

June/July 2019

ONcall

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Graduation welcome speeches: Alternative schools

It's that time of year — graduation speech writing for your school community — the excited family members and friends who want to celebrate and see their student walk across the stage without sitting for over an hour.

As an administrator at an alternative school, I often get questions from the public such as: “Does a graduation ceremony really matter for these students? Do the kids really care about that kind of stuff? Isn't it too much of a hassle if there are not that many students walking?”

My quick answer, after working for more than 20 years in education and for more than three years with incarcerated youth is: It absolutely matters because we give meaning and value to honoring and recognizing accomplishments of our youth. It matters because some of our students have never even been on a stage and the sense of pride and satisfaction you can see in their faces is lovely.

It matters because it's creating a culture where education is respected and is worth celebrating. Having a graduation celebration at an alternative school creates a ripple effect of joy that far exceeds the cost of printed programs and a sheet cake from Costco.

Every year, we hold graduation events at our school sites to recognize the achievements of our students. The events are smaller than at comprehensive schools, but they include all of the bells and whistles and are sources of motivation for students throughout the school year.

We aim for three to five student speakers who have gone through a process of auditioning and practicing. We also have an honored guest speaker. As the principal, I make it a point to not be the main speaker. We share the graduation theme and a few facts about our graduates two to four weeks in advance in case they want to integrate those elements into their speech. They have 10-13 minutes for their address.

We keep our language appropriate for our audience. This is not an opportunity to use the latest “educationese” — it is a chance to connect with the community and celebrate collaborative success.

Principal speech tips: keep it quick, memorable and succinct.

The outline for a basic welcome speech introduction is:

- Welcome
- State who we are
- Recognize families, dignitaries and graduates
- Share the theme
- Thank people for being here
- Perhaps a short “ism” or two, and
- Introduce the next person

(Over)

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Sample welcome speech

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Welcome to Three Lakes High School Graduation. We are a school that honors all, meets students where they are and takes them from good to great. We are not perfect, but every day we try to make a difference.

My name is Joy Koenig, and I am the principal. I am proud to serve in this capacity.

As the theme for this year's graduation is, "the movie of my life," I feel a bit inspired to talk about this ceremony as if it were a movie. Indeed, if this were a movie, I would probably want to run the credits first. I would thank the students, graduates, parents, families, and dignitaries. I would give each one of you time and space on the movie trailer, with your name in bold, honoring the fact that you are here.

And in this manner, I want to thank the students, graduates, families and friends for attending. Graduates, you look lovely and this day is all about you!

Our site superintendent, will be recognizing our state dignitaries and representatives from the governor's office, yet I would like to honor and welcome my district cabinet and superintendents. (Insert names) If you could please stand so we may acknowledge you, I would appreciate it. I would also like to the Oregon Department of Education folks who are here (names) who help support our school.

I would also like to thank Three Lakes staff for the fine education you provide for our students all year — and today, in particular, I would like to thank (name) for taking charge of the decorations as the graduation coordinator.

Typically, after the opening credits, the movie begins. And we have a fine film for you today — four stars, some might say (in spite of the fact that it is raining!)

Please sit back, enjoy, and prepare yourselves for a treat — listening to our students share a part of themselves, celebrate in their success, and continue their quest for the acquisition of knowledge.

So on with the show. Dim the lights — get the proverbial popcorn and together let's enjoy a great movie.

At this point, I would like to introduce (name), the OYA site superintendent. Thank you.

In conclusion

Concluding with the notion of honoring our students, we offer up a declaration of the graduates at the end. This is where we have the audience turn and face their graduate and repeat a choral response of positivity. It really is a great chance to share the energy together, and this has been a new part of our graduation ceremony that has been received with enthusiasm. Here is an example of one:

Declaration of Graduates

When I told my daughter I got to "declare the graduates," she said, "Well, make sure you tell them congratulations, but don't take too long doing it because I am sure there will be cake or something they will want to move on to. And don't start singing or rapping or doing anything crazy like that."

(Over)

In that light, I want to share a few short words, and attendees, I would like to ask you to enthusiastically repeat after me in chorus as we honor the graduates. It is eight short lines and we will end with a round of applause for our graduates. I am going to ask that you turn to face the graduates for this part:

Congratulations!

We are so proud of you!

We think you are amazing!

We think you are worthy!

We know you have worked so hard!

You absolutely deserve this!

Way to go!

Thank you for being who you are!

Applause!!!

To summarize — I leave you with three general thoughts around graduation events:

1. The best part of graduation is the students. So you can't go wrong if you keep the focus squarely on them.
2. Humor helps. Humor heals. Humor humbles us all — so whenever you can make light of any error or mistake that goes on (if it's not egregious and especially if it's yours), then go for it!
3. People bring so many different contexts to a graduation — some have never graduated, some folks struggled in school, and this can be a triggering event for them. I like to have greeters, positive people of power, who can welcome everyone to the event (not just site security). This helps to set the tone, along with some upbeat music as folks enter.

Contributed by Joy Koenig, Principal, Three Lakes and Riverside High Schools, located in Oak Creek Correctional Facility in Albany, Ore.