

Huntington High School's 163rd Commencement
Salutatorian Benjamin Edgar-McNerney's Address

Thank you, Eli for that very moving introduction. Hello everyone, my name is Benjamin Edgar-McNerney and it is an honor to stand before you today as the Salutatorian of the Class of 2024. I would like to thank Mr. Cusack, all the faculty and staff of Huntington High School, and most importantly, the graduates of the Huntington High School class of 2024, for the privilege of speaking to you today.

I would like to give a special thank you to my parents for putting up with me for these past 18 years. And to my three older brothers, two of which are in the crowd today, thank you for being the people I look up to... even if only in the metaphorical sense. And I think I speak on behalf of all the graduating seniors when I say, a tremendous thanks to all of you here today; and I would like to take a moment to honor those who are no longer with us, but who have helped us all become the people we are today and remain in our hearts and minds.

Well, here we are guys, June 28th, 2024. It's the day where we sit down in front of our teary eyed parents, who are absolutely-certainly-not in any way eager to get rid of us. We get to wear fancy caps and gowns, and we get to listen to speeches trying to be a little too funny and relatable (Mine of course does not fall into that category). It's graduation! And by the end of the day, all of us will be free of early morning alarms, tedious homework assignments, and relentless parent square messages. Our 13 years of education culminates today, when we receive the honorable distinction of being high school graduates and a piece of paper to prove it.

Because, of course, that distinction and that piece of paper are all that matter. Getting a high school diploma has been our only motivation to wake up in the morning. Not to see our friends, who we've only known pretty much our entire lives. Not to talk to our favorite teacher about his latest home renovation project for his soon-to-be newborn son, or her plans to buy a new periodic table shower curtain. Not even to fist bump our favorite security guards, something that we can always count on to brighten our day no matter how the morning went.

Not the weekly poker games, or the late night parties, and especially not the all-nighters pulled for a National History Day project.

Because, as the saying goes, it's not the journey that matters, it's the destination, right? Of course not, if that were actually the saying, this speech would probably be a lot shorter. As a matter of fact, this ceremony would be cut short too. Why bother sitting here when we'll just get our diploma in the mail in a few weeks?

Begrudgingly, I'm going to ignore the presumption that everyone came here just to listen to me speak for five minutes, although I'm still convinced that's why most of you are here.

As for the few others remaining, I think the answer is pretty clear.

It isn't that the end doesn't matter, it really does. Graduating high school is a major achievement and should be looked at with the utmost respect and veneration. And yet, without considering the actual substance of our achievement, the 13 years of entirely unique lives that each of us have lived, this day would feel much less meaningful. That's because each experience, whether significant or seemingly insignificant, has brought us to this moment, to the same destination, yet with an entirely different journey. And although our journey at Huntington High School is at an end, I know that we will take what we have learned and move forward into the world with the knowledge and confidence we need to succeed.

Those of you who know me well know that I am a diehard Tolkein fan. To quote Gandalf, the wise gray wizard in *The Hobbit*, "Some believe that it is only great power that can hold evil in check. But that is not what I have found. I've found that it is the small things, everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keeps the darkness at bay"

Although the future is exciting and holds great promise, I encourage you all not to get too caught up in looking ahead, but rather spend a little extra time focused on the present. Pay attention to those around you right now, at this moment. And give pause to the little beauties of life. Because when it comes down to it, it's these little beauties that make each of our lives unique and worth living.

Thank you again for the honor of letting me speak to all of you today. And congratulations to the Class of 2024!

Huntington High School's 163rd Commencement

Valedictorian Charlotte Gordon's Address

Good evening everyone, and thank you Kaylee, for that heartwarming introduction. I would also like to take a moment and thank Principal Cusack, Superintendent McCoy, our fantastic teachers, administration, and everyone else who has worked tirelessly to give us the incredible high school experience we had here at Huntington. Thank you to our lovely family members, friends, and other guests for sitting through this ceremony. I'll try to keep things brief -- I promise! And of course, congratulations graduates!

