

USCHS 2023 Commencement Speeches

Superintendent's Remarks

Dr. John Rozzo, Superintendent of Schools

Class of 2023, it is my honor to stand before you today as your superintendent of schools.

Graduation is a momentous occasion, marking the culmination of 13 years of hard work, perseverance, and personal growth. We are here at this ceremony because of the collective efforts of many. I would like to begin by recognizing those who have played an important part in your journey.

First and foremost, to our parents and family members, thank you and congratulations. There are 500 school districts in Pennsylvania—43 in Allegheny County alone. You chose to live in Upper St. Clair. As a fellow parent of a graduating senior, I can honestly say that moving to Upper St. Clair was one of the best decisions my wife and I ever made. I hope you feel the same way about your decision to live in this great community. While the last few years have tested and challenged schools in new and different ways, we are grateful for your continued trust and partnership.

To our school board, thank you for your leadership and service to our community. The impact you have had on the class of 2023, and all Upper St. Clair students, is immeasurable. We are fortunate to have a Board of Directors who are keenly focused on doing what is best for all students.

To our more than 500 faculty and staff (many of whom are with us this evening), your unwavering commitment to our students is appreciated beyond words. Whether in our classrooms, on the stage in the theater, in the cafeteria line, on our school buses or on the athletic fields, you have all helped prepare the USC class of 2023 for life after high school.

Our talented and student-centered high school administration—Dr. Wagner, Dr. Beck, and Ms. Senger. Thank you for your positive influence on the Class of 2023 and the entire high school community.

Thank you to our elected local and state officials who are here tonight. They play an important role—individually and collectively—in supporting our community and advocating for our school system.

Thank you to Mrs. Brooke Tarcson and Dr. Stephen Torquato who lead our high school activities office and have the primary responsibility in planning all of our senior events - including this evening's ceremony. To our school police and security officers, our custodial and maintenance team, and technology staff members—all of whom have helped with tonight's event—thank you.

Class of 2023, as we gather here to celebrate your achievements, I want to take a moment to reflect on the path that has led us to this point. I have had the privilege of witnessing the growth and development of this exceptional class. From the first day of kindergarten to this special occasion, I have seen you mature and grow, not only academically, but also as individuals ready to take on the world.

You are an integral part of the success of our school district. As I stated a few minutes ago, there are 500 school districts in Pennsylvania. Just last week, Upper St. Clair was named Pennsylvania's top school district for the second year in a row. You are the most important element of our recipe for success—which includes great students, talented and dedicated staff, unmatched parent support and engagement, and a community that has the utmost value for education.

Although it is trite to say, Class of 2023, it seems like just yesterday that you entered the doors of Baker, Eisenhower, and Streams elementary schools as kindergarten students. Since that time in the fall of 2010, much has changed in our world. The seniors who graduated when you were just starting school had a vastly different experience than you. If the world was the same today as when you began your school career, your lives would look and feel quite differently.

For instance:

- The first iPad was introduced the same year you began kindergarten and Chromebooks hit the market as you entered first grade.
- The seniors at the high school when you were in kindergarten did not have Instagram or Snapchat, as neither had yet been invented.
- TikTok did not surface until you were in middle school.
- Video conferencing capabilities flourished when Zoom entered the market in 2011 and Google Meet launched in 2017. Both were critical as we transitioned to remote learning and more industries embraced the flexibility of remote work.
- Venmo was not a payment option until 2012. If you owed a friend money or needed to pay for a ticket to a game or event, you actually had to carry cash.

- I know that many of you like to place mobile orders for Starbucks, Dunkin' and Chick-fil-A. DoorDash, Uber Eats, and mobile ordering were not available yet.

Needless to say, when you first stepped foot into kindergarten, our society was on the cusp of transformation. The world around us has experienced a profound technological shift and you have been immersed within this evolution. Technology has indeed revolutionized the way we live, learn, and connect with one another.

As we gather here to celebrate your accomplishments, we recognize that you are our next generation of leaders.

Your high school years have been nothing short of unique. You have exhibited resilience, adaptability, and a remarkable ability to embrace change. These qualities will serve as the foundation for your future endeavors.

Whether you enter higher education, the military, the workforce, or pursuing your passions, remember that the world needs your leadership now more than ever. Do not shy away from the challenges that lie ahead; instead, see them as opportunities to grow, learn, and shape a better future for us all.

