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WESTWORD

WEB EXCLUSIVES

In wake of rowdy commencement, school ponders changes

W Gabriel Friedman
News/Wire Editor

For years, the Niles West commencement ceremony has faced criticism for what some consider the indecorous manner in which it is conducted. An observance which at most schools a rite of passage that is solemn and dignified is regarded by many West students, teachers and administrators as neither.

“I think that each year it gets worse and worse,” said English teacher Sharon Swanson.

This year, many attendees felt that the ceremony crossed the line somewhere between the uncivil air horn blowing by family members and incessant text-messaging of the graduates.

“It was total chaos; it was disrespectful,” Swanson added.

Particularly troubling for many students, parents and staff alike was the premature celebration by graduates, who engaged in the ceremonial mortar board toss before all graduates’ names had been read.



Principal Dale Vogler distributes diplomas during the 2007 commencement.
Photo courtesy Jim Szczepaniak

Foreign language teacher Steve Beaver, who was sitting with his homeroom students during the ceremony, agrees with Swanson and thought that the undignified behavior extended to the graduates themselves.

“The graduates, during certain parts of the ceremony, were talking on their cell phones, text-messaging and listening to their iPods™. I thought that part could have been made better,” he said.

An eyewitness account from junior Vikky Mrozin, who attended the ceremony, described a similar scene.

“There were a lot of blow horns and people were going up on stage with iPods™. This girl was going upstage, and a security guard took away her iPod™,” Mrozin said.

Swanson applauds such action and would like to see more stringent measures. “They should search people when they come in so they can not take in their cell phones and blow horns and other paraphernalia. I think we should reemphasize the fact that this is a serious occasion,” Swanson said.

The issue presents a perennial conflict that often pits administrators hoping for a respectful ceremony against attendees who are elated with the graduation of their child, relative, or friend. This instance at Niles West is certainly not an isolated event. The *Chicago Tribune* reported earlier

this month that five Galesburg (IL) High School students were denied their diplomas because their families cheered during the school’s graduation, despite having signed a contract promising to refrain from such outbursts.

Graduates’ and spectators’ behavior, a plethora of air horns and other disrespectful aspects have school administrators considering possible remedies ranging from a change in location to other, more dramatic, measures—including ticket limits.

“Clearly, there are a large number of people who aren’t interested in celebrating properly,” said Assistant Principal of Operations (and incoming 2007-08 Principal) Kaine Osburn. “I think if we had it at a smaller venue, we could limit the tickets to just those who really share the same values as the graduates,” he added.

This year, each graduate was allotted six tickets, and more could be requested if necessary. According to Osburn, the more tickets that are distributed, the higher the attendance will be by those outside the graduate’s immediate family who might be less likely to honor the sanctity of the ceremony.

Beaver agrees but also thinks it could be helpful to discuss the issues beforehand with the attendees. “It seems to be a question of communicating with the people coming,” he said.

Swanson feels that the venue is the central issue in re-establishing the decorum that she feels should be maintained during the ceremony.

“It should not be held at a basketball arena,” she said. “You should not be able to purchase nachos.”

As a venue change is seen by critics of the current mode of commencement as the “first domino” in effecting change, relocation is likely to occur, if not next year, then in the near future, according to Osburn, who said that preliminary exploration is already taking place.

“We’re looking into it; we very much want it to [change], but the logistics of it are difficult, and we certainly want to communicate with the graduating students and their families to make sure we have their support, which is something I think we will have because they want it to be dignified,” Osburn said.

Osburn related that one solution under consideration would be to hold commencement in the Contest Gymnasium, with a closed-circuit television broadcast in the Robert L. Johnson Auditorium for those who wish to view the event but could not get tickets.

Besides the problem of location, many also feel that the format of graduation can be modified to better hold the focus of the students and the attendees.

“I think they can update the ceremony so that it keeps the attention of the graduates because they were fading out,” said Beaver, who intimated that his homeroom students’ resorting to the use of personal electronics during the ceremony was driven by such inattention.

Most common among suggestions offered by a number of students who attended the graduation was the elimination of speeches by board members and district administration, confining the oratory to the school’s principal, the valedictorian and salutatorian. “One of the board members didn’t even know what school she was addressing,” said one attendee.

In a March 2005 editorial, *West Word* offered a variety of proposals for modifying the commencement ceremony. To view those proposals, please copy and paste the following link and scroll to page seven: www.niles-hs.k12.il.us/westword/march06/editorials6-7final.pdf