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30 October 2023

Dear Autism Policy team,

We are James Ong (Evaluation and Policy Manager, I CAN Network) and Chris Varney (Chief Enabling Officer, I CAN Network) and we are Autistic professionals making this submission on behalf of I CAN Network. With 88 Autistic staff servicing 2,000+ Autistic young people, I CAN is Australia's largest Autistic-led organisation. We thank the Federal Department of Social Services for giving us the opportunity to make this submission to develop a National Autism Strategy (NAS).

I CAN Network is an Autistic-led social enterprise that aims to build "a world that benefits from embracing Autism" by proving "what Autistic people can do". We do this by:

1. Organising school and online peer mentoring programs for Autistic young people aged 8-22 years to build social connections, improve their self-esteem and develop transferable skills;
2. Running professional development programs and engagement events to teach school staff and leaders how to build safe school environments for Autistic students; and
3. Providing opportunities for Autistic people to be employed by the I CAN Network as mentors, program facilitators and managers.

Our programs are built on a strong understanding of the types of support and opportunities that Autistic young people need to lead better lives. This is backed by the lived experience of our staff who are either Autistic or know or care for someone who is Autistic, as well as 10 years experience directly mentoring thousands of Autistic young people and working with their families and schools.

I CAN Network supports a robust National Autism Strategy (NAS) that provides meaningful support and opportunities for the entirety of an Autistic person's life, from childhood to adulthood. In particular, the NAS needs to focus on the needs of Autistic children and young people as negative experiences in their childhood and teenage years can lower their quality of life later on.

Improving the outcomes of Autistic people requires changes at both an individual and societal level. Therefore, we advocate for a systems approach to improve the lives of Autistic young people.

First, peer mentoring programs should be run to directly engage and support Autistic young people in building their self-esteem, support networks and capabilities. These are the foundations in which Autistic people can enjoy more independent or self-directed lives and increased opportunities to access post-secondary education, meaningful employment and improved mental health outcomes. In particular, our online mentoring programs are our most scalable offerings, able to be expanded to all states and territories of Australia.

Additionally, running Autistic-led, trauma-informed professional development programs and promoting Autism acceptance can improve understanding of Autism among school staff and neurotypical students

respectively. These can drive changes in attitudes towards Autism in school, increasing acceptance of Autism and creating Autism-safe learning environments.

## **I CAN Offer to the National Autism Strategy 2024 - 2031**

The below submission explores how the I CAN Online Program is well placed to become the national program for facilitating Autistic young people's positive identity and belonging with peers. It costs I CAN \$300,000 annually to offer 1,360 places to 5-22-year-old Autistic young people nationally who are not Victorian government school students (refer to our partnership with the Victorian Government below). With an additional \$300,000 excl. GST per year we could offer 2,720 places to Autistic young people Australia-wide annually (this group would be exclusive of Victorian government school students). We propose that the National Autism Strategy invest \$1.2M excl. GST in the expansion of I CAN Online over four years which sees 10,880 I CAN Online places offered to Autistic young people Australia-wide who are not Victorian government school students.

The below submission also discusses Autism-sensitive classrooms and student body education on Autism and neurodiversity. Given I CAN's track record with professional development and student body education, we propose the National Autism Strategy invests a further \$250,000 excl. GST in I CAN to develop training materials for school inclusion leaders, mental health organisations and existing professional development providers which enables them to involve Autistic student alumni, Autistic parents/ carers and local Autistic adults in the delivery of their training.

## **Peer mentoring: Producing outcomes for Autistic young people**

Compulsory education occupies a huge chunk of an Autistic young person's life, with most of them receiving their education at school. However, Autistic young people experience difficulties engaging in and participating at school. According to the [2018 Survey of Disability and Carers \(SDAC\)](#), 77.7% Autistic young people aged 5-20 years experienced difficulties at school. Furthermore, according to the [NDIA](#), Autistic young people aged 5-14 years who were entering the NDIS scheme were, at baseline, the least likely to feel happy or genuinely included in school, to make friends outside of family or to develop functional, learning and coping skills compared to young people with other disabilities. These negative experiences of school, combined with a deficits-based perception of Autism, can feed into Autistic young people's social isolation and low self-esteem and self-confidence. These can contribute to mental ill-health and increased risk of leaving school early, highlighting the need to improve the education experiences of Autistic young people.

