



## Centre for Health and Social Research

I CAN (and you can too): Evaluation of a  
whole school and community program that  
embraces Autism

### Evaluation Report

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## **About the Centre for Health and Social Research (CHaSR)**

The Centre for Health and Social Research is a dynamic and contemporary research centre specialising in social marketing. The Centre's mission is to work with Australian communities to improve their health and wellbeing through research that has a direct and sustainable impact. CHaSR provides social marketing advice and consultancy services to a range of organisations. These include: assistance with problem identification; formative research including systematic literature reviews; focus groups and interviews; surveys and content analysis. CHaSR also has extensive expertise in the development and implementation of social marketing interventions, including message development and testing; intervention delivery; and the implementation of evaluations. We also undertake health services development and evaluation projects, working in collaboration with funders and providers, focusing particularly on alcohol and other drugs, as well as the inclusion of disadvantaged groups.

### **Researchers**

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## Executive Summary

### **I CAN (and you can too): Evaluation of a whole school and community program that embraces Autism**

Commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (VIC DET), the Centre for Health and Social Research (CHaSR) undertook an evaluation of the I CAN Schools Program. A similar (yet separate) I CAN Community program (outside of the school setting) was also evaluated by CHaSR under the CHaSR Associate Mentor Program (CAMP).

Both I CAN programs are pre-existing programs developed and run by the I CAN Network a non-for-profit organisation established to change cultures and systems to enable children on the Autism Spectrum to thrive and be accepted. The I CAN Schools program is specifically tailored for the school setting, built around a series of activities, skill building exercises and importantly, mentoring of young adults on the Autism Spectrum by young adults on the Autism Spectrum.

Preliminary evidence suggested the I CAN programs are successful at improving confidence and sense of self-worth in youth participants with Autism, however, there has been no formal evaluation undertaken to examine this. Therefore CHaSR's role was to formally evaluate the I CAN programs (School and Community) using validated tools and processes to identify potential outcomes objectively. The objectives of the program evaluation were to:

- Explore the impact of the I CAN programs on three major constructs of interest (participants' self-acceptance, social connectedness and optimism about the future).
- Explore parents' and teachers' perceptions of the I CAN programs
- Make recommendations for modifications to the program based on participant, teacher and parent feedback
- Make recommendations for future evaluation of the program to increase the evidence base.

### **Method**

The evaluation consisted of three components:

1. Participant Questionnaires
2. Parent Qualitative Interviews
3. Teacher Qualitative Interviews

Data were collected from a total of 20 student participants (19 male); 20 parents (12 from I CAN schools and eight from the I CAN community program); and 7 teachers.

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## Results

Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The students commented that the program enabled them to make friends 'like me' in a safe and comfortable environment. They reported that being part of the program made them feel proud, powerful and special. They raised few concerns about the program, other than wishing that it was longer.

The parents reported an overwhelmingly positive experience with the I CAN Schools program, noting significant improvements in their child following participation in the program. They reported both immediate impacts, such as making their children feel happier and assisting them to develop further skills; and ongoing impacts, such as giving them the courage to participate in activities or to try new things. Teachers reported similar perspectives to parents on the benefits of the program for students.

Parents and teachers consistently identified three components of the program as influential in enabling the children to thrive: mentors with ASD as role models; the strength-based approach of I CAN; and the safe and non-judgemental environment.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This small scale mixed methods evaluation provides preliminary evidence of the worth and value of the I CAN programs in supporting students on the Autism Spectrum in school settings.

Summary of recommendations for the program:

1. Continue the program in participating schools, and expand to other schools
2. Consider changes to the program delivery format from fortnightly to weekly
3. Consider strategies to increase the communication between I CAN and teachers

Summary of recommendations for evaluation:

1. Future I CAN programs should embed a pre-post evaluation into the program
2. Utilise a consistent evaluation framework, which routinely collects quantitative measures from all programs
3. Periodically collect qualitative (interview) data from parents and teachers
4. Develop an easy-to-use evaluation manual and tools for participating schools

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## Background and Introduction

As the understanding of Autism increases, the rate of diagnosis has also increased. Results of prevalence surveys over the past 10 years have varied greatly, from 0.5% (ABS, 2012) to 1.47% (CDC, 2010) with the generally accepted average of 1% of the Australian population (Autism Spectrum Australia, n.d). This number has consistently grown year-on-year.

Of those children with autism who are attending school, 86% report 'having difficulty' at school, primarily difficulties with fitting in socially, learning and communication. The majority (81%) of those with autism who complete school do not receive a post-school qualification (compared to 41% of those with any form of disability (ABS, 2012) and 32% of those without a disability). As with educational outcomes, those with autism are less likely to be participating in the labour force. In 2012, the labour force participation rate for people with autism was 42%; compared to 53% of people with disabilities and 83% of people without disabilities (ABS, 2012).

There is a clear and urgent need for the development of programs to support children with autism in the education system, both in terms of their educational outcomes and their self-acceptance and sense of self-worth and value to the community. Ideally, such support would be provided by people on the autism spectrum who share the lived experience and can empathise with, and relate to, the young people they are supporting.

'I CAN Schools' is a program run by the I CAN Network, Australia's first social enterprise founded by people with Autism. The program is based on the vision of schools benefiting from embracing Autism. This vision is significant given recent reports by the Senate Education Review Committee (January 2016) that describe a culture in many schools that 'manages' these students' deficits, rather than embracing their strengths. It was piloted over 2014-2015 in six schools, including four mainstream and specialist secondary schools and two mainstream primary schools. The program empowers school communities to value the benefits that come from embracing Autism. The heart of the program is a regular group mentoring session for students on the Autism Spectrum (usually 12-15 students) that develops their communication and leadership skills through a series of modules that explore teamwork, interpersonal communication.

