



MORTON

UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

May 16, 2021

Class of 2021 as prepared as any ‘to handle the challenges of the life ahead’

Morton High School awarded diplomas to 206 graduating seniors on Sunday, capping “the year no one thought we could do,” in the words of MHS Principal Deidre Ripka.



Indeed, Morton schools went full-time with in-person classroom instruction from day one and continued without interruption, a distinction “less than 10 percent of high schools in Illinois ... can claim,” said Ripka,

who thanked parents and the community at large for “trusting us” to educate their children and do so safely.

“I am so proud of this community” and this Class of 2021, said Ripka, who recounted the successes of its members – 33 Illinois State Scholars, 70 Mid-Illini scholars, 127 college scholarships to 67 students. Morton athletic teams overcame unprecedented adversity, among them doubt as to whether they’d get to play at all and seasons conducted out of normal order, to come away with trophies, notably in girls’ basketball and boys’ and girls’ cross-country. Fall and spring plays and concerts lived up to the motto of “the show must go on” and

then some, given some of the extraordinary accommodations that had to be made to a once-a-century pandemic.

Ripka singled out for special mention graduate Chloe Schonert, who in the year when “healthy quarantines became a thing,” continued her remarkable run of never missing a day of school – and never being late, either – from kindergarten through senior year. All in all, Chloe had 2,238 opportunities over 13 years to show up and be counted, and she always delivered, a fitting metaphor for the Class of 2021 collectively, in many ways.



Chloe Schonert never missed a day in 13 years

Superintendent Jeff Hill also recounted the year’s triumphs and expressed his “heartfelt gratitude” not only to the community that said from the get-go it wanted schools open – that was the desire of 93 percent of respondents in a summer survey – but a School Board which honored that direction and a staff that



Students receive an ovation from School Board, staff and community

came together as a team to make it all happen.

“Everybody’s lives changed a great deal this year because of the decision to go back to school,” he said. “Not one person in this district regrets that for a moment.”

The lessons learned were many, notably the importance of working together, of looking out for each other, of thinking independently, and of making the best of uncertain situations, said Hill.

The result?

“I cannot think of a class that is better prepared to handle the challenges of the life ahead,” said Hill.

Students also addressed the hundreds of parents and relatives and others who came to salute them and give them a proper sendoff.

Paighton Derrick thanked the teachers and other staff members for their unfailing “guidance and patience ... We owe you one.”

Sophia Bill spoke to the “home away from home” that school became for her over the years, and how the lessons she learned, at their core, taught her “how to be a better version of myself.”



Sophia Bill

Katherine Honegger asked her classmates to help grade their school experience on a scale of 1 to 10. Her personal scorecard hit a “solid 8.75 out of 10, because there’s always room for improvement,” she said, though it really isn’t possible to quantify all the lessons that go into preparing someone for the life ahead, or the memories that were collected along the way.



The mortarboards fly, capping off an unforgettable 2020-21 school year

And then students climbed the stage to receive the diplomas -- among them the children of four School Board members – they received the applause that was due them, and then, as is tradition, the mortarboards flew. It was a memorable ceremony to top off an unforgettable year.

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