

Welcome by Joel Yacono

"Good evening and welcome to the commencement ceremony for the Red Land High School Class of 2026. I ask that you please take a moment to silence all cell phones."

"Please rise, and gentlemen remove your caps, for our National Anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance."

<National Anthem is performed>

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

<Pause for Color Guard to leave the floor.>

"Please be seated."

Welcome (Prologue) by Class President Joel Yacono

"Good afternoon friends, families, teachers, staff and most importantly, us, the graduating class of 2026. My name is Joel Yacono and I am your senior class president. It is of great honor to be standing here in front of you, the people who have shaped our class.

We've shared great memories over the course of these 13 years. We've had fun dances and pep rallies. We've challenged each other in class and on the field. We've supported our community and enjoyed our excellent music department. We've been loud and proud in the Red Sea. And most importantly, we defeated the ponies in football for the first time since — (longer than I can remember.) It is no secret that these past years have flown by and have been the most impactful, carrying all the memories we've made along the way.

However, I have a secret I'd like to share with all of you. When I was a kid, I used to completely melt down from a simple re-arrangement of the living room. Pretty silly, I know. But as a kid, change was my greatest enemy. Halfway through 9th grade at a routine eye exam, I learned that I would need glasses. Crazy I thought. I never even liked sunglasses. I don't want real glasses. Yet, I took a chance, and I tried them. Looking up to the sky I said to my mom, "Are the clouds always this pretty?" Change had given me a new lens, literally and metaphorically.

Ahead of us is one of the greatest changes of our lives. Some of you will head off to college, some of you will get a job, some of you will be serving our country, and certainly all of you will be gone from the halls of Red Land High School. Equipped with our countless memories, it's our time to take a chance and fully embrace the change. I promise you won't regret it. Thank you.

<Pause for applause>

"It is now my pleasure to introduce the District administration seated on the platform. Dr. Todd B. Stoltz, Superintendent of the West Shore School District."

<Pause for applause>

"And, I ask that the rest of the administrative team of the District please stand to be recognized."

<Pause for applause>

"I would also like to recognize the school board seated on the platform. Mr. Brian Guistwhite, School Board President."

<Pause for applause>

"Additionally, I invite the rest of the West Shore School Board to rise and be recognized. Thank you all for attending this afternoon and for your involvement in our ceremony."

<Pause for applause>

"We work diligently to bring pride and honor to Red Land, and flourish under the guidance of the professionals who are dedicated to our success. In that spirit of the Red Land family, many of our teachers have joined us this afternoon, dressed in a reflection of their academic paths and to honor our journey as well. As they celebrate our accomplishments, let us take a moment to thank them for their commitment to us. I ask them to stand at this time to be recognized, and I invite you all to join the class in a round of applause."

<Pause for applause>

Next, I'd like to introduce our class speakers." Our first speaker is Salutatorian Rowan Concannon. Rowan will attend Penn State Main in the Schreyers Honors College. Studying finance—Rowan has already proven his ability to save money, as Rowan has carried the *same* backpack all four years of high school. Rowan was the President of NHS and captain of both the soccer and track & field teams. He aspires to use his leadership skills in the future as a consultant.

The class Valedictorian is Matthew Van Sickle. Though he's never been on an airplane, Matt will be studying Mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University. In the future, he hopes to own and operate his own engineering firm. Matt has also been growing his leadership skills. Despite the 304 hours of Brawl Stars that Matt logged this year alone, he also served as the NHS Vice President and competed as a varsity tennis player. Matt plans to continue his singles game on the university intramural team.

Salutatorian Speech by Rowan Concannon

Good evening everyone. Congrats teachers for making it another year, congrats parents for raising such esteemed individuals, and most importantly, congrats graduates on finishing high school. Our childhood is officially over. But our journey is merely beginning. Our lives and endeavors are in the imminent future. This accomplishment is a short time of triumph before we buckle down to conquer life. So, while we can cherish this moment, we also need to see this as an opportunity to raise the bar. I have watched people raise the bar for me for four years at the track.

