

Keynote Address
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Good evening and welcome families, friends, colleagues, and the Cheshire Academy graduating Class of 2020.

This is certainly not how any of us imagined Commencement when we gathered at Convocation in September. Graduation is built up to be the culminating moment of your high school experience and the beginning—the commencement—of a new, exciting phase in your life. Today's ceremony has grasped tightly to a few traditions we hold dear—the time-honored tradition of Senior Masters Smith and Boyd leading the graduates, carefully crafted speeches delivered from your treasured classmates, and the bright blue caps and gowns that signify your rite of passage from Cheshire Academy students to alumni.

The spring of your senior year in high school is supposed to include a few senior privileges, a prom, senior art shows and music performances, and senior day on the track, court or field. You have waited for these moments, held high by the expectations you have set for how your Cheshire Academy experience would end. You may feel cheated and denied of what was promised, and frustrated and disappointed as life played out a story that you had not written nor chosen to participate. Yet I challenge you to think and reflect upon not what you have lost, but what you have learned. This is your opportunity to face adversity and emerge as heroes.

The impact of COVID-19 has been catastrophic: to the economy, to world relations, to human life. Neither my parents nor yours have experienced a global pandemic. Adults around the world have been scrambling; beyond creating a vaccine and potentially a cure for the virus, we are scrambling to address real-world, real-time issues that were in many ways in front of us yet not in our line of sight. The pandemic hit and, without hesitation, frontline and essential workers put their lives at risk to serve humanity. The closure of schools and loss of jobs correlated with a dramatic increase in food insecurity and child abuse. World news sparked fear of both the known and unknown, and bombarded us with images and stories illustrating the decline in kindness, decency, and compassion.

Your senior spring was a disaster. But not one for which you are responsible. What you are responsible for is how you react and rise from this moment in time. You have the power to spring forth from this catastrophe as the world looks to you, the younger generation, to implement the changes necessary to bring us forward out of this mess and into a world of your own making, where the environment begins to be mended, race relations are honestly confronted, social injustices are recognized and responded to, and public health as an agency that supports and assists the public during a world crisis is a common shared belief. We're switching roles; my generation is looking to you.

You have the power to spark change in ways that demonstrate your understanding – a far more sophisticated understanding brought about by having to face disappointment early and hard. At Cheshire Academy, you have learned the value of being global citizens, capable of critical thinking and strategic problem solving. And this is where I have hope: in you.

At one point or another you have heard a story or read something about the teenage brain. I imagine you know that there is a reason you can sleep so much; in adolescence, your body is experiencing a major growth spurt and sleep is the fuel your body needs to support your development. You've certainly been told that teenagers lack impulse control as your prefrontal cortex is still developing. It's no surprise that you might act before thoroughly thinking about the consequences of your actions.

But here's the good part. The teenage brain is malleable and can adapt easily. This spring you were disappointed and let down. But you switched gears. You showed up to class and met your obligations. You found ways to connect with your teammates and work out. You sang virtually as an a cappella group. You engaged with your families, enjoying time together over a meal or a long walk. I've heard from so many of you about the silver lining of the forced isolation of the pandemic: you were able to see through the clouds. Some of you learned to play an instrument while others began journaling. You pitched in at home and helped to care for younger siblings, helping with their remote schooling. You made lawn signs to thank essential workers and wrote notes to isolated senior citizens living in nursing homes. Some of you raised money and others awareness, for the food pantry or COVID-19 relief. Many of you went to work, securing a job and learning the value of an honest day's work in the nursery, at the grocery store, or the daycare.

And others learned the true value of family when they found themselves unable to be reunited. Some of you sitting before me have not been in your home or seen your family since last fall. Your brains have allowed you to adapt, refocus, and change course. You've learned lessons that will stay with you and last longer than any lessons that I have learned.

I hope that your experiences at Cheshire Academy have helped to prepare you as well. In your preparation for the IB Diploma, you have learned the value of independence, follow through, and perseverance. You made a commitment and you saw it through until the end, no matter how many times you felt like giving up. On your team, when it was up to you to pitch a winning game or kick the tie-breaking goal, you learned that one person alone can't be responsible for a team's success. Trust, faith, and cooperation in one another are the characteristics of successful teams. And when you've felt an idea or a rule was unjust, you spoke out with clarity and conviction, whether it was to unblock Fortnite or allow the senior privilege of driving off campus during the school day. Small victories looking back, but all part of the lessons that have served you during the past several months. You have already been courageous, whether you have realized it or not. I trust you as you move forward as the generation poised to make a difference that will have a lasting impact on the world. Keep Cheshire Academy close; the people you have loved, the connections you have made, and the lessons you have learned. This is your home and today you officially are recognized as graduates of the Class of 2020 and our newest alumni. You will not forget this time; you will move forward forever changed and ready to be change makers.

Congratulations.