### **The program context.**

An informal evaluation conducted by I CAN with a convenience sample of previous participants found that 88% felt a sense of belonging within their I CAN Network mentoring program and 74% felt they were now accepted for who they are. To support these initial findings, the Centre for Health and Social Research (CHaSR) were commissioned by the I CAN Network to undertake a research project to evaluate the outcomes of (1) 'I CAN Schools' program silver package and (2) I CAN South West. These programs were delivered in 2016 as follows:

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The I CAN Network delivers programs in a variety of settings e.g. Schools, Universities, TAFEs, and Community settings. However, the foundations of all programs are built on the same premise; empower cultural change to view autism through an I CAN lens, whereby communities benefit through embracing autism. Additionally, the core features of all programs are similar.

- 1) Peer-peer mentoring: Facilitated by a Network Leader and Mentor, one of whom is on the spectrum
- 2) Networking and Social Connection: Program participants are given opportunities to connect with other people on the Spectrum
- 3) Self-advocacy: Program participants empower each other

The programs are able to be adapted to the needs of the particular setting and the community culture they are trying to change.

### I CAN Schools Program

The I CAN Schools Program is designed to facilitate cultural change within schools regarding how people (parents, students, teachers, community) approach autism. The 'I CAN Schools' program silver package was implemented in three mainstream government high schools in Victoria in school term 2 (May-June), term 3 (July-Sept) and term 4 (Oct until early Dec): Brauer College, Coburg High School and Ballarat High School. Across all three schools, there were 26 students who participated in the program.

The 'I CAN Schools' silver package delivers the program through a three-pronged approach. The first component (and the basis of the program) is fifteen fortnightly peer-peer mentoring sessions. Each mentoring session comprises activities that incorporate a series of modules including teamwork, personal strengths and motivations and saying 'I CAN'. The second component of the program delivers three motivational presentations focusing on resilience and leadership to both peers and parents by I CAN mentors.

The final component of the program is professional development for teachers through exposure to the program through two methods. Firstly, an educational workshop is delivered to teaching staff and secondly, a fortnightly rotation occurs whereby different teachers assist the I CAN facilitators deliver the peer-peer mentoring sessions.

### I CAN Community

An I CAN Community program, I CAN South West, was delivered in the region of Warrnambool, Victoria in May to November 2016. The basis of this type of program is the peer-to-peer mentoring sessions, however, the aim of the regional strategy is to evolve and expand the regional network to enable more children on the spectrum to have access to the program. The session content explores topics such as

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teamwork, personal strengths and motivations, communication and public speaking, leadership and creative projects. These topics are delivered through one-hour group mentoring sessions that reflect a 'learn, play, talk, do' structure.

## **The current project**

The current project utilises a rigorous evaluative research methodology to collect qualitative and quantitative data to measure participant outcomes after engaging with the I CAN Schools and Community Programs. In particular, the impact on three major constructs are of interest to this evaluation:

1. self-acceptance,
2. social connectedness and
3. optimism about the future.

## **Methods**

The following methodological processes including all data collection and participant recruitment protocols were reviewed and approved by ACU's Human Research Ethics Committee (2016-59H) and the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2016\_003064).

### **Evaluation Tools**

The evaluation consisted of three components:

1. Participant Questionnaire
2. Parent Qualitative Interviews
3. Teacher Qualitative Interviews

Copies of the Questionnaire and Interview Discussion Guides can be found in the Appendices.

Multiple components ensured that the voices of all participants (and key significant others) were heard, whilst also ensuring that no participant felt obligated to participate in any component that they were not comfortable undertaking. The inclusion of parents and teachers in the study design not only adds to the quality of the data but also enables us to address the information needs of these groups when they are considering participation of their child/student/school in the program. Triangulation of data also provides greater confidence in the validity of the findings.

The evaluation tools were developed in collaboration between the CHaSR research team and the program leaders of the I CAN Network, in an iterative process, with a focus on ensuring that we were utilising the most valid and rigorous measures whilst addressing the sensitivities, concerns and capabilities of the participants.

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## Participant Questionnaire

Initial discussions identified three key concepts to be measured that epitomised the goals of the programs: (1) self-acceptance, (2) social connectedness and (3) optimism about the future. An extensive review of the literature and existing scales was conducted to identify validated measures for each of these constructs, with a focus on identifying short measures (to reduce the burden on participants) and avoiding those with an overtly-negative overtone (as these could potentially invoke self-critical responses for participants).

The identified measures were then reviewed by the combined I CAN and CHaSR team and the most appropriate selected for inclusion. Some of the selected measures were amended slightly, as the majority of the validated measures come from a deficit model perspective and are negatively-valenced, which is inconsistent with the I CAN philosophy (and thus the evaluation focus) of a strengths-based model.

*Self-acceptance* and *social connectedness* were measured using the relevant subscales from the Self-Perception Profile for Children. This instrument has good psychometric properties and was designed for children aged 8-14 years. *Optimism* was measured using a single item from the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS). As a further measure of connectedness and to assess the participants' *perceptions of the program*, a 5-item 'Sense of Belonging' scale (designed for 9-18 year olds) was included in the questionnaire as well as three open-ended items. See Table 1 for survey measures.

The survey was developed for use in a pre-post design, with changes between the two time points indicative of the effects of the program. However, due to the tight timeline between project inception and the start of the Schools program, it was not possible to obtain ethics approval prior to the commencement of the I CAN Schools program; thus, only post-intervention data was collected.

