

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder**

Melbourne — 12 September 2016

#### Members

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Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

Ms Chris Couzens

Mr Paul Edbrooke

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Emma Kealy

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Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

#### Witnesses

Mr Chris Varney, chief enabling officer and founder,

Ms Gabrielle Breheny, chair,

Mr Will Rosewarne, stakeholders director,

Ms Jenna Gephart, Marymede Catholic College, and

Mr Bryce Pace, Brauer College, I CAN Network.

**The CHAIR** — I welcome to these public hearings from the I CAN Network Mr Chris Varney, chief enabling officer and founder; Ms Gabrielle Breheny, chair; Mr Will Rosewarne, stakeholders director; Ms Jenna Gephart, Marymede Catholic College, South Morang; and Mr Bryce Pace from Brauer College, Warrnambool. Thank you for attending here today. It was wonderful to be able to hear you speak at the conference last Friday, Chris.

All evidence at this hearing taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and other relevant legislation. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. It is a contempt of Parliament to provide false evidence. Recording of the proceedings will commence today and you will be sent a proof copy of the transcript and be able to make factual or grammatical corrections if necessary.

Thank you for attending today. I appreciate that some of you have had an early start this morning. I invite you to make a 15-minute presentation to the committee.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Mr VARNEY** — Thank you very much for having I CAN Network here. We have got our mentors and mentees here with you today. I CAN Network is a very interesting organisation. It is predominantly led by autistics — a strong team of 40 autistics as well as 40 more typically minded people. We started at the end of 2013. I was lucky to be its creator along with Gabrielle, who is sitting right beside me. It came from a place where we looked at the real paucity of youth programs out there for people on the spectrum, and what we observed was that there was a lot of work being done about autistics without autistics and very much a need for the voice of autistics to be in the services design and delivery of them.

I CAN Network is a mentoring business that offers training and consultancy as well. I was lucky to give a TEDx talk some years ago where I talked about a rethink of autism and talked about the I CAN Network that I was very lucky to have growing up on the spectrum. The idea took off from there. Our central recommendation that we are wanting to work through today is that we are not here seeking money.

**The CHAIR** — That is okay, because we haven't got any.

**Mr VARNEY** — Exactly. What we are really after I guess is an endorsement of the model that we are offering to the community. In the recommendations you make as a committee we are hoping that the value of peer-to-peer mentoring programs will be underscored, because we really do aspire to our peer-to-peer mentoring programs being made available to every young person on the spectrum across our schools and communities. There is a lot that community and schools can do. Ours is a social enterprise model, so our programs are purchased, and we have found that to be very effective.

Just to give our schedule, a team on the spectrum loves its schedules. I will be sharing with you our model and some of our journey, and then we will have some wonderful testimonies from Jenna and Bryce, who are in our program, and then an example of some innovation and then of course you can ask us any questions you like.

I guess to start off on the journey, I was diagnosed with Asperger's at the age of five. This was in the early 90s where very much parents walked into a room with one sense of their child and then went and sat down with someone from the medical field — my parents are both in the medical field, so I will just say that — and were given a totally different impression of what expectations to have around their kid. My mum walked into the room and being the unstoppable type of person that she is she said, 'Well, I'm not going to have a bar of lowering my expectations or thinking that he is going to have a life time of difficulty. I am going to have high expectations'. So I CAN was very much something I was raised with even though we found a lot of our people on the spectrum from the outside world tend to think, 'I can't do it like other people can'. I CAN was very much an ethos that I was raised within.

Very much the thrust with the I CAN Network is that we are unbelievably positive about the benefits of being on the autism spectrum. That is our product. We get out there, we train people on how to benefit from embracing autism, and it comes from the fact that the organisation was built by autistics and the siblings of autistics. Here is my brother and sister. Gabrielle, our chair, is the sister to a younger brother, Berwick, on the spectrum. So it has come from very much a people-led approach.

As our name suggests, we build networks. We are about building networks around kids, young people and now adults, because we have branched into adults on the spectrum, that really help them feel safe and secure to take risks, because in our experience — we have 300 people on the spectrum in our program, so that is 300 customers there — as soon as they feel safe and secure they can achieve phenomenal things. Once you set up that network that touches all — their family, their friendships, their school, their education — it can go a really long way.

We did take on the world when we set up I CAN. We looked at the data that was out there, and I was lucky to come with the benefit of long experience in the youth sector so I saw that young people on the spectrum were just falling through the cracks a lot. You can see here on the data — and you would have had this, I have no doubt, scattered throughout the many submissions you received — that we said, ‘Well, right, we really want to focus on building a transitional mentoring program that really helps set people on the spectrum up for success in their life transitions’. And so we now have a program that mentors autistic adults in employment, creates employment for people on the spectrum as well and then a secondary mentoring program and a primary mentoring program. So it really is about talking about the benefits of embracing autism.

