



**I CAN NETWORK LTD  
SUBMISSION  
TO THE FEDERAL  
SENATE SELECT  
COMMITTEE  
ON AUTISM**



# I CAN Network: Australia's largest Autistic-led organisation.

## Welcome to I CAN Network's submission to the Federal Senate Select Committee on Autism.

The I CAN Network story started with my parents and grandparents who ensured my childhood benefited from a network of supportive friends and teachers who made me think 'I CAN'. Years later, when I had embraced my Autism, I turned this lived experience into a vision for a company. In 2013 I founded I CAN Network with the help of two Autistic mates James Ong and Penny Robinson.

Our branding captures the wonder of the aurora borealis (or northern lights): a natural spectrum. Our commitment to an Autistic-led approach is so deep that Goal One of our strategy is to grow I CAN Network with a 50% difference: a minimum of half of our staff must be Autistic. Currently 38 of my Autistic staff are Autistic.

Our growth into Australia's largest Autistic-led service provider is a testament to the different intuition and imagination of Autistic people. We have used our Autistic processing styles to create a national mentoring program and storytelling technique which can be delivered via face-to-face and online.

On behalf of I CAN Ltd, I commend Dr James Ong who has honed our evaluation tools which, in turn, have produced the insights underpinning this submission. Thank you also to our schools, Autistic families, our staff and to Karen Hodgkins for her creative assistance.



Mr. Chris Varney  
Founding Director & Chief Enabling Officer (CEO)

As the Policy Analyst of I CAN Network, I have the privilege of compiling and writing this submission and ensuring that it is informed by I CAN Network's insights as an Autistic-led organisation.

As a founding member of I CAN Network Ltd, I have seen tremendous growth in the organisation as it reached out to more Autistic people across Australia. I have been fortunate to drive the development of an Autistic-led outcomes framework which informs I CAN Network's extensive Autistic-led group mentoring programs and community education. The outcomes we pursue are self-acceptance, pride, optimism, belonging and self-confidence among 9-20-year-old Autistic Australians.

There is much that needs to be done to ensure that Autistic people receive the same educational, job and life opportunities as other people. This submission, supported by a strong evidence base, describes the need for the Federal Government to support online mentoring programs that reach out to Autistic students across metropolitan and rural areas of Australia, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to better support Autistic people and social enterprises across Australia.

Thank you for listening to us.



Dr. James Ong  
Company Member & Policy Analyst



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## Introduction

I CAN Network is Australia’s largest Autistic-led service provider which aims to change the perception of Autism in Australia among Autistic people and the public from ‘I Can’t’ to ‘I CAN’. We do this by running face-to-face group mentoring programs in Victoria and Queensland and online group mentoring programs nationally to build the self-acceptance, self-confidence and social connections of 9-20-year-old Autistic young people and adults. These programs are designed by Autistic people who utilise their lived experiences to relate to the experiences, interests and processing styles of Autistic young people. We also organise professional development, speaking engagements and campaigns to increase public understanding of the strengths of Autistic people. We provide our programs and services in not only metropolitan areas but also rural areas across Australia. We are unique in the Autism sector: 50% of our management and staff are Autistic. We are committed to maintaining this percentage as our services expand.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Autism. As an Autistic-led service provider which has grown rapidly from nothing and is directly working with Autistic young people and adults, we are well-placed to advise on policy change relating to the education and employment of Autistic people. We sit on the Victorian Government’s Autism Education Advisory Group and Autism Plan Advisory Group, the Queensland Government’s Autism Education Advisory Group. Our Founder and CEO Chris Varney is National Patron of the Australian Association for Special Education and a member of Foundation for Young Australians’ LearningCreates Advisory Board. Furthermore, in running I CAN Imagination Clubs (primary school programs) and National Online Mentoring Programs which serve students with anxiety and other learning disabilities, we are also well-positioned to advise on the interrelationship between Autism, mental health issues and other learning disabilities.

In our submission, I CAN Network emphasises the need for the Federal Government to (1) fund the phased expansion of I CAN Network’s National Online Mentoring Program, (2) assist and fund Autistic people whose condition is undiagnosed or too mild for them to receive adjustments and funding in school and (3) support Autistic-led organisations such as I CAN Network who are providing services and jobs to Autistic people.

We would like to note that, as a member of the Australian Autism Alliance, we are a co-signatory to the Autism Alliance’s submission. In addition to accepting all the findings and recommendations of the Autism Alliance’s submission, our submission will provide unique insights and recommendations from I CAN Network’s perspective.

## Summary of recommendations

No.	Recommendation
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government fund the phased expansion of I CAN Network’s National Online mentoring program to ensure it achieves the following:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Strengthening the connections of Autistic students with their peers and school communities to ensure they make successful school and post-school transitions</li> <li>○ Supporting the mental health of Autistic students, especially during COVID-19</li> <li>○ Engagement of rural and remote Autistic government students</li> <li>○ Assistance to government schools needing support to convert face-to-face wellbeing programs to online delivery</li> <li>○ Focus on vulnerable communities including LGBTQIA+ and Autistic young people and the parents of Autistic students</li> <li>○ Greater national reach, beyond Australia’s east coast</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government Department of Social Services and National Disability Insurance Agency consult Autistic-led organisations, such as I CAN Network, on how to make NDIS plan information more sensitive to the diverse literary, visual and auditory processing styles of Autistic families.</li> </ul>
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government works with State Governments to fund the phased expansion of the coordinator positions of I CAN Network across States and Territories in which I CAN Ltd does not yet operate and in which it has reasonable capacity to expand. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The I CAN Ltd coordinators will be concerned with the phased roll out of face-to-face and online mentoring programs in primary and secondary schools, including in remote, rural and regional schools.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government undertake a review on how the <i>Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability</i> (NCCDSSD) is (1) used to determine funding for students with disabilities and Autistic students and (2) whether processes in implementing the NCCD have improved since 2016, particularly in government schools nationally.</li> </ul>
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Department of Education, Skills and Employment work with the Departments of Education of each State and Territory to develop Autism education strategies in conjunction with Autistic-led and and Autism-focussed organisations.</li> </ul>
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government support (1) Autistic-led social enterprises which create jobs for Autistic people and (2) Autistic people who want to start up their own small business or social enterprise.</li> </ul>
7.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government set up or sponsor events where companies and universities are brought together to talk about future pathways with Autistic young people and adults.</li> </ul>



## Online Mentoring: Supporting the mental health of Autistics during COVID-19

No.	Recommendation
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government fund the phased expansion of I CAN Network’s National Online mentoring program to ensure it achieves the following:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Strengthening the connections of Autistic students with their peers and school communities to ensure they make successful school and post-school transitions</li> <li>○ Supporting the mental health of Autistic students, especially during COVID-19</li> <li>○ Engagement of rural and remote Autistic government students</li> <li>○ Assistance to government schools needing support to convert face-to-face wellbeing programs to online delivery</li> <li>○ Focus on vulnerable communities including LGBTQIA+ and Autistic young people and the parents of Autistic students</li> <li>○ Greater national reach, beyond Australia’s east coast</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

I CAN Ltd’s National Online Mentoring Program has seen enormous growth during COVID-19-induced restrictions.