A nominated teacher assisted each participant with completing the student questionnaire. Students were given the option of completing the survey on paper, online or using a tablet device. Researchers provided a briefing to teachers on best practice regarding interviewer assisted data collection, such as reading or clarifying questions and/or transcribing participant responses with care not to influence responses. The questionnaire took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

The survey data were entered into SPSS for analysis. Summary statistics of the child questionnaire are reported as means with range for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables.

Table 1 – Student Survey

Construct	Tool/Source	Example items	Modifications
<i>Self-acceptance</i>	Self-Perception Profile for Children – Global Self-Worth subscale (GSW) (Harter, 2012)	“Some kids like the kind of person they are...Other kids have as many friends as they want”	Tick boxes moved to the middle of the scale (between the two statements) rather than at either end – based on feedback from the I CAN mentors that this reduced the processing load for respondents
<i>Social connectedness</i>	Self-Perception Profile for Children –Social Competence (SC) subscale (Harter, 2012)	“Some kids would like to have a lot more friends...Other kids often wish they were someone else”	As above
<i>Optimism</i>	Single item from the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) (NSH, 2006; Tennant et al., 2007)	Over the last 2 weeks, I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future	Nil
<i>Sense of belonging</i>	5-item version of the Sense of Belonging Scale (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002)	“I am supported at this program”	Nil
<i>Program perceptions</i>	Three open-ended items constructed for this evaluation	“The thing I like most about this program is”	N/A

### *Parent and Teacher Qualitative Interviews*

Parent and Teacher interview guides were developed in an iterative process, including two consultation stages. The focus and key aims of the qualitative questions were developed in consultation with I CAN. The research team then developed two interview guides (one for parents and one for teachers) to explore the impacts of participation in the I CAN Schools programs, with a specific focus on the identified major constructs of the evaluation. The second consultation was with representatives from the DET, who recommended including questions for teachers that explored the impacts of the program at the school level (e.g. organisation skills of I CAN, appropriateness of content, fluctuations in attendance) and the inclusion of a separate principal interview guide that focussed on higher level decision making considerations.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were scheduled with parents and teachers at a convenient time; these took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete and participants were provided with a \$25 Coles-Myer gift voucher.

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The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative thematic analysis was undertaken to ascertain parents' perceptions of the impact of the program on their child. Two research officers coded the transcripts for apparent themes and any discrepancies were discussed.

## **Recruitment**

### *I CAN Schools*

Three mainstream government high schools in Victoria participated in the I CAN schools program in 2016; Brauer College in Warrnambool, Coburg High School in Melbourne and Ballarat High School in Ballarat.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participating children and their parents or guardians. Recruitment packs, including information about the evaluation and consent forms, were distributed by teaching staff at each school. Due to a low initial response rate of children and families, a variety of recruitment strategies were utilised to increase the pool of participants. Follow-up reminders (via phone or email) were undertaken by the evaluation project officer (with permission from each school) or by a teacher. For Ballarat High School and Brauer College, an invitation to participate was extended to parents and children attending an I CAN parent evening. The parent evening is an event of the I CAN Schools program whereby the program participants present on a topic of their choice to celebrate the culmination of the program.

Teachers were recruited from the participating schools, I CAN program leaders nominated teaching staff (teacher or wellbeing coordinator) involved in the program at each school were confirmed by each school principal, and Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms were emailed to teachers.

Adult participants (parents, teachers, principals) provided signed written consent for their participation. For child participants, parents provided written consent for their child and the child provided written assent. Consent forms in hard copy were mailed to the evaluation team or physically collected from each school. Once consent forms were obtained, participants were enrolled in the evaluation.

### *I CAN Community*

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participating children and their parents or guardians from the I CAN South West community program in Warrnambool. The evaluation Project Manager (Nicole Murphy) presented the evaluation participation process to parents and children involved in the I CAN South West Program and handed out information packs during an I CAN parent evening. The consent requirements for I CAN Community participants were the same as I CAN Schools participants. However, adult participants were parents/guardians only and parents and children were able to provide a hard copy of consent/assent on the night or

were mailed to the evaluation team. Once consent forms were obtained, participants were enrolled in the evaluation.

## Results

### Student Questionnaires

Data were collected from a total of 20 student participants (19 male); 12 from the I CAN Schools program and 8 from the I CAN Community program. See Table 2.

Table 2 – Sample Characteristics

	Total sample		I CAN Schools		I CAN Community	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex						
Male	19	95	12	100.0	7	87.5
Female	1	5			1	12.5
School Year						
Year 7	7	35	5	41.7	2	25.0
Year 8	4	20	4	33.3	0	0
Year 9	3	15	1	8.3	2	25.0
Year 10	2	10	1	8.3	1	12.5
Year 11	3	15	1	8.3	2	25.0
Finished School	1	5	0	0	1	12.5
Total Sample	20	100	12	100	8	100

### Self-Acceptance

The students' mean GSW score was 18.3, which is similar to (although slightly lower than) that reported for other cohorts of similar aged children. Previous studies have reported GSW scores of 19.4 for typically-developing Dutch children aged 8-14 years (Muris, Meesters & Fijen, 2003) and 19.0 for typically-developing Serbian adolescents aged 14-15 years (Tubic & Dordic, 2015). A British study comparing 19 adolescents with Aspergers to 19 typically-developing adolescents reported GSW scores of 19.32 and 20.05 respectively (Williamson, Craig & Slinger, 2008).

### Social connectedness

The students' mean SC score was 13.9, which is lower than that reported for typically-developing children, but consistent with previous research with adolescents with Aspergers. Previous studies have reported SC scores of 18.1 for typically-developing Dutch children aged 8-14 years (Muris et al., 2003) and 18.5 for typically-developing Serbian adolescents aged 14-15 years (Tubic & Dordic, 2015<sup>1</sup>). A British

<sup>1</sup> Total calculated based on the reported mean score across the six items

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study comparing 19 adolescents with Aspergers to 19 typically-developing adolescents reported scores of 15.2 and 19.6 respectively (Williamson et al.,2008).