I'd also like to personally thank my parents, the reason that I'm standing before you today. Thank you to my mom, for teaching me the power of dreams. From you, I learned that the keys to happiness are staying selfless, living without a fear of failure, and never hiding your true self. I'm eternally grateful to have you not just as my mother, but as my best friend as well. Thank you to my dad, for educating me on the importance of determination and dry wit. I don't think I would be the girl I am now had you not read me countless stories before bedtime throughout my childhood. And thank you to both of them for driving me to school every day for the past twelve years, as I still don't have my license!

A lot of our first days of Huntington High School did not begin here AT Huntington High School. Rather, they began at home. I was part of Cohort 2, so my high school career began in bed, off camera still under the covers, while my orchestra teacher conducted scales from my computer screen. Mr. DiMeglio, if you're out there, ignore that last part -- I was definitely practicing diligently!

Orchestra was followed by Algebra 2 in the living room, then a snack during Spanish, you get the picture. But despite not being physically together for the vast majority of the week, we fostered a sense of togetherness through breakout rooms, jokes shared in the chats section of Google Meets, and an unbelievable amount of laggy Kahoots and Quizlet Lives.

Now, we are not standing six feet apart, but rather sitting shoulder-to-shoulder. I've made some incredible friends during my years here, and some incredible rivals too. Great speech Ben!

The COVID-19 pandemic was not my first experience with isolation. On my first day of kindergarten at Flower Hill Primary, I only had one parent at the bus stop. My mom was undergoing radiation for her cancer treatment at the time, so, quarantined, she wished me good luck through her bedroom window, and blew my dad and I a kiss before the bus arrived and I was whisked off to school. But once I got to class, the word isolation was erased from my vocabulary -- and replaced by its opposite -- community. From learning how to dye flowers with food coloring to giggling over the box of legos, it was inside the walls of Ms. Proimos' classroom where I learned the true meaning of friendship -- that having someone to go through life with will make any situation better. I learned that friendship isn't some rare occurrence -- a strong bond can be formed between any two people, so long as you always have something to talk about, or can find comfort in each other's silences.

Beginning in first grade, I had the gift of being part of Huntington's Dual Language program, where every other day, all subjects were taught entirely in Spanish. Being in this unique immersion program fostered my lifelong sense of

curiosity for language, other cultures, and the world around me. It also turned me into a more open and empathetic individual. I'd like to briefly express my congratulations to all our Spanish-speaking graduates and their families. Quiero expresar mis felicitaciones a todos los graduados y sus familias hoy. Excuse my pronunciation!

I'd like to take a moment to remember our dear classmate, Finn O'Brien, a classmate of mine since Flower Hill, who passed away this fall. There should be one more seat filled at graduation this year, and I know we would've all loved to see him here with us today.

I'll end with some parting advice for the spectacular Class of 2024. May your lives be filled with laughter -- no situation should ever be taken too seriously. May you retain the same sense of childlike wonder that you had on your first day of elementary school. Rely on your support systems -- I hope you never experience isolation, either physically or mentally, ever again. But if you do, I know that you are all more than prepared to deal with it. Know that there can be no light without the darkness. Don't be afraid to ask for help. And most importantly, have fun! Your Huntington High School education has ensured that every one of you has the power and knowledge to do great things, and I hope that you take advantage of that.

We are the masters of our own destinies. It's very possible that thirty years from now, your life will look nothing like how you thought it would today. And that's the beauty of it! While none of our paths have been easy, all of them are far from complete. I know your time here at Huntington has prepared you for a future filled with joy, success, and a lasting sense of community. As Helen Keller once

said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” On that note, Class of 2024, let’s graduate! I’ll see you all at the reunion!

Huntington High School's 163rd Commencement

School Board President Xavier Palacios' Address

Thank you David Dax for those kind words.

Dear graduates, faculty, fellow board members, family, and friends,

As the president of the Board of Education, it is my honor to stand before you today and congratulate the incredible class of 2024 on this momentous occasion. Today marks the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new journey filled with endless possibilities.

Who do you want to be? What will you do now? You may be asking yourselves these questions as we stand here today. These are questions that will follow you throughout your lives. As you navigate the ups and downs of life, remember the words of Albert Einstein, "The only source of knowledge is experience." So go out and experience life to the fullest, even if it means failing spectacularly at times - just make sure to take notes for the next time. Don't fear failure as it is an important ingredient of success. Embrace the challenges that come your way and use them as stepping stones towards your goals.

