

Huntington High School's 162nd Commencement

Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

Good evening soon-to-be graduates, faculty, staff and guests ...

I have been delivering graduation speeches for 20 years and have worked feverishly on each to create something that sticks ... something that graduates and their families will recall at Thanksgiving dinners decades from now and say “remember when he said ...” Well, this has got to be my year.

As you know, this is my last chance to do this as Huntington superintendent. I typically dig into my mind to find the right words to send off a class, but tonight, there is no question that it will come primarily from the heart.

What I have found most joyful throughout my time here are the relationships I have cultivated – with students, colleagues, parents, community members and others. It is these relationships that have truly shaped my experience and have motivated me to do my best work. In this light, I implore you, Class of 2023 members, to maintain positive relationships and choose joy as you travel life's roads. When you do so, you will feel good. When you feel good, you will do good. When you do good, it reminds others of what joy feels like and it might just inspire others to do the same. If someone comes into your life and has a positive impact on you, remain thankful that your paths crossed. If they can't stay in your life or if you drift apart over time, be thankful that they somehow brought joy into your life even if it was just for a short while.

Many of you have spent the last thirteen years together - the majority of your lives to date. You may not have thought about it much during the final days of your

senior year, but today is the last time that you/we will be together in the same venue. The fact is, life is about change. People come and go. Situations change. Geographies shift. I promise you, however, the memories made during your years in Huntington will not fade. Even decades from now when you can't recall what you did that morning, you'll remember something a teacher did or said or how a friend helped shape your teenage years.

A wise person claimed that there are four things you can't get back in life:

- A word after it's said
- An opportunity after it's missed
- Time after it's gone
- Trust after it's lost

When this life is all said and done, the only thing left is your legacy. You may not think much about it now, but understand the significance of how you choose to show up in this world. At the end of the day, don't be remembered as that individual who had so much potential and did little with it. Don't wake up tomorrow morning to impress anyone else. Wake up because there's a chance that you could be the light in somebody's darkness. Time is of the essence and don't plan on wasting it. Mahatma Gandhi said it best ... "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

As an aside ... please admit when you're wrong. Among the most significant problems in society today – very few people, including many of the world's most prominent leaders, just won't do it! Two very powerful words – I'm sorry. It is okay to be remorseful. It is okay to demonstrate humility.

As Huntington High School Class of 2023 members venture off into the next stages of their educational, professional and personal lives, it is my time to join them in doing the same. We are blessed to have been part of something very

special and for me, that includes witnessing your incredible growth through primary, intermediate, middle and high schools. We have celebrated successes and worked through some crazy things together – reopening a school, a superstorm, a global pandemic and just last week, a seemingly apocalyptic haze caused by, of all things, wildfires in Ontario. And these events really just touch the surface.

I've said it before and I'll say it again ... I would not want to have done my thing anywhere else but here. Scottish novelist and Peter Pan creator J.M. Barrie stated, "Never say goodbye because goodbye means going away and going away means forgetting." In this respect, this is in no way a goodbye, as I know none of us will ever forget. And in the spirit of Dr. Seuss, don't cry because it's over but continue to smile and remain ever grateful for it happening and for it happening in Huntington.

With much love, best wishes and Godspeed.

Buenas noches futuros graduados, profesores, personal e invitados...

He estado pronunciando discursos de graduación durante 20 años y he trabajado febrilmente en cada uno para crear algo que perdure... algo que los graduados y sus familias recordarán en las cenas de Acción de Gracias dentro de décadas y dirán "recuerden cuando dijo..." Bueno, este tiene que ser mi año.

Como saben, esta es mi última oportunidad de hacer esto como superintendente de Huntington. Por lo general, busco en mi mente para encontrar las palabras correctas para despedir una clase, pero esta noche, no hay duda de que vendrá principalmente del corazón.