### *Optimism*

More than half (55%) of the sample reported feeling optimistic about the future 'often' or 'all of the time'. This is similar to the proportion (58.2%) found in a study with typically-developing adolescents (Hunter, Houghton & Wood, 2015)<sup>2</sup>. Only two participants reported feeling optimistic rarely or none of the time, both were from the community program.

### *Perceptions of the program*

All of the participants reported feeling comfortable and accepted at, and committed to, the program. Nineteen of the 20 reported feeling supported at the program and part of the program, with only one school participant reporting they did not feel part of the program, and one community participant that they did not feel supported.

When asked what they liked most about the program, students most frequently commented on the opportunity to meet and make friends with other people 'like me' (n=7), and to be able to talk to others without feeling 'embarrassed' or being 'judged' (n=5). Five commented that the program overall was 'fun' or 'interesting' or that they liked 'everything', four noted particular aspects of the program such as 'the games' or 'learning social skills', and one named another participant.

*"How you can talk about how you feel without getting judged."*

*"It allows students on the spectrum to meet others on the spectrum and it allows all my autism traits to come out to play"*

When asked what they liked least about the program, two responses dominated. Six commented on the frequency or duration of the program – that there were too few sessions and/or the sessions were too short – and six stated that there was 'nothing' they didn't like. Actual negative comments about the program focused on other participants (n=5), generally that they were too loud or talked too much; specific activities (n=2), such as speaking in front of other people; or the physical environment (n=1).

*"Having to wait For the next session"*

*"Nothing much, sometimes there is a 'Bad Apple' in the group which slightly irks me"*

Finally, students were asked to complete the sentence "Being part of this program makes me feel...". All 18 responses were positively valenced. The most common

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<sup>2</sup> Data not reported in published paper; obtained directly from the author via email

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response was an expression reflecting positive self-esteem, such as 'proud', 'powerful' or 'special' (n=7), followed by words indicating positive emotions such as 'happy' 'joyful' or 'alive' (n=6), and a sense of belonging such as 'accepted', 'loved' or 'included' (n= 5). Four students commented that the program made them feel 'comfortable' and/or 'safe'.

*"Comfortable and Involved. It helps me be more social as a person."*

*"Like I'm actually amounting to something"*

*"Alive and human"*

## **Parent Interviews**

A total of 20 parents participated in the parent interviews; 12 from I CAN schools and eight from the I CAN community program.

All of the parents spontaneously reported that their child had experienced struggles at school. Some parents felt their child was not being adequately supported or was not able to excel in the current environment.

*"He has been bullied quite a bit at school and that's something that has had an effect on him. He is very, very smart. I understand he has all these great abilities but to fit him into the mainstream school system it just hasn't worked"* (Parent Interview 8; I CAN School).

*"He's got massive anxiety at the moment due to some bullying that's been happening at school with some kids....they are bullying him, hitting him and stuff. That's not really sort of being dealt with at school very well"* (Parent Interview 9; I CAN School).

*"Secondary school.I would say he actually went six months out of a total of two years because he couldn't cope at all"* (Parent Interview 1: I CAN Community).

*"[Student's name] was not a very cooperative student when it came to school work unless he had people there to help him"* (Parent Interview 4: I CAN Community).

*"When your children are little there is a lot of early intervention stuff you can get help with..but as the kids get older it sort of stops, especially when they get to secondary school"* (Parent Interview 8; I CAN Community).

They noted that this gap in provision was addressed by the I CAN Schools Program, which provided support in a way that was appropriate to their children's needs. Importantly, many parents from the I CAN Schools program commented that the

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program was part of a more comprehensive approach that evidenced the commitment of the school to addressing their child's needs.

*"This handful of kids without this [I CAN] there's nothing for them. They don't get picked for the sports teams; they don't get picked for academic things. This is something that they can shine in" (Parent Interview 1; I CAN School).*

*"These poor children are struggling. ....They're lost in the system and having something like I CAN is actually acknowledging that hey, we're unique. These children are unique and maybe there will be more education in the Education Department about it. We can't get in the specialist school, we don't qualify for that" (Parent Interview 12; I CAN School)".*

*"I felt good in a way that his needs were getting addressed from people there to help him and trying to figure out the best way to do it. I felt very good" (Parent Interview 4; I CAN School).*

*"[He is] I think more positive. I think I CAN is a big part of that and I think all the other things that he is doing at the school they're quite inclusive and accepting of him. The previous school he went to they weren't so he was coming from a long way back" (Parent Interview 5; I CAN School).*

The parents reported an overwhelmingly positive experience with the I CAN program, noting significant improvements in their child following participation in the program. While some held no expectations before the program begun, those that had pre-existing expectations reported that the actual outcomes their children experienced surpassed anything they could have anticipated.