And I guess to prove what we are doing in terms of making sure that autistic people are at the heart and soul of the organisation, we thought we would share some of this data with you, because it is a requirement in our board charter that a minimum of 50 per cent I CAN Network’s board, its management and its team are on the autism spectrum. It is absolutely a central criteria to how we work. As I said, there are 40 others who are mainstream professionals who have kind of relearnt things and come to the I CAN team. Of our 40 autistics, we have 4 board directors, 5 staff and 31 team members — 18 of those 40 are currently earning an income through the I CAN Network, whether that is as mentors, speakers or trainers — I have just come from training up the Catholic Education Melbourne team this morning, which has been fun — and 95 per cent of them report having gained workplace skills relevant now and in their future. That is probably one thing that only Gabby and I can comment on from the beginning of I CAN. At the beginning there was little exposure to work with a lot of our wonderful mentors, so we have literally taken some from being on welfare to now being taxpayers, which is just such a buzz. And 95 per cent report that working for I CAN Network has enriched their life.

We do a lot of public work. This year there have been 52 public talks and workshops that we have delivered in all sorts of spaces. Overwhelmingly, the benefit of hearing someone training who is on the spectrum, they go, ‘Wow! This is not the dry, stuffy definition of autism anymore. I’ve got the colour of all these great stories’. So you can see there that 95 per cent of our audiences say that the public views of autistics need to change. Before the talk I do not think they necessarily thought that, but afterwards they go, ‘Oh, wow! I wish everyone knew what I just heard’.

Where that all comes from, it all flows from our work. To give you a real sense of the need that this program has been meeting, in November last year we had seven mentoring programs, so we had experienced threefold growth in just four months. As soon as we had a public launch and a national TV feature, we grew across primary schools, secondary schools, TAFE communities and Victoria University, and now the Australian Bureau of Statistics have our mentoring program for their staff. An open plan structure got introduced and they said, ‘Can you come in?’. That will be fun. That has been quite a journey. At the beginning we suspected that a culture of mentoring where young adults on the spectrum working in mentoring, teenagers on the spectrum who could then work with young kids on the spectrum and then bringing in some ambassadors to break down the barriers that our cohort faced might work. Now I think we have proven that it does. That has been a great experience.

Across our I CAN schools the focus is on fortnightly mentoring. Some programs are weekly mentoring, and their content looks at teamwork and interpersonal skills. It is basically a leadership program for autistic students, because it is constantly developing them into mentors. We also do some of the talks at year levels so the programs often start with a mentor who might be introduced through their skill or qualification and then during their talk at a year level assembly they say, ‘I’m on the spectrum’. And you just hear dead silence from the students because they are so shocked that someone has said it that openly. And increasingly we deliver PD for teachers and companies. So 88 per cent of our mentees, from the data we have recently done, feel a sense of belonging in the program and are happier at their schools

As soon as you set high expectations for people who are not used to being given high expectations, you just see this wonderful growth trajectory occur. As we have done that, like constant invitations to be a mentor and a

leader in the team, that has been great; people look visibly different because you have kind of changed the goalposts for them.

In the program you have got content that could be delivered to anyone really. The special source of that is that it is put through the lens of someone on the spectrum. So a mentoring program will be delivered typically to between 10 to 15 students. We will be talking about a one-on-one model later on, but of the people delivering the program, at least one of them always must be on the spectrum.

As a measure to accelerate the development of mentors, we also run I CAN camps for both teenagers and young adults. These occur on a quarterly basis. They have now got a regional iteration as well. These are hilarious experiences. The first I CAN camp was the first kick-off we ever ran, and it was not run by professors, researchers, service providers or advocates; it was run by autistics. It was a huge experience. But now they are quite an operation. We run these, and to give you a sense, you get about 70 people who say, 'I want to come on the camp', but we only take 40 autistic teenagers and then a team of 20. It is an extraordinary weekend. The picture up there is of their dress-to-obsess night, where they dress up in their favourite obsession, so you can imagine you get like seven Doctor Whos or the whole *Star Wars* cast there on one night. It is a wonderful sense of belonging that they have when they are there. You can see that 86 per cent of teens and 94 per cent of young adults enjoy the camp experience.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — I am missing out.

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes, we have started having people just say, 'Can I come to camp?'. There have been a lot of teachers who have said, 'Oh, I want to come along to this'.

I want to briefly introduce this extraordinary young girl, Jenna. Jenna was one of our very first mentees in one of our high schools, Marymede Catholic College. As I said, we started at the end of 2013, were not delivering until 2014 and then we started working with Jenna in June 2014. Through camps and the mentoring, she is actually now a mentor herself in her primary school where we run an imagination club. I am going to hand over to Jenna. Just grab the microphone, Jenna, and say your own words.

**Ms GEPHART** — As you will know, I am Jenna. I am currently in year 9 and I am 15 years old.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Welcome, Jenna.