You have had the unique experience of attending school during a global pandemic, studying from home and adapting to new ways of learning. This experience has taught you resilience, adaptability, and the importance of Wi-Fi and toilet paper. Who would have thought that a tiny virus could teach us so much? Carry these lessons with you as you embark on the next chapter of your life.

That little virus accelerated our use of the digital landscape of social media. Remember that likes and followers don't define your worth or identify who you are. It's the real connections you make in life and the impact you have on others that truly matter. So go out there, share your story, but don't forget to live it too.

As you move forward, remember that you are part of a very diverse community, In a world that can sometimes feel divided, diversity reminds us that we are all interconnected and that our differences are what make us unique and special. Embrace the richness of different cultures, languages, and beliefs, and seek out opportunities to learn from those who are different from you. By doing so, you will not only enrich your own life but also contribute to creating a more just and inclusive society for all.

Today we say goodbye to the class of 2024 and hello to the newest members of the Blue Devil Alum family. Congratulations on your achievements and best wishes for a bright and successful future. Go forth and make us proud!

Thank you.

Huntington High School's 163rd Commencement

Superintendent Beth McCoy's Address

Good evening to all of you who are here to celebrate the esteemed students of the class of 2024,

I have spent the last few weeks thinking about what I could possibly say in my first Huntington High School graduation speech. I have also thought about this particular class a great deal- the class of 2024. A class who has truly been through it all. As their last graduation approached the world was turned upside down and they didn't have the celebration or culmination they were expecting or that they deserved. Then, they began their experience at Huntington High School in a way that they weren't expecting or that they deserved. They were in school on an alternating schedule, they attended countless Google Meets, camera on/camera off, they had in-person classes in interesting locations so they could be properly spaced out and they had those clear plastic dividers that were not as clear as we had hoped.

This group of resilient students have arrived to this momentous occasion today after going through a nontraditional end to middle school and a non-traditional start to high school, to say the least. Congratulations to all of you for being here today after these tumultuous times. I am so glad that you were able to experience all that Huntington High School had to offer you and that you were able to enjoy, thrive, and grow and learn academically, socially and emotionally for the past four years.

The reality for me is that I have spoken at many graduations before, particularly when I was an elementary principal and the students were moving up from elementary school to middle school. My speeches ranged from stories of the middle school

experience, to plays on words with nursery rhymes that students learned in pre-school, to what I thought were overall thought-provoking quotes, but what I have realized over the years is that pretty much any speech like this is all about delivery and connection.

It doesn't matter what I say or how intellectually sound it is, because if I can't connect to the audience then it truly means nothing. And after thinking that thought through, I realized that that is pretty much what life is like . . . you can go to a great school after you leave these doors or get the best job, but the connections that you have made here and the connections that you will make in your future mean everything.

Renowned author, speaker and professor, Brene Brown states “I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”

Connections to and relationships with others is what life is all about. Take a moment to think back on your first memories of elementary school- field day, your first moving up ceremony, when you played your first instrument, when you built your first Lego set, excelled in a sport, sang in the chorus and the list goes on. When you think about each of those memories, it is not the sport, instrument or the remarks at the event that you remember, it is the people you were with at those important times that matter most- the people you were connected to and had relationships with. It is the dinner with your family afterwards where you laugh and celebrate your accomplishment. It is the picture that your parent took to commemorate that special moment. It is the pamphlet or trophy that hangs in your room to remind you of how special you are and how much you matter to those around you. This same sentiment

goes for every memory you make in the future whether it is in college or the work force. The people who you surround yourself with and your connection to them are what will matter most- choose them wisely. Make sure they are people you want to build with, connect with, and make more memories with. Lean on these people, talk to these people when life gets tough, celebrate with them when life is amazing, and connect with them during every moment in between.

When you leave the doors of Huntington High School after this special evening, make an effort to maintain and foster the relationships with people that you have met up until now. Hold them close to you as you begin your next chapter, and continue to look back on these connections and memories of the Huntington Class of 2024 for the rest of your life.

Wishing you all the best of luck in your future endeavors. You are ready, able, and I am sure that you will make us proud.

Congratulations to the Class of 2024.