*"He wouldn't talk to people as much even relatives. I mean everyone, anyone that knows [Child's name] they can see the difference. He actually is communicating more, he has more conversations. He's more confident. Different kid. More organised" (Parent Interview 3; I CAN School)*

*"So through the program we noticed immense changes" (Parent Interview 11; I CAN School).*

*"I must say that it's the best thing he has gotten this year. Thank you very much for giving the chance. He was – it is absolutely amazing. The changes that I can see" (Parent Interview 4; I CAN School).*

*"I didn't expect it to be as profoundly empowering for them as it has been....I think it's a really valuable program and you can see physically how happy the kids are and when they're able to do something or able to get up and tell somebody about something that they're passionate about" (Parent Interview 9; I CAN School).*

*"When she (I CAN community student) went in I just thought this might be good for her to meet other people that understand her. But I certainly think to*

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*her it produced a whole lot more” (Parent Interview 5; I CAN Community).*

*“It has been amazing. It’s just everything and more” (Parent Interview 4; I CAN Community).*

All of the parents commented that their children had gained confidence and a stronger sense of self-worth from participating in the I CAN Program. They reported both immediate impacts, such as making their children feel happier and assisting them to develop further skills; and ongoing impacts, such as giving them the courage to participate in activities or to try new things.

*“But now I think he’s more confident and positive towards his life. He has become more happier than ever. I can see the changes (Parent Interview 4; I CAN School).*

*“He’s opened up a little bit as far as his autism is concerned on things that he doesn’t understand...he can tell people that he doesn’t understand something whether it’s teachers or the pastoral care people or even us as parents... and we work through it whereas before we weren’t getting anything” (Participant Interview 2; I CAN School).*

*“I think it’s improved his self-esteem. His self-esteem was always in his boots. I think it’s helped improve it. In a way it’s helped him with improving his leadership qualities” (Parent Interview 5; I CAN School).*

*“The other night when we had the end of year session, he was the MC. He just did so well and they said why don’t you give your talk that you’ve done for the expo and he just got up and did this talk about steam engines in front of all these people. No notes, no nothing. He never would’ve done that before. It’s the confidence” (Parent Interview 8; I CAN School).*

*“I saw him so much happier. I feel he is more confident in himself and he believes in himself” (Parent Interview 3; I CAN Community).*

*“We don’t hear “I don’t want to” as near as often as we used to and [she is] willing to actually just try” (Parent Interview 7; I CAN Community).*

Parents felt that the positive approach of I CAN, whereby Autism is promoted as a strength rather than a disability, helped the children develop self-acceptance and a more positive view of their capabilities. Importantly, the program also provided a safe, non-judgemental space where the children felt comfortable to be themselves.

*“He used to say all the time I wish they would take my Aspergers away, I wish they would give me a tablet that would take my Aspergers away. I used to say to him it is a gift, I know it makes part of your life a bit different but it’s a gift....But he would still say I want them to take it away. But he doesn’t say that now. He doesn’t feel that way anymore. I mean that’s just amazing” (Parent Interview 8; I CAN School).*

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*“One thing he has said to me during it which pulled at my heartstrings was mum I can be myself, I don't have to be fake all the time. And for a parent to hear that that he lives his day fake to try and fit in with everyone else is very upsetting. For him to have that network where he can just be himself is amazing” (Parent Interview 11; I CAN School).*

*“I think he liked the aspect that he could go there and feel safe with kids that wouldn't judge him. He discovered that being different is a good thing” (Parent Interview 7; I CAN School).*

*“He is not as depressed. I believe he found a place just belonging somewhere. He felt very lost in the world. Knowing other people are going through it and were supporting him was really essential” (Parent Interview 12; I CAN School).*

*“It has opened up his expectations as to what he can achieve..they go to I CAN and they learn that they are awesome and they can do things” (Parent Interview 6; I CAN Community).* A strength of the I CAN program was that it connected them with children with similar experiences and perspectives. This provided them with an opportunity to learn valuable social skills, improved their ability to communicate in social situations, and assisted them in developing meaningful friendships.

*“ During the year he has developed himself a brilliant little network of friends and he has done that on his own..He said that it's cool to be able to hang out with people that have the same disability that I have” (Parent Interview 1; I CAN School).*

*“He's made some really good friends and a good mentor. They've bonded; the three of them were at cadets getting photos together and made a friendship, feeling belonging in that way” (Parent Interview 3; I CAN School).*

*“The other night when they had the end of year thing, just seeing how they were supporting each other. I don't think he would've done that before. They were all working together to present this thing to all the parents. It was just great to see, it really was” (Parent Interview 8; I CAN School).*

*“I think it's a lot to do with the mingling and mixing and befriending of others that are on the spectrum also. They understand you. There is other people that think the way you do. So he formed good friendships” (Parent Interview 2; I CAN Community).*

*“She is a lot more sociable even at home. When we've had people around usually the minute someone knocks on the door she is up and gone in her room. Now we have people around, she is with us. She is chatting and people have actually noticed and they will say oh my god look at the change in [I CAN participant]” (Parent Interview 7; I CAN Community).*

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Parents perceived that the delivery of the program by young people with autism ensured that the messages resonated with the children, whereby they felt that the facilitators could understand and empathise with their struggles. The mentors also served as powerful role models, empowering the students to believe in their own capabilities by providing real life examples of their future potential.

*"To have people who have lived it and are currently living it they're saying I had a terrible time at school this happened to me and this happened to me but now I'm at Uni, I've had a successful life. It's much more relatable to kids. They don't want to listen to their parents, their teachers. To have people who are actually living it is so valuable"* (Parent Interview 8; I CAN School).

*"It gives the kids strategies and gets the kids to mix with other kids similar and to know that it is run by older, young people that are in the same boat. In that respect, it's really different to other therapies or other support things. It's a real different approach and it's done differently. It's really worthwhile having a go"* (Parent Interview 6; I CAN School).

*"It was good to see someone like [mentor name] who himself has autism and is a major mentor for these children. But for us as parents, it was good to see what is out there for our kids. The stats are not great and to be able to see proof, real life right in front of you of what there is for these children, that's probably the major benefit for us"* (Parent Interview 11; I CAN School).

*"Its having those like-minded people but also having mentors who are on the spectrum as well. Seeing people that drive their cars and all this kind of stuff makes a really big difference"* (Parent Interview 4; I CAN Community).