By way of background, in October 2017, I CAN Ltd created a world-pioneering online group mentoring program in October 2017 to scale our mentoring program Australia-wide and make it available to any Autistic young person or adult. We did this because of the natural limits of our face-to-face mentoring program in schools. Whilst our face-to-face mentoring in schools yields positive results for Autistic students, it takes years for it to spread to schools across Australia. Since our inception, we have experienced overwhelming public demand for our mentoring programs which is what pushed us to convert our content to an online platform.

Practically, the National Online Mentoring Program is a suite of online group mentoring programs run in cycles of six weekly sessions across Australia every eight weeks of the year. On average a cycle of six weekly sessions has up to 14 group mentoring programs running with up to nine Autistic young people in each. As of July 2020, we have capacity to engage 130+ Autistic young people nationally per week via online group mentoring. What sets the program apart is two Autistic mentors facilitate each online group.

Participating Autistic students are organised into online groups which support the relevant life transitions that lie in front of them. Autistic students transitioning to high school/ senior high school are organised into groups for 9-11-year-olds, 9-13-year-olds, 10-13-year-olds and 13-15-year-olds. Senior high school students/ Autistic young adults transitioning to post-school pathways are organised into a 16-20-year-old group. Alongside this, we offer groups which are interest-based and identity based such as our group for LGBTQIA+ and Autistic young people.

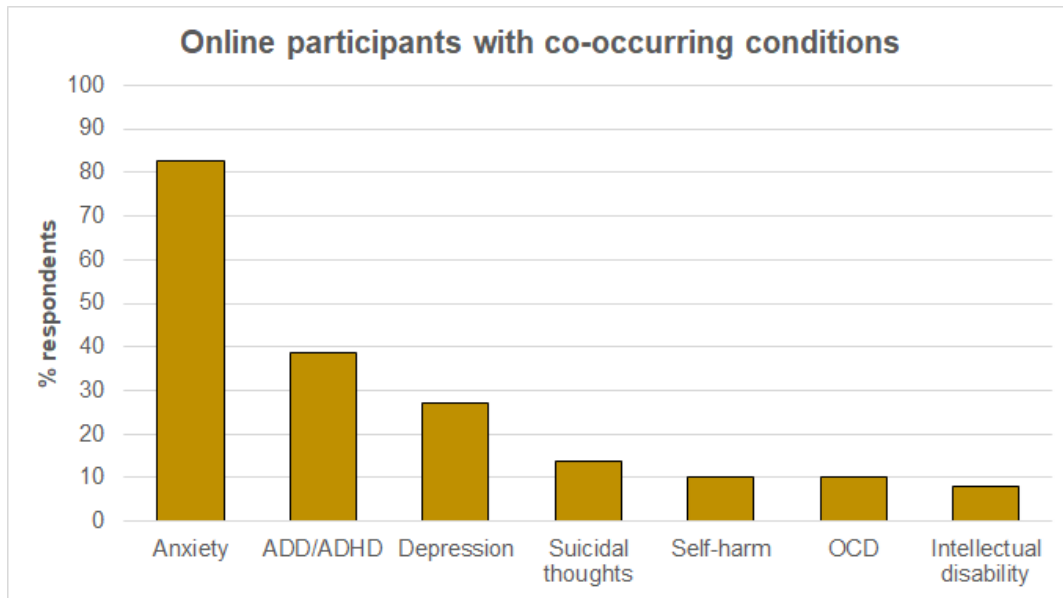
During the nationwide lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in March - May 2020, which coincided with the school holidays, I CAN Ltd ran, in addition to our evening programs, [online school holiday programs](#) for Autistic young people to build their self-esteem and connections during a period of uncertainty. Post-holidays we added an [after-school ‘afternoon’ online program](#) to our offerings given the reduced social connection Autistic students were experiencing because of school closures.

## Supporting the mental health of Autistic students, especially during COVID-19

I CAN Ltd has observed that Autistic young people have been more vulnerable during COVID-19-included restrictions necessarily because of their high anxiety. As outlined in Figure 1 (below), in our March - May 2020 most Autistic participants in our online programs had at least one co-occurring condition, particularly anxiety (82.7% participants). A sizable proportion of participants also had either ADD/ ADHD (36.8%) and/ or Depression (27%). Other co-occurring conditions which could be seen among participants in the online programs included suicidal thoughts (13%), self-harm, OCD and intellectual disability. Indeed, COVID-19 aside, we have observed that Autistic young people with co-occurring conditions are more at-risk to being disengaged from school.

Anecdotally, we know that COVID-19 has made it extremely difficult for Autistic students with co-occurring conditions to access and benefit from their education. We suspect the most vulnerable group has been students who are one of several Autistic students in their family. We have heard a handful of stories which indicate the stress of disrupted routines on family life has made remote learning near impossible for these Autistic families. The result, in some instances, is these students have missed the entirety of Term 2 2020.