We are very strong proponents of peer mentoring programs, having seen over the past 10 years the positive impact our programs have had on thousands of Autistic young people. In these peer mentoring programs, Autistic young people within a school or across Australia can come together to:

1. Connect with one another based on their common interests and experiences;
2. Gain insights on how their Autism and special interests can be leveraged as strengths; and
3. Participate in games and activities to keep them engaged.

We offer peer mentoring programs in both school and online settings to reflect the realities and needs of Autistic young people. We recognise that the safe, accepting space we offer through our school-based

mentoring programs can mitigate many of the challenges Autistic young people face at school. At the same time, we recognise that Autistic young people are more likely to face school attendance difficulties due to a vast range of factors. Having a robust national online mentoring program enables us to reach Autistic young people across all of Australia, including those who are not attending school in a face-to-face setting.

Peer mentoring programs such as I CAN Network's can achieve a variety of outcomes. Both our online mentoring and school mentoring programs have been [independently evaluated by the Australian Catholic University \('ACU'\) in 2022](#)<sup>1</sup>. ACU concluded that 'the strong evidence demonstrating marked improvements in outcomes for mentees and students warrants a tangible and time-sensitive expansion of the I CAN Network Mentoring Programs to allow all neurodiverse students the opportunity to access whichever version of the program is most suited to their needs'<sup>2</sup>.

More specifically, bringing together Autistic young people in one place creates a community for them to connect with one another and share their experiences and interests. Being part of a diverse Autistic community provides valuable social support to Autistic young people and teaches them that they are not alone in being Autistic.

Secondly, I CAN peer mentoring programs are predominantly run by Autistic staff who have lived experience of being Autistic and can relate to the experiences that Autistic young people face. Our staff have found ways to navigate their challenges while maintaining a strong sense of self-identity and self-belief. By being exposed to Autistic mentors who value them for who they are and who can share their insights and advice, Autistic young people start to see their own strengths and self-worth. In turn, these increase their motivation, confidence and self-esteem.

Third, participating in games and activities builds their transferable skills such as communication, public speaking and teamwork. These transferable skills increase the capacity of Autistic young people to advocate for themselves so that they can ask for adjustments that will help them in their studies and their life. For instance, mentees are given the opportunity to deliver an I CAN talk, where they talk about themselves and their interests. Delivering these talks improves their communication and public speaking skills, increasing their capacity to self-advocate in the future.

Lastly, peer mentoring programs can provide meaningful paid employment and professional growth opportunities for Autistic adults and parents/ carers of Autistic people. We have Autistic staff in full-time, part-time and casual positions, working not only as mentors but also in administrative and managerial roles. For many Autistic staff, particularly young adults and those with high support requirements, their role in I CAN Network represents their first paid position. This role provides them with valuable work experience to establish a career in related fields such as disability support, allied health care and teaching. It also offers them an income which is a stepping stone to them enjoying more independent or self-directed lives. For parents and carers of Autistic people, being offered employment in a flexible working environment allows them to earn an income and make a difference to other Autistic people's lives while allowing some time for them to take care of their Autistic young person or relative.

In summary, peer mentoring programs can contribute to improved outcomes among Autistic young people while providing employment opportunities for Autistic adults and parents and carers of Autistic people. Based on the ACU independent evaluation, [the Victorian Government has invested \\$5.75M in the expansion of I CAN Network's peer mentoring programs](#) to 254 government schools which will, in turn, make 11,516 program places in the I CAN School and I CAN Online Programs available to 5,892 unique government students. This result warrants the inclusion of peer mentoring programs in the NAS.

