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'You were robbed': Teacher writes open letter to high school seniors missing their last semester because of coronavirus crisis

From Louisiana's 2020 Teacher of the Year

By **Valerie Strauss**

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Chris Dier is the 2020 Teacher of the Year from Louisiana and a finalist for national Teacher of the Year. He has a message for high school seniors who find themselves spending their last K-12 semester hunkering down at home during the global coronavirus pandemic rather than indulging in traditional “senioritis” at school.

“This was supposed to be your year,” he wrote in an open letter. “... Let’s be abundantly clear — you were robbed, and it’s unfair.”

Dier teaches world history and AP human geography at Chalmette High School in St. Bernard Parish. He was in high school when Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana in 2005, and he and his family moved to Texas, where he finished high school and attended East Texas Baptist University.

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He ultimately returned to teach in his home parish, where he focuses on educational equity and multicultural lessons and has twice been voted as St. Bernard Parish District-Wide Teacher of the Year.

Dier wrote the open letter at the invitation of Mercedes Schneider, a teacher in Louisiana who also blogs here about education reform. On her blog, she said she has known Dier for most of his life. She wrote that she encouraged him to write an open letter to America's high school seniors, and he "enthusiastically and graciously accepted."

This appeared on both Dier's and Schneider's blog, and I was given permission to publish it.

Here's the open letter:

Dear High School Senior,

On Friday afternoon a few seniors came into my classroom after the last bell rang. They were concerned about prom and their senior trip. It broke my teacher heart to listen. As you're reading this, you most likely have similar concerns.

This is supposed to be your year. The year for your senior prom, sporting events, cheer competitions, senior trips, clubs, and the rest of what senior year has to offer. You were supposed to be the captain of that team, the officer of that club, or that student who wanted to be with their friends one last year before venturing into the unknown. This was

THE year that your entire schooling was building up to. But it was robbed from you because of this global pandemic.

Let's be abundantly clear – you were robbed, and it's unfair. If you're upset, then you should embrace those feelings. Commiserate with one another. Some folks will downplay the situation because they won't know what it feels like to have their senior year stripped at the last moment.

I, for one, will not downplay it as it happened to me. Hurricane Katrina devastated my community when I was a high school senior. I remember leaving my school on a Friday afternoon with my buddies only to never return to that school. I was supposed to be the captain of my soccer team, go to prom with my longtime crush, and finish the year with my lifelong friends. But it was all canceled. Instead, I stayed in a shelter and finished my high school in a different state. It was tough, and I had to find solace in places I never envisioned. It was hard, but we made it through. And I'm reliving that pain as I think of your disruption to your senior year.

Most do not need to experience Katrina to know that this is tough on you. Those of us who work in schools do so because we care above all else. That caring does not stop once you leave those school walls. In situations like these, we worry more about you. There is a lot of uncertainty, but rest assured, districts across the nation are working in creative ways, from potentially abbreviated school years to organizing social events when this subsides, to make this situation the best they possibly can for you. Some educators are working endlessly to transfer to virtual learning and accompany those without the internet. Administrators are working to get those meals together for those who need them. We are all in crisis mode but know that we are all doing everything we can to help during this tumultuous time. You are not forgotten. We are thinking about you. We are here for you. We care.

There's nothing I, or anyone, can say to make up for that time you are losing in what is supposed to be one of the best years of your life.

But I can offer some encouragement. Right now, you have the power to make the most out of this unfortunate situation. If a decade of teaching has taught me anything, it's that people your age are resilient and innovative.

Your generation can navigate multiple worlds and bounce between physical and digital spaces with ease. You are part of the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, and you embrace those differences in ways adults seem to struggle. You courageously put yourselves out there for the world to see and criticize. You push boundaries and challenge norms. You find ingenious ways to compensate for any gaps you may have accrued without the help of educators, whether it's through Khan Academy or a sibling. It's a small wonder why "post-Millennials are on track to become the most well-educated generation yet."

I can also offer some advice. Help one another and your family. They need you. Do your grandparents or your elderly neighbors need groceries? Offer support. Some teachers may even need your help as many try to transition to online learning. We need you. Utilize your tech savvy ways to bring yourselves closer together. Practice "social distancing," or physical distancing, but stay as social as ever. FaceTime. Text. Tweet. Snapchat. Make Tik Tok videos (I don't know if that's still a thing so don't laugh if I'm already out of date). Use these platforms to connect and uplift.

Binge Netflix and Disney+. Make memes. Exercise. Read books – maybe even those boring ones your English teachers were stoked for you to read. Or just read manga. Read something! Reach out to those friends you know don't have internet access. Call and check up on 'em. Listen to podcasts. Make a podcast. Start a hobby. Journal for posterity. You're living through history. Your bold reaction to this is going to make history.

Lastly, I can offer some support. You may not know me, but I feel your pain; it stings. We as educators mourn with you. Again, you are not forgotten. We see your hard work. We value your unique perspectives. We hear your audacious voices. We cherish all of it, and we will continue to do so even from afar.

I am sad for you; truly, I am. I feel deeply for you; truly, I do. It makes my heart hurt as I write. But if there is any group that can plow through this in creative ways, it is your group. There is no pandemic strong enough to silence you or dent the passion of your generation. Keep your head up and keep fighting. Our country needs you because you provide hope for our future. This year may not be what you envisioned, but I'm eager to see what you do with it.

After all, it is still very much your year.

Stay healthy,

Chris Dier, a high school teacher

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