



## High School Graduation

June 8, 2025

Speech by Sue Ikenberry, High School Faculty

I want to thank the class of 2025 for the honor of selecting me as your teacher speaker.

My first impulse was to accept the honor but ask someone else to speak for me, but I tried that over and over again as people congratulated me, and no one took me up on it.

So, here I am, up here with sweaty palms and heart beating at an alarming rate and, of course, a fluttering stomach, so bear with me.

First, I want to extend my heartfelt and warm appreciation to not only the students of the class of 2025, but also to the GDS faculty and staff who have worked so hard to help you reach this moment. They have done so much to make this possible. I am inspired every day by the hard work and dedication of my colleagues.

And I also want to thank the families for their goodwill and kindness. Your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings have done so much to inspire you, lift your spirits when needed, and instill confidence. And occasionally they may have helped you with your homework.

I came to GDS 42 years ago.

Immediately, it was obvious that the school was very special—even weird on occasion.

I'll never forget—about a month after I came—a debate in a faculty meeting about whether the students should be required to wear shoes. This debate went on for at least half an hour. As you know, the shoes won, but bare feet had plenty of advocates. Coming from Capitol Hill, where I worked for my Congresswoman as a case worker and legislative assistant, things were a bit formal.

As a new teacher, hired in late August, I had a difficult adjustment: my older students I sort of knew how to handle, I had taught community college, so I had developed some methods that worked pretty well, but the freshmen were impossible for me.

And I made every mistake possible (in fact, if I could remember every bad lesson I planned, I might put them in a book for new teachers, entitled “Don't do any of this”). I was not a success,

and I still remember the department head, Dorothy Jackson, coming into my room on Curriculum Night and spending the entire allotted minutes defending me to the understandably unhappy parents.

As the year came to a close, I had developed a few techniques that were not boring so things got better for me and my students—not great, but bearable for most of us. My third year, I developed an interesting tenth grade course, US Government and Politics, so that was the end of my teaching Freshmen. Richard began teaching US Government and Politics as well. He's retiring this year. It has been a pleasure having him as a colleague,

But back to the class of 1987—the class who had me as freshman my rookie year.

They had their 30<sup>th</sup> reunion in 2017. I came to the evening reception and immediately saw some of my former students from that class. Any of you who have even taught can tell you that you remember your first class vividly, so I immediately greeted them by name: “Hi, Melanie, Hi, Kacia”

These former students seemed to be surprised that I was so amicable, “You speak to us?!” one of them said. “ We were so mean to you!”

I didn't remember the students being particularly mean, and I understood why they might have had negative feelings about the experience, so I assured them that I had been a totally inexperienced teacher; they were 14 years old, so to the extent that anything went wrong, it was all on me. “You all taught me so much about interacting with a class and teaching, for which I've been grateful ever since!”

Suddenly, the students who had been part of that class (and I remembered them all vividly) came and hugged me and even took selfies with me.

They were ashamed of conduct that was completely appropriate to 14 year olds. And so happy that I didn't harbor unkind memories about them.

Thirty-three years later, these GDS students remembered that they had occasionally been hard on the green new teacher and felt very guilty and worried about it. Students at most schools would have remembered the inexperienced teacher and laughed about how bad she was, but not at GDS. GDS students felt that they should have done more.

So, I learned something new about what is so special about GDS. Kindness, a sense of obligation, and responsibility is exactly what GDS instills. GDS students don't let themselves off the hook. Our students hold themselves to high standards in the way they interact with each other and their teachers.

That's not to say that everything is perfect, but when it's not, the GDS student doesn't make excuses.

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I don't know that the first name basis here has anything to do with it, but I think it might. Humorist Art Buckwald gave a graduation speech in the 1970s at which he marvelled that his children could "learn so much, from so many people, with no last names"

I think GDS students build special relationships and feel a greater sense of obligation to "All these people with no last names". But I'll leave that for you to decide.

I have a couple bits of advice I'll pass on before I close:

- Don't lose the special. Benefit of having gone through GDS when you leave, take advantage of all that's been said and done. In this internet age, it's not hard to keep up with people, so using your social media, make a point of doing that with anyone from GDS. Stay in contact with your classmates and all people from GDS. When you go to a new school or a new job, make a point of trying to find out who from GDS perhaps, might be going there or live there or work there, and get in touch with people who were older or younger than you. It's networking that will usually prove meaningful, and sometimes useful as well, so take advantage of this special place.
- Use what you learned at GDS to take advantage of your new school. You probably won't call your professors by their first name, but you can still interact with them.
- Take advantage of office hours they will post to go introduce yourself.
- Look at their syllabus or your notes from the first class, and go ask a question that shows you were interested in the class they taught, Just as you would with one of us. There might be a tad more formality, but you can still build relationships, show your interest in their subject, make yourself known to them, and it will enrich your learning to do so. Knowing your professors, and sometimes teaching assistants, may take a bit more effort than it did to meet your GDS teachers, but it will not be difficult, and it will enrich your time at whatever school you have chosen.

And one more thing....

I want to thank so many of you last year for the kindness you showed me when my husband passed away from cancer. You were all so kind—the flowers, the gifts, the hugs, the kind words... they just kept coming and coming, and this year they have not stopped coming.

It has meant so much and really kept me afloat during the most difficult period of my life, and still does.

I'll never forget that you were there for me, Class of 2025. It's one more special thing about GDS, so thanks, class of 2025. I'll miss you so much. Come back and see us!!

Thanks for listening!

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