**Ms GEPHART** — Thank you. A lot of people have been taking notice at school of my interests, which are kind of different to theirs. I am more interested in cartoons; I really love to draw; and some people have taken the time to look over my shoulder and compliment my artwork. I really like cars, different types of cars, like supercars — they are all amazing. Being in the I CAN group, I was kind of nervous at first because I did not know what was going on. I did not know what to expect. I was one of the first students there so it was really nerve-racking. Now that it is a bigger organisation I can just sit back and smile and watch how far it goes.

I recently started mentoring in the imagination clubs for the primary kids, and they are just so lovely. I am hoping to one day get a university degree in graphic design and perhaps in industrial design and design my own supercar, and possibly do a semester in exchange for a program in Norway, because they have got some pretty good art schools there, so I have to keep my grades up.

**Mr VARNEY** — Is there anything you wrote down in your notes that you wanted to share?

**The CHAIR** — It is okay to read your notes. I do it all day.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — What is your favourite colour? What is your favourite supercar?

**Ms GEPHART** — Purple is a really nice colour. I like mainly colours that are vibrant, kind of like me. I am usually a shy person at school because I feel better if I am approached by someone rather than me approaching them, and that is how I kind of belt in with the I CAN Network. That is where some of my strongest friendships came from. I have a best friend who is in there somewhere. She is right next to me in the green shirt. Her name is Eilish. She is also on the spectrum. We met via the I CAN Network, and we grew close as friends. There is also a friend who is currently not in there. Her name is Alex. We met before the I CAN Network. We met when we were in a support group. Along with me she was featured on the I CAN Network's 'Humans on the autism spectrum' webpage. She is a really funny person. Via the I CAN camps I have met various other people.

**Mr VARNEY** — Jenna, tell us what you do at school. What happens at school in the mentoring?

**Ms GEPHART** — I usually help the little kids feel like they have got older people to look up to, and in school when I am not mentoring I am usually just hanging out with friends. When I am in class, if I have enough time, I can just sketch a couple of things. I love to experiment with drawings as my autistic talent, which is drawing.

**Mr VARNEY** — What did you draw one time when we asked you what the program meant to you? You drew a picture, your doubts one.

**Ms GEPHART** — Yes, the doubts one. I was trying to create a picture of how when you are in the I CAN Network, you kind of just let go of your doubts. I kind of portrayed it as a picture of a girl on a hill just letting go of pieces of paper, because I did not know what to portray doubts as, so I just chose paper.

**Mr VARNEY** — Great.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. Are we hearing from someone else?

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes. We experienced a lot of need. As soon as one school, Marymede Catholic College, got off the ground a lot of others said, ‘Can we have the program?’. They heard a good referral, so things kicked off from there, so we built a regional model behind it. The starting point for this was across the south-west coast, so local autism support groups built momentum behind the idea of an I CAN south-west to operate the network from Colac to Hamilton. Bernie came down on 12 August to our meeting, which was great fun. Thank you, Bernie.

The local schools have two programs. Brauer College through some start-up funding from government has its own program. South West TAFE hosts a mentoring program for 14 young people that benefits students across five schools. That is a great model. Depending on what the school’s budget might be like — the unit price of a group mentoring session is approximately \$475, and that can benefit up to 15 students, but in a group situation, if you are running it at a community level and there are multiple schools pooling funds, it can be far cheaper — you can make it work for lots of diverse school communities.

Investors have seen that there is actually a business model behind this, so it quickly gained some local business support. They have set up their own regional board to manage that local investment, so now you have got Ballarat, Bendigo, Albury-Wodonga, Gippsland, Kyabram and Mildura looking at the model of this regional satellite. Of course we are talking to some other governments — Tasmania, South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales — about what it could look like. To kind of give you a picture of the south-west model we have a wonderful young architect here, Bryce Pace from Brauer College. Bryce, we will hand over to you.

**Mr PACE** — Good morning. As you already know, I am Bryce. I am 17 years old, and I am currently studying year 11 at Brauer College in Warrnambool. To give you a bit of background about me, I was diagnosed with autism when I was nine years old. Before I was diagnosed, I thought I was what most neuro-typical people would describe as normal. I was a happy kid who did not care what people thought of me.

In primary school I had a rough time after my diagnosis, as my school did not know what or how they should teach me. To them I was just their kid with the disability label. They taught me life skills. Some of them, like reading a telephone book, were very last century, and I was living in this century. I wanted to move forward, but I felt they were holding me back. When I reached secondary school, I hid who I was as I wanted to be treated like everyone else. I did this for four years and only this year have started telling people of my diagnosis.

That story is the reason why I am the person I am today. It is the story of many others with similar experiences; however, if it were not for my primary school’s negative view of autism, I would probably not be so passionate about student voice.

In July my confidence made a big leap. I made a nomination speech in front of over 180 students from all over Victoria to be elected to the state student representative council. I made my speech about being on the autism spectrum and how I wanted to represent all students who are considered to not be mainstream, in particular those on the autism spectrum. My autism is not a disability, as it has given me a lot of amazing and unique abilities. For example, I have an amazing nose. I can smell watermelon chewing gum at 50 paces, and if someone has not had a shower today, I will know it.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Sorry, Bryce.