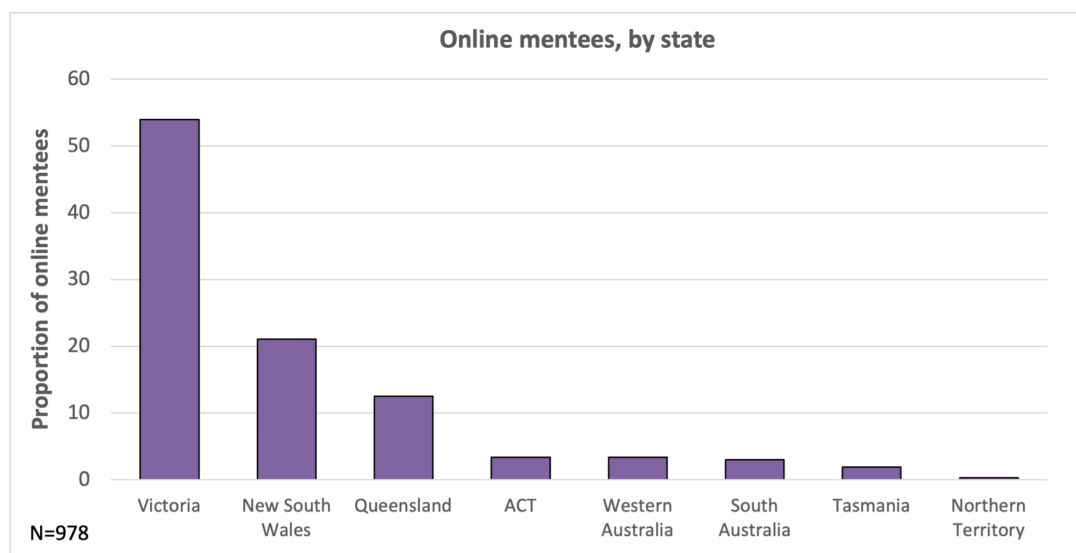
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<sup>1</sup> Jones, S., Lowe, J., Mizzi, S., (2022), Independent Evaluation: I CAN Network Mentoring Programs Final Report 15 December 2022, Australian Catholic University Research Impact Unit.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

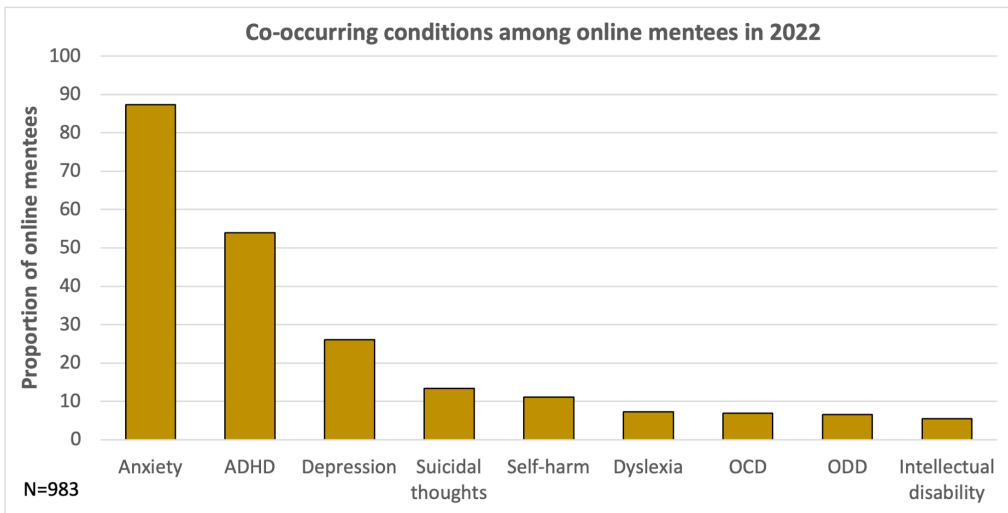
## Case study: I CAN Network's online mentoring programs

I CAN Network's online mentoring programs are our most scalable offering, achieving outcomes among Autistic young people aged 5-22 years across Australia. In 2022, I CAN Network ran 75 programs over five six-week cycles during school terms and two six-day cycles during the school holidays. These programs engaged a total of 983 Autistic young people across all states and territories of Australia (Figure 1).



