Good evening families, staff, distinguished guests, and of course the graduates of the class of 2020. It is a tremendous honor to deliver this commencement address, my first commencement address as West Orange Superintendent of Schools. This will be a bond which we will share in perpetuity and there is no class I would rather share it with than you. Over the course of the last number of weeks, many folks have commented to me such sentiments as, I guess this wasn’t what you would’ve expected from your first year as superintendent, do you regret taking a superintendent position? While the last 3 months certainly could’ve been expected, I couldn’t be happier to have taken on the position of superintendent of West Orange Public Schools and to be right where I am.

In fact, I refuse to have my first year as superintendent defined by what’s happened in the past 3 months. To do so, would be to forget and ignore all the amazing moments and experiences that I’ve had this year from taking in the phenomenal theatrical talent, to grooving to the Jubilee choir, marveling at the extraordinary feats and accomplishments on the athletic fields and in the classrooms, or simply just talking and interacting with you at these events. I can’t thank you enough for welcoming me warmly into your school district which you call home. And as I refuse to have my year as superintendent defined by these closures, I would ask you to follow me and do the same and not define your year and your career in West Orange Public schools by the last 3 exceptional months.

In the Cascone household last week, I recall one of my daughters saying to their mom, that’s not fair. My wife responded with a familiar retort which I recall my parents saying to me on a number of occasions, life‘s not fair. Of course, I have heard this said many times and have even said it myself but for the first time I found myself really thinking about how I felt about that statement. Was life in fact fair or not? I was then reminded of the words of advice William Shakespeare offered In Hamlet. He stated, “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

The overall meaning of these words is relatively obvious, which is essentially advocating for the power of positive thinking, don’t sweat the small stuff, it’s all about your mindset. Of course, it is the putting of this philosophy and approach to practice that is the difficult part and that which requires focus and discipline. Certainly, at times like these it is of both the utmost importance and difficulty.

I would suggest that you are not the most unlucky graduating class, but perhaps the luckiest of all. After all, graduation from high school represents the culmination of 12 years of learning opportunities. Opportunities which have ostensibly prepared you to enter into post-secondary life. I would suggest that you have been equipped with one of the most powerful and impactful life lessons to prepare you than could have ever been conceived or implemented in the classroom. If you are willing to look for the silver lining in this cloud you will find that you have learned several crucial life lessons which I am hopeful you will carry with you moving forward.

First and foremost, take nothing for granted, live each day to the fullest, love, laugh, and don’t sweat the small stuff, rather appreciate all you have, for no one knows when one’s life can be changed completely overnight.

Second, friends, coworkers, acquaintances and teammates are important parts of our lives and some may become lifelong friends that are as close as family. However, when the rubber meets the road, there is no one that is going to be there for you, care for you and love you like your immediate family. Treasure, and always cultivate and keep these relationships and people close to you. I’ve seen all too often in my life family members estranged, not speaking, not seeing one another. Strive always to honor and love your family.

Third, in a world often controlled by governments, large corporations and special interests, there is nothing more impactful on the day-to-day life of our communities and ourselves then the power of the lone, mindful, and accountable individual. You alone, have the power to determine how you see yourself, how you see others and how you see the world. You alone have the free will to chart your course in life. Take time to block out the white noise of the modern technological era. Connect with your inner self, connect with the earth. The future fate of our civilization will rest on the ability for individuals to take responsibility for their own mindset and their own actions.

Fourth, in as much as prior to the school closures we might have bemoaned interacting with other people on some level and even shied away from interpersonal interaction. We have learned how much we need one another and depend upon interacting socially with our fellow human beings.

That is in the end the secret of life, be the best version of yourself, spread love, spread kindness, and serve others. Find the source, the mechanism which helps to achieve this through a daily effort. That is all we can ask of ourselves and that is all we can ask of others. If you individually commit to this mission you’ll not only realize all of your dreams in full; but we will also do so collectively as a civilization.

You will always have a home here in West Orange Public Schools, and I hope to be here leading this amazing school and community for many years to come and look forward to welcoming you back with open arms. May this truth and offer be some comfort to you that although you may not have had the opportunity to say farewell to people within the school year of 2020 there will be many many more opportunities for you, not to say farewell but hello again in the future.

And now by the power invested in me by the Board of Education, I can confirm that the graduates present here today have fulfilled all the requirements as pursuant to state Department Education guidelines and Board of Education policy for graduation from the West Orange High school. I bid you and your families heartfelt congratulations and Godspeed.