Huntington High School's 163rd Commencement

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 2024. To begin, I appreciate your class officers acknowledging the fact that one seat remains empty tonight. We know that your classmate Finn's spirit is with us on this beautiful night that would have also been his opportunity to celebrate with you, the class of 2024. It is a beautiful thing that the class gift is in honor of his memory and I thank you for that.

This will be my ninth graduation speech and each year around this time I sit at the computer and I look at the blank screen and I think about what type of message I might want to share with the graduating class. My words to you are the last little piece of advice we will share with you, as an institution, before you officially graduate and move on to the next phase of your life. That moment will happen very shortly and I have always taken this responsibility very seriously... to share one last thought with you before you move beyond our reach. So I think the advice I'd like to share with you comes from a very personal place and also a professional one. As I look back on my 28 years in education, I've come to work with thousands of students as a teacher, a dean, an assistant principal and as a principal.

Over the past 12 years here, and particularly during the last four years as your principal, I've been afforded the opportunity, on quite a number of occasions, to provide some level of help to a number of you. Whether in the form of a simple schedule change, or working through a conflict, getting a job, helping you to get

into college or assisting in some way as you made it across the finish line to graduate today. I've been in a position, for some of you, to be able to offer my help.

As I reflect on my career in education thus far, there have been many highlights over the years. But this one aspect of my role has truly been the honor of my professional life and one for which I am ever so grateful. To be able to help... that is honestly a gift... and that is a gift that has been given to me here at Huntington High School. To be able to help someone, even in a small way, is one of the most rewarding things one can do. And so, this is my parting advice to you... find a way to put yourself in a position, at some point in your life, to help others. As much as there really are no guarantees in life, if you can find a way to do this one thing, I can almost promise you that it will lead to your own personal and professional fulfillment. The question is, how can you go about putting yourself in this position?

Being in a position to help others does not just happen overnight and it most certainly does not happen alone. In fact, it is very unlikely that you can go about helping others if you don't have a network of like-minded people to assist. As Mrs. McCoy said earlier, the connections and relationships you foster are truly what matter, and this case is no different. If you want to help others, you must build that network by being genuine and hardworking, kind and honest. This is the only way to gain the trust you will need in order to build that team that can provide the help that others need. Because the fact is, you can't help people unless they allow you to and you can't do it without the trust of others who believe in the mission as well.

I've been so fortunate to have so many people here at Huntington High School who are more than willing to be a part of that team, who truly believe in the mission and who are genuine and hardworking, trustworthy, kind and caring. Being able to build and be part of a team like that is a feeling that really cannot be described in words. Seek those people out, and be one of them, and you will find purpose and happiness in whatever you choose to do.

I believe that getting yourself into a position to help others is, in some ways, the hard part. Once you have found ways to establish that, the rest is quite easy. All you have to do, is care. And caring costs nothing. Perhaps a little of your time and energy, but what you get in return is immeasurable.

And here's one small pet peeve if I may... try to never use the phrase "just let me know if there's something I can do..." The fact is, people who are truly in need almost never want to ask others for help, and there's always something you can do... so don't ask. Instead, assess the situation, get all the details you can, find out what is needed and just do it. Get your hands dirty, as the saying goes, and do whatever it is that needs to be done. This is, as I have seen so many times over, the Huntington way.

Through my work here at Huntington High School over the last 12 years, I have come to know one thing that stands out: what you do for others, shows the world who you really are. I believe Huntington has helped me to learn this because Huntington is unique. Whenever there is a need, this community comes together and, without fail, offers to help. I have also seen this scenario play out time and time again with so many of you in this senior class.

So many of you already have a genuine sense of empathy for one another. I've seen you help and honor each other with not a single self-serving thought and absolutely no expectation of anything in return. I've even seen some of you already beginning to build your own teams and networks that I just described in an effort to offer help... and it is inspiring... it gives us so much hope for the future. My wish is that all of you will find a path like this and that you all can experience the joy of providing help to others. A life of purpose and fulfillment awaits those who do.

And so, Class of 2024, may you be truly blessed as you go forth. Never forget where you came from and may you take comfort in knowing that no matter where you go or what adventures await you, your home is always here, we will always love you and you will forever be Blue Devils.

Thank you.