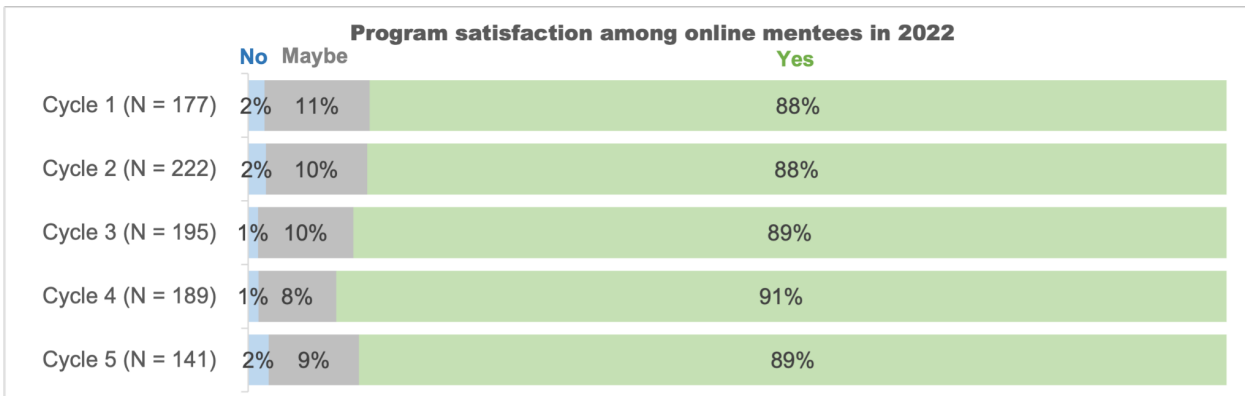
**Figure 1: Online mentees in 2022, split by Australian states and territories**

I CAN Network's online mentoring programs engage a group of highly vulnerable Autistic young people with co-occurring conditions (Figure 2). In particular, most mentees that participate in our online mentoring programs have anxiety and/or ADHD, with a sizable number of them having depression, suicidal thoughts and/or self-harm.



**Figure 2: Online mentees in 2022, split by co-occurring conditions**

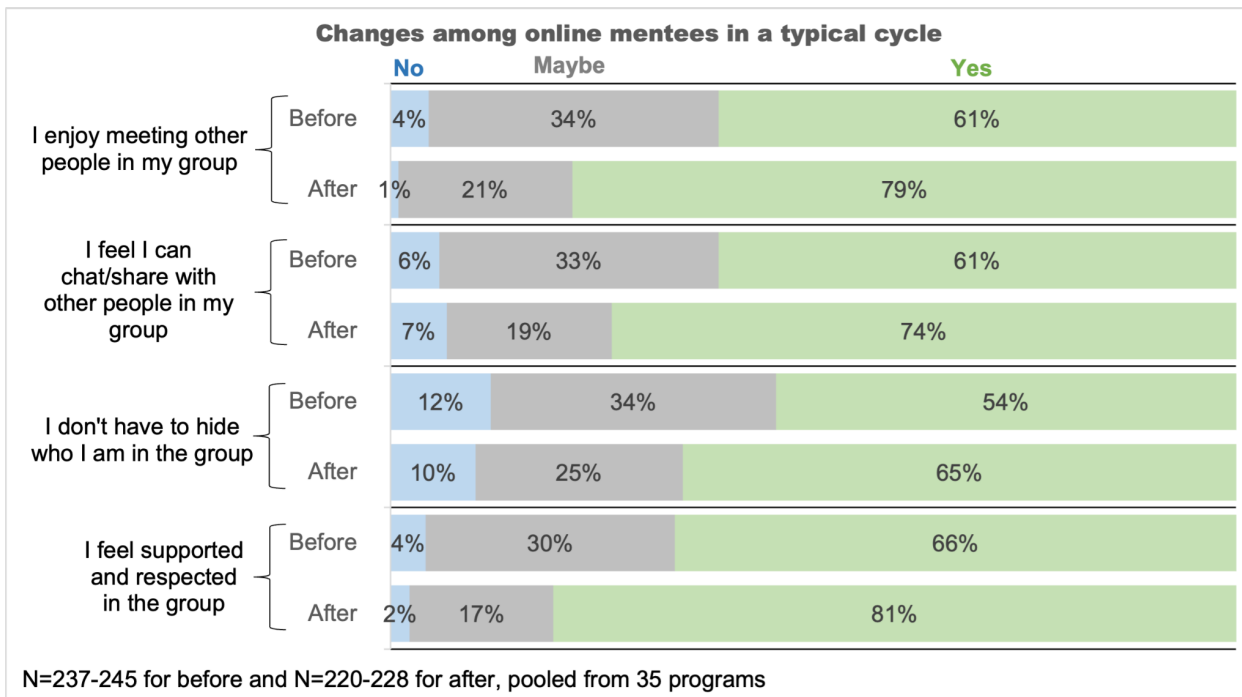
Autistic young people in Australia enjoy our online mentoring programs. This is shown by the high satisfaction ratings towards our online mentoring programs, with an average of 89% across all five six-week cycles (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Program satisfaction among all online mentees in 2022**

