

2026 Commencement Script for Teleprompter

Good afternoon and welcome to the commencement ceremony for the Cedar Cliff High School Class of 2026. I ask now that you please silence all cell phones and other electronic devices. *Pictures and videos are allowed!*

Please rise, and gentlemen remove your caps, for the singing of our national anthem, which will be performed by our talented senior members of the Cedar Cliff Chamber Singers.

<National Anthem is performed>

Please be seated while the JROTC color guard leaves the floor.

<Pause for Color Guard to leave the floor.>

It is my pleasure to welcome you all: administrators, the board of school directors, faculty, staff, students, friends and family, and the Class of 2026 to The Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex for the 2026 Cedar Cliff High School commencement ceremony.

My name is Jackson Griswold, and I am honored to be your Master of Ceremonies.

Welcome to our celebration!

I would like to give a special welcome to the people who, without them, tonight would be impossible. Firstly, the West Shore School District admin team, Principal Post, and our senior advisors; Mrs. Shaub and Mrs. Higgins. Thank you for all of your hard work and dedication to our senior class.

Today, my job is simple: keep the energy up, keep things moving, and make sure we all enjoy this day the way we should.

Now let's pause for a moment here. I would like to ask you all to take a look around. Look at your friends and peers. This is what four years of work, growth, and a lot of memories looks like all in one room.

From early mornings when the hallway lights still felt too bright, to rushing through assignments that were due at 11:59 that always got done at 11:58 . . . from fixing schedules to find your friends, to sitting in classes where time moved either way too fast or not at all, we've all made it to this moment together. And that, my friends, is something worth celebrating.

High school isn't really a collection of separate days or isolated events. It's more like a long distance run you start without fully realizing where the trail is going to take you. Not a single sprint, not a single finish line you can point to early on, but something extended, with its own rhythm, uneven ground, and a lot of unexpected turns.

At the beginning, everything feels new in a very literal sense. You're aware of every detail, finding your classes without getting lost, trying to stuff your backpack full of papers, figuring out where you're supposed to stand in the lunch line so you don't end up waiting all of 4A for lunch. It's like the first stretch of a run where you're still adjusting your stride, figuring out how much energy to spend to stay steady. Even things like raising your hand, joining a team, or figuring out where you belong feel like decisions you're super aware of.

But then it all changes; somewhere along the way, everything shifts. You stop thinking about every hallway and every bell, because one minute you're taking a test in Mr.

Weyant's class and a few minutes later you're doing the pacer test with Mr. Lebo. You

recognize patterns—not just in school, but in yourself. You know which teachers expect what work from you, which nights are going to turn into late ones, and which group chats are going to blow up right before a project is due.

And what's interesting is that no one runs it the same way. Some people's efforts seem effortless early on, always ahead, always organized, and then hit stretches where it gets harder. Some start out uncertain, and then somewhere along the way they find their stride and surprise everyone including themselves; and a special congratulations to the ones who didn't think they could make it but did. This run wasn't always about one aspect of our lives; we all enjoyed what we focused on, whether it was academics, athletics, socializing, visual or performing arts. We all got through our runs in different ways, whether it was with a stick of gum in class, athletics, music, art, or volunteering. Some stay steady in a way that's serene, but consistent the whole way through.

While you all are sitting here tonight, you're not at the finish line. This high school graduation doesn't mean we have reached the end of the trail. It's more like reaching a point in the run where the terrain changes again. You become more aware that what comes next is going to require a different kind of effort, a different kind of attention. It's less about learning how to start, and more about learning how to carry what you've already picked up while letting go of what is no longer needed.

I also want to acknowledge all of those on the sidelines, everyone who's been part of keeping the course steady while we ran it.

And now as we move forward tonight and push the class of 2026 onward to new horizons where we can continue to enjoy our run, just stay with each moment as it comes.

Not ahead of it, not behind it just present in the part of the path we're on right now. The path that leads across this stage and on to further frontiers.

With that, let us begin our senior celebration!

Congratulations Class of 2026.

Thank you.

<Pause>

It is now my pleasure to introduce the district administration seated on the platform:

DR. TODD STOLTZ, Superintendent of Schools

<Applause>

And, would the rest of the cabinet and administrative team of the district please stand to be recognized?

<Applause>

I would also like to recognize the board of school directors seated here on the platform:

Mr. Brian Guistwhite, President of the School Board

<Applause>

Additionally, I invite the rest of the West Shore School Board to rise and be recognized.

