

WVCSD EdTalk: June 29, 2022
Dr. David Leach, Superintendent of Schools

The following is the text of Dr. Leach's commencement address to the Class of 2022:

The Warwick Valley High School class of 2022 is arguably the most accomplished to have ever passed through its doors. No one, and I mean no one, would be seated if I asked the graduates who participated in honors classes, championship sports teams, theater, musical performances, leadership groups, honor societies, career and technology, clubs, or community service to stand.

Graduates, the pride we all feel right now is unparalleled. Everyone I spoke with, including some of your parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and grandparents, is incredibly proud of you. In fact, this brings me to my first bit of advice for you: Now may be the perfect time to hit your parents up for some money.

I do have three quick pieces of advice that deal with your iPhone.

Phone home (or text). Your loved ones miss you.

Turn on and keep on your "My Find App" on your iPhone. Your parents will worry about you 24-7; they pay the bill so leave it on.

Then, put the phones away and experience life.

I know you see the guy who makes the snow closings in the hallway and wonder how a guy in his early thirties can be Superintendent, but believe it or not, my classmates and I sat in your seats over 33 years ago, on Friday, June 23, 1989. I was looking forward to the upcoming social events and my graduation from high school. Nonetheless, I was also anxious. I would soon be leaving all of my classmates and friends. I recall being uncertain about the future. And I was unsure about what to study in college and my likelihood of success. I only knew what my parents and family studied and about their careers. I viewed myself as an "average" student, not too remarkable.

Don't get me wrong. Like you, I instinctively understood that my talent and abilities were more than just a test score, class rank, or grade point average. Nonetheless, the concept of average and grades as a measuring stick was so ingrained in my mind that I rarely questioned it at the time. There were the smart kids and those who were not. I knew I was good at many things, but they didn't seem necessary or valued. I wanted to find some conventional path to success and happiness, but I didn't understand what that path should be. And I had not been too successful in following the traditional route.

Occasionally, I would check self-help publications for the solution, but they only provided pretty generic advice. Work harder, set goals, believe in your instincts, take calculated risks, life is a competition, and so on.

I've learned a lot since that time. My experiences taught me that we are all unique. There aren't brilliant people and everyone else; we do, however, often follow the norms of a standardized system that insists there are. Measures we use to reduce complex individuals to one-dimensional beings overlook our talents and individual uniqueness.

Talent comes in many different shapes and sizes. Whether while attending a high school reunion, staying in touch with my friends, or meeting old acquaintances by chance, I've learned several of them have seemingly become very successful people—people whose success no one saw coming. In reality, I did not find several common characteristics, or unknown "hacks," among the unexpectedly successful. There's a lot of variation, but with one exception. Rather than pursuing someone else's definition of accomplishment, success is deeply personal to them, and they are committed to pursuing what brings them meaning and purpose. Personal fulfillment.

This Fourth of July, many Americans will take the opportunity to think about their sense of patriotism, and give particular focus to the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson was willing to include the pursuit of happiness as an individual right in the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." What did he mean by the pursuit of happiness? Instead of pleasure, I believe it is personal fulfillment to which he is referring. The profound satisfaction you experience when accomplishing goals that are deeply important to you.

When you emphasize personal fulfillment over traditional conceptions of success, you'll be on a private path that allows you to accomplish what matters to you and, in the end, will result in your pleasure and success. There is no predetermined recipe for fulfillment; rather, it is individualized. You must pursue fulfillment by doing something that provides you with significant joy and something you actually care about.

In closing, let's honor each student's individuality and talents. Our quest for the "average," with its one-dimensional conception of success, has grossly undervalued human potential. Our personalities, strengths, and interests are all unique. Everyone can make a distinctive contribution. We will arrive at a truly positive sum if we acknowledge this and try to strengthen it in each of us. No one should lose or fall short in order for every student to succeed. This approach enables everyone – and I mean everyone – to realize their full potential.

Here are some noteworthy events from this week at our schools:

Pine Island Elementary School

Kindergartners will return to Park Avenue and Sanfordville in September, and everyone is excited about returning to the ‘big schools.’ But before we pack our last box and close our kindergarten doors for the last time, we send out a very special thank you.

