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Dear Education and Health Standing Committee,

My name is James Ong. I am the Evaluation and Policy Manager of I CAN Network Ltd. On behalf of I CAN Network, we welcome the opportunity to provide a submission for the Standing Committee's *Inquiry into Support for Autistic Children and Young People in Schools*.

I CAN Network is an Autistic-led social enterprise that is pursuing a vision of 'a world that embraces Autism' by running programs 'to prove what Autistics can do'. Our most notable programs are our school and online peer mentoring programs for Autistic young people aged 7-22 years. These mentoring programs are designed to build social connections and improve the self-esteem of Autistic young people. The mentoring programs are led by Autistic young adults who have lived experience of Autism, putting them in the best position to pass down the positives of being Autistic to student mentees and adapt the mentoring sessions to mentees' needs.

In our submission, we would like to talk about I CAN Network's peer mentoring programs and Victoria's Autism education policies, and how they might be relevant to Western Australia's (WA) education system. Our submission will respond to the third question of the inquiry's terms of reference: "*Strategies in other jurisdictions that support school systems to respond to the needs of autistic students, and the applicability of those strategies to WA*".

I CAN School® mentoring programs

I CAN Network runs I CAN School® Mentoring Programs, peer mentoring programs for Autistic students aged 7-20 years, in primary and secondary schools across Victoria and Queensland. We run high school programs for Autistic students in secondary school and I CAN Imagination Club® programs for primary school students who have learning differences and/or social anxiety. Both mentoring programs aim to establish a sense of belonging, instil a positive sense of self and Autistic identity, and boost self-esteem by improving their self-confidence, optimism and mental wellbeing among mentees. The mentoring programs also aim to build mentees' transferable skills such as communication and public speaking skills so that they can advocate for themselves in the future. Ultimately, the I CAN School® Mentoring Programs hope to promote positive school experiences for Autistic students so that they can complete school, enter post-secondary pathways and find sustainable employment.

I CAN Network runs internal evaluations to evaluate the [social impact of our school mentoring programs](#). Our internal evaluations indicate that the high school programs can make a positive impact to Autistic students in secondary school, both in terms of their self-esteem and how they engage with other people. Across all high school programs in Victoria and Queensland, mentees' self-esteem improved after the program (Figure 1), with:

- A 16% increase in mentees feeling confident in themselves;
- A 9% increase in mentees feeling that good things will happen to them;
- A 9% increase in mentees giving things a go that they found difficult; and
- An 8% increase in mentees feeling positive about being Autistic.

