legislative preparation for the funding of your schools is now in train through the Schools Assistance Bill, which will be introduced into the Parliament in this session and will come into force on January 1 2009.

In addition to confirming the SES funding model, that legislation will contain a new accountability and performance reporting framework for non-government schools and systems, which I will discuss a little later. This framework will be the same as that proposed for government schools under the National Education Agreement which is currently being negotiated through the Council of Australian Governments.

SCHOOL REFORM IS A NUMBER ONE PRIORITY

Many of you will have seen the Prime Minister's statement to the National Press Club on Wednesday on the subject of school reform. He left Australians in no doubt about the importance of quality education and good schools to the nation's future prosperity and social goals.

If we are going to achieve the goal the Prime Minister has set of making Australia one of the most highly educated and skilled nations on earth we're going to need improvements across all schools whether they're government, Catholic or independent, and whether they serve high, middle or low socio-economic status communities.

We will have to equip every school leaver with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed as citizens in the knowledge-based world of the 21st Century.

Generally speaking, Australia does well in this task compared to other countries. We have excellent schools and some of the highest performing are represented here today.

But we cannot be satisfied with where we are now, because much still needs to be done. Our competitor nations in advanced and emerging industrial

economies are investing in strategies for rapid educational improvement. High achievement cannot be taken for granted. Overall, our progress as a nation is being held back by a long tail of underachievement at the bottom.

For instance, the most recent OECD testing results show that Australia's average performance in literacy worsened between 2003 and 2006 and that too many disadvantaged students were performing below the OECD baseline.

Australia also has relatively low levels of Year 12 or equivalent completion, which have failed to increase for around a decade and a half.

30 per cent fewer Indigenous young people reach a Year 12 or equivalent qualification than their non-Indigenous counterparts. There is much to be done.

The Rudd Government is determined to make big improvements right across the board, with the aim of raising year-12 or equivalent retention rates to 90 per cent, halving the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2020 and ending the era in which it this country has tolerated children from poorer homes being left to fall behind in education.

We are busy pushing ahead with change.

In our first budget we have allocated \$19.3 billion to education initiatives, including:

- A National Curriculum for all students in English, maths, science and history as well as a National Asian Language Studies Program;
- A \$1.2 billion Digital Education Revolution that will over time provide access to a computer for every student in years 9 to 12; and
- A \$2.5 billion Trades Training Centre program across Australia which will help to provide robust trade skills for students and keep them engaged in schooling.

In the last two months alone we have approved \$116 million in funding for 116,000 new computers in 896 secondary schools across the country and more than \$90 million for new Trades Training Centres that will benefit almost 100 schools nationwide.

All of these programs are available to all schools from whatever school system and the independent sector has benefitted along with the public sector. More than 200 independent schools were included in the Round One of the Digital Education Revolution receiving over \$12 million. Examples include Grace Lutheran College in Rothwell, Queensland, which received 404 computers, Saints College in Maitland NSW, which received 486 computers and Frederick Irwin Anglican School in WA, which received 299 computers.

A NEW DIRECTION FOR NATIONAL SCHOOL POLICY

As the Prime Minister detailed on Wednesday, the improvements we are making are helping drive large-scale changes in Commonwealth-State financial relations, with new grants like National Partnerships being created to reward quality teaching and lift outcomes in low-socioeconomic school communities.

But if you look beyond each individual program you will see the Commonwealth is heading in a new direction in schools policy.

For too long the debate about schools was diverted into unproductive avenues. Public schools were pitted against private, traditional curriculum was pitted against new, and academic ends were pitted against technical.

That era is now over. The true target of our efforts must be individual students no matter which type of school they attend.

The Commonwealth has embarked on a new direction.

It's being driven by new understandings about the best ways to improve education outcomes; most significantly by new evidence about the importance of high quality teaching.

The recent McKinsey study into the world's best school systems argues persuasively that the quality of an education system simply cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and that the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction, particularly in those schools where the learning needs of students are most acute. It further finds that leadership is second only to teaching in improving student outcomes.

Therefore, to improve school performance we need to do four things:

1. We need to get the right people to become teachers;
2. We need to develop them into effective instructors;
3. We need to lift the standards of teaching for all students and target excellent teaching at those students who need it the most, particularly those from the most socially disadvantaged communities; and
4. We need to ensure that school leadership, facilities and curriculum enable us to do all of the above to an unsurpassed level of excellence.

The initiatives the Prime Minister outlined last Wednesday set out to do just that.

The first – the new National Partnership on Quality Teaching – will see that the best graduates:

- are recruited to teaching;
- are trained to be excellent and inspiring classroom instructors;
- are better rewarded for their efforts; and

- teach in the government and non-government schools that need them the most.

Our programs to do this will be based on studies of the effective and innovative programs from overseas, including the U.S.'s Teach for America and the U.K.'s Teach First.

And the second – the new National Partnership to lift performance in low-socioeconomic school communities – will give principals and schools the authority to choose from a suite of flexible programs to attract better teachers, provide more one-on-one help for struggling individual students, engage parents and re-organize school hours and activities to meet their local community needs.

To make this happen we have made a commitment to provide new and additional investment, with an estimate of around \$500,000 per year for an average-sized school.

LITERACY AND NUMERACY PILOT PROGRAMS

Literacy and numeracy are of course the crucial learning skills upon which all other student progress depends.