In terms of the outcomes achieved in our online mentoring programs, mentees experience positive changes in terms of how they interact with other people and in being themselves in the group (Figure 4). Over a typical six-week cycle, we saw a/an:

- 18% increase in mentees enjoying meeting other people in their group;
- 13% increase in mentees being able to chat or share with other people in their group;
- 11% increase in mentees not having to hide who they are in their group; and
- 15% increase in mentees feeling supported and respected in their group.



**Figure 4: Outcomes achieved among mentees in a typical six-week cycle**

These outcomes are achieved in a group environment that is positive, safe and welcoming. This allows mentees to be themselves, reducing the stress associated with masking, and to interact with like-minded peers. This is highlighted by one mentee who said:

*“I have been in a lot of social groups. This is the only one that has actually let me be myself. I had to pretend to be someone else [in other social groups] when I really didn’t want to, which was really hard. With this [I CAN] group, I managed to build that self confidence in order to be myself.”*

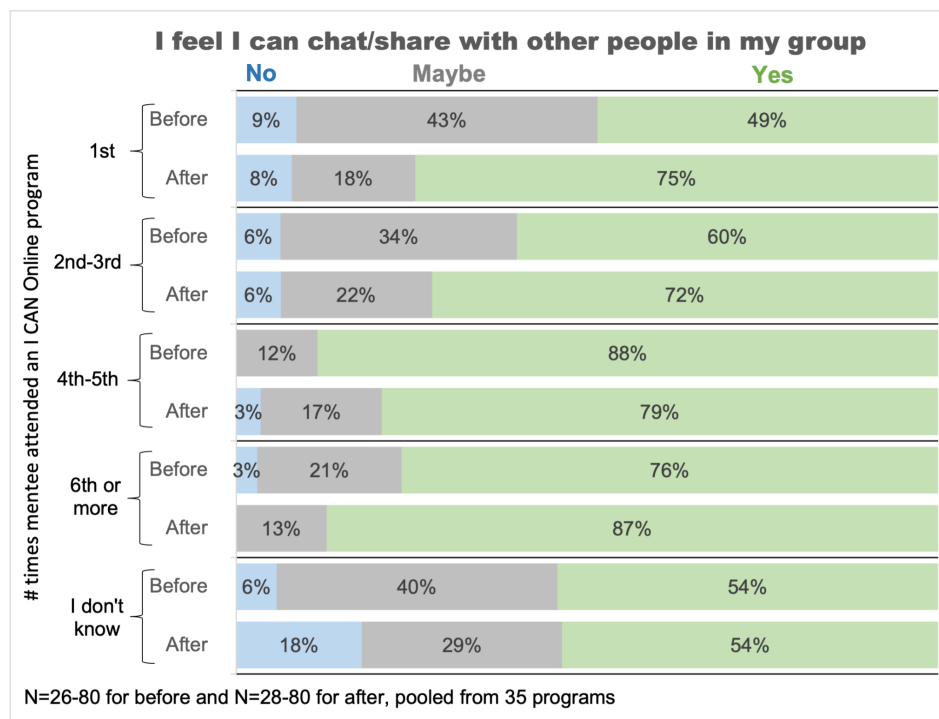
and shown by an artwork from a mentee (Figure 5).