**Figure 1: Autistic young people in March - May 2020 online mentoring with co-occurring conditions**

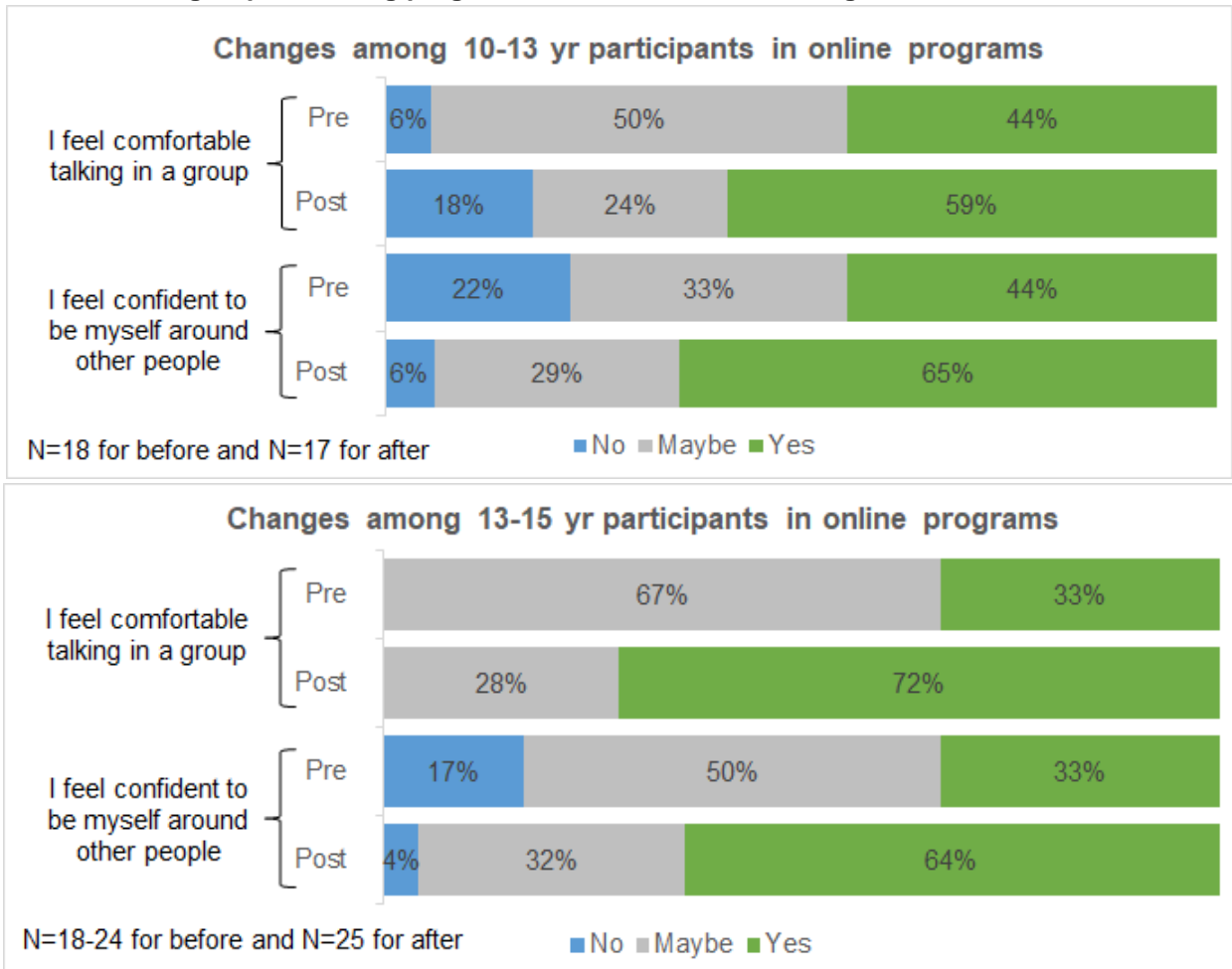


## Achieving positive outcomes for Autistic young people through online mentoring

Our online group mentoring programs provide an important channel for Autistic students to interact with one another, increasing their social connection which has incalculable benefit to students' mental health, especially during COVID-19.

Figures 2 and 3 (below) show the positive impact of online group mentoring. Within the 10-13 and 13-15 year old programs over March - May 2020, participants' level of comfort in talking with each other increased by 15% and 39% respectively while their confidence to be themselves increased by 21% and 31% respectively. These results were reinforced by participant feedback which stated that the programs increased their confidence to talk about Autism to other people and to feel more positive about their Autism. These results can be attributed to the friendly discussions in the programs, where mentors and participants can support each other and put forward ideas and insights which are mutually beneficial to one another. As a result, participants felt that they were not alone.

**Figures 2 and 3: Online group mentoring programs in March 2020, coinciding with COVID-19 restrictions**



**Testimony from parent Rebecca**

*'Hi I CAN Team,*

*Thank you for letting my son be a mentee in your mentor program. We have some feedback we would like to pass on to the team and those who would like to know of its impact on the community.*

*My son would like to give some feedback on how the mentoring sessions have helped him. The sessions have helped him to gain a better perspective of who he is as an Autistic Teen. It has helped him to understand stress and how it can impact on him including his feelings in regards to stress.*

*As a parent I have noticed my son is a lot more happier and has made a big difference to him emotionally in that he has been happier towards his siblings and not taking out his anger and frustrations out on them as much. He has been more calm and he's able to share his feelings more often. He has also become more affectionate towards me (He even comes and gives me a hug!) and more open to sharing his feelings.*

*I look forward to my son continuing in the programs and so glad I found them through Facebook as the sessions have had a massively positive impact on my family. I hope that these programs will still be available for a long time as I plan to put my current 2 yr old ASD son into these sessions when he is old enough.*

*Thank you so much for offering the service and making them so easily accessible. Should you have any further questions or wish to discuss this further please reply to this email'*



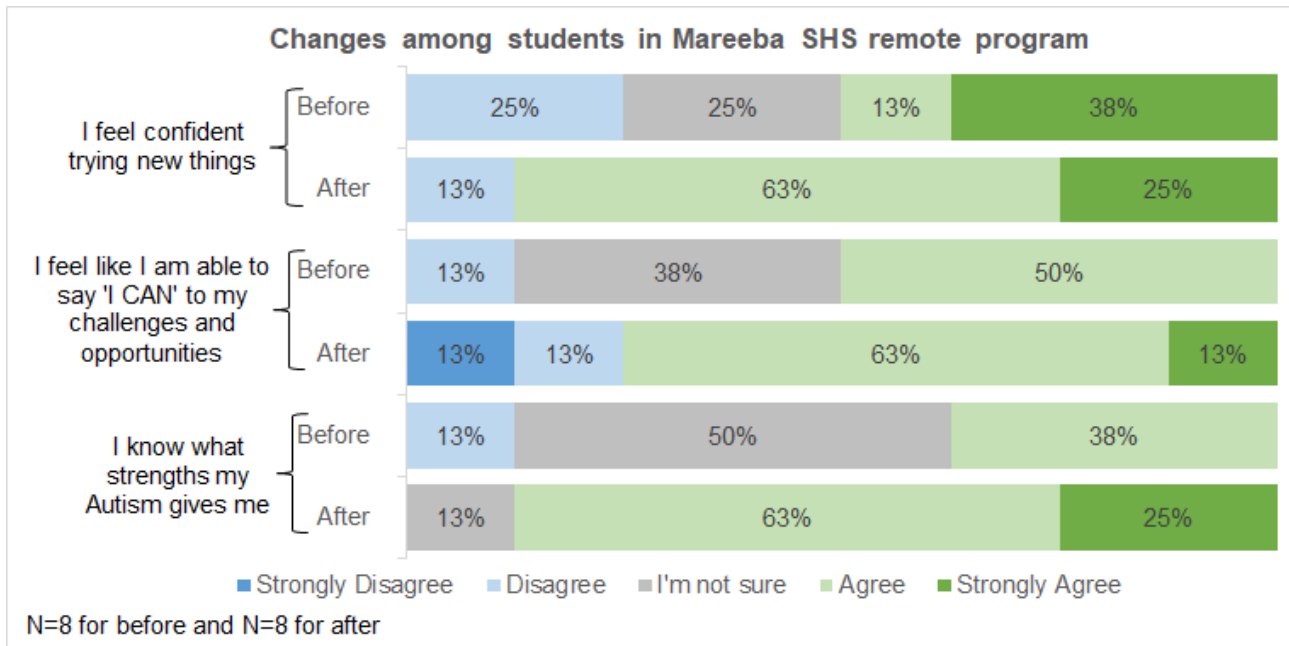
## Engagement of rural and remote schools via online mentoring

I CAN Network has proven that online group mentoring is an effective tool for supporting the mental health of Autistic young people in rural and remote schools. In 2019 I CAN Ltd partnered with the Queensland Department of Education to deliver online mentoring to 40 Autistic students in rural and remote Queensland State schools over Terms 2 - 4 2019.

This took the form of eight one-hour online group mentoring sessions delivered by Autistic mentors (at least one from Queensland) on a weekly basis during school hours for up to 8-10 Autistic students in each group. The online sessions were followed by a post-program face-to-face activity in which Autistic students debriefed the program with an Autistic mentor and teacher supervisor.

Online mentoring made a considerable difference to Autistic students in rural and remote schools. Figure 4 (below) shows the evaluation results collected from participating Autistic students from Mareeba State High School (SHS): a school located 40km south-west of Cairns in Far North Queensland. A total of thirteen students from Mareeba State High School participated in the Remote Schools Online Mentoring Program run from May 2019 to July 2019. Mareeba was one of 11 participating remote Queensland State Schools in the program. Overall, we saw positive changes in the students during the program.