Lo que más me ha alegrado durante mi tiempo aquí son las relaciones que he cultivado: con estudiantes, colegas, padres, miembros de la comunidad y otros. Son estas relaciones las que realmente han dado forma a mi experiencia y me han motivado a hacer mi mejor trabajo. En este sentido, les imploro, miembros de la Clase 2023, que mantengan relaciones positivas y elijan la alegría mientras recorren los caminos de la vida. Cuando lo hagas, te sentirás bien. Cuando te sientas bien, harás el bien. Cuando haces el bien, les recuerda a los demás cómo se siente la alegría y podría inspirar a otros a hacer lo mismo. Si alguien llega a tu vida y tiene un impacto positivo en ti, agradece que tus caminos se hayan cruzado. Si no pueden permanecer en su vida o si se distancian con el tiempo, agradezca que de alguna manera trajeron alegría a su vida, incluso si fue solo por un corto tiempo.

Muchos de ustedes han pasado los últimos trece años juntos, la mayor parte de sus vidas hasta hoy. Puede que no hayas pensado mucho en ello durante los últimos días de tu último año, pero hoy es la última vez que estaremos juntos en

el mismo lugar. El hecho es que la vida se trata de cambios. La gente viene y va. Las situaciones cambian. Cambio de geografías. Te prometo, sin embargo, que los recuerdos hechos durante tus años en Huntington no se desvanecerán.

Incluso dentro de décadas, cuando no puedas recordar lo que hiciste esta mañana, recordarás algo que hizo o dijo un maestro o cómo un amigo ayudó a dar forma a tu adolescencia.

Una persona sabia afirmó que hay cuatro cosas que no puedes recuperar en la vida:

- Una palabra después de decirla
- Una oportunidad después de haberla perdido
- Tiempo después de que se haya ido
- Confianza después de perderla

Cuando esta vida está todo dicho y hecho, lo único que queda es tu legado. Puede que ahora no pienses mucho en ello, pero comprende el significado de cómo eliges aparecer en este mundo. Al final del día, no seas recordado como ese individuo que tenía tanto potencial e hizo poco con él. No te despiertes mañana por la mañana para impresionar a nadie más. Despierta porque existe la posibilidad de que puedas ser la luz en la oscuridad de alguien. El tiempo es esencial y no planees desperdiciarlo. Mahatma Gandhi lo dijo mejor... "Vive como si fueras a morir mañana. Aprende como si fueras a vivir para siempre." Aparte... por favor, admita cuando se equivoque. Entre los problemas más importantes de la sociedad, ¡muy pocas personas, incluidos muchos de los líderes más destacados del mundo, simplemente no lo harán! Dos palabras muy poderosas: lo siento. Está bien estar arrepentido. Está bien demostrar humildad.

A medida que los miembros de la la clase del 2023 de Huntington High School se aventuran en las siguientes etapas de su vida educativa, profesional y personal, es mi momento de unirme a ellos para hacer lo mismo. Tenemos la suerte de haber sido parte de algo muy especial y para mí, eso incluye ser testigo de su increíble crecimiento a través de la escuela primaria, intermedia, secundaria y preparatoria. Hemos celebrado éxitos y trabajado juntos en algunas cosas locas: la reapertura de una escuela, una supertormenta, una pandemia mundial y, la semana pasada, una neblina aparentemente apocalíptica causada por, entre todas las cosas, incendios forestales en Ontario. Y esto realmente solo toca la superficie.

Lo he dicho antes y lo diré de nuevo... No me gustaría haber hecho lo mío en otro lugar que no sea aquí. El novelista escocés y creador de Peter Pan, J.M. Barrie, dijo: “Nunca digas adiós porque adiós significa irse e irse significa olvidar”. En este sentido, esto no es de ninguna manera un adiós, ya que sé que ninguno de nosotros lo olvidará jamás. Y en el espíritu del Dr. Seuss, no llores porque se acabó, sino continúa sonriendo y mantente siempre agradecido por lo que sucedió y por lo que sucedió en Huntington.

Con mucho amor, los mejores deseos y buena suerte.

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School Board President Christine Biernacki's Address

Good evening, distinguished guests, faculty members, parents and above all, the incredible 2023 class of Huntington High School.

It is with great pride that I stand before you on behalf of the Board of Education.