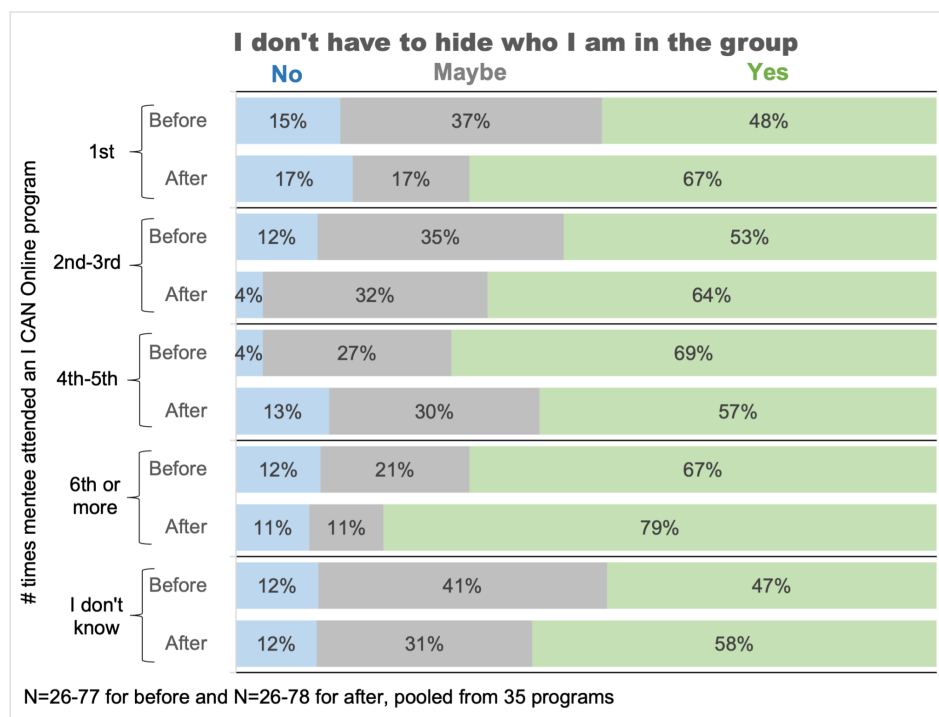
*“I CAN Network: A place where you can learn lots of new things and make new friends on Zoom! I CAN Network also allows you to be yourself during the group and be included.”*

**Figure 5: Mentee creation describing what they achieved from the online mentoring program**

These outcomes are not only achieved among Autistic young people attending online mentoring programs for the first time, but these outcomes can be sustained and further improved as they repeatedly attend online mentoring programs. These can be seen in the immediate improvements in their communication skills (Figure 6) and changes in self (Figure 7) among first-time mentees and a gradual increase in baseline 'yes' responses among mentees who attend two or more online mentoring programs before the next cycle starts.



**Figure 6: Longitudinal changes in communication skills among mentees participating in online mentoring programs**



**Figure 7: Longitudinal changes in self among mentees participating in online mentoring programs**

These evaluation results are backed up by findings from the independent evaluation of I CAN Network's Online Mentoring Programs organised by ACU. They reported that mentees who attended the online

mentoring programs exhibited improvements in fitting in and feeling accepted by like-minded peers, sense of belonging and sense of hope<sup>3</sup>.

Overall, these evaluation results highlight the satisfaction and positive changes Autistic young people experience when participating in the online mentoring programs. Our online mentoring programs have the potential to engage more Autistic young people across all states and territories in Australia in the future. Hence, online mentoring programs are I CAN Network's most scalable offerings that should be incorporated in the NAS.