<Applause>

Thank you all for your presence today and your involvement in this ceremony.

The teachers in attendance today have been by our side pushing us to succeed. It is a privilege to have them here to support us one last time as we celebrate our graduation. I ask that all Cedar Cliff High School teachers present today please stand as we recognize them for their dedication to their students and for creating a strong foundation for us all. Without their devotion in their classrooms, none of this would have been possible. I am sincere when I say thank you.

<Applause>

This year's Valedictorian plans to study **Biochemistry** at the **University of Virginia**.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome your valedictorian, **Leah Rusignuolo**.

<Applause>

<Leah speaks>

Good afternoon board of directors, administrators, family, and the Class of 2026. As many of you can relate I have spent these last few weeks reflecting on my time at Cedar Cliff and today I would like to share a camping story.

In August of 2024, the field hockey team was embarking on their annual preseason camping trip. Some of you may remember, at that same exact time, remnants of Hurricane Debby were swirling their way up the coast towards central PA. The rain was already starting to trickle down as we drove south on interstate 81 to Pine Grove Furnace. I spent the entirety of my drive thinking, "Are we seriously going to camp in the

rain?" I don't even like camping to begin with, but sure enough that is exactly what we were about to do in this weather albeit.

The team was drenched within the first hour after setting up our tents and we still had two more days to endure. My mindset was only getting worse by the minute. I felt defeated knowing nothing I brought or wore would be kept dry. I was getting increasingly annoyed that we went on this trip despite the weather, and was accumulating a long list of things I would rather be doing, which was essentially anything but camping. Meanwhile, Weaver was happily eating the remaining Doritos from our lunch, while getting a fire started with the dry wood he packed. The night crawled by as we huddled in our tents and watched the water pour in.

When morning finally arrived we gathered for the best circle talk we've had in all my years. For those of you who have never witnessed a field hockey "circle talk," it is normally long and used to positively recognize a teammate or address issues and tensions within the team. That morning the circle talk was short. The mood and mindset shifted to pure relief; we were going home. The field hockey team scurried around, moving faster packing up the campground than we ever did in our timed mile test.

Quick camping tip: don't go camping during a hurricane—ever, but if you do, take Weaver with you.

As I reflect and look for perspective on this experience, it reminds me of wise words from famous author and poet, Maya Angelou: "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude." These words can serve as a compass for our future endeavors.

But our class is about more than just surviving the rain. We are also here today because of the sunny days we created together. Let's celebrate what we've achieved: breaking school track records, winning a state championship title, making it to states for choir, winning scholastic writing awards, and so much more. These aren't just line items on a resume; they are proof of what happens when a group of people decides to bring a winning attitude to everything they do.

However, none of us reached this stage alone. To our parents, grandparents, and friends—thank you for being our umbrellas when we couldn't find our own. To our teachers and administrators—thank you for giving us the map and the tools to navigate the storms. We are here because you believed in us, even when we were just trying to get by and stay dry.

Circling back to Maya Angelou's wisdom on perspective and attitude, I couldn't change my camping situation back at Pine Grove Furnace. There was no stopping the rainfall or leaving the campground, but I had the power to choose how I reacted to my circumstances. It would have been easy to enjoy a sunny campground, but the power of choice that sets us apart is choosing to find sun on the cloudiest of days. We are all entitled to our feelings but we get to dictate our actions and reactions. We have a choice, we can sulk in the mud or use the mud as a slip and slide.

As we enter these new chapters in our lives, we are all going to have our own 'flooded tent' moments, whether that is while attending a college or university, entering the workforce or serving our country. Maybe it's the first time you feel homesick or the first

day you walk into a job where you don't know a single soul. Our natural instinct may be to let our mindset plummet, just like mine did in the rain. But that is exactly when we have to remember: the situation is fixed, but our response is flexible.

We will all walk away from experiences remembering the trying times over the ones that ran smoothly, and those challenges are the ones that blossom into our most memorable stories. Our paths are diverging today but the “weather” will still be the same.

We will all face moments when things don't go as planned, and in these moments nothing will matter as much as our perspective. So when the rain starts to fall, you have an important decision to make. What will your attitude be?

I encourage everyone here to reflect on past moments as I offer this advice, choose your attitude. Be open-minded. Grow from your experiences. And lean on the people that love you when you can't see the sun through the clouds.

<Applause>

Thank you, **Leah**.

Our second speaker today will be heading to **University of California, Irvine** to study **Biomedical Engineering**. Ladies and gentleman, your salutatorian, **John Hartman**.