Today, as we celebrate your remarkable achievement, I am reminded of the powerful words of George Bernard Shaw: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

As you begin the next chapter of your lives, I encourage you to embrace the chance to be unreasonable, to be unafraid of challenging the status quo and breaking free from being ordinary. Never accept the answer, "but that's how we always do it." That response is the killer of innovation, art, ideas and often humanitarianism.

Being unreasonable or outrageous does not imply recklessness or failing to consider consequences. Instead, it is the mission to exceed imagined limitations, question the norm and dream beyond what others deem reasonable. It is about having the audacity to believe that you can make a difference, that you can positively affect the world around you and that you can leave a permanent mark on the lives of others. Blue Devils, please remember that it is often those who no one imagines are able who ultimately change the world.

Whether you choose to start your own business, pursue a career in the arts, become a health care worker, an inventor, a master craftsman or dedicate your life to service, do

it with fearlessness that defines true greatness. Believe in your talents and never settle for anything less than what you are capable of achieving.

Great achievements often begin as an idea that most would find ridiculous or impossible.

Use your ideas and courage to promote justice, to advocate for equality and to uplift those who have been made to feel less significant. Your efforts to empathize with others will make you exceptional leaders.

Finally, I encourage you to stay connected with one another and our school community. You are not just graduating today; you are becoming alumni and you are a part of the resources and fabric of our district. Cherish the memories you have made here and when you need inspiration, look back at those times and let them bolster your resolve. Remember that you are part of a larger and great community and it is always here for you.

Congratulations, Class of 2023! May your journey be filled with imagination, passion, legendary adventures and a relentless pursuit of the outrageous. Make sure the world knows that you are here!

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Principal Brenden Cusack's Address

Good evening parents, guests, faculty, members of the board of education, central administration and most important, the graduating class of 2023. I appreciate everyone's understanding and flexibility regarding the weather and the plans for this evening's event. Regardless of the challenges presented, I am so glad that we can come together this evening to celebrate you, our graduating class, as this is what it's all about. You have finally made it across the finish line and tonight is all about you. I do however, want to briefly recognize Mr. Jim Polansky and Dr. Kathie Acker as they are in some ways graduating along with you. We have been together in some capacity over more than 20 years and I want to thank them both for their leadership, their guidance and most of all, their friendship. Over the years we've had a lot of good times together and I'm truly going to miss you both.

Back to the Class of 2023. So I have to admit, I used ChatGPT to generate my speech to you this evening. It wrote it for me in about 3 seconds. Originally, I was planning use that as an example of some sort. I was going to show you how impersonal and robotic it was and so to avoid the temptation to rely on these artificial means by which to generate ideas. But it was really good. I mean... it was *really* good... it was better than what I would've written and most people say I'm a pretty decent writer. But it was better than me. So good that I couldn't even use it here as an example. But it occurred to me that maybe that is, in fact the example and the message I'd like to share with you this evening. The fact is, technology keeps getting better and closer to reality minute by minute. The temptation to use it as a short cut is only going to get stronger over time. And... in response, the technology to detect artificial intelligence will continue to get better

as well. It's literally a war of the robots out there and I think the key word in the context of all of this is integrity.

Whether you find yourself in the future on the user end of artificial intelligence, or if you find yourself on the creation end of it, as many of you may, I think integrity will be key as we enter into a new age of technological innovation. In many ways it will be up to you and your generation to decide how far we go with technology and how it will forever change the world in which we live. Integrity must continue to serve as your compass to guide you. I'll be perfectly honest, when I saw what kind of graduation speech AI could produce, a little piece of me said... awesome, I'm done! Use it! Save hours of time! In fact, perhaps the words I'm saying to you right now were not actually even written by me. For all you know, this very speech was generated by artificial intelligence. The fact is, unless you are a specialist of some kind, you may never really know whether or not I wrote what I'm saying to you right now... but the fact remains that I know. And that's where integrity comes into the picture. I know for a fact that if I wasted my last opportunity to speak to you as a class with a shortcut, that I would not be very happy with myself. I know that if I did not at least try to speak to you from the heart in some way, I would have regretted it.