## Professional development: Creating Autism-safe schools and classrooms

The school culture is an important factor in engaging Autistic young people at school. It combines an environment where Autistic students feel understood and accepted with reasonable adjustments to ensure they have the same opportunities for learning as their neurotypical peers. Unfortunately, for various reasons, schools are often not seen as safe places for Autistic young people, reducing their engagement in and/or attendance at school.

First, not enough is being done to give Autistic young people reasonable adjustments at school. According to the [2018 SDAC](#), 45.9% of Autistic young people indicated they need more support or assistance to engage in school than what they were receiving. The transition to remote learning during COVID-induced lockdowns [exacerbated these unmet needs](#) for many Autistic learners. In particular, some families did not receive any individual contact or personalised support to meet the needs of their young person. This contributed to some Autistic young people not doing any schooling or online learning during the lockdowns.

Additionally, Autistic young people are more likely to face school attendance difficulties compared to their neurotypical peers. As noted in the Senate inquiry on The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters, Autistic young people face various factors that contribute to school attendance difficulties. These include exclusion, bullying, not having their sensory and/or learning needs met and the pressure to mask to the point of burnout.

Hence, it is important to target the school culture to make schools more inclusive and accommodating for Autistic young people. Targeting the school culture enables Autistic young people to feel safe at school. This will increase the chances of them staying in school and completing their education, opening post-school pathways such as further study and/or sustainable employment.

Professional development programs are a valuable way to teach school staff and leaders how to support Autistic young people at school. However, these programs tend to be designed from a deficits-based perspective of Autism and are primarily delivered by non-Autistic people. This has a strong impact on how Autism is framed to student teachers, teachers, school leaders and support staff and strategies that are recommended to support Autistic young people. For example, typical professional development programs view the lack of eye contact as a deficit that needs to be corrected. However, many Autistic people find prolonged eye contact to be very uncomfortable and distracting, consuming their energy and reducing their willingness to interact with other people. If applied in a classroom setting, Autistic young people may be less likely to learn or engage in the classroom, contributing to worse learning outcomes than their neurotypical peers.

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<sup>3</sup>Jones, S., Lowe, J., Mizzi, S., (2022), *op cit*, pp. 37 - 42.

One way to improve professional development programs in Autism is to design training that is strengths-based, neuro-affirming, trauma-informed and Autistic-led or Autistic-informed. In particular, it is important that the voices of Autistic young people are incorporated in any training relating to supporting Autistic students. This is because Autistic-led or Autistic-informed content gives school staff and leaders valuable insights on the common experiences and challenges Autistic young people face at school such as executive functioning difficulties. These insights might not be realised by non-Autistic people who think and behave differently from Autistic people. Sharing these insights allows school staff and leaders to plan how to create Autism-safe school environments that cater to Autistic young people's needs.

I CAN Network has been running Autistic-led professional development programs for nearly a decade, delivering them in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and Australian Capital Territory. Our model provides an example of how lived experience and insights from Autistic people and professionals can give schools a toolkit to create safe learning environments for Autistic young people. Hallmarks of our professional development programs include:

1. A shift from a deficits-based, pathologising model of Autism to a strengths-based, neuro-affirming model;
2. Explanations of the many challenges that the Autistic community has been discussing for years but are not understood by the wider community (such as masking, Autistic burnout, school attendance difficulties, double empathy problem and pathological demand avoidance);
3. Recognition of the challenges that Autistic young people might face in school and how to provide meaningful support that does not imply that they require 'fixing';
4. An emphasis on how to create collaborative home-school partnerships, with the recognition that many Autistic students have Autistic parents;
5. A focus on multiple neurodivergent profiles and how they can be supported;
6. An overview of state and territory disability inclusion reforms, and how they relate to a strengths-based model of Autism; and
7. Neuro-affirming resources within and beyond our team to discuss Autism and neurodiversity with the broader student body.

Although we are not the only provider in the Autism professional development field, we do have the unique benefit of direct relationships with over 135 partner schools where we offer Autistic-led peer mentoring programs. Combining peer mentoring programs with Autistic-led professional development programs allows the outcomes from peer mentoring programs to be carried over to an Autism-safe classroom.