**Figure 4: the outcomes of Mareeba SHS students participating in the Remote Online Mentoring Program**



Specifically, Figure 4 (above) shows that the positive changes looked like a 37% increase in students' self-confidence, a 26% increase in students' willingness to say 'I CAN' to their challenges and opportunities and a 50% increase in students' understanding of the strengths which Autistic gives them. These results show the increased sense of self-awareness and empowerment students had when they participated in the program. These outcomes are valuable in rural and remote communities where there is currently a paucity of services for Autistic people, highlighting the benefits of running online programs to reach out to more Autistic people across rural and remote Australia.

## Conversion of face-to-face programs to online delivery during COVID-19

COVID-19 pushed I CAN Ltd and our school partners to convert our face-to-face programs to an online delivery model. This submission discusses our face-to-face program in more detail below. In brief, our face-to-face programs involve 10-15 hours of in-school group mentoring for up to 16 Autistic or neurodiverse students, delivered weekly or fortnightly by two I CAN Ltd, at least one of whom is Autistic. The face-to-face program is commonly accompanied by a one-hour professional



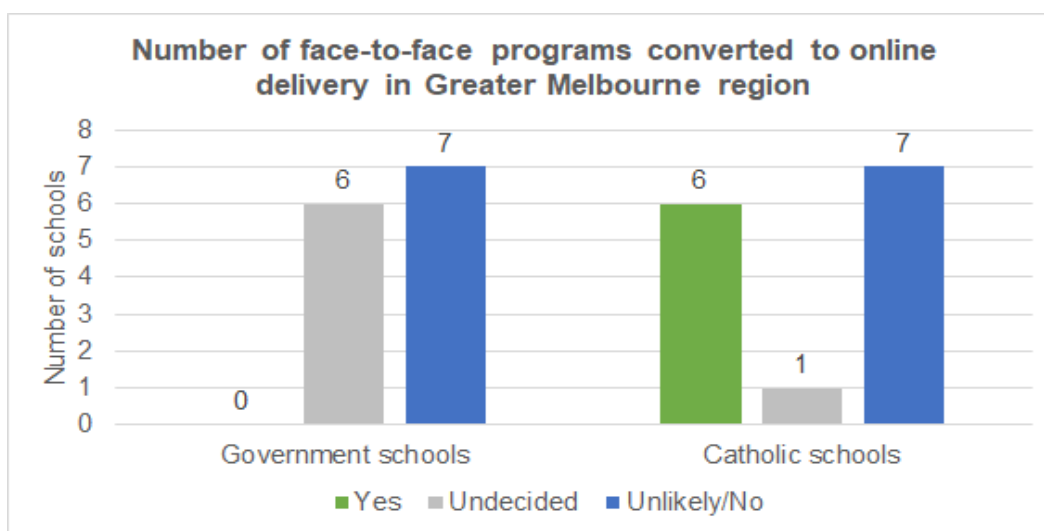
development session which builds the capacity of educators to create inclusive cultures in their schools and a one hour parent session which aims to empower parents with a sense of hope towards their child’s future.

As a case study, in the Greater Melbourne region, I CAN Ltd observed that Catholic and Independent schools had greater capacity to embrace I CAN Ltd’s online conversion of face-to-face group mentoring than government schools. Figure 5 (below) demonstrates this. Specifically Figure 5 charts the responses of schools to online mentoring over a four day period: 13-16 July 2020. Six of 14 Catholic schools embraced online mentoring in contrast to none of I CAN Ltd’s government school partners at the time of writing. This is necessarily due to the below factors:

- The Catholic school system has a strong emphasis on ‘pastoral care’ which influences the attitudes of school leadership teams towards social/ emotional programs like I CAN Network
- The government school system necessarily has greater pressures due to the broad and diverse socio-economic positions of their families which can create a ‘digital divide’ for government students in regional, rural and remote schools.

In short, this submission argues that government schools need increased support to support online wellbeing programs for students during COVID-19.

**Figure 5: the outcomes of Government and Catholic schools in the Greater Melbourne region converting their face-to-face program to online delivery**



**Testimony from Thomas, a teacher at a Melbourne Catholic school** - discussing the benefits of supporting online conversions of I CAN Ltd’s face-to-face mentoring.

*‘With so much uncertainty in the first half of 2020 for all of our students, I CAN sessions were able to offer some consistency in the day to day of our students living life on the spectrum. Although these students were not able to see one another face to face, over the several weeks they met, there developed a certain sense of confidence among each of them. Their ability to speak up, discuss and talk about themselves when it came time were only some of the many positive ways Caitlin, Dezzezy and the I CAN team were able to support and engage our students living on the spectrum’.*

**Engaging vulnerable Autistic communities: LGBTQIA+ & Autistic young people.**

I CAN Network has proven that online group mentoring is an effective tool for supporting the mental health of Autistic young people who identify as LGBTQIA+. This is an important group of young people to support as Autistic people are [more likely to identify themselves](#) as LGBTQIA+ compared to the general population. Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ Autistic young people are [more likely to have mental health issues](#) such as depression and anxiety compared to their peers. Our online programs, therefore, aim to give LGBTQIA+ Autistic individuals an avenue to meet and to support each other. This is evidenced by the results in Figure 6 (below).

**Figure 6: Online programs for LGBTQIA+ and Autistic young people**

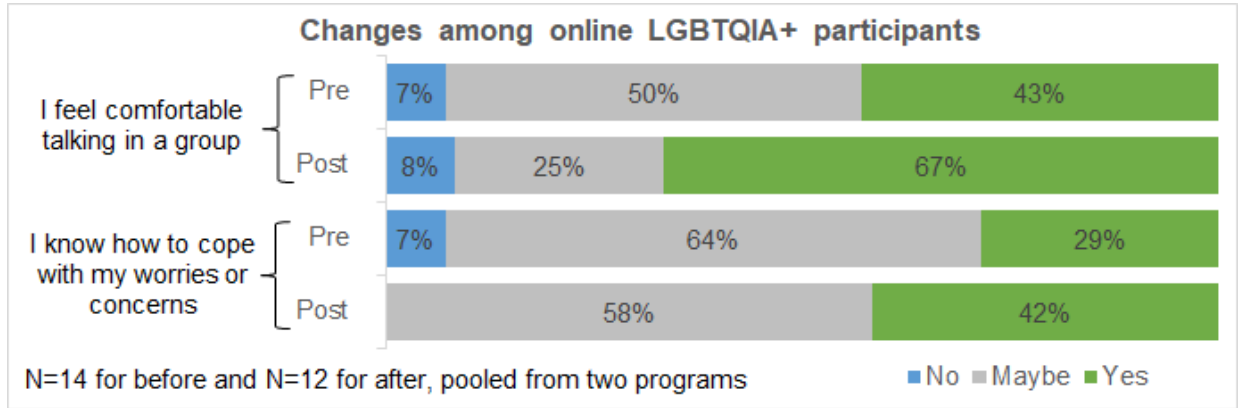


Figure 6 (above) shows that I CAN Ltd’s LGBTQIA+ online programs achieved a 24% increase in people feeling comfortable talking in a group and a 13% increase in people who knew how to cope with their worries or concerns. From participant feedback, participants were grateful that they met other people in the program who were Autistic and LGBTQIA+. This not only relieved them from the sense that they alone but also affirmed their positive identity. The group also allowed participants to appreciate other people’s perspectives about Autism and LGBTQIA+.