I am certain many of you have already faced this dilemma and I'm sure you will continue to face this moral question going forward. And it's not just about writing essays in college. It's more than that. By the way, don't use AI to write papers in college... they will catch you. But it really is about much more than that. In fact, it's really about more than artificial intelligence or any kind of technology. It's about refusing to give up a part of yourself in order to expend less effort. It's about integrity. Whenever you work toward something and put forth effort, you give a part of yourself. And in giving that portion of yourself, you little by little show who you are. The effort you put in, no matter what the task, shows what you

are all about. It shows what you stand for. Whether it's your effort in college, at work, or the effort you put into your family or into a relationship, it all demonstrates to others who you really are. That effort, no matter what, is worth it.

No shortcut will serve you very well in the long run. And shortcuts generally won't send a positive message to those around you. True, it takes integrity and it takes effort to show who you really are and what you are all about, but it will always be worth it in the end. So many of you have shown this here at Huntington High School and I remain hopeful that you will continue to do so as you move on to your next phase in life.

And so, in closing, it is my hope that as we all move forward into the unknown, that we can rely on you to stick to your sense of integrity and that you will always use your passion and your effort to show others who you really are.

Class of 2023, may you be truly blessed as you go forward. Never forget where you came from, remember that we at Huntington High School will always love you and know that you will forever and always be Blue Devils.

Thank you.

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Valedictorian Laurel Bonn's Address

Thank you Gemma and Erin, I love you both.

Welcome! On behalf of myself and my fellow graduates, I just want to first quickly start by thanking some of the people who have brought us here and made our success as Blue Devils possible;

Mr. Cusack and Mr. Polanski for providing a safe and productive learning environment for students.

Mr. Wilson and Mr. Watts for teaching us to think about the consequences of our actions, a lesson that many of us didn't enjoy, but one we won't forget.

Mrs. Walsh for helping many of us reach the stressful next step of our academic lives.

Gil for always being there with a big smile when we needed someone to talk to.

Mr. Hoops for establishing a new era of Huntington athletics and supporting every one of us student-athletes.

And a big thank you to all of the teachers, administrators, coaches, and families who supported us and got us to this point.

And so, we sit here today as the newest alumni of Huntington High School, and I don't know about you but as exciting as that is, it's kind of scary. No longer do we have the four-year-old safety net of a structured routine. No more nine period days, two-hours of after school practices, morning bake sales, or Mr. Cusack's daily Remind texts at precisely 7 AM informing us whether it's an A or B day.

We transformed from the freshmen who with wide eyes, curious minds, and anxious butterflies laid low in the crowded halls, into the seniors who confidently walked with wisdom, maturity (well, hopefully), and eagerness for the future. We laughed painfully at the Jokes of the Day, shouted chants in the bleachers at football games, survived AP hell week, and meticulously dodged the obstacle course of leaking ceilings.

This journey from beta to alpha, guppy to shark, timid to tenacious was filled with the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, all while wearing a blindfold through unpredictable terrain.

So now what? Just as we thought that we had finally mastered the twists and turns of our individual paths, we are once again entering the uncharted territory of our next chapter. However, what is different this time around is that we travel with a greater vision thanks to the experiences and lessons we learned from the many mentors, teachers, and friends at Huntington.

With that, some advice that I wish my perfectionist and naive freshman-self understood is that yes, academics are important and great effort will result in great

things, but don't fear failure. Failure is an opportunity to learn, and one unexpected diversion in your path may lead to the magical yellow brick road. As some of you may know, I almost let myself go down a road where I knew I wasn't going to be happy because I was afraid of disappointing others. I was afraid that I didn't deserve this title of Valedictorian if I wasn't going to attend an Ivy League institution. It took me two whole years filled with doubt, pain, anxiety, and tears for me to finally be brave and accept my "failure." And some days, these doubts creep back. But what enabled me to finally do what my gut knew was right and for me to finally reach my yellow brick road, was knowing that I would be supported by my parents, my brother, my friends, and my Huntington family.

