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Students need an inspiring graduation speech

Graduation ceremonies and celebrations were upended last year when the pandemic started in the spring. In-person events were canceled, and remote events were new to everyone. Now we are all more familiar with connecting digitally, but we are also tiring of exclusively virtual communication.

This year, many schools are planning to hold in-person events for graduation, that most important rite of passage and an essential recognition of completing 12 years of school. All of that hard work deserves a hearty pat on the back — literally and virtually.

Students benefit from the appreciation of their efforts and the traditional formal graduation event that closes one chapter and prepares them for the next. If you are out of practice or want some inspiration, here are some tips and sample speeches to help you send off your students.

Tips for your own speeches

Graduation speeches are usually reserved for the superintendent, principal, board chair of assigned director, valedictorian, and/or special guest. Brevity should be your guide. Students and their families are excited about this event, but they appreciate speeches that are both inspiring and concise.

These tips can help you plan comments that are brief and celebratory:

Share wisdom from your own experience. What do you wish you had known as a young adult? What have you learned that you can pass along as food for thought? Be honest and even confessional.

Organize tips into a brief list of advice. Think in bullet points. Use humility and humor if that fits your personal brand.

Follow the show-don't-tell rules of storytelling. Use your own stories about education, career and life that changed your life or your outlook. Give examples, and be authentic. Avoid generalities and platitudes. Students are more likely to listen and benefit from your advice if it is genuine and relatable.

Use your own strengths. Students can benefit from learning about our failures, and they can benefit from hearing how we leveraged our strengths to improve our lives or advance in our careers. Talk about what you know, not about what you think they should know. If you aren't sure, ask your network for observations about your strengths. You may learn a lot about yourself.

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Put it in writing

Graduation ceremonies can be overwhelming. Students may not hear what you say in the moment, but they may appreciate the chance to reflect on your words of wisdom later. Be sure to post your comments to your school or district website or social media channels. You could even include speeches in your printed program.

Start with a really good title. Have fun and capture attention with a catchy title that makes them want to know more. A few examples are:

- Things I shouldn't have done but glad I did
- How adulthood is like a carnival roller coaster
- What was I thinking? (a personal favorite)

Provide food for thought. The ceremony should be personally meaningful to students. Help them reflect by including questions to help them think about their future:

- Who are the people who influenced you positively this year and in your past?
- What strengths help you overcome challenges? What are the things you want to leave in the past as you face your future? Name three to five habits, practices or beliefs.
- Name three to five dreams, goals or aspirations you want in your future life.

Give advice, but keep it simple

Graduation speeches should include advice. After all, this is the boundary between childhood and adulthood, isn't it? Share what you know, but keep it light:

- Learn from your mistakes, but try to find new lessons if you continue to make the same mistakes.
- Take care of your health. Appreciate your ability to sleep soundly through the night. Someday it won't be so easy.
- Treat everyone like you'll be working for them someday, because you might.
- Find something bigger than yourself to contribute to. We are all part of a community.
- Take time to breathe. Try to remember that everything will be ok — one way or another.
- Express your pride in your students. Gratitude is impactful and motivating. Sometimes we forget to say that we are impressed, proud and grateful. Repeat as needed. Include individual and class achievements, such as the number of students going to college, receiving scholarships and awards, and contributing community service hours.

Sample speeches to inspire you

Writing speeches can be daunting. It may help to check out inspirational speeches from other schools or notable guest speakers. Here a few from last year, also a pandemic graduation.

Dear Class of 2020, YouTube Originals Speeches by

- Barack Obama
- Beyoncé
- Collin Jost
- John Mulaney
- Katie Perry
- Lady Gaga
- Mariah Carey

www.youtube.com/results?search_query=dear+class+of+2020

16 Best Graduation Speeches That Leave a Lasting Impression
www.teenvogue.com/story/best-graduation-speeches-examples-ideas

Graduation
Speech

The 21 greatest graduation speeches of the last 60 years
www.vox.com/a/greatest-graduation-speeches

May 2021
Page 3

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