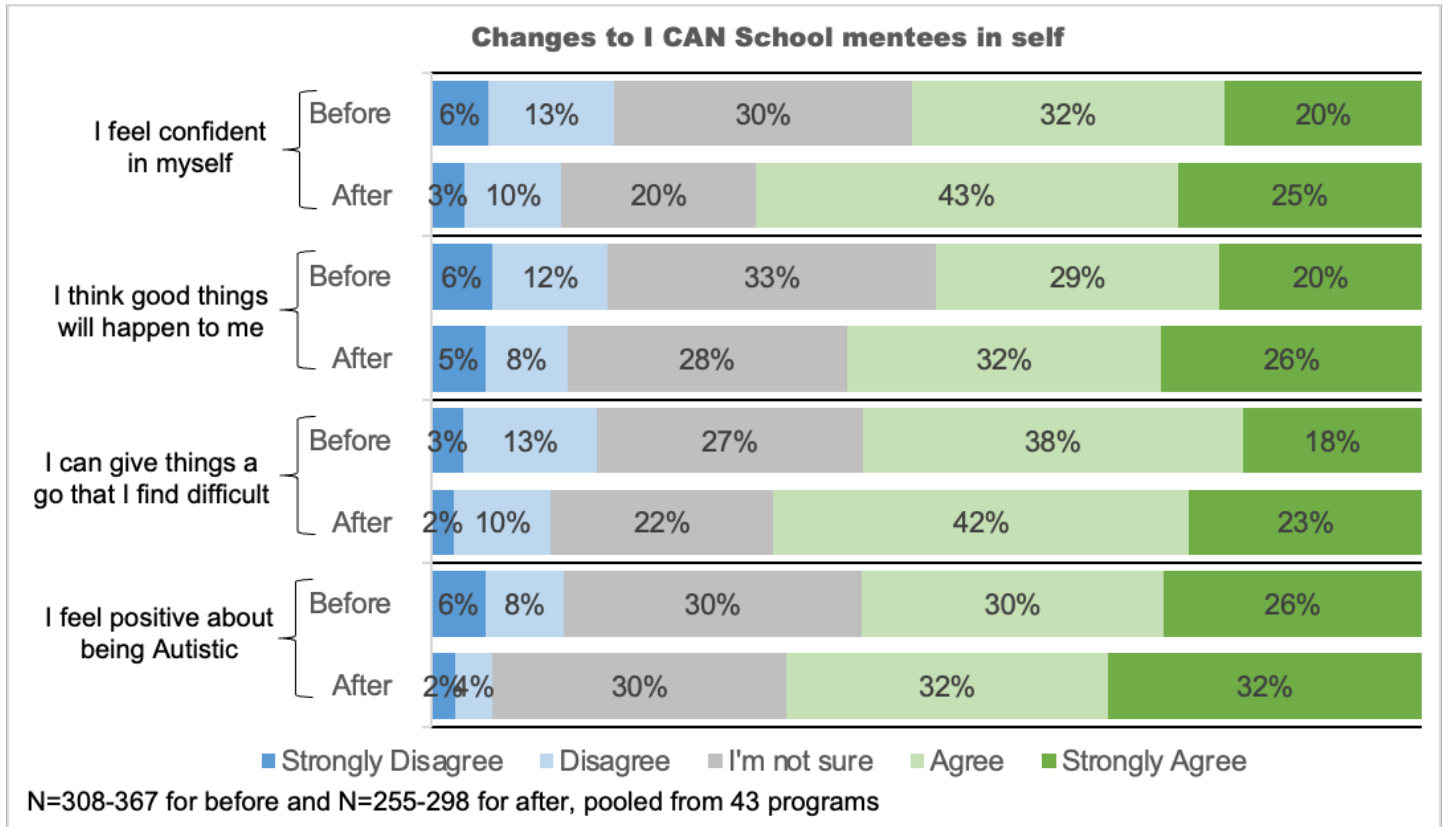


Figure 1: Changes in mentees' self-esteem after attending the high school programs

Additionally, we saw improvements in how mentees interact with other people (Figure 2), with:

- An 18% increase in mentees feeling connected to other Autistic students;
- A 9% increase in mentees feeling confident to interact with other people; and
- A 15% increase in mentees feeling confident to communicate in front of other people.

