

## **New Bedford High School Graduation Address**

**June 14, 2013**

**Mayor Jon Mitchell**

Mr. Kulak, Superintendent Shea, members of the School Committee, parents, teachers, guests, and members of the New Bedford High School Class of 2013.

Thank you for inviting me here today. Delivering a graduation address is one of the great honors in American public life. By custom, the Mayor of the City of New Bedford is assigned to address to the high school every year. This is one of the best parts of my job.

Graduates, it is an honor for me to be here today to celebrate the culmination of your years of hard work. Getting here was not a walk in the park. You've had to sacrifice to keep your grades up, had to choose studying over going out with friends, had to deal with peer pressure, and had to pass the MCAS. You've done it. You deserve our praise today. You have achieved something very real, and you have every right to be proud.

But you of course didn't do it alone. We all depend on others in different ways. As I told last year's graduates, you share this day with a safety net of people who supported you along the way.

While there are too many to list, two groups deserve your highest gratitude. You sit here today in part because your teachers stood up and delivered to you every day. They worked hard for you not because there was any money in it for them. They don't get rich doing what they are doing. They stayed up at night correcting papers, gave you

extra attention, and asked for nothing in return because they were devoted to your development as young men and women. They wanted to make you better.

The other group is sitting out there. It will be years before you come to recognize how much your parents have done for you. Mark Twain once said that when he turned twenty-one, he was amazed at how much his parents had learned since he was fourteen. Teenagers don't always see eye-to-eye with their parents, and sometimes think their parents just don't understand, but mark my word, in time you will realize that your parents have always had your best interests at heart. They have supported you, and they are so proud of you. And today, they also deserve to be proud of themselves.

You may be thinking that this ceremony is the end of a *long* road. Your parents, I assure you, are thinking that the last four years went by in a blink of the eye. They cannot believe that their little baby is graduating from high school. Graduates, *you* may think that you are going through a big transition right now, but parents, they have no idea what *you* are enduring as you sit here tonight.

But the reality is, graduates, that you *are* about to enter a new phase of your life. You are leaving behind certain comforts, habits, and experiences.

You're leaving behind your classes for sure, but there's so much more. You leave behind your morning routine that seems second nature. You leave behind seeing your friends in the hallway. You leave behind your assigned house, your home room and your locker. You will leave behind proms and the bonfire before the Durfee game. You will

even leave behind the cafeteria meals you just love, as well as the other meals.

But while you are leaving much behind, you are also taking something very valuable with you, namely a New Bedford High School diploma. That diploma has value that you will now carry with you for the rest of your lives. Employers and colleges will read the words “New Bedford High School” on it and know that you came from someplace special and did something special.

My job as Mayor is, in part, to help make sure that those diplomas that you hold rise in value over time. They are worth a lot now and we want them to become worth even more as the High School’s reputation for excellence grows in years ahead.

That’s why I want to use this occasion to say a few words to students, parents, and teachers about what we are doing to build a stronger school system and a stronger New Bedford High School.

Building a new school system that lives up to our City’s expectations can be seen as a three step process.

First, we need the right leadership. There is no substitute for far-sighted, experienced leadership.

Second, we must get the system’s financial house in order. Delivering a first rate education requires having enough money to spend in the places where it’s needed most. Poor fiscal management leads to crowded classes, fewer textbooks, and underpaid teachers. In the end, it drags down student performance.

And the last piece is the operation of the schools themselves. We all know that it takes motivated principals, inspiring teachers and the right curriculum to deliver an education worthy of our children.

We've taken the first step. The leadership change has taken hold. Superintendent Shea has reminded us all this year why effective leadership matters. His steadiness at the helm has restored confidence among faculty and enabled the system to avoid a damaging takeover by the state.

In the next two weeks, we will turn the district over to another first rate educational leader, Pia Durkin, who is widely considered to be one of the finest superintendents in Massachusetts.

In time, I believe, Mike Shea will be seen as the right man in a time of need for New Bedford's Schools.

One of his legacies will be the directness with which he has taken on the task of resolving the second major hurdle in school reform, the district's financial problems that had been festering for so long.

The budget cuts contemplated now are painful. There's no two ways about it.

But for the first time in a long time in our schools, hard decisions have been confronted, not avoided. These decisions have been made for the sole purpose of restoring the financial foundation of our system through heightened transparency and attention to detail. Above all, they are meant to support the interests of our students. For the short run pain of the cuts, whose necessity grows out of deep-seeded, systemic problems, we are setting the stage for long run success.

My intention today is not to seize on the occasion of your graduation to offer a policy speech. Far too often, elected officials at every level of government have been guilty of doing just that, talking right past the graduates themselves. I'm not here to do that to you.

Rather, there is another, more important point. As you move on in your lives, and encounter challenges large and small, don't avoid them, dive right into them. Think about it. Every story that's ever moved you, every person you've ever admired, every time you've accomplished something you're proud of has been the product of taking action.

You have a choice. You can either be a passive victim of circumstance or you can take charge of your circumstances.

Kicking problems down the road is easy. It is easy because it requires nothing of you. Ignoring problems can be most easily rationalized when someone else created them in the first place.

Facing up to challenges and taking action is a harder choice because it exposes you to the possibility of failure. Failure is something to be feared. Ignore the cliché so often trumpeted in graduation speeches that you shouldn't fear failure. I fear failure. You should too. If you are indifferent about the outcome of any worthwhile endeavor, you'll never try hard enough to succeed.

What's worse than failure is failing to try. When you choose action over inaction, whether you meet success or failure in the end, you may take comfort in the knowledge that, as Theodore Roosevelt once put it, you won't "take your place with the poor and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." The life of the spectator is more

comfortable in the moment, but it is the men and women of action who find fulfillment in their lives.

Graduates, congratulations on your achievement today, and I hope you will return to our great City some day to take action each in your own way to make it a better place.