

Good evening board members, Dr. Kopicki and cabinet members, families, friends, and most importantly the Cox Mill High School Class of 2026.

Before I move on, and like the proud principal I am, I'd like to brag about this amazing group of Chargers.

In the classroom, our Chargers have excelled. The Class of 2026 earned millions of dollars in scholarships, including the prestigious Parks Scholarship; 46 of you are graduates of the NAF Academy of Information and Technology; 20 of you are now certified as Nurse Aide I professionals; and 18 of you have chosen to serve your country with military service in the Navy, Army, Coast Guard, and Air Force. As a proud military mom, I thank you in advance for your service.

You've led more than 60 student clubs, given countless hours to your community, and demonstrated leadership and character that reflect the very best of Cox Mill High School and Cabarrus County Schools.

On the stage, you have left a lasting legacy. Our senior band students led their ensembles to numerous 1st place

marching band awards, including two grand champion awards, and they earned Superior Ratings in all Concert and Jazz Band events over the last four years. The Cox Mill Theatre students delivered a stunning production of *Seussical the Musical*, earning a record seven Blumey Award nominations. The seniors of the Chamber Choir consistently received superior ratings at MPA, participated in statewide choir festivals, and led the Charger Chorus to a successful performance tour in Nashville. The seniors of the Dance Department made history with their first place finish at state competition and multiple superior ratings at DPA.

On the field, court, and mat our Chargers continued to shine. We had nine athletic teams qualify for the playoffs. Our women's volleyball team made it to the Final Four with a 28 and 2 record. We celebrated three Coach of Year winners, four Player of the Year winners, five Conference Championships, 30 state qualifiers, nine collegiate signees, and one state champion.

Please give all of these students a round of applause for their many accomplishments!

Tonight, you've heard encouraging words of advice from Dr. Kopicki along with your classmates. I want to take a moment to add to those encouraging words but also leave you with a challenge.

I learned from an early age that change is inevitable. Starting in 5th grade, I attended six different schools in five different states in the span of two years. Many of you have had similar experiences being the “new kid”. You experienced that awkward feeling walking into a classroom or the lunchroom trying to find a place to sit, which also meant you were trying to find that place where you belong. Despite all my practice being the new kid, I'll be honest—I felt that same uncertainty walking into Cox Mill in January as your new principal.

Would I fit in? Would I be able to continue the excellence already here?

The choice to move six times when I was a kid was not mine, and much of the change you have experienced and will continue to experience will not be your choice. However, you will still learn from it. You will learn how to walk into a room and be okay with that awkward

feeling because at some point you will realize you are not the only one feeling awkward. You will learn how to adapt to new situations and new environments. You will also learn that adapting to new environments doesn't mean you have to change who you are and what you hold to be true. You will learn that friends come and go in your life, and it's okay. You will also learn that the ones who stick around are the ones that were okay with your awkwardness. In fact, they likely were one of the people in that room feeling just as awkward as you were.

Much of the change you will experience in life won't be your choice. But you will learn from it. You will learn how to adapt, how to connect, and how to stay true to who you are—even in unfamiliar spaces.

But here's the challenge: the greatest growth doesn't come from the change that happens to you. It comes from the change you choose. John D. Rockefeller once said, "Don't be afraid to give up the good to go for the great." In a few years, many of you will find yourself at the top of your game. You will find success and satisfaction in college, a military career, or a career you are moving into right now. You will receive praise from others, and you may even be in a position where they want you to train or

teach others. You are a model for others in this position. This is amazing, and it is absolutely something the adults in your life want for you – success. However, I want you to think about Rockefeller's quote when you are sitting in the “good”, as this might be the perfect time to make a change. As an English teacher, I like to use analogies, and as someone who married into the world of auto racing, I can't help but compare life to racing. Imagine you're near the end of a race, running comfortably in the top five. Your team might tell you to hold your position. It's safe. It's solid. But winning often requires a risk. Sometimes you have to leave the pack, change lanes, and take a chance—knowing it might not work. But also knowing it just might be what gets you to the finish line first. You don't grow by staying comfortable. You grow by choosing the challenge.

So as you leave here tonight, you will face change. Some of it will happen to you. Some of it will be your choice. Wherever your path leads—military, college, or career—don't settle for good. Learn from it, appreciate it, but don't stay there too long. Be willing to take the risk that leads to something greater. I want to leave you with this quote from Socrates: "The secret of change is to focus

all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new."

Class of 2026, thank you for making my first go as a principal a great one. You will always hold a place in my heart as my first graduating class.

Now go forward, Chargers—and build something great.