**The CHAIR** — No naming and shaming.

**Mr PACE** — I recently discovered that I am also pretty good at drawing buildings and coming up with designs that are imaginative and that people enjoy looking at. My graphics teacher has even made a comment that I should start designing resorts, as my house drawings look so good. When I first discovered the I CAN Network I was actually at work, and there was something about their student mentor program on the news. I instantly got interested, as I could see how this program could benefit students like me on the spectrum. At the time I had no idea of the impact this network could have on me. This year I signed up to be part of the pilot mentoring program in the south-west and have attended a camp. I go to meetings every second week at my school. When I walked in on the first day, I did not know what to expect. Honestly, I still do not.

I love this program, as it has given me an opportunity to allow all of my autism traits to come out to play. I have gotten to talk to students who before the program I probably would not have talked to or even known existed. This program has also given my confidence a boost. For example, a year ago if you had told me I would speak before you today about how wonderful autism is, I would not have believed you. I was terrified of public speaking and of what people would think of me being on the spectrum.

I would like to finish by saying the one thing that has gotten me this far is my belief in myself and how my autism and my voice can be of benefit to those who still struggle with their own diagnosis. That is the reason the I CAN Network exists. Chris and everyone who works at the I CAN Network believe the same thing, and they are working towards this vision. I believe a world that embraces and appreciates autism is possible; we just have to work towards it.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Well spoken.

**Ms McLEISH** — Congratulations.

**Mr VARNEY** — Thanks, Bryce. You have had a picture of the group mentoring in schools. We focused on schools today, but there are universities and TAFEs that we deliver at, and soon there will be workplaces. To give you a picture of community and one-on-one possibilities I am going to hand over to Will.

**Mr ROSEWARNE** — Thanks, Chris. Up until now we would have seen that there are a large number of school programs and community-based settings that the I CAN Network program runs in. For a lot of our participants access to these programs has unfortunately been tied to participation at particular schools. One of the things we keep seeing when we attend events such as the Melbourne Autism Expo and the Victorian Autism Conference is that we get an extraordinarily large amount of people who inquire about access because they heard about what we do and have said, ‘Well, are you guys going to be out in Leongatha any time soon?’. The problem that we have is that as a social enterprise that has only existed since 17 September 2013 we have not quite headed out that way yet, but there is plenty of potential there.

The sorts of regions we are getting a lot of interest from are reflected at the bottom of that slide but also in your handout at the very top of the second page. In response to all of our attendees coming to events like the Melbourne Autism Expo and the Victorian Autism Conference we are getting a lot of interest from the south-west region, which stretches right down to Warrnambool and Geelong, and from Albury-Wodonga, Kyabram, Echuca and Shepparton, as Chris outlined earlier. The rather dull text down the bottom there — I accept full responsibility for that as I am the graphic designer, but I do try my best — gives us a bit of an idea as to what we are doing in a variety of different settings. That is what we hear extrinsically.

It is also important for us to understand how we are doing intrinsically. On the first page of our handout we have already had some insights into the data about how our attendees at camps are enjoying themselves, the sort of connection and engagement we are getting out of our mentees in the school programs, the self-esteem and confidence boost that all of our mentees are experiencing and the impact we are having on professionals in different settings. It makes sense that we should be trying to drive an autism rethink throughout more communities that do not necessarily rely on there being a school there, because there may be issues with access to funding. That is also a recurring theme — that many regions do have a large interest in our programs but there simply is not the funding there, so access to resources does create a huge problem. But we are really committed to driving our rethink in as many communities as possible.

What we are looking at doing next year is really building upon our peer-based mentoring model, and you will see that an essential part of that is our school-based mentoring program. That is going to be built on by having access to more community-based mentoring programs. We are looking at your south-west, your Echucas, your Sheppartons, your Kyabrams. The principal of Kyabram P-12 College, Stuart Bott, has said that he is prepared to fund it irrespective of what other funding outcomes suggest, so Kyabram is right behind this autism rethink. We will be delivering that in conjunction with Youth Partnerships, and a huge part of our next step in terms of growing the I CAN model is really growing in conjunction with community-based organisations but also in a cross-sector collaboration, really drawing upon our friends who work in the employment sector and in the specialist services space.

If you have young people, like your Jennas and your Bryces, who are starting to approach employment and need assistance in really finding out what works for them in terms of a career, they can have that counselling that works in there. For our young people who might unfortunately have some mental health concerns — particularly when you are in a regional setting and you do not have access to people you can speak to and relate to, there may also be mental health concerns there — we also have a cross-referrals process there so they can access specialists in psychology and also access the one-on-one mentoring.