**Engaging vulnerable communities: Parents and Carers of Autistic students**

In 2020 I CAN Ltd ran pilot online mentoring for the parents of Autistic students aiming to build their confidence for navigating the secondary school system in Australia. This is a crucial group to support given the high exposure of these families to [emotional vulnerability and disruptions](#) as well as the [increased rates of divorce](#) among parents of Autistic children.

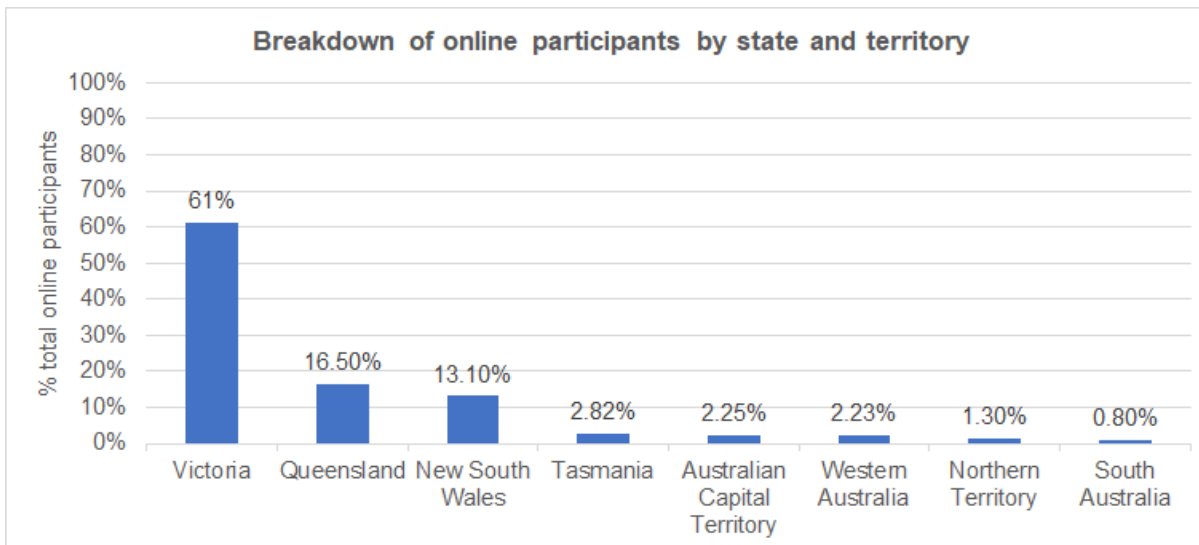
Unfortunately our delivery of parent online mentoring simply became untenable during COVID-19-induced lockdowns. Parents had absolutely no bandwidth to remove themselves from the family unit even for one hour of an evening. Many parents were purely focused on surviving each single day of remote learning.

Whereas we saw a high appetite for parent online mentoring in January 2020, by April 2020, this had reduced due to the pressures placed on parents by COVID-19.

**Ensuring a national reach, beyond Australia’s east coast**

Our National Online Mentoring Programs have seen tremendous growth in the past year, reaching out to the most vulnerable Autistic young people across Australia. From April 2019 to May 2020, we have engaged 711 Autistic young people nationally in our online mentoring programs. However, I CAN Network needs support in the areas of customer service, marketing, online engagement, social media, human resources, and database management to broaden our engagement beyond Australia’s east coast. This will ensure that every Autistic student has I CAN Network’s online mentoring platform available to them. Below is a breakdown of the 711 Autistic young people by State and Territory:

**Figure 7: breakdown of participants in the National Online Mentoring Program by state**



## Making NDIS information more Autism-friendly

No.	Recommendation
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That the Federal Government Department of Social Services and National Disability Insurance Agency consult Autistic-led organisations, such as I CAN Network, on how to make NDIS plan information more sensitive to the diverse literary, visual and auditory processing styles of Autistic families.</li> </ul>

The NDIS funds people with a permanent, significant disability to cover their support needs in daily life and to participate more fully in society, the community and the labour market. It mainly covers their needs in six areas: communication, social interaction, learning, mobility, self-care and self-management. Autistic people make up a large proportion of active NDIS users. As of 31 December 2018, 34% active NDIS participants have an Autism diagnosis (29% primary diagnosis and 5% secondary diagnosis). In addition, 91% Autistic NDIS users require assistance with interpersonal interactions and relationships, yet current NDIS activities do not improve the social connections of Autistic people aged 15 years and older.

I CAN Network fills an unmet need as we run online mentoring programs which support an Autistic person’s communication skills (i.e., understanding and being understood by others) and social interaction (i.e., making and keeping friends) needs.

Even though I CAN Ltd is not a registered NDIS provider by choice, we interact with parents of Autistic participants who receive self-managed or plan-managed funding from NDIA to pay for online and community mentoring programs. The NDIS has allowed I CAN Network to increase the number of online programs to serve more participants, going from 4-5 online programs to now running 14 online programs as of our May-July 2020 online cycle. The NDIS has also assisted parents of low SES backgrounds to pay for an Autistic child’s participation in online programs. Without the NDIS, parents would have needed to save money over a 12-month period to pay for a child’s participation in one online program. With the NDIS, some of our online participants have participated in multiple online programs stretching up to a two-year period.

**Table 1: breakdown by state of the number of mentees and NDIS participants participating in National Online Mentoring Programs from January - June 2020.**

State and Territory	Count of Online mentees: January - June 2020	Count of NDIS no across January - June 2020
Victoria	148	114
Queensland	40	32
New South Wales	33	23
Tasmania	7	5
Australian Capital Territory	2	2
Western Australia	7	7
Northern Territory	1	0
South Australia	2	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	240	185

**Table 2: breakdown of funding sources from online participants January - June 2020.**

Funding source	Count of account name
Unknown	43
Independently Funded	38
Plan Managed - NDIS	31
Self-Managed - NDIS	128
<b>TOTAL</b>	240

From I CAN Ltd's perspective, we see some parents who are overwhelmed by how to use their child's NDIS plans to achieve their child's goals, particularly parents who are using NDIS for the first time. We have had to guide some parents on how to manage their child's NDIS funding and how NDIA-managed plans cannot be used to pay for I CAN Network's mentoring programs.

Anecdotally, we hear parents vocalise their stress from review meetings which are scheduled without warning. We have heard of examples of parents receiving a phone call informing them that they are scheduled for a review meeting the following week, giving them little time to gather reports from their providers describing how they are using the funding. These problems can be compounded among Autistic parents who can be overwhelmed by the complexities of NDIS.

There are [Easy English booklets](#) to make it easier for people to read and understand the NDIS. However, these booklets may not have been utilised by Local Area Coordinators (LACs) to guide Autistic parents on how the NDIS process works. This has necessitated us to clarify how the NDIS works to parents so that they can best utilise their child's plans to pay for our online mentoring programs.