On behalf of all teachers, support staff, aides, monitors, secretaries, everyone at Pine Island, thank you to the parents of all students who attended Pine Island School for the past two years. At times, these years have been challenging, but in between those difficult days we had the opportunity to experience many magical moments with your children. We learned that happiness can be found in blowing bubbles, watching a butterfly, running outside, or choosing an ice cream from the ice cream truck on a hot, sunny afternoon. The kindergartners definitely filled our days with smiles, laughter, and many fun-filled times. Thank you for sharing your child with us, and have a wonderful and safe summer.

Park Avenue Elementary School

Park Avenue students ended the year with a wonderful Sports Day event. Outdoor activities included games such as Mission Impossible and Battleship. A huge expression of gratitude to Physical Education teacher Kristen Schulze for helping to organize the days’ activities. Thanks, also, to Ms. Katlyn Chester, Ms. Helen Fernandez, Ms. Jeanette Myrick, and Mr. Scott Sibilla.

The fourth grade orchestra met for the last time, and reflected on their learning during the 2021-2022 school year. The students have grown so much this year, from learning how to open their case during their very first lesson to performing alongside the upper grade orchestras at the annual String Fling concert. This year’s motto was “Watch Us Grow In Orchestra,” and have they ever! Ms. Keely Blaikner shares, “I couldn’t be more proud of their growth and accomplishments. Here’s to their future and their overall musical journey!”

Sanfordville Elementary School

Third and fourth graders participated in the *Read Around the World* contest, organized by SES Media Specialist Ms. Danielle Cancel. Students read books with different settings from all over the world, making sure they read from at least four different continents. At the end of the contest, all 21 people who took part got Read Around the World passports and reading certificates, and three students won the grand prizes.

Fourth grade students headed to middle school next year were recognized during a Moving Up Ceremony attended by BOE President Mr. Keith Parsons, Superintendent Dr. David Leach, Assistant Superintendent Mr. James Yap, Director of Pupil Personnel Services Meghan McGourty, OUBOCES Board Member William Boss, OUBOCES Chief Operating Officer William Hecht, OUBOCES Director of Special and Alternative Education Jim Higgins, and

Warwick BOCES Satellite Principal Sarah Puccio. Family and friends gathered outside for this special occasion. Before Principal Maraia gave an opening speech to wish the students best of luck in middle school, Lucas Lapenna and Evalie Seid led everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance. She shared how impressed she has been by this group of students' love of reading, and included their final read aloud, from the book *Be You* by Peter H. Reynolds, in her speech. The book encourages them to embrace the future with positivity and to be their true selves. Awards were handed out, including the NYS Attorney General's Triple C Awards and the Principal Awards, which are given to two students from each class who consistently demonstrate PAWS behavior in and out of the classroom. Thank you, SES PTA, for hosting an amazing bowling party at Pin Street following the ceremony. Students were even treated to ice cream treats and goody bags when returning to school. Thank you to the 4th grade staff, the PTA planners, and all of the super helpful parent volunteers!

Warwick Valley Middle School

Warwick Valley Middle School honored its ascending eighth graders during the annual Moving Up Ceremony last week. To the sounds of proud applause from the audience, 262 students received their eighth grade certificates before an audience of family, teachers, and administrators. Prior to the presentation of certificates, honors, and awards, Principal Georgianna Diopolous, Associate Principals Christopher Radon and Jared Yapkowitz, as well as Superintendent of Schools David Leach, each addressed the students. On behalf of the WVMS administration, Mr. Radon said, "This year's eighth grade class was so special. They came to us four years ago as young fifth graders and are leaving as exceptional musicians, artists, athletes, scholars, and leaders. Our future is looking very bright!" The event wrapped up with students and parents gathered in the cafeteria for pictures. Good luck to the Class of 2026!

Warwick Valley High School

This past weekend, Warwick Valley High School honored the members of the Class of 2022, graduating 326 seniors during a commencement ceremony held on C. Ashley Morgan Field. While this class had a four-year high school experience that was certainly different, they will be remembered for their resiliency during a global pandemic, for demonstrating leadership to the underclassmen, and for supporting their peers in ways that made everyone better. The Class of 2022 was truly connected to their peers, their teachers, and their counselors. Valedictorian Arden Hallet, Salutatorian Sarah Davis, Class President Stacy Wansor, and Senior Speaker Anthony Roca spoke to their class with messages revolving around being kind, grateful, inspired, and resilient. It was a beautiful day for the graduates and their families. Congratulations to the Class of 2022!