One of the huge things about our school program is, while it is great, some students do need extra support, so from 1 February next year we are also going to be offering one-on-one mentoring that is both in person and online to leverage the technology we have got available. If we have a mentee who needs that support in your Shepparton, in your Kyabram, that does not mean they are not going to be able to access our mentoring. I think we owe it to everybody we work with to do the best we can, so that is what we are going to be looking at next year.

I am just conscious of the time we have taken today in hammering you guys with statistics, so I think we would now be very happy to take any questions that the committee has.

**The CHAIR** — Are you okay with that?

**Ms BREHENY** — Yes, I am good. I am happy to answer any questions.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. Yes, we are kind of running behind time, but that is not unusual for these types of hearings. I thank you all for your presentations today. Jenna and Bryce, thank you very much. You are very admirable, articulate and very talented young people. I CAN is gaining a pretty significant reputation for the work that you are doing. I guess the question I have is: as you know and everybody knows, the spectrum is very broad, so how does the I CAN Network support people on the spectrum who do not necessarily have the same communication needs as others or abilities as others and also those on the spectrum who have been diagnosed with multiple concerns, not just mental health but ADHD et cetera? How does the I CAN Network support those people?

**Mr VARNEY** — I will cover the latter part first. In every program we have there are people who have multiple spectrums at play. Our Imagination Club programs in our primary school mentoring actually have young people on the spectrum with ADHD or social anxiety or who might just need the confidence boost, because in primary school mentoring the word ‘imagination’ replaces all those spectrums, and your ticket in is having a big imagination. The kids never find out; a kid in primary school does not often hear that they are on the spectrum. A lot of parents choose adolescent years to share that, so the primary school mentoring definitely covers that very broad range of young people, as does the secondary program, but the secondary program is more exclusively for young people on the spectrum.

In the secondary program we have 23 young people who have greater support requirements. ‘Greater support requirements’ is our language that we use to describe severe autism and low-functioning and non-verbal. I live with a young man who has severe autism. We tested the language of the community of 62 autistics, and we really found that the words ‘low-functioning’ and ‘severe autism’ have been created by the medical profession and are not necessarily the words that my extended family and my immediate friend and neighbour would use, so we chose the frame of ‘greater support requirements’.

In the very beginning of the I CAN Network, the Northern School for Autism approached me and said, ‘We think your model could really work. Will you work with us over a period of three years to pilot what your

program will look like for this cohort of young people?'. The pilot is just finishing, so soon the I CAN Network will be able to talk about the unique model that we have there.

For those 23 young people the program is the same, but the pace is very different. At Northern School for Autism our mentoring takes place over a longer period of time. They take a weekly model, so it is a whole elective. Obviously special schools are a whole can of worms, but the curriculum at Northern School for Autism is quite strong. The Wednesday is actually the I CAN day, where one week you will have mentoring content on teamwork and leadership. How that works is I CAN provides the content, and then we work with the teachers on the delivery, because in my mentoring sessions there — because I am the lead network leader on that one — I will have young people with a 2-minute processing delay or multiple spectrums or an intellectual disability, so the outcome at the end will often be quite different to the mainstream mentoring that we will do in our other schools. The content can be the same, and you can still have high expectations; it is just at a different pace. That school also chose to reduce the number of people in the mentoring. We do not deliver group mentoring to 15 young people in an autistic school or for young people with greater support requirements. It is often to a group of five or seven young people at a time. You can still achieve phenomenal outcomes. They have done amazing things.

What has been a huge eye-opener is that these young people who have greater support requirements know far more than anyone else how to engage their friends who also have those requirements or high communication needs. At Northern School for Autism we asked the I CAN mentors we were developing among the students, 'How do we engage your friends in room 23, room 24 who are non-verbal and would struggle in some of this mentoring?'. They came up with the idea of a student council — not your conventional badge-type thing, but very much a student council that would, I guess, get students thinking about the need to have a voice.

When we said to the students, 'All right, let's create this council', the first thing they wanted to do is change their school uniform, because unfortunately if you look across autistic schools or special schools, there is not much thought ever put into the uniform or how the students look and appear in everyday life. The first reform this NSA student council are working on is their student council, and they are running their own I CAN camp in October in the Macedon Ranges. The answer is that it absolutely can work. There are 23 young people who have been in that pilot, and once we finish the work this year we will be able to show it far more widely. The other autistic schools involved are Jacana School for Autism and Warrnambool Special Developmental School.

**The CHAIR** — It is great that you are actually extending across regional areas. It is really great to hear.

**Ms McLEISH** — I just want to drill down a little bit more on the mentoring program so I can really understand not just how it came to be but how you establish it in a particular school. And I am looking at your general advice here that became involved. How do you get into the school, and then, once you are in that school, how do you then get the kids who are going to be involved — like that 10 to 15 who are involved — in the mentoring project? What was that process?

