THE I CAN® PLAN FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

Engaging Victoria's Autistic students in public schools

V3 - 19 August 2026

I CAN Network Election Platform:
Victorian State Election 28 November 2026

INTRODUCTION

The *I CAN® Plan for Public Education* is I CAN Network's platform for the 2026 Victorian State Election. I CAN wants to see a Victoria in which all Autistic students have I CAN available to them, for their connection and confidence. I CAN welcomes engagement with this platform. I CAN is open to negotiating the options presented herein with the State Government-elect based on their priorities.

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WHAT IS I CAN?

I CAN Network Ltd (I CAN®) is Australia's largest Autistic-led organisation delivering (1) Autistic-led mentoring programs for Autistic/neurodivergent students and (2) professional development for educators at scale. Founded in 2013 by Autistic law graduate Chris Varney, I CAN® is a thriving public company with over 100 staff (80 of whom are Autistic) governed by a non-executive Board. I CAN® has become one of the largest employers of Autistics in Victoria. Whilst I CAN® has a national reach, its base is in Victoria where it has a state-wide reach to deliver its three services: I CAN School®, I CAN Online and I CAN Professional Development.

1 **I CAN School®** is an 8-session group mentoring program building belonging, confidence and Autistic pride in Year 7 - 12 students. Its primary school variation I CAN Imagination Club® builds the same outcomes in Prep - Grade 6 students, but substitutes Autistic pride for a softer, age-appropriate introduction to neurodiversity. What separates these programs from others is strong Autistic-led design and delivery: at least one of two I CAN® staff on a program need to be Autistic. Evidence to date has said this strong Autistic-led component is what achieves the high rates of belonging observed in the program.

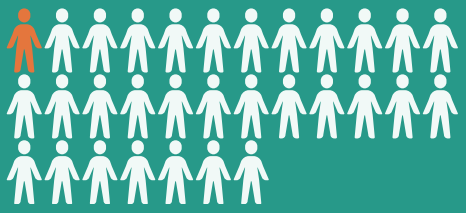
2 **I CAN Online** is the online equivalent of the I CAN School® Program delivered outside of schools and driven by parent/carer demand. Please note that as a term I CAN School® Program is often used as an umbrella term for all of the I CAN® services in schools, inclusive of the involvement of government school students in I CAN Online.

3 **I CAN Professional Development** consists of content and workshops which pool I CAN's lessons from program delivery into insights for educators on reducing students' anxiety, managing behaviour, reducing work avoidance and increasing school attendance.

I CAN® shares its insights with the State Government. I CAN is a member of the Autism Plan Advisory Group, Autism Education Strategy Advisory Group and Disability Inclusion Advisory Group. Founder/CEO Chris Varney sits on the Education Secretary's Inclusive Education Expert Panel and has served as Chairperson of the Victorian Disability Advisory Council since 2022. Chris is also Co-Chair of the National Autism Strategy Reference Group.

I CAN® plays an important role in the Victorian autism sector. I CAN® works closely with Advocating for Children with Disability, Amaze, Different Journeys, Yellow Ladybugs and Autism Valued.

WHY I CAN?



One in every 31 Victorian children (3.3%) are Autistic[1].

23.5%

Only 23.5% of Autistic Victorian adults have completed post-secondary education[3].

39%

Autistic young people (aged 5-20 years) experience significant challenges in school. Only 39% of Autistic Victorian adults have completed Year 12 or equivalent[2].

43%

School refusal (or more appropriately described as 'School Attendance Difficulties') accounts for 43% of school absences in Autistic students[4].

These are all reasons why the I CAN Program, which promotes positive school engagement, is a key aspect of Victoria's Autism Education Strategy.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR I CAN?

Evidence from the 2025 school year says the I CAN Program is increasing Autistic students' social connection with their peers in school by 23%, their positive Autistic identity by 16% and their confidence by 14%.

90% of teachers agree that they learnt something positive about autism from an I CAN professional development workshop and 87% agree that they could apply what they learnt to their practice.

The results have been facilitated through the strong emphasis I CAN® has placed on data collection and program improvement since 2014. The results of internal evaluations and five independent evaluations have informed a strong evidence base behind the I CAN Program and its facilitation of belonging, confidence and self-acceptance in Autistic children and young people. Recent full evaluations can be accessed through **this link**.

The method of the I CAN Program is governed by a set of program logic maps which inform evaluation tools and ongoing content design. The I CAN Youth Advisory Group looks closely at evaluation results and survey tools to give advice to the Board and Management on how to make the I CAN Program and its tools as relevant as possible to Autistic students and their evolving culture.

