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National call for uniform approach to bullying in schools

All Australians should be concerned about the current 'unacceptable situation' of the individual rights of young people in addressing bullying, according to the Chair of the National Centre Against Bullying, the Hon Alastair Nicholson AO RFD QC.

Justice Nicholson said one student in every five in Australian schools is affected by bullying, and their rights in being protected from bullying were not being addressed adequately by governments.

"We are an advanced society, and have an opportunity to lead the world in addressing the rights of young people," he said. "However, we are failing them, whether it is in addressing cyberbullying or traditional bullying. Bullying has strong links to suicidal ideation. We should be able to cut these links in our society."

He called for the National Safe Schools Framework to be mandated in Australian schools to overcome the current situation of each State having different policies to address bullying.

He also supported the recommendations on bullying contained in the report of the Australian Child Rights Taskforce, sponsored by UNICEF Australia, which was launched in Sydney earlier this month. The report assessed Australia's progress 25 years after ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It highlighted Australia's failure to introduce legislation to enforce the treaty.

Justice Nicholson also called for:

- young people to have a role in working with the e-Safety Commissioner to address cyberbullying,
- the threshold of 'seriousness' in the *Enhancing Online Safety for Children Act 2015* to be amended to allow for instances of cyberbullying that may not reach the threshold to be dealt with by the e-Safety Commissioner, and
- greater investment in resources to prevent, identify and address bullying and cyberbullying.

Justice Nicholson, who is also Chair of Children's Rights International, made the call ahead of the July national conference against bullying which is seeking to find solutions to bullying, in both theory and practice for Australia. The conference will be held in Melbourne on July 28 and 29.

The conference is attracting some of the world leaders in bullying, including Professor Dorothy Espelage, of the US, an expert in bullying, youth aggression and teen-dating violence, as well as Canadian Professor Wendy Craig, a leading expert on the effects of bullying and healthy relationships.

Justice Nicholson said the overall approach to both traditional school bullying and cyberbullying should be "preventative and proactive" rather than "reactive".

"It should not rely on apprehending and dealing with 'bullies', but should be aimed at creating safe and respectful environment for children and young people," he said. "At the same time the law should be clarified to provide that bullying is against the law, as has happened in relation to cyberbullying in New Zealand.

"Although most schools have taken steps to address bullying, there are still concerns about the implementation of anti-bullying strategies and the lack of adequate and appropriate responses by schools to bullying.

"As the Task Force recommended, the Commonwealth and the States and Territories should be investing in human, technical and financial resources to build capacity in schools, police, legal advice centres and other areas to prevent, identify and address bullying and cyberbullying. These strategies should be applied through uniform national legislative and policies."

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MEDIA RELEASE



National Centre
Against Bullying

NCAB is an initiative of the Alannah & Madeline Foundation, which runs care, prevention and advocacy programs to protect children from violence and bullying.

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About the Alannah & Madeline Foundation: The Alannah & Madeline Foundation is a national charity protecting children from violence and its devastating impact. The Foundation was established in memory of Alannah and Madeline Mikac, aged 6 and 3, who were tragically killed with their mother and 32 others at Port Arthur, Tasmania on April 28 1996. The Foundation cares for children who have experienced or witnessed violence, and runs programs that help to prevent violence in the lives of children. Our vision is that every child will live in a safe and supportive environment. For more information visit: www.amf.org.au or call 1300 720 747.