**Mr VARNEY** — It is a three-step process. I was lucky that when we were creating this I spoke to schools. I had come from running the 40 Hour Famine nationally, so I was like, 'Okay, I know how to talk to schools'. Schools are big communities. They have got to drive their own solutions, so the first part, step 1, is co-designing. So it is like a normal consultancy process. You sit down with the school principal and some teachers, and you learn what that community is. They will tell you who they are and what their principles are. Every school has their own unique philosophy, and so I CAN is something that can easily fold within that. So we co-design: 'All right, what would you like to achieve?'. Now it has been in a school for three years, and the whole vision is really setting up that school community so that we have built up their capacity and they have got school leavers on the spectrum who can return as mentors to younger students on the spectrum. So Jenna is the case study of having achieved that, though she is still at school. It is just a primary school she is lucky to mentor in.

But after that co-design process, then the teachers, the welfare or learning enhancement team, come to us and say, 'All right. We've identified this group of 15 students that we would like you to start with', and then they might add students here too once it has worked et cetera. Once we have identified a group of 15, we then invite their parents and those students. If it is a secondary program, we invite the students; if it is a primary program, we do not invite the students, because it is Imagination Club and it is different. But in secondary, we invite the parents and the people to a meeting where they need to give consent to the program. So we have mentors that

run the night and share about the program, share their stories, and the young people and their parents fill out a form on how they work and the structures they need et cetera.

Then the third step: sometimes schools will want us to do a talk at a general year-level assembly. It will be Will saying, 'I'm a lawyer, and anyone can get out there and achieve their dreams, and I am on the spectrum'. The purpose of that will be to help mainstream students have a rethink. They will never identify that we are running a mentoring program in the school, so that the students on the spectrum do not feel singled out. The only people that identify they are in a mentoring program are the mentees themselves. The mentors never identify the kids that are in the program.

So co-design, parent consent and then working with the students, and of course it occurs on a voluntary basis. So we measure the program. It is a business, so there are measures on retention and the levels of satisfaction and all of that. So that is how it works. But every program likes to have its own magic, so they create their own name. At Aquinas College, where I mentor, they call themselves the Mutants.

**Ms BREHENY** — They chose that name.

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes, they chose that name. At Parade College they call themselves Spectrumbusters. In Bryce's program it is the Brauer College Determinators. Every program will have its own difference, so they are all very diverse.

**Ms McLEISH** — So did the 10 or 15 people that might get identified to be part of that program know each other beforehand? They had no anxiety then about — —

**Mr VARNEY** — Everyone walks into I CAN events going, 'I don't want to be here', so that is the extraordinary trajectory, because we run camps for kids who do not like camps, and the mentoring a lot of the time is for people who do not like group work. But I guess the magic of it is, because it is led by people in the spectrum, we say, 'Look, I find this hard too, but we all need to give this a go because it's part of getting out there and being part of the world and you've got stuff to offer and this can be fun'.

The first part of the mentoring is always really special, because it is trying to build a group bond. So we run loads of team activities. The beginning is just fun and activities, and then eventually it is deepening the content, where you start to equip them with leadership skills. As soon as they are part of that tribe — where is our camp photo? — quickly in the group they fall on their friends. Jenna, do you want to tell us how that happened at Marymede? Was it icy in the beginning?

**Ms GEPHART** — Yes, it was icy in the beginning.

**Mr VARNEY** — When did it melt?

**Ms GEPHART** — Perhaps maybe one, two weeks of it. I do not really remember that well.

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes, it takes a little while to warm up, and then it gets going. You do walk with the students through it.

**Ms McLEISH** — And the age range — 10 to 15 would be like years 7 to 12?

**Mr VARNEY** — Years 7 to 12, and the camps are years 7 to 9 and years 10 to 12. Because maturity is so different for kids and young people on the spectrum, you can meet a 13-year-old who is ready to talk to 25-year-olds or an 18-year-old that can have an animated conversation about Minecraft or whatever with an 11-year-old. Our activities tend to have quite a broad age range with them.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Firstly, I would just like to say: where have you been? As a former teacher in an SDS, this is just something that we have been hanging out for. It fills such a massive gap; it is quite amazing. I even love how in your letter to the committee, Chris, instead of saying co-founder or manager or CEO, you say 'chief enabler'. It speaks a lot to your ethos — and by the way, nobody is too old for Minecraft. We are designing the new Frankston station with Minecraft!

Just to get on to my question, I just want to know from your perspective: how can government help encourage employers to view the benefits of employing people with ASD?

**Mr VARNEY** — So your question is: how can government encourage employing people on the spectrum?

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Employers.

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes. I think it is storytelling of the great employment stories out there — I might hand over to Gabby on parts of this question — but also to say, as a manager of 40 autistics, 18 of whom we pay, once you get the structures right in the workplace, they can do two weeks of work in two days. To put it in perspective, no-one is ever calling up Gabby, Will or me and saying, ‘It’s after 5 o’clock; I can’t work’. If they are in their autistic hyperfocus, and that is dedicated to their work project, they are phenomenal workers. They will work right throughout the weekend. I sound very exploitative saying this, but they are phenomenal on any project I give them that meets their actual passion and what they want to do. It is hard to understand unless you are autistic and you appreciate that hyperfocus.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — You see it in schools.