Pole vault may be the weirdest sport ever invented. It started in Europe as a practical way to cross marshy terrain, and has now turned into professional athletes trusting themselves to be thrown 20 feet in the air. However, the professional athletes are not how most of you know pole vault. The majority of you know it for the nasty fails on social media whether it is someone getting impaled by the pole or someone entirely missing the pit. But in all seriousness, I have been around pole vault my whole life and I have learned many lessons through the jumps.

The most prominent lesson is how to handle pressure. I can tell you from first hand experience the most nerves I've felt have not been from an AP test or one of those scary Saturday mornings when your dad gets you up early to do "work." While these will certainly spike cortisol, nothing compares to standing on the back of the runway on your last attempt to make a bar.

Just go ask Cason— he can tell you all about making jumps on his last attempt. On a last attempt, you stand there with the whole stand's eyes on you while you wait for the height to go up. It's intimidating to watch the bar raise 14 feet in the air, and for me— standing all but 5' 6 (5' 7 on a good day) to say "I'm going to clear that bar." The truth is I haven't cleared that bar. I have attempted to clear 14 feet eleven different times to no avail. Yet, I continuously pick up my stick again and again because I know from my previous bar clearances that I am capable of making the height.

Students, right now— take a look up to the stands behind you. I'm certain you feel a pressure similar to that runway. Our parents, family, and friends are all watching us receive our greatest accomplishment yet. They're excited to see where we go next. But in truth, we may be nervous, uncertain if we will succeed, or maybe even confused about what we will do. But that's where we get it wrong. Looking back to our past 13 years, we've taken SATs, applied for jobs, and even finished that stupid pacer test. We've proved that we can clear the bar. The only difference now is that nobody will set the bar for us. Now, we get to pick what height to clear. I would encourage us to not aim low, but imagine ourselves flying over an 18 foot bar.

In truth, whether we make it or not, just striving for it has made us capable of more than we originally thought possible. And when the pressure sets in, we can trust ourselves to let go and soar.

Congratulations class of 2026. Thank you.

<Pause for applause>

Matthew Van Sickle, Valedictorian

Good evening class of 2026 and everyone who has supported us on our journey to graduation.

I want to begin by taking a time machine back to the final day of 8th grade. I'm sure all of you remember that day for different reasons, whether it be the mixed emotions you felt, the chaotic yearbook signing that you took part in, or the movie that you watched in your favorite teacher's

classroom. Nonetheless, I remember it because of a conversation that I had with a fellow student.

Outside of Mr. Pottiger's classroom, I told Rowan that I would be valedictorian in four years' time, to which he responded by making the exact same claim. We went back and forth for what felt like an eternity, stating our cases and explaining why each of us was equipped to outdo the other.

At the time, that interaction felt incredibly important. Looking back now, though, what stands out is not the competition itself, but the pressure we placed on ourselves at such a young age. Even before high school officially began, many of us were already stressing about grades, stressing about expectations, and stressing about the future.

We are all familiar with stress. It follows us everywhere we go: to the classroom where a test is taking place, to the workplace where chores are piling up, and to the highway where a traffic jam is blocking our path. However, most of us probably fail to realize that stress comes in two forms: distress and eustress.

When we tell our friends and family that we are "stressed out" from our daily hassles, we often assume that we are experiencing distress. Thus, you might be surprised when I tell you that distress is actually quite rare.

On the other hand, Eustress, –spelled e-u-stress– is both positive and relatively common. In order to help you understand how stress could possibly be positive, let us take a mental trip to a place that I should probably visit more often: the weightroom.

You see, within any weightroom, you lift weights with the purpose of growing your muscles. But how do they grow? Through stress and tension. Every rep causes microscopic damage to your muscle fibers, which your body then repairs and strengthens. This explains why gym sessions, although painful in the moment, eventually produce denser muscles and a healthier body.

