

CLASS OF 2020

I have never written a graduation message in all my years as an educator. As such, my final graduation ceremony will be the first time I delivered my thoughts in any written form.

As usual, I mention the scholarship awards for each year's cohort of seniors: the class of 2020 has amassed a total of \$7,295,183 in scholarship monies.

I would usually then reflect upon the trials, tribulations, and successes associated with that graduating group of students. To that point, this class has experienced something of historical proportion. Something we would not have imagined would occur. In an instant, at the very precipice of rejoicing in all that it means to be a senior, preparing for your transition into adulthood, enjoying the fruits of your efforts, reveling in those events that manifested what your senior year was to look like, they were snatched away from each of you. Gone were "The Prom", "Senior Week", "Senior Awards", "Yearbook Signing", "Graduation Ceremony," and all the little accompanying events associated with every moment that should have come.

I am sure I have missed something that you and your family considered unique to you, and I apologize for that. I do understand how for each of you, the loss of those events was particularly meaningful in some way to you and your family, and I am sorry for that and wish I had a way to make it all go away. Unfortunately, I can't, and I am appreciative of all the emotions that you are currently experiencing.

However, during this time of disappointment, the unthinkable happened. As I stated previously, I could not have ever imagined something occurring that would eclipse the COVID-19 Pandemic and its impact locally and around the world. Sadly, this was not something new, but rather an all too common occurrence that became the proverbial "STRAW"! The visions of George Floyd dying for the entire world to see changed everything. I am not going to rehash the particulars, because that is for another place and discussion. However, it is a defining moment for all of us. It is especially significant for you, the class of 2020. You are about to become the next wave of leadership in our communities, our country, and in the world. The reactions globally to George Floyd's murder have impacted the world as a whole. It has raised questions both abroad and here at home, are we, The United States of America, who we say we are?

You have a right to be angry and confused. Amidst all of that, you are experiencing issues as families that are difficult to comprehend. You have a right to be confused and to question. You have a right to be angry. You have a right to feel frightened. Some of you are experiencing emotional trauma, the loss of a beloved relative or friend along with the loss of your extended support group to help you through this difficult time. I could go on and on, but to what point? It is happening to all of us! I, you, and we are in this together, and we will come through it, more durable and hopefully more aware.

The words I found so compelling, in the tumultuous and volatile early 1970s, from a song by Bill Withers, resonates with me now more than ever. In his number one hit, "**Lean On Me**", Withers wrote:

*"Sometimes in our lives
We all have pain, we all have sorrow.
But if we are wise,
We know that there's always tomorrow.*

*Lean on me when you're not strong
I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on.
Please swallow your pride
If I have things you need to borrow
For no one can fill those of your needs
That you won't let show.*

*You just call on me, brother, when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on.
I just might have a problem that you'll understand,
We all need somebody to lean on."*

It is difficult times like these that show us how far we have come and clearly, how much more now we need to progress. We are a society of interactions and interpersonal relationships. Do not let this transition to "virtual" life and learning steal our humanity and empathy as well. Whatever you think has happened to only you, trust me there are many more with similar or worse experiences, **WE** are not **ALONE!**

I challenge this graduating class to several propositions:

1-These incredible times have provided us a window into what it feels like being separated from our family and friends. It allows a window into how we sometimes must ask for help and other times provide that help. I challenge each of you never to pass up the opportunity to offer support, ask for help, and, most importantly, be thankful and gracious for the chance to do either one of them.

2-You are about to embark on the next phase of your life. Regardless of whether you go away to school or stay close to home, you will be solely responsible for everything you do, every choice you make. I challenge you to choose wisely and, when in doubt, refer to what you learned growing up and apply it to your decision-making process. There is no longer the safety net of being a minor; your decisions will have consequences. Make sure the choice is yours and not the extension of someone else. Choose wisely!

3-Pursue your dreams and passions as you begin to formulate what path your career is going to take. Plan your route and recognize the work that will be necessary to achieve those goals in your plan. There are going to be roadblocks and missteps along the way, address each one with enthusiasm and determination. I challenge you to reach for the moon! Expand your limits! But do not fear to find those limits. I want you to realize that the journey is helping define who you are. It is essential to always consider a plan "B". It is not embarrassing; it is thoughtful and mature.

4-Finally, we are experiencing a moment in history. It is time to lend a helping hand. It is time to exercise our strength as a society and a democracy. We must participate in the rights afforded us by The Constitution of The United States: speak out against injustice, exercise your right to vote, assemble peacefully, and with purpose. We must not let this moment pass without doing something about it.

In closing, I want to congratulate the class of 2020. I am so proud of how you have handled a unique and unprecedented situation. You listened to your teachers, your family, and attacked the new format for learning with a vengeance. You took on the challenge rather than shy away from it. Your reward is that you have successfully graduated and are ready to face the world bravely as tested veterans of a worldwide pandemic and incredible social unrest.

As this day comes to pass, I regret that I will not be able to stand on stage at the Paper Mill Playhouse and shake each of your hands and offer my heartfelt congratulations to you individually. Know that I am proud to have been your Superintendent and honored to be a part of your Springfield Public Schools and Jonathan Dayton High School legacy.

Michael A. Davino

Superintendent of Schools
Springfield, N.J.