The strength of I CAN's evidence base is why the I CAN Program has been on the **Department of Education's School Mental Health Menu** since 2022.

[1]Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (2023), https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2023/opinion/australias-rates-of-autism-should-be-celebrated#:~:text=But%20the%20same%20research%20reported,behaviour%20challenges%20than%20older%20children, accessed 6 May 2026.
[2]Victorian Autism Organisations (2026), *A@P Policy Platform Mar 31 - Apr 2 2026*, p. 3.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Parliament of Australia (2025) *The national trend of school refusal and related matters: Final report.* Senate Education and Employment References Committee.
[5]Uljarević, M., Hedley, D., Rose-Foley, K. et al. *Anxiety and Depression from Adolescence to Old Age in Autism Spectrum Disorder.* J Autism Dev Disord 50, 3155–3165 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04084-z
[6]Victorian Autism Organisations (2026), op cit, p. 3.

WHAT IS THE I CAN EXPANSION FY24-FY27?

The I CAN Expansion FY24-FY27 was set up in the 2023/2024 State Budget and was based upon the Australian Catholic University's 2022 independent evaluation of I CAN® which recommended a *'a tangible and time-sensitive expansion of the I CAN to allow all neurodiverse students the opportunity to access whichever version of the program is most suited to their needs'*[7].

The 2023/24 State Budget committed $5.64 million to a four-year I CAN Expansion, inclusive of funds for **practical resources** available to all government schools[8], an independent evaluation and the Department of Education's (the Department) management of the I CAN common funding agreement. Over FY24 - FY25 the Department committed a further $400,0000 to the continuation and extension of the Disability Inclusion Ambassador Program bringing the total quantum of public funding over four years to $6.04 million.

The purpose of the FY24-FY27 public funding, among other things, was to continue the I CAN Program in 100 government schools and expand the program to a further 154 schools so a total of 254 government schools were involved over FY24 - FY27.

The 2023/24 State Budget also earmarked ongoing funding for I CAN® to the quantum of $1.8 million per year in order to continue and expand the I CAN School in-person and online mentoring programs to be available to all government schools.

[7] Jones, S., Lowe, J., Mizzi, S. (2022). Independent Evaluation: I CAN Network Mentoring Programs Final Report 15 December 2022, Australian Catholic University Research Impact Unit, Executive Summary.
[8] Refer to I CAN Education at https://icannetwork.education/.

WHAT IS THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF I CAN?

The Department funded an independent evaluation of the I CAN Expansion over FY24 - FY27. Through a competitive request for proposal process, the Department selected the **Cube Group** to deliver the evaluation. Cube Group, together with the Department and with support from I CAN has set up a rigorous evaluation of all components of the expansion, including the I CAN School® Program, I CAN Online and the I CAN enabling programs including the practical resources, professional development workshops and the Disability Inclusion Ambassador Program.

This evaluation has delivered an Interim Report 1 in December 2024 and an Interim Report 2 in October 2025. It will also deliver a Lapsing Program Report for the Department of Treasury and Finance (which responds to their Resource Management Framework) in October 2026 and a final report for the Department in May 2027.

HOW COULD I CAN INTERACT WITH FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORTS?

The I CAN Program is aligned with 'Foundational Supports': the model proposed by the Independent Review into the NDIS ('Review) as a system of specific supports for people with disability which will exist outside the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The I CAN Program engages a very diverse cohort of Autistic/neurodivergent students in school settings and online. Some I CAN participants are also NDIS participants; some are not eligible. I CAN is aligned with both types of Foundational Supports (FS): general and targeted. *General FS* because I CAN is an example of a peer support program which builds the capacity of individuals who may already be NDIS participants. *Targeted FS* because the I CAN Program is a support to children, adolescents and young adults who may not be NDIS participants[9].

HOW COULD I CAN INTERACT WITH THRIVING KIDS?

At the time of writing, there are two avenues in which the I CAN Program can support the State Government-elect's roll out of Thriving Kids. Implementation of Thriving Kids will begin pre-Election in October 2026 and achieve full implementation under the management of the State Government-elect by January 2028.

1 **I CAN Imagination Club®:** As mentioned above, I CAN Imagination Club® is the primary school variation of the I CAN School® Program and to date it's been predominantly targeted at Grades 3-6 students who may or may not have a neurodivergent condition. Moving forward, from FY27 onwards, I CAN Imagination Club® will now offer content for Foundation to Grade 2 students which has been informed by the program's existing evidence base.