**Mr VARNEY** — Exactly.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — You get kids focused on something and they will not eat.

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes. I will hand over to Gabby.

**Ms BREHENY** — In that storytelling vein, I think what we have learnt from managing so many people on the spectrum is I do not know what the government could directly do with workplaces and stuff, because you are not going to force an employer to hire autistics. But yes, with our storytelling, I was speaking to someone and they did a week of work placement with an IT grad — and to disclose as well, not all people on the spectrum are IT experts; I know one or two people on our team who are IT experts. There was a guy who was employed in one of the programs, and he did about 200 times the work pace of everyone else during that week, and then the next week IBM employed him.

I think it is really about being able to create those structures around people, which is what we found here as well. It has been an immense learning curve. Chris, since the start, three years ago, has changed. He has managed people before; he has managed some practices. In talking about how I CAN does that and encourages that, there are a few different approaches to it. You could talk about how indirectly our programs serve to encourage people to seek employment and stuff. We will have kids coming through our programs who before the programs did not even think they would get employed. They probably thought they would be on the dole or whatever for the rest of their life. Then a year into the program they say, ‘Hey, I want to do architecture’, and they will have those aspirations. You have got that indirect effect that just naturally comes from building someone’s self-confidence.

But there are more direct ways we do it, in that for people who work with us we build those structures around them — for example, even just changing around our recruitment practices. Lots of people on the spectrum will be in service providers and areas where we might go to a jobs skills provider and they say, ‘Hey! Let’s fix up your résumé’. Your résumé can be perfect and great, but by the time they get to the actual interview process and the job application process interview itself, they might get really anxious and overwhelmed and are not able to best display their skills in that. We will give them the questions beforehand, and you might want to give more practical ways of showing their skills as opposed to just your face-to-face stuff, which may not even be useful if the job does not involve lots of face-to-face interaction.

There is a real culture within I CAN Network in that we have such a culture of how we are enabling this person — are you taking into account their communication structures, or are you taking into account how they best work? What we have seen with the success that we have had is that when you do do that right, often — not even often — always they will excel and exceed expectations. I am not sure if that answers your question.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — It does. It answered my second question too, so my third question is: when are you coming to the south-east?

**Mr ROSEWARNE** — Do you mind if I answer that question?

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Please do.

**Mr ROSEWARNE** — On 19 June I actually met with Ben Vasiliou at SkillsPlus in Frankston.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Beautiful.

**Mr ROSEWARNE** — They are going to be joining with us as one of our specialist service providers for our program next year. At the Victorian Autism Conference on 1 September I met with headspace in Frankston, who are happy to offer us an office space in Frankston.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Beautiful.

**Mr ROSEWARNE** — So as a direct point, that is where we are looking to be in the next 12 months for our integrated service offering. Then for your Kyabrams there is also a replicated sort of service there. It is really just finding our partners and engaging with them to find out where the right match is, because we want to be philosophically aligned, and we want to make sure that we are partnering with organisations that have really leveraged the strengths of people on the autism spectrum and to really facilitate that process of walking them through being a teenager right through to a young adult, to a fully employed or fully engaged young adult. They might not necessarily want to find a job in IT, especially if they are an expert in trying to facilitate that process, but we have Bryce, who might want to be an architect. He might enjoy sketching buildings for another two years, so let us make sure he is happy doing that and make sure that we are putting him at a spot where those achievements can really be celebrated.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — I know Ben, and I am big supporter of headspace, so let us get talking. We need you down there.

**Mr VARNEY** — Where are you in the south-east?

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Frankston.

**Mr VARNEY** — Because we have got Dromana College, who are also wanting to, and Chisholm TAFE.

**Mr EDBROOKE** — Beautiful. We need you down there.

**Mr FINN** — If you are looking for an endorsement, you have got one here, let me tell you. From what I have seen of the I CAN Network, it is absolutely amazing. I think it is fair to ask: have you achieved what we all need to achieve in the autism space — that is, flexibility?

**Mr VARNEY** — Our workspace is very flexible. It is constant flexibility. Right from the beginning the first-ever thing we did was run a camp put together by autistics for autistics, and that experience demanded flexibility. Signing ourselves up to the mission of proving what autistics could do taught us. I can tell you that in the beginning I did not know what I was doing, but then quickly setting the goal — ‘Well, I’ve told everyone I’m doing it; I’d better figure it out’ — and then going from there did work. We spent so much time on our values and breaking down what those values are, and we are really proud of them. Did you want to share, because I think the flexibility — —

**Ms BREHENY** — Yes. I was going to say I think it is interesting that you bring up that flexibility, because I guess there is an idea out there that the autistic population is inflexible inherently.

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes.