*"Those young teachers that are Aspergers guys themselves, he now realises he can do anything he wants to. I don't think he thought there is life after school. And now he realises that he can do whatever he wants to do and become whatever he wants to become"* (Parent Interview 3; I CAN Community).

The parents did not provide any suggestions re possible changes or improvements to the program and appeared happy with the current program content. However, most noted that they were not aware of most of the content or activities.

Recommendations made by parents tended to focus on the potential expansion of the program and/or greater integration of the program messages into the ongoing activities of the school or the broader community. Undertaking more work with teachers and the broader school or general community to increase awareness of I CAN messages was seen to be an important step for enabling children on the spectrum to be accepted for who they are, and to ensuring they receive appropriate education and support in schools.

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*"Just one thing I was thinking that is the way I can actually talk to us parents, if maybe once a year if it is possible to do a session at the school maybe in the afternoon time maybe, just to make others aware that people with special needs are not different"* (Parent Interview 4; I CAN School).

*"I think all schools should be running it but they should be somehow involving kids who hassle these kids a lot, to realise what they're actually doing and the benefit of actually befriending these kids"* (Parent Interview 9; I CAN School).

*"And plus being in the I CAN they tend to sympathise with his plight a little bit, some of the teachers and they explain things a little bit better in the classroom to him. All that sort of opens up as well whereas before he was left floundering a lot of times because they would say something in class and they would rush through it"* (Parent Interview 2; I CAN School).

*"It might be nice if they actually got out and did community-based things as well. It would be great to see them out together as a group"* (Parent Interview 4; I CAN Community).

The parents spontaneously reinforced their hopes for the future of the program, including continuing the program in schools, more funding and more frequent sessions. Their hopes included the expansion of I CAN to enable other children on the Autism Spectrum to be able to access the program and experience its profound benefits.

*"He is not as depressed. I believe he found a place just belonging somewhere. He felt very lost in the world. Knowing other people are going through it and were supporting him was really essential. It's been a massive task. I wish it was weekly actually"* (Parent Interview 12; I CAN School).

*"I think they should run it more often. Every day all day. No, I know that's unrealistic. Look if the program could be run as part of a weekly thing I think that would be fantastic"* (Parent Interview 9; I CAN School).

*"Yeah, so again saying more sessions. So whether weekly sessions would fit I don't know"* (Parent Interview 8; I CAN School).

*"I hope the program runs for many many years. I say to him (participants son), maybe you can become a mentor and he sort of looks at me and says yeah maybe I could"* (Parent Interview 3; I CAN Community).

*"It is a brilliant program and keep doing what they are doing I think. Don't stop it"* (Parent Interview 7; I CAN Community).

*"I couldn't recommend it enough. I reckon any kid on the spectrum should give it a go. I know that just watching the kids who have done [the program], just the difference between them initially and at the end of the year is just amazing. It's done amazing things for them"* (Parent Interview 2; I CAN Community).

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## Teacher Interviews

Teachers reported similar perspectives to parents on the benefits of the program for students; improved confidence, belonging and sense of self-worth. They also identified the same three components of the program as influential in enabling the children to thrive: mentors with ASD as role models; the strength-based approach of I CAN; and the safe and non-judgemental environment.

*"It's a really supportive network for the kids and the kids were able to develop a sense of belonging in the group pretty much immediately, which encouraged them to continue to keep coming back" (Teacher interview 1)*

Teachers also acknowledged the sense of achievement experienced by the students after they presented to parents and other program participants on a topic of interest at the end of the program. Providing students with opportunities and support to excel enabled them to feel good about themselves and their capabilities.

*"I think the I CAN speeches were really good, getting them to think of what they are capable of because perhaps some of them hadn't thought of that before or didn't think they were capable as much" (Teacher interview 2)*

Teachers offered suggestions for program improvements such as more frequent sessions (weekly) to enable students to consolidate their learnings more effectively. Other suggestions included upskilling mentors and more fluid communication with teachers about content delivered in the sessions.

*"Being able to do the program is fantastic but when they're trying to develop for example a speech or whatever it is hard because it's once a fortnight" (Teacher interview 5)*

Challenges that were highlighted by some of the teachers as impacting on student participation in the program included not wanting to be singled out as 'having autism', timetabling issues, and some students not connecting with the other students in the sessions.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This small scale mixed methods evaluation provides preliminary evidence of the worth and value of the I CAN programs in supporting students on the Autism Spectrum in school settings.

All three respondent groups (participating students, parents and teachers) were overwhelmingly positive in their responses to student participation in the I CAN program. Notably, all three groups reported significant improvements in the student's sense of self-worth, confidence and sense-of-belonging.

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There were three key aspects of the program that underpinned the positive outcomes:

- mentors who were just 'like them' who provided role models of future potential;
- the positive approach of I CAN, whereby Autism is viewed as a strength rather than a deficit; and
- the safe, non-judgemental environment.

Students and parents alike expressed a strong desire for the program to continue, and for more frequent and ongoing. Parents expressed their hopes for expansion of the program to enable other children on the Autism spectrum the opportunity to receive the same benefits.

Whilst this was a small-scale, post-only evaluation, the consistency of the feedback across the groups leads us to recommend the following.

**Recommendations for the program:**

1. Continue the program in participating schools, and expand to other schools
2. Consider changes to the program delivery format from fortnightly to weekly sessions – which would strengthen the perception of support experience by the students and may enable them to better solidify their learnings.
3. Consider strategies to increase the communication of the program content between I CAN and teachers to promote better working relationships in schools.