None of us has a crystal ball and knows what the future holds. But what I can say for certain is that much more will change in our world over the next 13 years than during your time as students in our schools.

I know that I can speak for all the fellow parents and family members, and tell you that we have mixed emotions about you graduating high school. We are incredibly proud of your individual and collective resumes. We are eager and excited to watch what the next chapter holds for each of you. At the same time, we are a bit anxious. Not due to absence of confidence in you; rather, because we love and care about you very much and only want you to be happy, healthy, and safe. You see, to us, despite your transformation into young, accomplished emerging adults, we still envision that image from the fall of 2010 when our little five-year-olds walked across the threshold into kindergarten for the first time.

To close this evening, I want to share a few final thoughts that I hope you remember.

I am certain that you are prepared to enter the world of adulthood. How do I know that? Because you are Upper St. Clair Panthers. Always be proud of where you are from, for it is indeed a special place.

While this may be the last time all 333 of you are together in person, please stay connected with your friends and classmates—for you are our future. As I said earlier, technology has changed much of our lives in many ways.

However, the research is clear, the power of strong and meaningful relationships with others remains the key to success and happiness.

Congratulations, Upper St. Clair High School Class of 2023! May you carry the lessons and experiences of your time as Upper St. Clair students into the next segment of your lives. The world is waiting for and needing your leadership. I have no doubt that you will rise to the occasion and make us proud.

Board of School Directors' Response

Daphna Gans, President, Upper St. Clair Board of School Directors

I started my work on this graduation speech like one would any other piece of writing. I sat at my desk, I made sure the light was just the right level of brightness, the thermostat was set to the perfect temperature, put my phone on silent to minimize distraction, opened my MacBook, and started to do some research. And then, I began to type... www.chat.openai.com into the search bar, so I could ask ChatGPT to suggest what I should include. To my surprise, it wrote a full speech. And the speech was surprisingly not bad. In fact, it was the quintessential graduation speech, hitting every note you'd expect.

Congratulations to the class of {insert year}, celebrate your achievements, look toward the future, face challenges with grit and resilience... It even had a non-controversial quote.

While it might have sounded right, it did not FEEL right. And not just for the obvious ethical reasons.

It did not feel right because it did not capture the intangible. It did not capture the essence of the Upper St. Clair School District. It did not capture the nature of each of you, the graduates of THIS year, THIS cohort, THIS group of individual young adults, each representing an entire world. (And, it certainly did not have "the voice"—the elusive concept many of you had to uncover during the writing of your college essays).

It got me thinking. Is artificial intelligence, AI automation, really going to change your future in radical ways we cannot even imagine? And if the answer is yes, have we—collectively, as your parents, your teachers, your coaches, your educators—have we prepared you for such a future?

I can spend this precious time I have with you today to tell you how this new frontier of artificial intelligence will drastically change your jobs, your careers, your futures. But the truth is, every generation in history has faced an unpredictable future. Some of these unforeseen events are naturally occurring, some are human-made. Some may be life altering and threatening, others may be exciting and open new opportunities. Some events affect a local group, others are global.

But what the past few years have taught us is that life is more complex than even the most advanced set of algorithms. We can develop predictive models that will address every "what if" scenario we can think of, we can attempt to prepare as best we can. But

we will always face uncertainty.

And at the end of the day, the only way out, is through. There are no short cuts. There are no cheat codes to life.

And the good news is that I genuinely believe that your time here at the Upper St. Clair School District has equipped you with the skills to not only face an unpredictable unprecedented future, not only pivot and adapt, but to thrive in it. I would go even one step farther. The Upper St. Clair School District modeled to you how to be a LEADER, an innovator, a problem solver in times of unprecedented health and social circumstances. We made decisions, we acted, and many times, we needed to debug our program and restart. But we kept learning and growing together.

Your high school career started with school closures and online learning, continued with a hybrid learning modality in 10th grade, a return to school with some modifications for your junior year, and finally, a “typical” senior year. Yet, through hard work, collaboration with others, and outsider-the-box thinking, each of you was able to not only fulfill your academic potential and excel, but also pursue your athletic, artistic, and creative life goals.