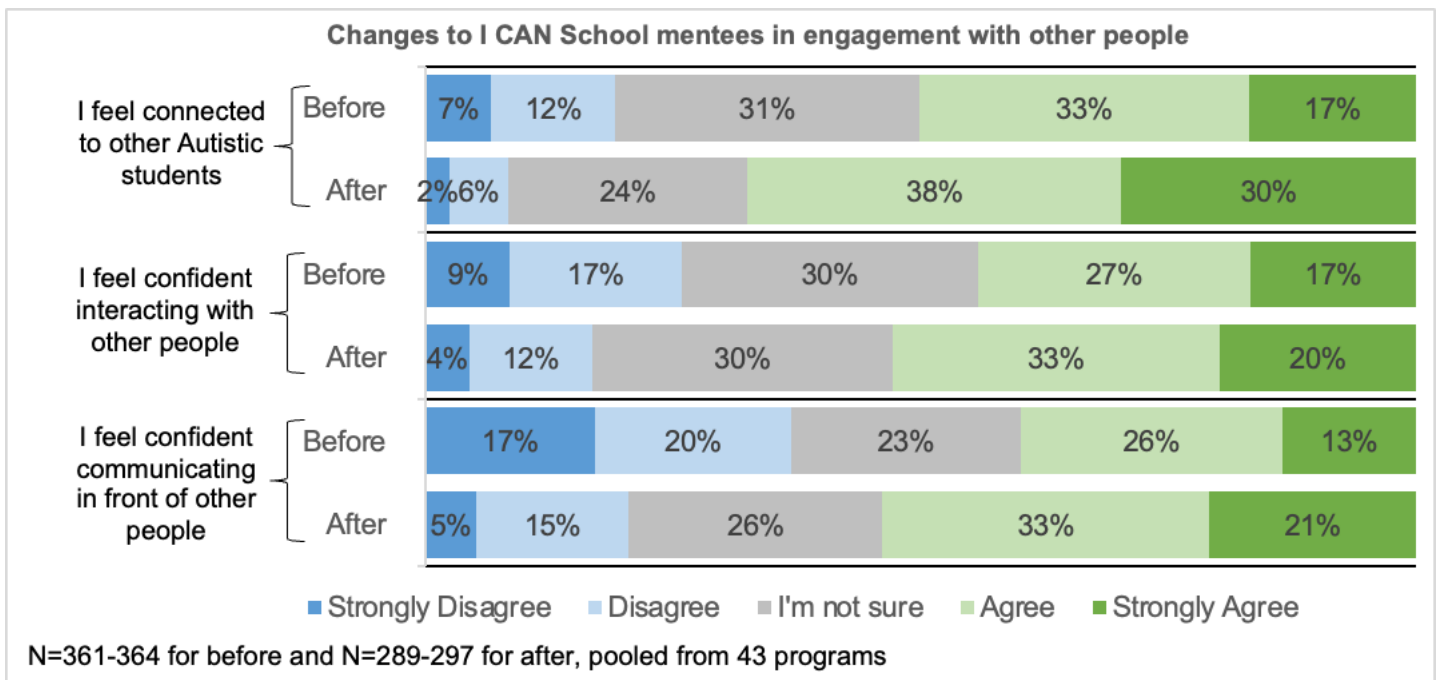


Figure 2: Changes in how mentees engage with other people after attending the high school programs

Collectively, these results highlight the positive impact our school mentoring programs are having to Autistic students' self-esteem and social connections. These can contribute to improved school engagement and experiences which can lead to Autistic students completing their education.

This internal data is similar to independent data. The [2022 independent evaluation of the I CAN School programs by Australian Catholic University \(ACU\)](#) indicated that 84.5% of primary students and 86.3% of secondary students were likely to recommend the program to another student. Primary and secondary students experienced statistically significant increases in their sense of belonging through participation in the I CAN program. Furthermore, Autistic secondary students experienced a statistically significant increase in their acceptance of their Autistic identity and engagement with the Autistic community.

The evaluation results presented in this submission cover school mentoring programs in Victoria and Queensland, most of which are government schools. Hence, the evaluation results can be applied to public schools in WA. Additionally, we deliver school mentoring programs to mainstream and specialist schools in metropolitan, regional and rural regions of Victoria and Queensland, either in-person or online. Given that public schools in WA cover a wide swathe of metropolitan, rural and remote regions, I CAN Network is able to deliver school mentoring programs online to public schools across all regions of WA.

I CAN Network's professional development programs

Schools can be a difficult environment for Autistic students. According to ABS' 2018 [Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers](#), 77.7% of Autistic students aged 5-20 years experience difficulties in school, particularly in fitting in socially (59.8%), learning difficulties (55.3%) and communication difficulties (51.5%). Furthermore, Autistic students do not receive enough support to learn at the same level as their peers, with 45.9% of them indicating they needed more support or assistance at school.

Negative experiences in school can lead to poor education outcomes among Autistic people. Autistic people are less likely to complete a TAFE (17.9%) or university (8.1%) qualification compared to those with other disabilities or without any disabilities. This can feed into worse employment outcomes, with Autistic people being three and eight times more likely to be unemployed compared to people with disability or without disability respectively (34.1% vs 10.3% and 4.6% respectively). These statistics indicate the need to improve the experiences of Autistic students in school if we are to improve the educational and employment outcomes of Autistic people.

I CAN Network delivers peer mentoring programs in schools to improve Autistic students' social connections, self-esteem and skills so that they are more likely to stay in school and complete their education. Accompanying the peer mentoring programs are professional development programs that cater to teachers and school staff. These professional development programs aim to encourage teachers and school staff to develop classrooms and school environments that are supportive of Autistic students' strengths and needs, increasing their engagement in the classroom. Internal evaluations indicate that most teachers and school staff attending our professional development programs learn how to better support Autistic students at school. Over 122 responses from 14 government schools in Victoria (Figure 3):

- 94% of participants learnt something positive about Autism;
- 93% of participants learnt more about the challenges and strengths of Autistic people;
- 93% of participants felt they could work better with Autistic people;
- 92% of participants felt they could better support Autistic people; and
- 91% of participants were more likely to promote Autistic people's achievements to other people after the program.