So, whether you launch yourself into a gap year, overseas to Europe (shoutout Brad), or college across the country, know that Huntington will always be here as your rock, your center, and your light, that will burn for eternity. No matter how far apart, we will always gravitate towards each other like the planets in the solar system, with this school as the sun that keeps us all connected. Huntington High School is where we will always be able to find a source of light remembering all of the good times, happiness, and childhood memories that happened the past four years. I am honored and proud to be leading the last official send off of our Class of 2023's rocket into the universe in which after, all of us will lead our individual missions.

Before we do just that, I have one final mission for all of you: through tears, frustration, and mistakes, find happiness and satisfaction in the little things. The little things ignite small fires that grow into burning passions. I cannot wait to see where these passions take all of us in the future.

As the once very influential and idolized figure, Buzz Lightyear said, “To infinity and beyond!”

Mission accomplished Class of 2023! Congratulations to us all! Thank you.

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Salutatorian Haileigh Smith's Address

Good evening friends, family, faculty, and most importantly, fellow graduates. I'd like to start by thanking superintendent Mr. Polansky, Principal Mr. Cusack, Assistant Principals Mr. Smith and Mrs. Williams, deans Mr. Gilmor, Mr. Wilson, and Mr. Watts, the board of education, and every member of the Huntington Family who have helped get us to where we are today. I know it wasn't easy.

I'd also like to give a special thank you to those closest to us, who not only came in support on this momentous occasion, but who have been there for us since the beginning, rooting us on and guiding us to becoming the incredible young men and women we are today. Mom and Dad, this is where you get your shout-out.

When I first found out I had to give a speech, I was stuck. Writer's block doesn't even begin to describe what I went through. But, as with most high school projects or papers, an idea struck me at 12 o'clock on a random night just days before the deadline and I decided to go through all the old yearbooks since elementary school. As I flipped through the pages I was hit with how much has changed over the last 13 years. But, at the same time, I was awe stricken with how almost nothing has changed. Sure we may have gained a foot or two in height, lost the braces, maybe changed our hairstyles. But, whether they were 8 or 18 years old, I saw the same smiling faces that eagerly had their pictures taken on the first day of school, the same enthusiastic kids radiating with each and every spirit day, and the same goofy or loving personalities showing through the signatures in the back of every book. Those kids running their hearts out in pictures of elementary school field days were caught in the same athletic poses in high school, only this time they had varsity jerseys on their backs. The happy toddlers waving in the yearly parades were now uniformed members of the band or Highsteppers, leading

those same parades themselves as graduating seniors. To me, the funniest part was seeing how half the kids we voted for superlatives in Finley claimed those same superlatives again in senior year. If that doesn't show continuity, I don't know what does.

As I looked through these yearbooks, I began to realize that we're seasoned veterans at this whole graduation thing. This may be the biggest one we've had so far, but depending on which schools you went to, some of us are looking at our fourth or fifth graduation ceremony (of course some of them were called "moving up ceremonies" but it's all the same thing). With every graduation it felt like we were losing something in the moment. But then time happened, and we moved on to bigger and better things. We kept the best of what and who we had with us and we gained more than what we ever would have expected in terms of relationships, opportunities, and experiences. I have no doubt that the same will be true for this graduation.

I know I've said a lot about things staying the same over all these years, but there was one difference that I wanted to address. In the middle of most elementary school yearbooks, the class is lined up in the shape of the first letter of their school to show pride in their section of the district. For me it was a "W" for Washington Primary, "W H" for Woodhull (I had a lot of "W's" in my history). But by the time you get to the High School yearbook, there are no letters or divisions. There's one unified class of 2023 grouped together, much like we have today. If the trends I've mentioned have proven anything, it's that no matter where we go or how many years pass by, the connections between us will continue on beyond our departure from High School. You'll find them in the pages of your yearbooks, with the friends you choose to keep, and in the memories you'll carry with you for the rest of your lives.

Thank you to the class of 2023 for making the last 13 years all that they have been and congratulations to everyone!