2 **I CAN Professional Development:** As indicated above, there is a strong evidence base behind I CAN's professional development content. In a world in which AI summarises information on everything, educators more than ever want content which shares stories that stick. I CAN offers unique content which blends the language and frameworks of the Department with storytelling and practical tips from an Autistic lived experience perspective. Specifically the content covers the relationship between autism/neurodivergence and executive functioning, overwhelm and work avoidance. Moving forward, I CAN will partner with specialists to focus its content on autism/neurodivergence and challenging behaviours. With the advent of Thriving Kids, I CAN is ready to scale up its professional development to maternal and child healthcare clinics, kindergartens, early childhood centres, allied health services, general practitioners and primary schools. The outcome for the State Government-elect from I CAN's professional development will be a Thriving Kids workforce capable of earning the trust of the Autistic community in order to build their capacity and resilience.

At the time of writing, I CAN is considering a pilot mentoring program for parents/carers whose Autistic children are transitioning to primary school. I CAN is happy to share the progress and evidence behind this pilot with the State Government-elect.

[9] Independent Review into the NDIS (2003) <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/working-together-ndis-review-final-report.pdf>, accessed 27 April 2026.

WHERE IS THE I CAN PROGRAM GOING?

1

The I CAN School® and I CAN Imagination Club programs have a high retention rate. Moving forward, I CAN proposes that from FY28 onwards, government schools be allowed to participate in I CAN twice per year should it meet their needs. In each of the options below I CAN estimates that the approximate percentage of I CAN Programs partnering with unique government schools will be 48%.

2

The I CAN School® Program in secondary schools has predominantly targeted Year 7-9 Autistic students. Moving forward, from FY27 onwards, the program will diversify and include a later years equivalent focused on Year 10-12 Autistic students. I CAN is in a strong position to deliver this given the number of I CAN Mentor staff who are successful Autistic school leavers.The later years program will take stock of the reforms in education including the VCE Vocational Major and the Victorian Pathways Certificate.

3

The Disability Inclusion Ambassador Program is a small program focused on building up the leadership of Autistic government school leavers to deliver engagements to government school audiences. Moving forward, from FY28 onwards, I CAN proposes that the benchmarks for the program have an overt focus on delivering presentations to Year 7 and 8 cohorts in government secondary schools. I CAN observes that the greatest degree of bullying of Autistic students occurs in Year 7 and 8. Students in these grades are jostling for social position and small pockets of them can have a tendency to throw insults at Autistic students. Based on our evidence base, I CAN believes peer-to-peer education delivered safely and appropriately can help to counter this trend in Year 7 and 8 cohorts.

4

As mentioned above, I CAN is ready to scale up its professional development content and practical resources for schools. I CAN proposes that from FY28 onwards it develops practical resources which take the form of:

- Comics/scripts books for Autistic primary and secondary students with accompanying guidance for relevant school staff teams.
- Comic/script book on post-school transitions.
- Script books for educators on autism/neurodivergence and challenging behaviours.

I CAN also propose a standalone resource/script book for school leaders on partnering with parents/carers which supports both parties having fair and reasonable expectations of each other and mutual accountability for student wellbeing, behaviour and outcomes.

5

I CAN Online has engaged 744 Autistic government school students from over 425 government schools since July 2023. Evidence says I CAN Online predominantly engages Autistic young people vulnerable to mental ill-health and disengagement from school. I CAN Online is NDIS-friendly but is operating amidst a change in market factors brought about by ongoing NDIS reform. Moving forward, from FY28 onwards, I CAN proposes that the benchmarks for I CAN Online be reduced from their 2023 levels given this change in market factors and redirected towards stronger benchmarks for the I CAN Year 7 transition program which is gaining increasing traction with government schools. I CAN proposes that the remaining benchmarks for I CAN Online be included in the proposed School Attendance Action Plan falling out of a renewed Autism Education Strategy.

HOW DOES I CAN WORK WITH VICTORIAN AUTISM ORGANISATIONS?

This platform from I CAN® aligns with the **calls to action** shared by Victorian Autism Organisations at #AutismAtParliament, 30th March - 2nd April 2026. These calls to action included, among other things:

1. Initiatives which build employer capability in autism anchored by a new Victorian Autism Plan 2027 - 2031;
2. With a renewed Autism Education Strategy which supports;
3. A cohesive Foundational Supports system.

What is I CAN pitching for over FY28 - FY31?

I CAN® can support all of the above actions through the I CAN School Program (inclusive of I CAN Online, I CAN Professional Development and Disability Inclusion Ambassadors) in primary, secondary, specialist and combined schools which can inform the ongoing development of **practical resources** for the benefit of all of Victoria's public schools.

Therefore this platform presents three options for investment by the State Government-elect: an expansion option (Option A), staggered growth option (Option B) and a continuation option (Option C).