<Applause>

<John speaks>

Good afternoon and welcome to our administrators, school board members, faculty, staff, families, and fellow graduates. On behalf of the class of 2026, I am honored to

speak with you today. To my classmates, congratulations. Every one of you has worked hard to reach this moment.

I have been a fan of Greek mythology since I was in elementary school. I can still remember checking out "*The Lightning Thief*" from the library for the first time. At the time, I just liked the monsters, gods, and heroes, but looking back, I realize that in many of those stories, there is a lesson that comes too late.

A classic example of this is the story of Icarus. Daedalus, Icarus' father, made wings out of feathers and wax so they could escape the island of Crete, where they were trapped. Before they left, Daedalus warned Icarus not to fly too low, where the sea would weigh down the wings, or too high, where the sun would melt the wax on his wings. But once they were in the air, Icarus, feeling the sun on his back and the wind across his face, climbed higher and higher, forgetting his father's warning. To Daedalus' horror, the wax melted, the feathers came loose, and Icarus fell into the sea.

Many people remember the story of Icarus as a warning against pride or hubris. But I think it also shows how easy it is to mistake guidance for limitation. Icarus may have felt that his father's warning was holding him back, when really, it was meant to protect him.

In a way, graduation is our own moment before flight. Today and in the years ahead, we will receive advice from people who have already stood where we are standing now. Most of the time, they are not trying to limit us. They are trying to help us avoid mistakes they have already seen, made, or learned from. It's easy to take advice as criticism, even when it is meant to help. Sometimes we think we have it figured out, only for

someone to tell us to slow down, think, and try again. Anyone who has had to verify trig identities or learn stoichiometry knows this all too well.

Even though it might have felt like they were being nitpicky, they were teaching us to slow down, pay attention, and not quit the second something got frustrating. They weren't making us stare at the same problem for thirty minutes just to waste our time. They were teaching us how to work through frustration instead of avoiding it. Icarus did not fall because his father wanted to limit him. He fell because he mistook protection for restriction. Daedalus had something Icarus didn't: experience.

As graduates, we are ready to make our own choices, but that does not mean we have to pretend we have every answer. The people who helped us get here have seen things we have not, and listening to them does not make our flight any less our own.

Over these last few months, many of us have made one of the biggest decisions of our lives so far. And while each of us had to make that choice for ourselves, none of us made it completely alone. Our decisions were shaped by our own experiences, but also by the people who challenged us, questioned us, encouraged us, and reminded us to think beyond the moment. That does not mean they chose for us. It means they helped us see the choice more clearly.

In an acceptance speech, Brad Pitt quoted James Norbury's book, *Big Panda and Tiny Dragon*. In the story, the Big Panda asks, "Which is more important, the journey or the destination?" The Tiny Dragon replies, "The company."

As we leave today, each of us begins a flight of our own, but the people we listen to, learn from, and surround ourselves with will shape both the journey and the destination.

The right company will not always tell us what we want to hear. Sometimes, they will challenge us, question us, and remind us to think before we fly too close to the sun.

No one wants to repeat Icarus' mistake, and no one wants to stand by while someone they care about learns a lesson too late. But the lesson of Icarus is not that we should be afraid to fly. If Daedalus and Icarus had played it safe, they would have never left Crete.

Growth requires risk, and we should not be afraid to take chances. We just have to remember that taking risks does not mean ignoring the people trying to help us stay in the air. So, to the class of 2026, let's listen to those who have stood where we stand now. And to those guiding us, keep sharing what you have learned. Your experience may be the warning, encouragement, or perspective someone else needs before beginning a flight of their own.

Class of 2026, may we fly high, listen well, and remember the people who helped build our wings. Thank you.

<Applause>

Thank you, **John**

At this point in our ceremony, I call forward **Mrs. Jennifer Post**, Cedar Cliff Principal, and **Mr. Patrick Tierney**, Senior Class Guidance Counselor, who will recognize those who received Senior Awards this year.

<Award winners stand to be recognized>

<Applause>

Thank you, **Mrs. Post** and **Mr. Tierney**, and congratulations to all of the award winners.

I call upon **Mrs. Jennifer Post, our high school principal, once again**, for the presentation of the class.

<Mrs. Post presents the class>

As I prepared for today, I remembered a song from my youth called “Everybody’s Free to Wear Sunscreen.” It was originally written by Baz Luhrmann as a graduation speech and was later turned into a popular song. It offered all kinds of advice, but the message everyone remembers is “wear sunscreen”

That made me ask myself: what advice do I want the Class of 2026 to remember?