Eustress functions in this same way. Similar to how muscles grow only when they're challenged beyond comfort, we grow as individuals only when we take on manageable obstacles. The academic and social pressures that we experienced throughout high school were far from pleasant; however, they motivated us to accomplish great things. Without them, we wouldn't be anywhere near where we are today.

That said, elite athletes aren't strong solely because they embrace stress. They are strong because they don't embrace stress alone. Whenever they attempt their heaviest lifts, they make sure that they are surrounded by their spotters, coaches, and teammates. People who will motivate them to get the bar up, but also help them if the weight becomes too difficult to carry.

So, if I could leave you with one message this evening, it would be to choose your environment wisely. Whether your futures involve college, employment, or military service, we must

remember to surround ourselves with a healthy support system. We should actively seek out people who will push us to be the best that we can be, but also assist us when our challenges become threatening.

Seemingly, we can embrace the eustress that accompanies everyday life by reminding ourselves that our struggles are only temporary, and by making a conscious effort to view setbacks as opportunities for growth. As stated in my psychology textbook, “stress invigorates our lives by exciting and motivating us. An unstressed life would hardly be challenging or productive.” With this in mind, let us never fear the weight of life, but, instead, learn to rise because of it.

Congratulations class of 2026. Thank you.

Epilogue by Class President Joel Yacono

Thank you Matthew and Rowan for those words. When change feels overwhelming, when the bar feels too high, and when stress is weighing us down, remember to look around this room—to our family, our friends, our teachers, and our staff. These are our spotters. These are the people who have cheered us on, pushed us through every rep, and believed in us when we did not believe in ourselves.

You know, it’s often too easy to lose sight of these people, so don’t forget them— send them an email, shoot them a text, give them a hug, and always thank them for all the work they have put in for us.

From this day forward, I challenge you to put on the new lens, and through it—trust the people beside you, soar over every bar ahead, and never lose sight of the family we built here. Red Land will always hold a very, very special place in my heart. I will miss you, and all of your smiles. Congratulations class of 2026! We made it! Thank you.

<Pause for applause>

Commencement awards will now be presented by Mrs. Mikayla Norton, Assistant Principal and Mr. Thomas Moore, Senior Class Counselor.”

Speeches for Commencement award winners

Please join me in congratulating the Commencement Award Winners.”

Band, Dylan Beaman; Basic Home Repair, Broch Rambo; Business Education, Haley Snyder; English, Ava Lyijnen; Graphic Arts, Cameron Sutton; JROTC, Grace Stoner; Mathematics, Nathan Jackson; Orchestra, Alyssa Lingenfelter; Physical Education Boy, Nathan Jackson; Physical Education Girl, Rory Gaye; Science, Danielle Morrett; Social Studies, Izzy VanDyke; Vocal Music, Teagan Sierer; Vocational Technical, Ari Bowersox; Wood Working, Jackson Reich; World Language, Lydia Laur; RLHS Patriot Boy, Austin Michelsen; RLHS Patriot Girl, Rory Gaye; Salutatorian, Rowan Concannon; and Valedictorian, Matt VanSickle.

"Ms. Melissa F. Herbert, Red Land Principal, will now present the Class of 2026."

Melissa Herbert, Principal

Good evening graduates, family, and friends.

To the graduating class of 2026: I read a quote first attributed to Aristotle, "If you want to lead the orchestra, you must turn your back on the crowd."

This quote resonated with me. As I sat with it for several days, I realized just how much it applies to this exact moment in your lives—a moment defined by leadership, personal growth, and, most importantly, change.

Our paths in life are not predetermined. In fact, it takes the utmost courage to turn your back to the crowd, quiet the external critics, and tune into the music that speaks truly to you. It has been an absolute joy watching you over these last several days—laughing with your friends, walking the halls of your previous schools, and running through bouncy houses, fully embracing that very last recess with your peers.