They are therefore the starting point for our attempts to overcome educational disadvantage.

The Government is currently in the process of negotiating with the States a National Action Plan for Literacy and Numeracy.

Last week I announced funding of 29 pilot programs, more than \$40 million in new funding,

The details of the pilots have been determined in consultation with state and territory and non-government education authorities. They are the next step in developing focused improvement strategies, grounded in evidence about what works to bring sustained improvement in outcomes for students.

They include projects with Independent Schools in Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales; linking schools together to strengthen the skills of school leaders and teachers through high quality professional development and use of new diagnostic and assessment tools for improving literacy and numeracy.

A NEW ERA OF TRANSPARENCY

In all these areas, we are moving beyond the traditional and discredited focus of schooling debate in Australia; the debate that revolved around competition between sectors and failed to focus on the realities of need and outcome across all sectors.

Our approach is to recognize and respect the diversity of schooling in Australia and to put forward the proposition that high quality education should

be available to all children, wherever they live, whatever background they come from and whatever sector their school is in.

As you may have noted in the debates of the last week, we believe this new approach requires a new era of transparency and accountability.

For parents to fully understand the choices they can make for their children, we need a more transparent and consistent basis for them to examine the options.

To target resources in a way that will best improve our education system, we need richer sources of information. We need to know where efforts are bearing fruit and where they are not so we can take effective action.

For schools, teachers and education authorities to learn which strategies work in which circumstances, we need comprehensive information about both the performance and the circumstances.

We have already announced the establishment with the States and Territories of a new \$17.2 million National Schools Assessment and Data Centre to ensure that this and other information about early learning and school outcomes are effectively analysed and used to inform program implementation.

For this reason we are going to make individual school performance reporting a condition of the National Education Agreement that will come into effect from 1 January 2009.

Within a year, we want to see increased information on individual student performance available to Australian parents.

And within three years, a report that shows not just how their child is doing, but how their child's school is performing compared to similar schools.

I want to emphasize that these will not lead to the creation of dumb league tables that tell us little but to smart reports that show us how well each school is meeting agreed standards compared to schools with similar enrolments and challenges.

This framework will mean consistency of reporting on the variables and the outcomes that are relevant and important in understanding the effectiveness of schooling. They include national test results and participation in PISA international assessments. They include aspects of the student population like socio-economic status, numbers of indigenous students, numbers of students with disabilities and those learning English as a second language.

This framework will lead to better informed parents, better informed policy makers and a better informed public debate. The framework will also require reporting on the income streams into schools, so we can properly analyse what difference extra resources make.

Today, standing before you in this gathering, I want to make it absolutely clear that everything we require of public schools, we will require of non-government schools and everything we require of non-government schools we will require of public schools. The framework we seek is a truly national one which will give parents, the public and government information about every school. It is only by covering every school can we truly satisfy ourselves that we understand the quality of schooling experienced by every child and can lift the quality of schooling across the board.

I know that these changes will be unsettling for some. Many schools are reluctant to have problems highlighted or be compared to other schools, even similar schools. But we make no excuses.

As you may know, I recently travelled to New York to see similar 'value added' reporting requirements and reform proposals in action. What I saw was that measures like these are working.

And they are working to the advantage of many of those who are the most wary of them.

In New York, the reforms introduced by the School Chancellor Joel Klein have improved results for the poorest students, targeted more investment to the neediest schools and raised the salaries of teachers and principals in those schools. No school or teacher performing well and working hard has anything to lose from these changes, but there is a great deal to gain.

No doubt you will be told later today that these changes are nothing but a copy of the policies of the previous government.

I must say those claims when I heard them after the Prime Minister's speech made me almost burst out laughing. Those previous efforts involved simplistic, one-dimensional reporting and included no serious investments to raise standards where failure was identified.

The only standards they raised were flags up flagpoles.

Analysis of transparency measures overseas show that without additional resources and efforts to address failure, more transparent arrangements on their own achieve little.

After more than a decade in office, the former Howard Government never achieved in school transparency what it set out to do and, even if it had, it would have made no positive difference.

The Howard Government's agenda was limited to naming and shaming school as part of a political plan to play the blame game with State Labor Governments. It would have been transparency for political point scoring, not scoring goals in education.

The fact the Liberal Party never ever committed real new resources to make a difference for disadvantaged schools or for teacher quality makes it clear their agenda was all about politics and not about the education of children.

We have left that time of divisive politics and policy inertia behind us. The Rudd Government is committed to transparency so we can make a difference with new resources supporting a new approach to quality schooling for all Australian children.

CONCLUSION

This is an exciting time to be involved in education and particularly schools.

The old divisions between systems and between national and state jurisdictions have lost their relevance.

In the absence of yesterday's blame game, we can now see more clearly what needs to be done to make substantial improvements in educational outcomes for all of our schools: better teaching, better leadership and better programs targeted to the schools where they can have the greatest impact.

The Rudd Government is awake to the evidence and intent on improving teacher quality and leadership, increasing and targeting resources and insisting on greater rigor and effort across our schools, starting with the basic foundational skills like literacy and numeracy.

The Independent sector has led the way in so many of these areas and we want to work with you to keep your standards high and lend your insights to improve the chances of all children in all schools across all sectors.

Thank you.