By running professional development programs that are strengths-based, neuro-affirming, trauma-informed and Autistic-led or Autistic-informed, we can improve the capacity of school staff and leaders to build Autism-friendly school environments that cater to the strengths and needs of Autistic students. We feel that such an Autism professional development program is something that should be included in the NAS.

## **Autism acceptance: Students embracing Autism and neurodiversity**

Autistic young people are more likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers. It is estimated that, [globally](#), 67% of Autistic students (aged 5-22 years) are bullied. In Australia, research from [La Trobe University's](#) Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre found that 59% Autistic students aged 15-25 years were bullied at school, compared to 45% non-Autistic students.

The effects of bullying towards Autistic young people can lead to them exhibiting [mental health problems](#), particularly anxiety and depression, and [school attendance difficulties](#). Because of the high prevalence and negative effects of bullying towards Autistic young people, the Senate Select Committee on Autism urged action against bullying of Autistic students at school, and recommended that anti-bullying policies and programs be specifically tailored to reduce bullying towards Autistic students. However, current anti-bullying policies and programs only prevent or stop bullying behaviour itself. They do not promote acceptance of all kinds of differences among students, including neurodiversity and Autism. A student body that does not understand and accept neurodiversity and Autism may contribute to misunderstanding, exclusion and bullying towards Autistic young people. It also contributes to an unsafe school environment that deters Autistic young people from attending school or forces them to mask their differences, negatively affecting their mental health. These effects are especially amplified for Autistic young people with intersectional identities, including Autistic LGBTQIA+ young people.

Hence, anti-bullying programs should go one step further and focus on the acceptance of Autism within the student body. Given that Autistic people communicate and socialise differently from non-Autistic people, it is important to appreciate different ways of engaging with the world. One way this could be done is to run programs that help students learn more about Autism and neurodiversity. These programs would involve showcasing Autistic voices and experiences that provide a more accurate and respectful picture of Autism, appreciating both the challenges and strengths of Autism. Additionally, the program would normalise the idea that people can learn and experience the world in different ways via neurodiversity. By passing down knowledge about Autism and neurodiversity to students, they will know more about Autism and its strengths and challenges. This can build a positive and accepting attitude of Autism, allowing them to be more open to what Autistic young people have to say, accommodate their needs, and celebrate their strengths. At the same time, they will be less likely to bully Autistic young people and be more empowered to intervene to stop bullying of Autistic young people.

A great case study of an impactful Autism acceptance program for students can be seen in Baimbridge College, Hamilton, Victoria. In 2022, I CAN Network held student talks in the school in response to a student cohort that lacked understanding of what Autism is and how to support their Autistic classmates. Alongside the I CAN School program for Autistic students, we organised a student talk for each year level cohort in years 7 to 11. Each student talk consisted of a 30-minute presentation on what Autism is and a question and answer session for students to ask questions. Autistic students from the I CAN School program were consulted on things that could be changed from the student talks. Feedback from both students and teachers indicated that the discussions were very insightful and educational, highlighting a model that could be used to spread Autism acceptance across the student body.

Professional development and Autism acceptance programs can work together to reduce exclusion and bullying of Autistic students in school. These programs promote conversations on neurodiversity and Autism among teachers and students, contributing to increased understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity and Autism. This not only reduces bullying towards Autistic young people but also promotes inclusion of Autistic young people at school and in the classroom. Together, professional development and Autism acceptance programs should be considered for inclusion in the NAS.

## Conclusion

I CAN Network's submission has presented a case for peer mentoring programs, Autistic-led professional development programs and Autism acceptance programs to be included in the NAS. We feel that these

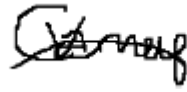
programs put the much-needed spotlight on Autistic young people in the NAS and target changes at both an individual and societal level to improve outcomes and quality of life for Autistic people.

I hope that you have enjoyed reading our insights for the NAS. Should you have any enquiries on the submission, please contact us at [james@icannetwork.com.au](mailto:james@icannetwork.com.au) and [chris@icannetwork.com.au](mailto:chris@icannetwork.com.au).

Yours sincerely



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