Given the above, we recommend that the NDIA make LACs and support coordinators aware of the existence of resources such as Easy English booklets which make it easier to teach parents how to use their child's NDIS plans. We also call on the NDIA to generate resources specifically tailored to Autistic parents that enable them to more easily understand the NDIS process without being overwhelmed by a huge amount of information.



## Expanding Autistic-led mentoring programs across schools and communities

No.	Recommendation
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● That the Federal Government works with State Governments to fund the phased expansion of the coordinator positions of I CAN Network across States and Territories in which I CAN Ltd does not yet operate and in which it has reasonable capacity to expand.                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The I CAN Ltd coordinators will be concerned with the phased roll out of face-to-face and online mentoring programs in primary and secondary schools, including in remote, rural and regional schools.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Face-to-face mentoring programs in schools

I CAN Ltd delivers face-to-face programs for 9-18-year-old Autistic students in schools as we know the difficulties and challenges Autistic students face. According to the 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC), Autistic students are more likely to face difficulties in school (77.8%) compared to non-Autistic students (55.7%). Autistic students mainly face difficulties in fitting in socially (59.7%), learning (55.3%) and communication (51.5%). The needs of Autistic students are largely unmet with 45.9% of them indicating that they need more support or assistance in school than what they are currently receiving. Although the types of unmet needs in school were not specified in the survey, among all Autistic people surveyed, the needs that were most unmet are those relating to cognitive or emotional tasks (40.8%) and communication (34.3%). These are areas of unmet need that I CAN Network's group mentoring programs are focused on.

With schools paying \$5,000-7,000/year for our face-to-face programs, we invest a lot of time in ensuring that we build the self-acceptance, self-confidence and social connections of 9-18-year-old Autistic students. In Victoria we partner with 77 schools (47 government schools, 27 Catholic schools and 3 independent schools) to deliver face-to-face mentoring programs in Greater Melbourne, Goulburn Murray and the South West Coast. In Queensland we partner with 9 State schools to deliver face-to-face programs in South East Queensland. Earlier we discussed how in 2019 we partnered with 11 State schools, including Mareeba State High School, to deliver online group mentoring in Far North Queensland, North Queensland, Central Queensland and Darling Downs South West.

We have been proactive in building an evidence base behind our mentoring programs by running evaluations with students, parents and school staff. Evaluations run by I CAN Ltd and the Australian Catholic University show the positive impact our face-to-face programs are having on the self-acceptance, self-confidence and social connections of Autistic students.



**Figure 8: Positive change in the self among Victorian Autistic students in I CAN's face-to-face programs**

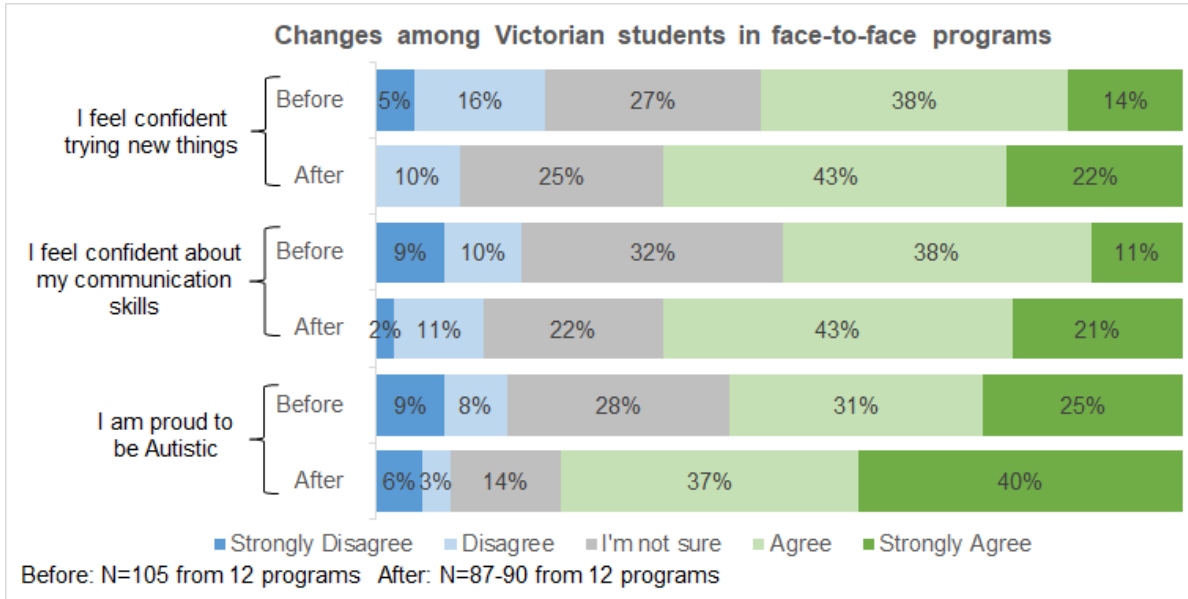
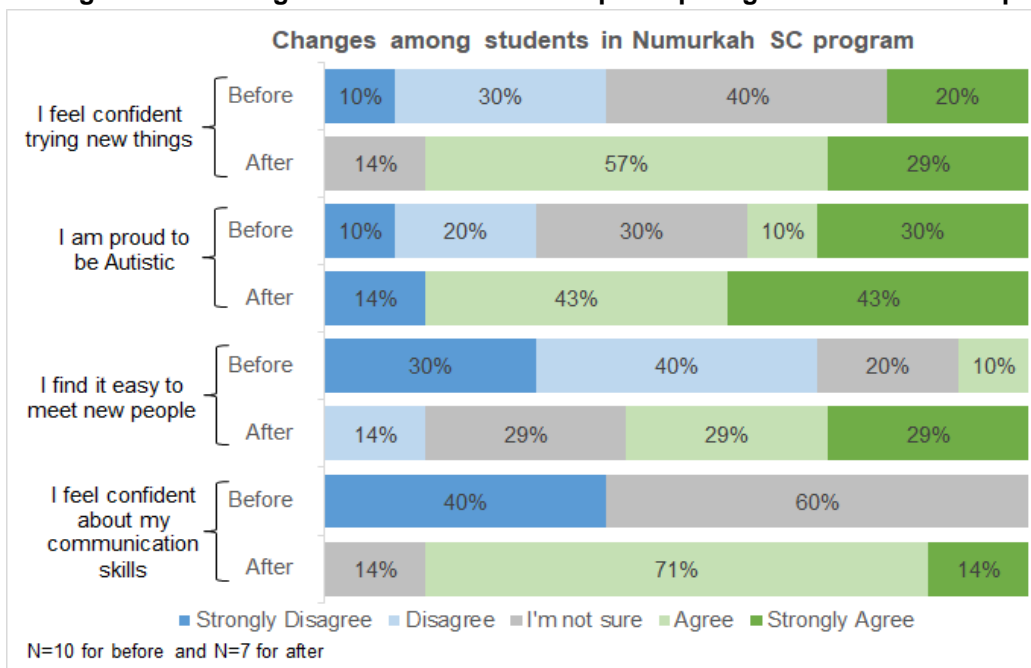


Figure 8 (above) indicates the impact of the I CAN mentoring program on Victorian Autistic government students in 2019. Students' self-confidence increased by 13% and their confidence with communication skills increased by 15% as a result of the program. In addition, the proportion of participants who were proud to be Autistic increased by 21%. This latter finding was reinforced by feedback from students that they found the programs to be a safe community where they could meet and hang out with like-minded peers and openly share their experiences. By meeting other Autistic students in the program, students felt that they understood their Autism more and viewed it in a more positive light.