**Ms BREHENY** — We found that they are not. I remember when we are bringing people in that one of our core values has to do with we are open and we talk about how we are flexible. Lots of people reflect on it and say, ‘Wow!. That goes against the grain of what you would expect from within our population anyway’. In terms of us achieving all that we have to achieve, there is obviously a lot more to do as well, but I think we are doing okay.

**Mr VARNEY** — One thing on the flexibility line — because we do believe in tough love, and everyone in our program subscribes to that — is that we have a line that we push ourselves to grow, but we do not push ourselves to breaking point. I think in the very beginning when we came up with that language, that one stuck throughout, because people really understand what it means. But I think the special source of going, ‘Right. Stretch yourself, but don’t get to meltdown point’, that has really worked. The flexibility is always evolving.

**Mr FINN** — I think one of the big issues — you mentioned it earlier — is the word ‘expectations’. How do we go about raising those expectations in education amongst kids and adults with autism themselves? How do we go about doing that?

**Mr VARNEY** — Again I think it is building up a positive profile behind autistic individuals who have had high expectations of themselves, so people like your Bryces and Jennas, and giving them platforms to get out there, because look at what Bryce has done. He has got up there and spoken at a huge event — 140 people — and is now on the Victorian Student Representative Council. He will definitely be a mentor in I CAN south-west, so all of that is ahead of him. But I think probably what is important for the government to do — because government when it sends signals, the rest of the community turns around and goes, ‘Oh! Government is there. Okay’ — is send a signal that ways of learning about the spectrum need to be delivered by people on the spectrum, and positive stories about people on the spectrum, the training around autism, need far more autistic voice.

To give a great example, Elise and Max are two of our mentors that are here today, and the three of us were delivering PD with a group of 40 teachers at Catholic Education, where we kept talking about high expectations. A signal you could send is that when people are choosing to look at autism, that that choice actively considers having people on the spectrum in the delivery of it. If you send that signal, I think that will push a lot of systemic change around their expectations.

**Ms BREHENY** — It is not a novel concept; you can apply it to any population. If you are going to bring in someone and say, ‘You are not going to achieve very well’, then they are probably not going to, so why not raise that bar and expectation?

**Mr FINN** — That is very true. On that issue of the south-west one, it was a long trip to Warrnambool, but worth every minute I can tell you. It was excellent.

**The CHAIR** — We will be heading back there as a committee, I think.

**Mr VARNEY** — Good. We would love that.

**Mr FINN** — I think I CAN Network has a huge role to play in what we are on about here on this committee. How do we get you involved across the board, not just in mentoring, but in a whole range of areas such as employment and just teaching the community that autism is not the end of the world?

**Mr VARNEY** — In the very beginning when I went out and gave a TEDx I did have so many people across Australia and then people internationally who said, ‘Come and solve this problem’. As a company and as a business you have to bite off something you can chew in the beginning, so now that we have got good evidence behind group mentoring, we can see us expanding into one on one. I think at the moment our speakers in professional development agency is a great way that we can consult with people and train people, so there is a lot that we can offer through that service. People like Catholic Education are reaching out asking us to do training. Then with the Australian Bureau of Statistics we go, ‘We’ve got great employees who might fare well and might end up on your performance management system unless we come in there and really make sure there is a great culture in there’. That is where we can come in, because Specialisterne is helping people find jobs. We offer jobs in mentoring, but we are better at helping people retain their job, so that is the value proposition we offer to a workplace.

In terms of consultancy with other groups on how to work with people with autism, a lot of people contact me — and by extension us — wanting to do that work. Now we are finally getting a head above the surface, you are right; there is work we can do there. Obviously we look at all the investment schemes that happen around social enterprises to help us grow that business stream, but I think another recommendation you could make in terms of helping us be across the board is giving a signal that social enterprise can play a real role and that it is a community-driven solution that is really important to grow, because this generation — your Jennas and Bryces — really understand it. We are in Victoria. It is the social enterprise state, so it should be promoted.

In terms of working across the board, I guess it is important I CAN Network has changed from young people to now, where we are delivering services to 8 to 35-year-olds, and that has really grown.

**Mr FINN** — And how long have you been doing this?

**Mr VARNEY** — We have only been in delivery since April 2014.

**Mr FINN** — That is what I thought.

**Mr VARNEY** — But we set up at the end of 2013, but it took us a while to get the whole thing up.

**The CHAIR** — I think your rapid expansion says a lot about the success of the programs that you are running. We are actually out of time, but thank you very much.

**Mr VARNEY** — No problems.

**The CHAIR** — I want to thank you for your submission to the committee, particularly the recommendations that were included in that. I particularly was impressed with recommendation no. 4, which was using our current existing regional development initiatives to promote that community development and social enterprise, which is such a natural fit.

**Mr VARNEY** — Yes, there are so many of them.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you again, and thank you for coming along today, Bryce and Jenna. It was a pleasure to have you here and to hear your thoughts on being peer support people within your schools.

**Witnesses withdrew.**