**Recommendations for evaluation:**

1. Future I CAN programs should embed a pre-post evaluation into the program design to enable the collection of evidence of the impact on student outcomes.
2. Utilise a consistent evaluation framework, which routinely collects these quantitative measures from all programs to enable comparison over time and between regions, as well as providing ongoing feedback for program modification
3. Periodically collect qualitative (interview) data from parents and teachers to explore the range of other outcomes not readily reflected in quantitative data
4. Develop an easy-to-use evaluation manual and tools for participating schools to enable the routine collection of evaluation data without incurring the costs of external evaluators.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Child Survey

**THANK YOU** for agreeing to fill in this survey.

Remember that there are no right or wrong answers, we are just want to know a bit more about the students who are coming to the I CAN program.

Finding out more about you helps us to make the I CAN program the best program it can be.

This survey has two kinds of questions.

Some ask you to write down a word or a few words:

For example: **My favourite type of animal is:**

Elephant

Some ask you to tick one box to show which option you agree with most

For example: **I like to eat icecream**

Yes	No
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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First we would like you to choose a name to use for the survey – this could be your favourite movie character, superhero, or actor.

My name for this survey is

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Thanks. Now, tell us a bit about you.....

1. I am

Male	Female
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. I am in

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
<input type="checkbox"/>					

3. A teacher or adult I feel comfortable talking to at school is

4. My favourite movie or TV show is

5. My favourite character is

6. The thing I am most interested in is

7. Three words that describe me

8. The best thing about me is

9. Over the last 2 weeks I've been feeling optimistic about the future

None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
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<input type="checkbox"/>				
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**The next few questions ask you to describe yourself.**

Each question has a description of two different types of kids. Decide first which statement is most like you. Then put a tick ✓ in one of the answer boxes next to that statement, depending on how much it is like you. **Tick only ONE box for each question.**

For **example**, Chris really likes to watch TV and doesn't like to play outside at all. So he would answer

		Really True for Me	Sort of True for Me	Sort of True for Me	Really True for Me	
<b>S A M P L E</b>	Some kids would rather play outdoors in their spare time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other kids would rather watch T.V.

For **example**, James doesn't like to watch TV at all but sometimes he likes to play outside. So he would answer

		Really True for Me	Sort of True for Me	Sort of True for Me	Really True for Me	
<b>S A M P L E</b>	Some kids would rather play outdoors in their spare time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids would rather watch T.V.

**Now continue.....**

		Really True for Me	Sort of True for Me	Sort of True for Me	Really True for Me	
<b>10.</b>	Some kids are often unhappy with themselves	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids are pretty pleased with themselves
<b>11.</b>	Some kids don't like the way they are leading their life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids do like the way they are leading their life
<b>12.</b>	Some kids are happy with themselves as a person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids are often not happy with themselves
<b>13.</b>	Some kids like the kind of person they are	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids often wish they were someone else
<b>14.</b>	Some kids are very happy being the way they are	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids wish they were different
<b>15.</b>	Some kids are not very happy with they way they do a lot of things	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids think the way they do things is fine

16.	Some kids find it hard to make friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids find it pretty easy to make friends
17.	Some kids have a lot of friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids don't have very many friends
18.	Some kids would like to have a lot more friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids have as many friends as they want
19.	Some kids are always doing things with a lot of kids	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids usually do things by themselves
20.	Some kids wish that more people their age liked them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids feel that most people their age do like them
21.	Some kids are popular with others their age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other kids are not very popular

**The last few questions are about the I CAN Schools program**

	NO!	no	yes	YES!
22. I feel comfortable at this program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. I feel I am a part of this program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. I am committed to this program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. I am supported at this program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. I am accepted at this program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

27. The thing I like most about this program is

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28. The thing I like least about this program is

29. Being a part of this program makes me  
feel

Thanks for filling in the survey and helping us to make the I CAN program even better for you.

If any of the questions made you uncomfortable, or you need someone to talk to about the survey or your feelings, you can talk to an adult or teacher at school you feel comfortable with.

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## Appendix 2: Parent Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me a little bit about (NAME)?  
*[What does he/she like doing? Does he/she enjoy school?]*
2. I understand that (NAME) participated in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL). How did you hear about the I CAN program?
3. Thinking back to before the program started, how did you feel about (NAME) participating in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL).  
*[Were you feeling positive about it/looking forward to it? Did you have any concerns about (NAME) participating in the I CAN program?]*
4. Still thinking back to before the program started, how did (NAME) feel about participating in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL).  
*[Was he/she feeling positive about it/looking forward to it? Was he/she feeling anxious about it?]*
5. Now that it has finished, how do you think (NAME) found participating in the I CAN Schools program?  
*[did he/she enjoy the program? Was he/she happy to be a part of the program]*
6. What, if anything, do you think was the main thing that (NAME) gained from participating in the I CAN Schools program?  
*[How do you think the sessions helped (NAME)?]*
7. Do you think that participating in the I CAN Schools program has had any impact on how (NAME) feels about him/herself?  
*[does he/she seem to be feel more positive or (negative) about him/herself?]*
8. Do you think that participating in the I CAN Schools program has had any impact on how (NAME) feels about having autism/Aspergers?  
*[does he/she seem to be feel more positive or (negative) about having autism/Aspergers?]*
9. Do you think that participating in the I CAN Schools program has had any impact on how (NAME) feels about his/her life and his/her future?  
*[Is he/she looking forward to the future? Does he/she think that he/she will enjoy life as an adult?]*
10. Do you think that participating in the I CAN Schools program has had any impact on how much (NAME) feels accepted by other kids at school?  
*[Does he/she have a group of friends who accept him/her as they are? Does he/she feel that he/she fits in at school? Does he/she feel more supported at school?]*
11. Now that (NAME) has participated in the program, was the I CAN program what you expected it to be?  
*[what did they do that you expected them to do? Was there anything they did that you didn't expect them to do? Was it better or worse than you expected?]*
12. Did participating in the I CAN Schools program have the benefits for (NAME) that you were hoping for?  
*[what were the benefits? Were there any negatives?]*
13. Is there anything about the I CAN Schools program that you think should be done differently?
14. Would you recommend the I CAN Schools program to families of other children on the autism spectrum?  
*[why? Why not?]*

