As families across Oregon celebrate high school graduations this time of year, most of the Class of 2013 will earn standard diplomas. Those are widely considered the best tickets to college admissions. Today and tomorrow at this time, we’ll look at two groups of people who aren’t getting those diplomas. Rob Manning reports on the problems facing adults who never finished high school.

Just 40 percent of high school dropouts in Oregon have full-time jobs. That may lead them here. Tom Previs is the assistant manager at the state employment office in Oregon City.

RM: "Are there certain fields that 10, 20 years ago -- someone wouldn't need a GED or a high school diploma, and now they do?"

TP: "Well, I could give you -- do you want to go for a little walk? This'll give you a great example."

We walk to a bluff above the Willamette River. Below us, the Blue Heron mill is being taken apart. It used to employ hundreds.

Previs said, “A lot of people, that was the only job they ever had. Some of them come out of there, without, not even a GED. Some in the past -- some of the mills we’ve had -- in Estacada, 4th grade education. Those types of jobs --they’re just not around any more.”
The unemployment rate for Oregon’s high school dropouts is about three points higher than graduates — and far higher than people who’ve been to college. Gary Blackmer with the Secretary of State’s office recently studied what’s happening with Oregon’s 300,000 adult dropouts. He says students were falling through the cracks.

Blackmer said, “The high schools were not -- felt like they weren’t in a position to notify everyone that this student had dropped out -- and the community colleges didn’t know students in their area who had dropped out. So they literally were just going without a lot of attention.”

State education officials say they’ve been working with community colleges to connect information systems – and as a result, they’re learning more about who is falling through the cracks.

They’re also looking at a model to find high school dropouts based on what’s worked in a related area. Oregon used grant money to find -- not high school dropouts -- but people who left community college. The effort identified policy barriers. Grant manager Tammie Stark and college officials spent a year and a half combing through thousands of registration records for students who’d racked up lot of credits before leaving.

Stark said, “We found about 100 students who are eligible for associates' degrees over a ten-year period. And there are about a thousand students who are potentially eligible.”

Mia Zetter left Portland Community College to pursue a nursing degree in Kentucky some years ago. She didn’t realize she’d actually already earned a PCC degree.

Zetter said, "I could’ve gone in as a second-degree student versus as initially getting your degree -- so it could’ve made things a little easier getting into a nursing program."

Oregon’s director of research for community colleges, Elizabeth Brand, says the system that found Mia Zetter is now being applied to former high schoolers.

Brand said, "We had some funds leftover, so we were able to use that same address validation software, to go through the records of those who had started the GED, but had not completed the GED, and then to contact those individuals to say ‘hey, the test is changing, you really want to get in here and get this accomplished.’"

State officials say they’ve found nearly 24,000 Oregonians who have started, but not fully completed, GED exams. The exams will be even harder next year.
Attracting students back, if they haven't come back on their own, may be tough. Bruce Clemetsen at Linn Benton Community College says marketing has limited value.

Clemetsen explained, "Even though it's in the newspaper, it's on some internet sites, it's in movie theaters – what students that come to the program tell us that come to the program tell us is it's their family, it's others that say 'You really can do this, you need to get back to school, there's a different future for you,' and they have to take it to heart."

Back at the Clackamas employment office, workforce advisor Diane Danielson is helping jobseekers without high school diplomas. She says even the offer of free GED tests and classes doesn't convince some jobless dropouts.

Danielson said, "Not that it sounds like it's too much –it's that they've always gotten a job without it. And so, I see repeat people come back and say 'You were right, I really do need it.'"

Clackamas Community College can offer free GED classes, but not every college can. There's not state general fund money for them.

That leaves it up to individual colleges to re-direct their own money, or find grant money to help students get their GEDs.

Federal funding priorities present another problem. PCC's Veronica Garcia says a new limit on federal financial aid is affecting would-be students.

Garcia said, "It really limited their options, and they really had to start paying out of pocket. So that was a big blow to the college."

In part two tomorrow, you'll hear who else is absorbing that blow.