OPTION A - 'EXPANSION'

Option A, themed on expansion, involves an investment of $10.15 million to cover the costs of I CAN, a third party evaluator and the Department to expand the I CAN Program so that it delivers 700 mentoring programs to 336 unique government schools and 150 professional development engagements/networking events for government schools and Thriving Kids providers.

700 government school I CAN® mentoring programs

336 unique schools involved through the I CAN School® Program, including schools delivering I CAN Imagination Club® for Foundation to Grade 2.

150 professional development engagements/networking events for government schools and Thriving Kids providers per annum.

30-40 engagements by Disability Inclusion Ambassadors to government school audiences per year.

10,885 I CAN School® Program places for 5,712 unique government school students

	FY23/FY27 contract	27/28	28/29	29/30	30/31	FY28-FY31
# School Programs	491	160	180	180	180	**700**
Financial impact outputs						
I CAN School® Program	4.30	1.70	1.75	1.84	1.93	7.22
Practical resources	0.40	0.16	0.16	0.17	0.18	0.67
Disability Inclusion Ambassador Program	0.40	0.16	0.16	0.17	0.18	0.67
Sub-total - to I CAN®	5.10	2.01	2.08	2.18	2.29	8.56
Third Party Evaluator	0.40	0.16	0.16	0.17	0.18	0.67
Department management	0.54	0.21	0.22	0.23	0.24	0.91
Sub-total	0.94	0.37	0.38	0.40	0.42	1.59
TOTAL	6.04	2.39	2.46	2.59	2.72	**$10.15M**

OPTION B - 'STAGGERED GROWTH'

Option B, themed on staggered growth, involves an investment of $9.4 million to cover the costs of I CAN, a third party evaluator and the Department to grow the I CAN Program so that it delivers 645 mentoring programs to 310 unique government schools and 115 professional development engagements/networking events for government schools and Thriving Kids providers.

645 government school I CAN® mentoring programs

310 unique schools involved through the I CAN School® Program, including schools delivering I CAN Imagination Club® for Foundation to Grade 2.

115 professional development engagements/networking events for government schools and Thriving Kids providers per annum.

30-40 engagements by Disability Inclusion Ambassadors to government school audiences per year.

10,032 I CAN School® Program places for 5,270 unique government school students.

	FY23/FY27 contract	27/28	28/29	29/30	30/31	FY28-FY31
# School Programs	491	140	155	170	180	645
Financial impact outputs						
I CAN School® Program	4.30	1.57	1.64	1.71	1.77	6.7
Practical resources	0.40	0.15	0.15	0.16	0.16	0.6
Disability Inclusion Ambassador Program	0.40	1.00	0.15	0.16	0.16	0.6
Sub-total - to I CAN®	5.10	1.86	1.94	2.02	2.10	7.9
Third Party Evaluator	0.40	0.15	0.15	0.16	0.16	0.6
Department management	0.54	0.20	0.21	0.22	0.22	0.8
Sub-total	0.94	0.35	0.36	0.37	0.39	1.5
TOTAL	6.04	2.21	2.30	2.40	2.49	**$9.40M**

OPTION C - 'CONTINUATION'

Option C is built upon the ongoing funding ($1.8 million per annum) earmarked in the 2023/24 State Budget with allowance for inflation and rising costs given the ongoing funding was calculated in 2022/23. Option C, themed on 'continuation', involves an investment of $8.3 million to cover the costs of I CAN, a third party evaluator and the Department to continue the I CAN Program so that it delivers 548 group mentoring programs to 264 unique government schools and 75 professional development engagements/networking events for government schools.

548 government school I CAN® mentoring programs

264 unique schools involved through the I CAN School® Program, including schools delivering I CAN Imagination Club® for Foundation to Grade 2.

75 professional development engagements/networking events for government schools and Thriving Kids providers per annum.

30-40 engagements by Disability Inclusion Ambassadors to government school audiences per year.

8,525 I CAN School® Program places for 4,471 unique government school students.

	FY23/FY27 contract	27/28	28/29	29/30	30/31	FY28-FY31
# School Programs	491	137	137	137	137	**548**
Financial impact outputs						
I CAN School® Program	4.30	1.37	1.45	1.51	1.58	5.91
Practical resources	0.40	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.55
Disability Inclusion Ambassador Program	0.40	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.55
Sub-total - to I CAN®	5.10	1.63	1.72	1.79	1.87	7.00
Third Party Evaluator	0.40	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.55
Department management	0.54	0.17	0.18	0.19	0.20	0.75
Sub-total	0.94	0.30	0.32	0.33	0.35	1.30
TOTAL	6.04	1.93	2.03	2.12	2.22	**$8.30M**