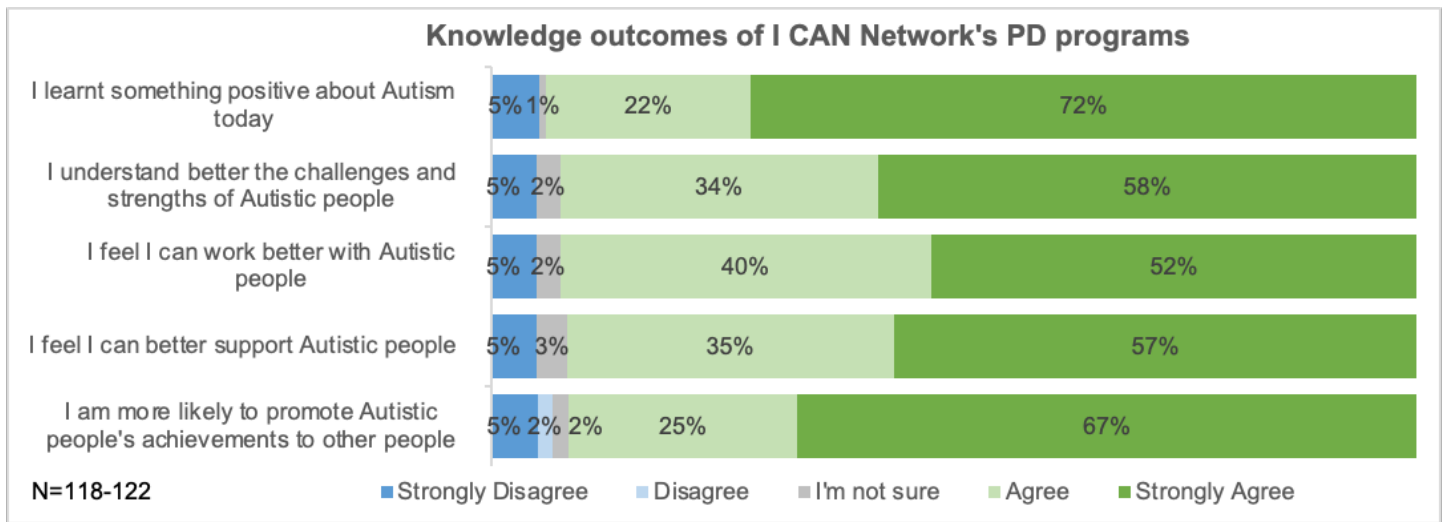


Figure 3: Knowledge outcomes achieved from I CAN Network's Professional Development (PD) programs

These results indicate that professional development programs are important for making classrooms and school environments more accommodating to Autistic students by improving teachers' and school staff's knowledge of Autism. The professional development programs can either be delivered stand-alone to schools, or they can be packaged together with a school mentoring program. By offering the professional development programs alongside the peer mentoring programs, the benefits of the peer mentoring programs can be extended to the classroom and other parts of the school environment. Both offerings are available to schools in Victoria and Queensland, so they can be extended to schools in Western Australia.

Autism strategies and policies in Victoria

The I CAN Network works with the Victorian government to develop policies, strategies and initiatives in Autism education. They are designed to improve the experiences and engagement of Autistic young people in school, increasing the chances that they will complete their education and secure sustainable employment. There are a number of policies and strategies in Victoria that the I CAN Network is involved in, a few of which are discussed below.

Victorian Autism Plan

The Victorian Autism plan is drawn from the Victorian Parliament's 2016-17 *Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* and Victoria's State Disability Plan to outline a whole-of-government strategy that aims to improve the lives of Autistic people and their families and carers. The plan is split into four domains:

- Inclusive Communities
- Health, Housing and Wellbeing
- Fairness and Safety; and
- Contributing Lives.

Under the plan, the Victorian government works with Autism organisations to implement initiatives that cater to Autistic people across Victoria. I CAN Network's programs and work are focused on the Contributing Lives domain, specifically on education and skills.