### Engaging regional schools

Our programs are having immense impacts on the lives of Autistic students in rural areas where there is currently a lack of Autistic services. One prime example of this is our school program in Numurkah Secondary College. This school is located in Numurkah, 60km north-east of Echuca, Victoria. Even though it is a small school with [only 240 students](#) in 2019, we saw a lot of changes in the students that participated in our face-to-face mentoring program.

**Figure 9: positive change in self among Numurkah SC students participating in the face-to-face program**



Per Figure 9 (above) mentees exhibited positive changes in themselves, feeling more confident to try new things and prouder to be Autistic than they were before the program. In addition, they also developed skills which will be helpful in their lives such as meeting new people and communication skills. These results show the immense impact mentoring programs can have to Autistic students in rural communities. This is what motivates us to expand our programs to more schools across rural areas of Victoria, Queensland and other States and Territories.

## Funding adjustments for students with mild or undiagnosed Autism

No.	Recommendation
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That the Federal Government undertake a review on how the <i>Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability</i> (NCCDSSD) is (1) used to determine funding for students with disabilities and Autistic students and (2) whether processes in implementing the NCCD have improved since 2016, particularly in government schools nationally.</li> </ul>
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That the Federal Department of Education, Skills and Employment work with the Departments of Education of each State and Territory to develop Autism education strategies in conjunction with Autistic-led and and Autism-focussed organisations.</li> </ul>

We call upon the Federal Department of Education to work with States and Territories to ensure funding systems reach Autistic students whose Autism may be too mild for them to receive current adjustments and support, even though they face numerous barriers to achieving their social, emotional and academic outcomes at school.

Some Autistic students need reasonable adjustments to participate in their education on the same basis as their non-Autistic peers. In Victorian Government schools, if a student's Autism is profoundly severe (i.e. significant challenges in adaptive behaviour and language skills), schools can receive funding via the *Program for Students with Disability* (PSD) to cover a student's adjustments and support needs. This can range from hiring specialist staff such as occupational therapists and speech pathologists, buying augmentative and alternative communication devices and purchasing social/ emotional support programs like the I CAN Network mentoring program. However, if a student's Autism is undiagnosed or mild, they will miss





out on PSD funding, depriving them of the necessary support and adjustments to learn at the same basis as their non-Autistic peers. [This was the case of one Autistic student](#) whose diagnosis was not ‘severe’ enough to receive PSD funding. The student’s school thankfully reallocated \$40,000/year in their budget to pay for an integration aide.

In addition, the non-funding of Autistic students whose condition is necessarily too ‘mild’, arguably creates a negative feedback loop for schools. This is because such students will not be included in the *Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability* ([NCCDSSD](#)) which only counts students with disabilities who are receiving adjustments in their education. [Federal](#) and [State](#) governments use or will be using NCCDSSD data to calculate how much they will fund schools to support students with disabilities. This will negatively affect the amount of funding schools receive to support students with disabilities. With limited funding, a school’s ability to support Autistic students whose condition is mild will be negatively impacted. Consequently, these Autistic students will most likely not receive adjustments and will continue to face challenges and barriers to their education as they potentially fall behind their non-Autistic peers. Hence, it is important that schools are supported to identify Autistic students who require adjustments to their education, particularly those students who are not currently receiving them, so that schools receive enough funding to provide such adjustments.

[A potential challenge](#) in implementing the NCCDSSD is in school staff understanding the NCCDSSD, particularly with the evidence that needs to be collected to report the type and level of adjustments students with disability need. This understanding can vary among different school sectors as outlined in PwC’s *2016 NCCD Continuous Quality Improvement Project* report. This report found that Catholic schools showed the highest level of understanding and application of NCCDSSD and were more likely to correctly identify the level of adjustment required for students with disabilities compared to independent and government schools. The differences in NCCDSSD implementation among the three school sectors came down to how NCCDSSD is embedded in all parts of the Catholic school system from schools to state and national Catholic Education Commissions and the strong relationships with NCCD consultants and external specialists such as speech pathologists and paediatricians.

The differences in understanding and executing the NCCDSSD among different school sectors has an impact on the school staff identifying the adjustments required for students with mild or undiagnosed Autism. As a result, funding for schools to implement adjustments and support Autistic students can be adversely impacted.

I CAN Ltd observes how the above plays out in the number of Victorian Catholic and government schools which purchase standalone I CAN mentoring programs (eg. a program exclusively for their Autistic/ neuro divergent students and not part resourced by a neighbouring school). In 2019, 19 Victorian Catholic schools had the resources from their NCCDSSD funding to pay for a standalone I CAN program. In contrast, only half of 20 Victorian government schools fully paid for the I CAN program from their school budget. The other half had to secure funding from external sources such as local fundraising, the Victorian Government School Focused Youth Service and the federal National School Chaplaincy Program. This contrast underscores the consequences of education sectors having an unequal understanding of the processes behind the NCCDSSD.

In sum, government schools in particular need to be better trained and equipped to identify and provide adjustments for students with undiagnosed or mild Autism. The consequences of getting NCCDSSD wrong will negatively impact the funding and ability of schools to support and provide adjustments for Autistic students. Given that the PwC review is over four years old and governments are using NCCDSSD data to inform funding for students with disabilities, it is timely that the comprehension and use of NCCDSSD are reviewed to ensure schools are adequately funded to provide adjustments for all Autistic students, particularly those whose condition is undiagnosed or mild. Hence, we call on the Federal Government to undertake a review on how NCCDSSD data is used to determine funding for students with disabilities and Autistic students and whether processes in implementing the NCCD have improved since 2016, particularly in government schools.



## **State-based Autism education strategies**

I CAN Network calls upon the Federal Department of Education and each State and Territory Department of Education to develop Autism education strategies in conjunction with Autistic-led and and Autism-focussed organisations.

I CAN Network commends the Queensland Department of Education and Victorian Department of Education for their deliberate Autism education strategies, set within broader inclusive education strategies. I CAN Network has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the strategy of both governments by creating space for policy-makers to listen directly to the voices of Autistic students and their parents.

## Supporting Autistic-led social enterprises that create jobs for Autistic people

No.	Recommendation
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That the Federal Government support (1) Autistic-led social enterprises which create jobs for Autistic people and (2) Autistic people who want to start up their own small business or social enterprise.</li> </ul>
7.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That the Federal Government set up or sponsor events where companies and universities are brought together to talk about future pathways with Autistic young people and adults.</li> </ul>

### Introduction

The Federal Government needs to take steps to support Autistic-led social enterprises which create jobs for Autistic people. This is because employment prospects for Autistic people are not only bleak but are also worsening. According to the 2018 SDAC, Autistic people are less likely to participate in the labour workforce (37.9%) than other people with disabilities (53.4%) and those without a disability (84.1%). Autistic people are also 3.5 times more likely to be unemployed (34.3%) than other people with disabilities (10.3%) and 7.5 times more likely than those without a disability (4.6%). Compared to the 2015 SDAC, these employment statistics have worsened for Autistic people with labour force participation reduced by 2.9% and unemployment rates increased by 2.7%. We anticipate that these statistics will worsen as Australia feels the economic after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the labour market becomes more competitive, increasing the burden and challenge of Autistic people being employed.