After many revisions, I landed on this:

“Do not let others define your happiness.”

Now, many of you may be wondering, “What exactly does that mean?”

Let me give you a few examples.

When I meet new people and tell them I’m a high school principal, most of them cringe and ask how I stay sane. My response is always the same: 95% of students are wonderful young adults who are unfairly judged by society. The other 5% just need a little more guidance before finding their path.

But ultimately, all of you found success, or you would not be sitting here tonight.

I also tell people that I love working with students. Your optimism is infectious. It reminds me not to become cynical like so many adults do. While I may be skeptical that every one of you will become the next TikTok influencer or NFL superstar, I genuinely love hearing your dreams and ambitions. You are full of energy, hope, and excitement about the journey ahead.

Do not let anyone tell you what success should look like for your life.

Whatever your definition of success may be, chart your own path.

Do not let others define your happiness.

Pursuing your happiness may not always be easy.

As you begin this next chapter, understand that learning often comes through failure. You will not succeed at everything on the first try.

Just ask the brave parent who gave you your first behind-the-wheel driving lesson. Trust me, none of you were experts that first day. Some of your parents are probably still recovering from the experience. And based on a few parking jobs I've seen this year, some of you are still figuring it out.

But that is okay.

No one expects perfection from you immediately. Grow from your mistakes. Rise stronger and wiser than before. Do not allow setbacks or criticism to derail your ambitions. If you are willing to work hard and be resilient, you can achieve remarkable things. Your graduation tonight is proof of that.

Ignore the doubters.

Do not let others define your happiness.

One of the biggest challenges you will face is the tendency to compare yourself to others.

Individuals rarely showcase their failures, disappointments, or struggles behind their success. And society's definition of success and beauty is often nothing more than a social construct, not a universal truth.

Be careful what standards you choose to measure yourself against.

Comparing yourself to unrealistic expectations or curated media will only leave you feeling inadequate. Recognize that who you are is already enough.

Be yourself. Authentically and unapologetically.

Because the moment you start living for someone else's approval is the moment you stop living for yourself.

Do not let others define your happiness.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not make a shameless pitch for West Shore in my speech when discussing happiness. Remember that happiness often comes from places you least expect.

Sometimes, it comes from giving back.

Ask your classmates about the joy they found in helping elementary students this year throughout the district, or those who coached youth sports. Looking back, many West Shore graduates invested their time in helping you grow and succeed. They did it because there is fulfillment in helping to make someone else's life better.

One day, you may discover that some of your greatest happiness comes not from what you achieve personally, but from what you give to others.

Do not let someone else's naysaying close the door on what could become one of the most meaningful experiences of your life.

West Shore will always welcome you back with open arms to help teach, coach, or mentor the next generation of students so that they can achieve their dreams, too. Remember, Once a Colt, Always a Colt.

Do not let others define your happiness.

Class of 2026, I could not be more excited for you and your journey ahead.

Be you. Chart your own path and keep dreaming.

Do not let others define your happiness. And remember to wear sunscreen.

Class of 2026, congratulations! You have earned this moment.

<Applause>

With that

I present the 2026 Cedar Cliff High School graduating class to Dr. Stoltz and Mr. Brian 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 - including required subjects and total credits. They are therefore entitled to receive a Cedar Cliff High School diploma from the West Shore School District.

It is my pleasure to welcome Dr. Stoltz to the podium to accept the Class of 2026.

<Dr. Stoltz accepts the class>

Welcome, Cedar Cliff 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, Mrs. Post, 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 Cedar Cliff 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 are awarded>

After 13 years of education, we celebrate this milestone together. Would the graduates

please rise? ***[Raise arms to class]***

Our educational course at Cedar Cliff High School is now concluded, and to symbolize the completion of our high school careers, the end of a very important step in our lives, and the introduction of a new one. I now ask that all graduates follow my lead as I move my tassel from the right to the left side of my cap.

[Move tassel from right to left]

<Pause>

Congratulations, Class of 2026!

<Applause>

I ask now that the audience please rise and join in the singing of the Alma Mater, led by once again, the senior members of the Cedar Cliff Chamber Singers.

Please honor our class by remaining in your seats until all the participants in today's ceremony have recessed out of the complex.

<PAUSE>

On behalf of the senior class of 2026, I thank you very much for attending the commencement ceremony. Have a fabulous day!

<Alma Mater and Recessional>