The plan was the basis for a Common Funding Agreement between the I CAN Network and the Victorian Department of Education and Training to expand its school mentoring programs in Victoria and pilot an online mentoring program for Victorian Autistic government students from 2020 to 2023. Under the agreement, I CAN Network was successful in expanding its school and online mentoring programs to reach out to more Autistic young people across Victoria. This has led to a further \$5.7 million in funding from the Victorian

Government to further expand its school and online mentoring programs from 2024 to 2027. This will enable us to reach out to even more Autistic young people across Victoria.

The Western Australia government has a State Disability Strategy that lasts from 2020-2030, but it currently does not have a specific strategy for Autistic people. Having an Autism-specific strategy would be helpful in coordinating the activities of the government and different Autism organisations to support the needs of Autistic people in WA.

Disability Inclusion Package

Disability Inclusion is a \$1.6 billion-funded initiative from the Victorian Government to improve support for students with disability via a number of programs. It is being progressively rolled out across all government schools in Victoria from 2021 to 2025.

The most notable part of the initiative is the use of Disability Inclusion Profiles to support the needs of students with disability. Disability Inclusion Profiles describe a student's strengths and needs at school and any adjustments the student needs to engage in school at the same level as their peers. Disability Inclusion Profiles are developed via a strengths-based approach involving meetings between the student, their family and school staff. The Disability Inclusion Profile forms the basis for schools to secure funding for supports and adjustments the student needs to engage in their education.

Given the central role of the student in talking about their strengths and needs to school staff, I CAN School® Mentoring Programs are well-placed to build the capabilities of Autistic students to advocate for themselves. Our school peer mentoring programs promote positive changes to self, with mentees exhibiting improved self-confidence, self-acceptance and communication skills after the program. These outcomes allow mentees to talk about themselves and their Autism to other people, improving their capabilities to advocate for their strengths and needs. These capabilities are important for tailoring supports and adjustments in Disability Inclusion Profiles that reflect what the Autistic student needs, improving their engagement in education.

The initiative is being supported by a new tiered funding model, where schools can seek either school-level (tier 2) funding to deliver adjustments and inclusive practices for all students with disability and student-level (tier 3) funding to support individual students with high support requirements. The funding reforms have allowed schools to purchase an I CAN School® Mentoring Program using their school-level (tier 2) funding. These have contributed to the expansion of I CAN Network's school mentoring programs to cover more schools across Victoria, allowing us to reach out to more Autistic students.

Finally, a number of programs provide new resources or activities to help schools be more inclusive to students with disabilities. These include specialist expertise, coaching, professional learning, evidence-based guidance and resources and coursework on inclusive education. Collectively, these programs contribute to a co-ordinated initiative to improve the learning experiences of Autistic students in schools while building the capability of schools to be more inclusive of Autistic students. This initiative is something that the WA government could consider to improve how it works with Autistic students.

Autism Education Strategy

The Autism Education Strategy is part of the Disability Inclusion initiative that specifically aims to improve Autistic students' learning and wellbeing outcomes while building school communities that are inclusive of Autistic students. The Autism Education Strategy is split into six pillars:

1. Promote and celebrate Autism inclusion and diversity at the whole school level;
2. Build the capability of school leaders and staff to meet the educational needs of Autistic students;
3. Involve the student, families and experts in collaboratively planning for students' education;

4. Support Autistic students' health and wellbeing;
5. Support Autistic students' individual education needs; and
6. Strengthen accountability and transparency for students with disabilities.

Supporting these pillars is the Diverse Learners Hub. It is a centre of excellence that supports schools to better teach and care for learners with diverse needs, including Autistic students. It does this by providing resources on diverse learning and meeting the needs of diverse learners, coaching school leaders on making whole-school changes to better support diverse learners and incorporating research on diverse learners in its work.

I CAN Network is closely involved in the implementation of the Autism Education Strategy. Our I CAN School[®] Mentoring Programs are linked to pillars 1 and 4 relating to promoting and celebrating Autism inclusion and supporting Autistic students' health and wellbeing respectively. Similarly, our professional development programs support pillar 2 relating to building the capability of school leaders and staff to meet the education needs of Autistic students. Moreover, I CAN Network is part of the Autism Education Strategy Advisory Group that meets with the Victorian Department of Education six times per year. In these meetings, we provide feedback on the implementation of the Autism Education Strategy and the Diverse Learners' Hub. Altogether, I CAN Network is involved in and influences the implementation of the Autism Education Strategy.