### The role of I CAN Network in the Autism employment space

I CAN Network is responding by creating jobs for Autistic young people and adults. Since our incorporation in September 2015, we have employed around 60 Autistic people, including 31 female Autistics. We are committed to ensuring that at least 50% of our management and staff are Autistic. This gives us a unique opportunity to create a work culture that values the talents, time and capacities of Autistic people. For instance, hiring Autistic people to become mentors provides a lived experience in our face-to-face and online mentoring programs. This creates a high relatability between mentors and mentees which, in most cases, enhances the mentees' self-acceptance, self-confidence, sense of belonging and optimism.

### Trainee mentor positions

We are especially proud to be bringing up former mentees from our mentoring programs to become mentors through our trainee mentor positions. Through this position trainees who enjoy mentoring their peers can be exposed to the professional skills behind mentoring and to I CAN Ltd as a workplace, all while they are still students. This involves them assisting I CAN mentor staff to run activities with small groups of mentees during mentoring sessions. This provides an easier stepping stone for trainee mentors to become fully-fledged mentor staff in I CAN Network's face-to-face or online programs.

Giving trainee mentors a pathway to employment in I CAN Network provides them with fulfilling work in the short-term and transferable skills and experiences which will increase their employability in the long-term. This reduces their chances of unemployment and their reliance on government welfare payments and support. As at July 2020, I CAN Ltd has successfully developed 20 trainee mentors into paid I CAN mentor staff.

Interviews with trainee mentors evidence the positive reception to the program. Trainee mentors enjoyed their work, particularly in interacting with mentees in the program. They also learnt how to mentor other people and gained life skills such as leadership, communication and self-awareness that will be useful in their future careers. This was the case for Jake who was a trainee mentor in a Catholic Secondary School in Melbourne over 2018-19. For him, a highlight of being a trainee mentor is the friends he made with the mentees in his group: people he still communicates with to this day. In addition, his

communication skills improved as a trainee mentor, to the point where he is able to socialise with other people and to talk in front of a room of people.

**Figure 10: Jake presenting as a trainee mentor at I CAN Networks's 2019 AWETISM Expo powered by ANZ**



In his interview, Jake emphasised that he likes public speaking now, going from not liking ...*anything that dealt with communication with other people*... in Year 6 to now feeling ...*full of myself, more confident, a lot less feeling like the guy that sits in the corner*... after his AWETISM Expo speech in Year 9. Jake looks upon his trainee mentor experience fondly, saying that he looks ...*upon it [the trainee mentor program] quite fondly and sort of wish I could still do it*... The trainee mentor program enhanced his attachment with the St James College I CAN program.

We are currently expanding the trainee mentor positions to more schools to ensure that more mentees have the chance to become trainee mentors. To enable more trainee mentors to be employed as mentor staff in I CAN Network, we require government support to pursue and initiate more opportunities which create jobs for Autistic people. This could be incorporated into the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) [Scheme](#) run by the Department of Social Services (DSS). The ILC Scheme provides grants to organisations, including Disabled People Organisations (DPOs) which are run by and for people with disabilities, to run programs that benefit all people with disabilities and their families or carers.

Strengthening the staff training focus will allow Autistic-led social enterprises such as I CAN Network to sustain or expand its programs so that it can reach out to and create more jobs for Autistic people, particularly those Autistic young adults who are not eligible for NDIS. Additionally, more funding should be allocated to the Mainstream Capacity Building Program of the ILC Scheme which should be expanded to include DPOs and Autistic-led social enterprises that deliver services to Autistic people. This would enable Autistic-led social enterprises to build strong administrative structures and skill bases that facilitate service delivery and job creation for Autistic people across Australia.

### **Opening Autistic people's eyes to post-school pathways via the I CAN Network AWETISM Expo**

I CAN Network Ltd runs annual Autistic career expos in Melbourne, South West Victoria and Goulburn Murray Victoria in partnership with ANZ. Each expo is entitled 'AWETISM Expo' because it showcases and celebrates the unique talents and strengths of Autistic young people and adults. We bring together Autistic students from our face-to-face programs to run presentations and exhibits which express their talents and interests to not only other students but also the media and the community. We also assemble universities and companies who set up stands to expose Autistic young people and adults to meaningful career pathways. The Expo has been positively received by everyone with 88% attendees enjoying 2019's AWETISM Expo (Melbourne).

Given that Autistic people are currently less likely to complete a post-school qualification and to be employed, events such as the AWETISM Expo are great touchpoints for universities and companies to converse with talented, confident Autistic people who want to pursue their strengths and interests in their post-school pathways. By encouraging universities and companies to attend Autism events relating to post-school pathways, Autistic people can build awareness and networks that would be immensely valuable for navigating their career, leading to sustainable employment in the long-term. We therefore call on the Federal Government to set up or sponsor forums and events where universities and companies are brought in to converse with Autistic young people and adults about tertiary education and employment so that Autistic people see their future possibilities.

### **Supporting Autistic people to start up their own small business or social enterprise**

The government should fund and support Autistic people who want to establish small businesses and social enterprises to translate their ideas into tangible products and services. Given the [need for Australia to innovate](#) and the fact that [98% Australian businesses are small businesses](#) (sole traders or employing less than 20 people), starting up a business or social enterprise is a viable way for Autistic people to be employed.

At the same time, I CAN Ltd has experienced numerous challenges in establishing a small business or social enterprise that we would like to note. The biggest challenge we have found is in building and expanding the administrative structures as the social enterprise expanded. Most of the grants we received from various funders are used to expand our programs to more schools across Victoria and Queensland. However, these grants did not support the expanding administration needs as the social enterprise grew. As a result, during the 2016-2017 financial year, it was difficult to keep the social enterprise growing with only one paid role and limited financial literacy. It was not until we hired more staff that we started to consolidate and strengthen the administration and internal structures of the organisation. This work is ongoing to ensure that we build a more sustainable Autistic-led social enterprise which continues to deliver excellent programs for Autistic people and the public.

Given that Autistic people tend to be less comfortable with change and uncertainty, both of which are inherent in growing a small business, we feel that Autistic-led organisations should be well-supported by the government to make the leap. Therefore, we call on the Federal Government to provide grants to Autistic adults wanting to set up a social business. The criteria of the grant could not only focus on the initial steps of starting up a small business or social enterprise but also learning how to support the expansion of the business and improving the applicant's business capabilities and literacy such as bookkeeping and human resources. These programs and supports should consider the unique strengths and challenges Autistic people possess such as their attention to detail and their fear of uncertainty, respectively. These grants and initiatives for Autistic people can be based on what exists now such as the Enterprise Capability Voucher Stream from Business Victoria and the New Business Assistance with NEIS initiative. By establishing new programs or adapting existing initiatives for Autistic people, these Australians can be given the push to start up their own business or social enterprise to pursue their ideas while being employed, resolving the unemployment problem in the process.