As a collective, a group, you even started some new school traditions such as the redesigned global education week. You formed new clubs, such as ESPORTS and Spikeball. Many of you were involved in promoting mental health awareness and programming in our high school by founding the Minding Mindsets club, and along with the Wellness committee, formed Stand Together. And beyond shaping your own school community, many of you volunteered to help senior citizens in the larger community of the township of Upper St. Clair and surrounding areas. While you intended to provide technology support during the pandemic, your efforts in fact helped combat social isolation in a frail elderly population, already compromised during the pandemic (yes, you deserve applause). Even as recently as last week, some of you partnered with a senior community for a prom fashion show...and these are just a few of the ways your class has already shaped the world around you, for the better.

Today we are launching you, the 2023 version of the Upper St. Clair School District graduates. So, go out there. Follow what you have learned here at Upper St Clair. Continue to work hard responsibly and with integrity, using the resources available to you, yes, including AI. If they are not enough, invent new ones. Find your voice. Engage fully in whatever you choose to do, collaborate with others, innovate, take action to contribute to your environment, take good care of yourselves and your loved ones, and always, always, lift others and support those who need some help.

And, most importantly, come back to us. Share with us what you have learned, your life stories, your wisdom.

We cannot wait to see the 2.0 version of the class of 2023. Congratulations!

Student Speeches

Maura Joyce, USCHS Student Council President

We are here today to express our heartfelt gratitude for the love that has been extended to each and every one of us, the graduating seniors. Throughout our journey, we have been fortunate to receive abundant love and support, and we are truly thankful for the opportunities that have enabled us to both receive and share this love with others over the past four years.

As we stand at this significant milestone in our lives, we must acknowledge and appreciate the tremendous efforts that have been invested in our growth. Our parents, teachers, and the wider community have played instrumental roles in nurturing us and creating an enriching educational environment where we can all thrive. We are humbled by the recognition and honors that our district has gained, thanks to the dedication and service of each of the students present here tonight.

However, we are aware that the true rewards of our endeavors will manifest as we move forward to achieve the goals that have been set for us.

Therefore, on this occasion, we offer the following aspirations: May our lives be profoundly influenced in a way that allows us to reach our fullest potential. May we actively seek wisdom and strength in all our pursuits. May our focus remain unwavering, enabling us to embrace the blessings that await us. And above all, may our hearts always be filled with a passion and true desire to serve others as we move up to shape the modern world.

With heartfelt gratitude, we extend our thanks to all.

Marina Gzikowski, USCHS Senior Class President

As a class, we have overcome and achieved so much, and I could not be more proud to be a part of it. As freshmen, we came in with no idea what to expect out of high school, but as we all know things quickly became more and more unexpected rather than easier. Our freshman year was cut short by Covid, and when we expected the return in two weeks, it ended up being months of quarantine and online school. Adjusting to high school became more challenging, but nonetheless we came out on the other side and were able to make the best of it and accomplish so much.

Our class is united with one another through our unique high school experiences. We are resilient and can handle any challenge, and we have had some amazing achievements along the way. Members of our class helped lead the Upper St. Clair High School Speech and Debate team to once again be awarded State Champions. We helped to raise \$2,775 for Children's Hospital through Polar Plunge, with multiple seniors being top fundraisers for the event. Seven of our senior girls were recognized at the Medallion Ball for having completed over 100 hours of community service each. Our seniors visited local senior citizens earlier this year to help them learn how to use new technology. Members of our class led our school in implementing the Stand Together program at the high school the past two years, which helps to reduce stigma and spread awareness surrounding mental illness and substance abuse. We had multiple class of 2023 music students present at the (PMEA) All-State Festivals for band, orchestra, and choir. We helped to put on four outstanding musicals the past four years: Shrek, Smokey Joe's Cafe, Seussical, and On the Twentieth Century. We had students in the cast, crew, and pit that helped make our theater program shine. Members of our class in the band, orchestra, and choir performed at Disney World and Daytona last year. Our seniors were great leaders in all of Upper St. Clair's sports as well. The football team made it to the WPIAL championship this year, and many of our sports teams made it to playoffs such as soccer, baseball, lacrosse, swimming, softball, and basketball, Ultimate Frisbee City Championship, hockey (Penguins Cup Final), with our girls basketball team making it to the WPIAL finals for the third year in a row. Our senior athletes exemplified leadership and dedication throughout all of their seasons. Throughout our four years at the high school, we have truly grown. We have learned how to persevere through anything, and that skill will carry us forward and allow us to contribute amazing things to this world. As this chapter closes, let us remember all of the ways that this place has changed us and all of the lessons we learned in the classroom and outside of it.