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## Appendix 2: School Principal Interview Guide

1. I understand that [these students] participated in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL). How did you hear about the I CAN Schools program?
2. Tell me about the considerations that you took into account in committing the school to a program such as this?
3. What are the requirements/input of you as a school in making this program available to your students?
4. Thinking back to before the program started, how did you feel about [these students] participating in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL).  
*[Were you feeling positive about it/looking forward to it? Did you have any concerns about [these students] participating in the I CAN program?]*
5. How is the program communicated to other students at the school? What is the scope for their involvement (beyond the peer presentation)?
6. How does the program link to other curriculum/ learning programs for the students involved?
7. Has the school provided and promoted opportunities for a range of staff to rotate through the I CAN fortnightly sessions? What methods of promotion were used?
8. How would you describe the uptake from other staff in attending fortnightly sessions? What has impacted their participation?
9. How would you characterise student attendance at sessions (e.g. regular, fluctuating etc.)? In your opinion, what have been the contributing factors?
10. Now that the [students] have participated in the program, was the I CAN Schools program what you expected it to be?  
*[What did they do that you expected them to do? Was there anything they did that you didn't expect them to do? Was it better or worse than you expected?]*
11. Did the [students] participating in the I CAN Schools program have the benefits for teachers that you were hoping for?  
*[what were the benefits? Were there any negatives?]*
12. Did the [students] participating in the I CAN Schools program have the benefits for the school community that you were hoping for?  
*[what were the benefits? Were there any negatives?]*
13. How sustainable are the outcomes outside of the sessions?
14. Is there anything about the I CAN Schools program that you think should be done differently?
15. Do you have any feedback or recommendations about the: communication, planning and organisational skills of the service providers (s)
16. Would you recommend the I CAN Schools program to other schools with students on the autism spectrum?  
*[why? Why not?]*

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## Appendix 3: Teacher Interview Guide

NOTE: in the square brackets, black text = wording for school wellbeing coordinators (answering about a cohort of students); blue text = wording for integration aide (answering about one student)

1. I understand that [these students/**this student**] participated in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL). How did you hear about the I CAN Schools program?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about the [students/**student**] who participated in the I CAN Schools program? *[What process did you use to identify [these students/**this student**] to participate in the program? What are the facilitators and barriers to [students] participation?]*
3. Thinking back to before the program started, how did you feel about [these students/**this student**] participating in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL). *[Were you feeling positive about it/looking forward to it? Did you have any concerns about [these students/**this student**] participating in the I CAN program?]*
4. Still thinking back to before the program started, how did [these students/**this student**] feel about participating in the I CAN Schools program at (SCHOOL). *[Were [these students/**this student**] positive about it/looking forward to it? Were [these students/**this student**] feeling anxious about it?]*
5. Now that it has finished, how do you think the [students/**student**] found participating in the I CAN Schools program? *[Did they enjoy the program? Were they happy to be a part of the program?]*
6. What, if anything, do you think was the main thing that the [students/**student**] gained from participating in the I CAN Schools program? *[How do you think the sessions helped (NAME)?]*
7. Have you noticed any changes in the [students/**student**] as a result of participating in the I CAN Schools program? *[what has changed? Why do you think this is?]*
8. Do you think that participating in the I CAN Schools program has had any impact on how the [students/**student**] interact with other students? *[Do they have a group of friends who accept them as they are? Do they feel more supported at school?]*
9. Do you think that participating in the I CAN Schools program has had any impact on how the [students/**student**] interact with their teacher(s)? *[Do they have a group of friends who accept them as they are? Do they feel more supported at school?]*
10. Do you think that participating in the I CAN Schools program has had any impact on how much the [students/**student**] feel accepted by other kids at school? *[Do they have a group of friends who accept them as they are? Do they feel more supported at school?]*
11. Now that the [students/**student**] have participated in the program, was the I CAN Schools program what you expected it to be? *[What did they do that you expected them to do? Was there anything they did that you didn't expect them to do? Was it better or worse than you expected?]*
12. Did participating in the I CAN Schools program have the benefits for the [students/**student**] that you were hoping for? *[what were the benefits? Were there any negatives?]*
13. Did the [students/**student**] participating in the I CAN Schools program have the benefits for other students that you were hoping for? *[what were the benefits? Were there any negatives?]*
14. Did the [students/**student**] participating in the I CAN Schools program have the benefits for teachers that you were hoping for? *[what were the benefits? Were there any negatives?]*
15. What do you think are the strengths of the program? Is there anything about the I CAN Schools program that you think should be done differently? *[Do you have any feedback or recommendations in relation to the: Content (e.g. topics covered), Structure (e.g. Number of sessions, frequency or duration of sessions, as applicable to students, peers, parents and staff sessions), Organisation (e.g. effective/efficient communication, always have required equipment for sessions, responsiveness to needs of the school/staff/students/parents).*
16. Have you had any direct feedback from students? If so, what has been reported?
17. Have you had any direct feedback from parents or students? If so, what has been reported?
18. Would you recommend the I CAN Schools program to other schools with students on the autism spectrum? *[why? Why not?]*

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