WA's equivalent to the Diverse Learners Hub is the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SEND) within the WA Department of Education. It delivers intensive support and assistive technology to students with a diagnosed or imputed disability while building the capacity of teachers and school staff to build inclusive learning environments via learning resources, consultancy and professional learning. Furthermore, SEND delivers specialised learning programs (SLPs) for Autistic students in WA public schools who are at significant risk of disengagement, underachievement or behavioural difficulties, with the aim of improving their school engagement and academic achievement. In addition to academic support, the programs also aim to build positive peer relationships, social skills and self-regulation among Autistic students. Having achieved excellent results, the program has been recently funded to [expand to eight more schools](#) over 2023 to 2025.

I CAN Network sees an opportunity to work with SEND to run school mentoring programs that build social connections and improve the self-esteem of Autistic students outside the classroom. In particular, I CAN Network is happy to work with SEND to research and pioneer strengths-based approaches to Autism that harness Autistic students' existing strengths to overcome their weaknesses and improve their engagement in school.

School Mental Health Menu and Fund

The School Mental Health Menu (the 'Menu') in Victoria is a suite of evidence-based programs and initiatives that aim to address the mental health and wellbeing needs of school students. Arising from Recommendation 17 of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, the Menu is split into three tiers:

- Tier 1 (Positive mental health promotion) are universal interventions that aim to build an inclusive and supportive school climate to promote the positive mental health and wellbeing of school students. These include programs relating to bullying prevention, mental health literacy and social and emotional learning.
- Tier 2 (Early intervention and cohort-specific support) are targeted interventions that provide additional support to students with additional mental health needs. These include trauma-informed and grief and loss programs, as well as support for specific cohorts including students with disability.
- Tier 3 (Targeted support) are indicated interventions for students with emerging or diagnosed mental health needs or experiencing mental ill health. These programs are delivered by a trained mental health and wellbeing professional such as a psychologist, social worker or occupational therapist.

The Menu is supported by the School Mental Health Fund (the 'Fund'). The Fund is an ongoing pool of funding that schools can use to purchase evidence-based programs and initiatives from the Menu, depending on the needs of the student body and specific student cohorts.

I CAN School® Mentoring Programs and the accompanying professional development programs are [part of the Menu](#). This allows schools to use funding from the Fund to purchase an I CAN School and/or professional development program for their Autistic students. Similar to the Disability Inclusion reforms, being part of the Menu has allowed I CAN Network to expand its school mentoring programs to cover more schools across Victoria, allowing us to reach out to more Autistic students.

Currently, the WA Department of Education only has [mental health](#) and [bullying](#) initiatives that target students who experience mental ill health or bullying respectively. From the Department, there are no programs or initiatives that prevent mental ill health and bullying in the first place. With Autistic students more likely to experience mental ill health and bullying in school than other students, these problems would not be rectified in a timely manner, increasing the risk that they will disengage and drop out of school. The Victorian Menu is innovative in that it not only assists students who are actually experiencing mental ill health, but also provides universal and targeted support for students to prevent mental ill health, including Autistic students. The WA government should consider setting up and implementing a suite of evidence-based programs and initiatives that aim to improve the mental health and education experiences of Autistic school-aged students. It is a bonus if the suite is supported by a pool of funding that allows schools to purchase these evidence-based programs and initiatives without using their own funding.

Conclusion

I CAN Network's submission describes and provides evidence behind its peer mentoring and professional development programs for Autistic students and teachers respectively in school. These programs aim to build a sense of belonging, instil a positive self and Autistic identity and boost self-esteem among Autistic students, while encouraging teachers to develop strategies that support Autistic students' strengths and needs. Ultimately, the outcomes of these programs will improve Autistic students' engagement in the classroom and school, increasing the chances that they will complete school, enter post-secondary pathways and find sustainable employment.

Additionally, I CAN Network has illustrated a number of ways that it works with the Victorian government to develop and implement policies, strategies and initiatives in Autism education. These policies not only enable I CAN Network to expand its I CAN School® Mentoring Programs and professional development programs to more schools across Victoria, but also promotes initiatives that are designed to improve the education and school experiences of Autistic students across Victoria.

I hope that you have enjoyed reading through our submission and learnt a lot about our experiences in supporting Autistic students and the Victorian government in Victoria. Should you have any further enquiries on our submission, please do not hesitate to contact me at james@icannetwork.com.au.

Yours sincerely



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