Ashvita Saxena, USCHS Senior Speaker

Has anyone here done the ice bucket challenge? You know, that social media craze that took over in 2016 where you would film a video of freezing cold water being dumped on you? Well, that feeling of ice-cold shock hitting you feels the exact same as being a brand-new student in your freshman year of high school. I have moved numerous times, but nothing would prepare me for having to start over at a time when most people have already established their group of friends. However, at the same time, nothing prepared me for this huge sense of togetherness and community I was met with when I settled into Upper St. Clair. I was taken in by people who are now my very best friends and I can say with confidence that I am truly grateful my family chose Upper St. Clair as our home. From the chaotic frenzy of the first day of freshman year, when we didn't know where our classes were, to the end of senior year, where every nook and cranny of that school building now holds a memory, we have been on a whirlwind journey of growth and self-discovery. Yet, through these highs and lows, through the challenges and triumphs, the true power of unity persevered, and I believe it is essential to appreciate the lives we have built here. We have spent countless hours studying, playing sports, taking tests, engaging in extracurriculars, and counting down the days until we would be sitting here at this ceremony. However, let us also remember that in the midst of all that craziness, we had some pretty special moments. The very first event that brought us together was freshman field day, granted we were forced to participate, but once those competitive juices started flowing, we realized the true importance of teamwork and had an experience with people we may not have talked to otherwise. When Covid isolated us, we were brought back together by our very first outdoor homecoming. The feelings of familiarity and comfort were restored by being reconnected with those we may have lost touch with and being surrounded by our friends that we now call our family. These feelings continued when all the senior girls woke up at 5 am just to watch the sunrise together on our very first day of senior year. Finally, we realized this sense of togetherness was truly bittersweet on decision day when we saw all our friends in those college t-shirts and maybe even shed a tear or two when the reality set in that we would soon be leaving this home for another. Despite the fact that we will all be embarking on our own journeys soon, we will always have Upper St. Clair and the special memories that made us a family. One thing we have all learned here is that community does not only refer to our friends or who we choose to surround ourselves with, but so much more. Community can refer to that slight, passing smile you give to someone in the hallway who you don't really know, but you also kind of know at the same time, those parents and teachers you have a running inside joke with, or the time we all gathered in a huge circle and swayed while singing our senior song at Senior homecoming. These moments may have seemed insignificant, or small, or just a part of your daily routine, but the truth is that they had a very special job in strengthening our relationships with each other and, most importantly, with our community. We should all feel extremely proud to be a part of this home because our experiences here have shaped us into who we are today and created a mosaic of memories that will forever remain with us.

Now that we are moving forward to the next chapter of our lives, we will ALL feel that ice-cold shock I mentioned at the beginning. Through this process, we are going to seek out new communities and new experiences to be a part of. As we do so, we must take the lessons we learned here in high school- the importance of hard work and perseverance of course, but most importantly, how to build relationships with respect and communication, and how to maintain these relationships with empathy. As we navigate new challenges in the future, we can draw upon the foundation of togetherness that we built during our time at Upper St. Clair

Together, we are a testament to the power of community. We must remember to carry this spirit of togetherness within us as we say goodbye to this chapter. And with that, I would like to say thank you to all of you, to all of the faculty, to all of the wonderful people in this community that made it feel like home. Thank you, Upper St. Clair, for showing us the true meaning of togetherness.

Jasmine Dietiker, USCHS Senior Speaker

Walking out of the main entrance last Friday at 2:20 undoubtedly released a mountain of emotions. We all felt the sudden happiness, relief, and freedom coupled, of course, with some uncertainty and regret. We paid attention to our steps one last time as we talked to friends, as we laughed and cried. Throughout our high school experience, we've walked through these doors hundreds of times, never really realizing just how impactful each door and each hallway is until we see them for the last time.

The last day of eighth grade was the first time we all walked through these doors together, pledging to spend the next four years trying our best to become a better version of ourselves, to make mistakes, and to learn from them. As freshmen, we walked through the theatre doors to our first class meeting, through these gates together to our first home football game, and through the doors to the large gym to be intimidated by the upperclassmen to sign up for every single club during RUSH.

