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School leaver Tiffany Bartlett, is typical of young school leavers with moderate to high disability who wait years before even getting on a job employment network waiting list.

The discrimination of low expectations

Over-burdened capped employment services mean that school leavers with severe to profound disabilities wait years just to get on a waiting list. The root of the problem lies in low expectations of such kids Damien Anderson told Denny Rosey.

There is plenty of money and several programs to assist school leavers obtain work and training - provided you are the *right* sort of school leaver.

If however, you have a severe to profound core activity disability, the likelihood of getting into a Disability Employment Network or other Commonwealth employment service is zip. Discriminatory? Absolutely.

At present, service providers can only accept a limited number of people in this category. Every 'capped' program is jammed to capacity and school leavers have to wait years just to get on waiting lists.

While the problem is enormous, it is symptomatic of a deeper malaise according to Damien Anderson, state policy manager (NSW) with National Disability Services. He maintains that people with severe to profound disabilities are blighted by low expectations from an early age and from all sides. "There's a culture of low expectations around these children from school teachers, parents and just about everybody. It's very easy to talk a kid's ability down."

Anderson says schools can make a huge difference. "We need to make sure the school curriculum provides kids with the practical skills they need to achieve their potential after they leave school. We want that for all kids but for these kids it's particularly important. We frequently find that when these kids leave school, low expectations lead to low service expectations for them."

He added, "We need a range of employment gateways for these kids and currently there aren't any. Employment services are overcrowded and very few kids go into Business Services these days – almost all go into state funded services. It's a path that offers them and their parents a sense of security and parents like the certainty that their kids are in the system."

But even though day programs have limited value Anderson says school leavers have little choice. People brought up to believe their capacity is extremely restricted are not likely to approach employers who for the most part shy away from employing anyone with severe disabilities.

"You can't expect kids to say 'No I won't go to a day programme. I want to go for a job.' That takes a leap of faith and currently there's no safety net if their experience in a job doesn't work out. If you want kids to meet their potential, the risks have got to be removed and that's been very slow to happen," he commented.

The discrimination doesn't stop there. People with severe to profound disabilities (about 3% - 5% of the population) are not entitled to disability accommodation services and are not able to access employment programs if they can't work 15 hours a week without support.

"They are entitled to the Disability Support Pension, the mobility allowance and some other things but when you weigh these up against the small number of things they can do with their lives, they have nothing like the entitlements most other people enjoy," Anderson said.

Their situation is exacerbated he says by artificial jurisdictions and the "bizarre rules" of different disability programs and he understands why many people are not willing to cope with constant frustration and discrimination.

"These kids and their families are at the end of their resilience," Anderson maintains. "They cannot withstand any more shocks. They've been kicked around for years by ever changing service systems and ever changing rules and entitlements."

A small proportion of school leavers with moderate to profound disabilities do obtain paid work, but these come about only with a great deal of behind the scenes lobbying and intensive searches for enlightened employers.

"One very successful Sydney service provider which has been around for 20 years reckons they have to make 100 phone calls to get one job," reports Damien Anderson. "It has a floor full of people who do nothing but make phone calls to employers to locate jobs for people."

In recent years some large corporations have united under the banner *Employers Making a Difference* to offset the prevailing dim situation. Telstra, Australia Post and Westpac now have affirmative action employment strategies, a handful of merchant bankers provide mentoring support and one large enterprise is committed to helping kids with literacy and learning difficulties.

But it's going to take a lot more than that for kids with moderate to profound disabilities to feel optimistic about their future. ☹