But now, the time has come to step up to the podium, turn your back to the audience, take a deep breath, quiet the noise around you, and listen to the music playing within. As Phillip Daigle stated so simply, "You can't go somewhere new, unless you leave where you were."

Class of 2026, it is time to be brave. Leave behind the security you have come to rely on, step into the unfamiliar, and embrace this change. Throughout your life your audiences will change, your tempo will change, you will change. Take a deep breath, quiet the noise around you, and compose your own music,

because I believe the music that will come from the class of 2026 will be a unique and colorful symphony with hints of red, white, and blue. Remember, you will always be a patriot for life, and you may always come home, and remember ...we wish you more.

It is with great pride and pleasure that I now present the 2026 Red Land High School graduating class to Dr. Stoltz and Mr. Guistwhite, as I declare these graduates of the class of 2026 have met all requirements for graduation outlined by West Shore School District Policy and criteria set forth by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. They are therefore entitled to receive a Red Land High School diploma from the West Shore School District. Congratulations.

Dr. Todd Stoltz, Superintendent

Welcome, Red Land Class of 2026. Today is a celebration of your achievements, your perseverance, and the countless ways you have represented your school and community with pride. Along the way, you have built friendships, created memories, faced challenges, and reached an important milestone that brings us together this evening.

As you sit here tonight, you may be feeling a mix of emotions — excitement about the future, pride in how far you have come, and maybe even some uncertainty about what lies ahead. That

is completely normal. Over the years, many of you have distinguished yourselves in the classroom, on the stage, on the field, in service to others, and through the leadership and character you have shown every day. We are incredibly proud of all you have accomplished.

No matter what path comes next — whether you are employed, enlisted, or enrolled — each of you leaves Cedar Cliff with experiences, lessons, and relationships that will help guide you forward. While your futures may look different from one another, you all share the ability to make a meaningful impact wherever life takes you. And with that in mind, I offer you this simple but important piece of advice ...

Set goals

Set goals and make a plan to achieve them. Whether it's landing your first job, being promoted, pursuing more education, earning more money, buying a new vehicle --- if you don't have a target, you'll never hit it. Beyond setting goals, find things that you love, that you feel passionate about, that make you happy, and do more of them. The passion for what you do will feed your soul and help you overcome challenges, setbacks, and failures, and give you hope for a better tomorrow.

Class of 2026, it is abundantly clear that people value living and raising a family in the West Shore community, and everything it has to offer. If you are a West Shore Alumni, would you please stand to be recognized?

Without any further ado, Ms. Herbert, it gives me great pleasure as the Superintendent and appointed representative of the Board of School Directors of the West Shore School District to accept the list of graduating seniors for 2026 from Red Land High School.

I do hereby certify and affirm in the presence of all assembled that each individual has met or exceeded the requirements for graduation set forth by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the West Shore School District, and is ready to receive his or her diploma.

I am pleased to present the graduating class of 2026 to the parents, family, friends, alumni, and community, and offer them our best wishes for happiness and fulfillment as they pursue their future endeavors.

"Diplomas will now be awarded by Ms. Melissa Herbert, Principal – Mrs. Shelly McGowan, Mrs. Katelyn Jackson, and Mrs. Mikayla Norton, Assistant Principals – Mr. Thomas Moore, Senior Class Counselor, and Mrs. Heather Wolfe and Mrs. Taylor Wiggins, Senior Class Deans."

<Diplomas are awarded>

Closing

"Will the class members please rise and join me in the turning of the tassels."

<Tassels turned...>

"Congratulations, Class of 2026!" "Will the Class of 2026 and our guests please rise and sing the Red Land Alma Mater, led by the Senior Chamber Singers."

<Alma Mater played by the band>

"We thank you for joining us this evening. We ask the audience to remain in the stands while the Class of 2026 exits together for the last time during the Academic Recessional."

<Exit with class>