Then, we walked out the doors on March 13, 2020, thinking we would be walking back in just two weeks later. Instead, we spent sophomore year at home, waking up at 7:29 for homeroom at 7:30 and only pointing our cameras at our foreheads. But even though we were stuck in the same chairs for hours on end each day, we still caught up with friends in breakout rooms and laughed through online club meetings, our united school spirit never faltering. And of course, thank you to every single teacher who still walked through these doors every single day determined not to let a pandemic take too much away from our education. I can still remember the day we as a school held up thank you signs to the camera to show our gratitude and how we were inspired by your dedication and hard work. When we walked back through these doors together on the first day of junior year, we had seemingly become upperclassmen overnight. As junior mentors, we helped freshmen adapt to a new and slightly overwhelming environment, just as the Class of '21 had done for us. As newfound club leaders, we pushed forward with new meetings and volunteering plans. And as the Class of 23', we served as the bridge between pre-pandemic and post-, the only current class that remembered what it was like before March 13 and fought to bring back traditions for the rest of the school to experience.

Before we knew it, we walked out of the theatre after our last senior meeting, stood in the student section for the last time, and passed our clubs down to the underclassmen we had intimidated to join.

As Alexander Graham Bell once said, "When one door closes, another opens." Over the past 12 years, we've walked through these doors together into the next stage of our lives. And now, this is the last door that all of us will walk through as our high school years close behind us. As we look back at our high school years, we will remember everyone who held countless doors and opportunities open for us, like our parents, teachers, counselors, and school administrators that gave us the support we needed to make it here today. After we walk out this last door together, is so important that we continue to look for that next door and remain brave enough to open it, even if we don't know exactly what lies behind it. I wish you luck as you close this door in your life and walk through the next one of many, and I know that the doors of Upper St. Clair will always be open to welcome us home.

Ansh Goyal, USCHS Senior Speaker

I feel elated every time someone refers to us by our mascot. The Panthers. The PRIDE of Upper St. Clair. Not just because it's unequivocally one of the coolest mascots ever, but also because the Panther is the most apt description of our characters. Think about just how similar we are to panthers. Well for one, panthers are nocturnal animals—they stay awake throughout the night and sleep during the day. And let's be honest, 90% of us here today can probably relate to that. In all seriousness, there are three things that allow panthers to rule the jungles—their impenetrable

unity, their unmatched **strength**, and their fearless **character**. And though we may not realize it, these are the three traits that set USC students apart from the rest of the country.

For one, panthers always stay together, a tight-knit pride that, when united, can overcome every challenge. And the same is true of USC. Think of the Covid pandemic. Not only were we united in our gratitude for open-note tests, classes in bed, and half-day Wednesdays, but we were united in grief. Our grief over losing all physical connection with the rest of our pride. And through that grief, we found ways to stay connected with each other, even when the odds were completely against us. From online club meetings to “The Pantherella,” we did everything in our power to be united. And this unity showed even past the pandemic. Just as a Panther supports his pride, so did we support our wonderful principal Dr. Wagner in his moment of pride, uniting as one to commemorate his astonishing achievements. I could go on and on about the community we have built at Upper St. Clair, but all that needs to be said is that our togetherness is the reason for our strength.

Speaking of strength, another reason for the panther’s dominance is their unmatched power. And while we may not have claws (as much as we wish for them), we all have a different form of power—the power to make a change in our community. Panthers from so many different clubs have used their strengths to come to the aid of those in need. And not only have we used our strength to change the community, but we have also helped mentor the next generation of Panthers, all of whom are sure to carry in our footsteps. We Panthers are not prey that sits in silence waiting on the world—WE are the APEX that lives through action.

And finally, just like a panther’s fearless character dictates its dominance, so too does our fearless attitude. We are not afraid to take risks. Whether it’s loading up on AP classes or performing live in front of hundreds of people, or writing an entire essay with ChatGPT, the Class of 2023 is truly the master of risk-taking. And even though these risks can lead to the occasional mishap, it’s through these fearless choices that we Panthers hunt down our dreams. My fellow graduates, now that we’re all leaving to find our places in this vast world, we will need to use every one of these skills. We will need to find a new pride to call home, we will need to use our strength to survive and thrive, and we will need to take risks to reach our goals. But throughout these last four years, Upper St. Clair has instilled within each and every one of us unity, strength, and character, so that we are able to find our path in the real world once we’re gone. So, as we all leave our den to find our place in the world, I want all of you to know that you are prepared to take on any challenge the world throws at you. Thanks to dear old Upper St. Clair, it’s truly a great day to be a Panther.