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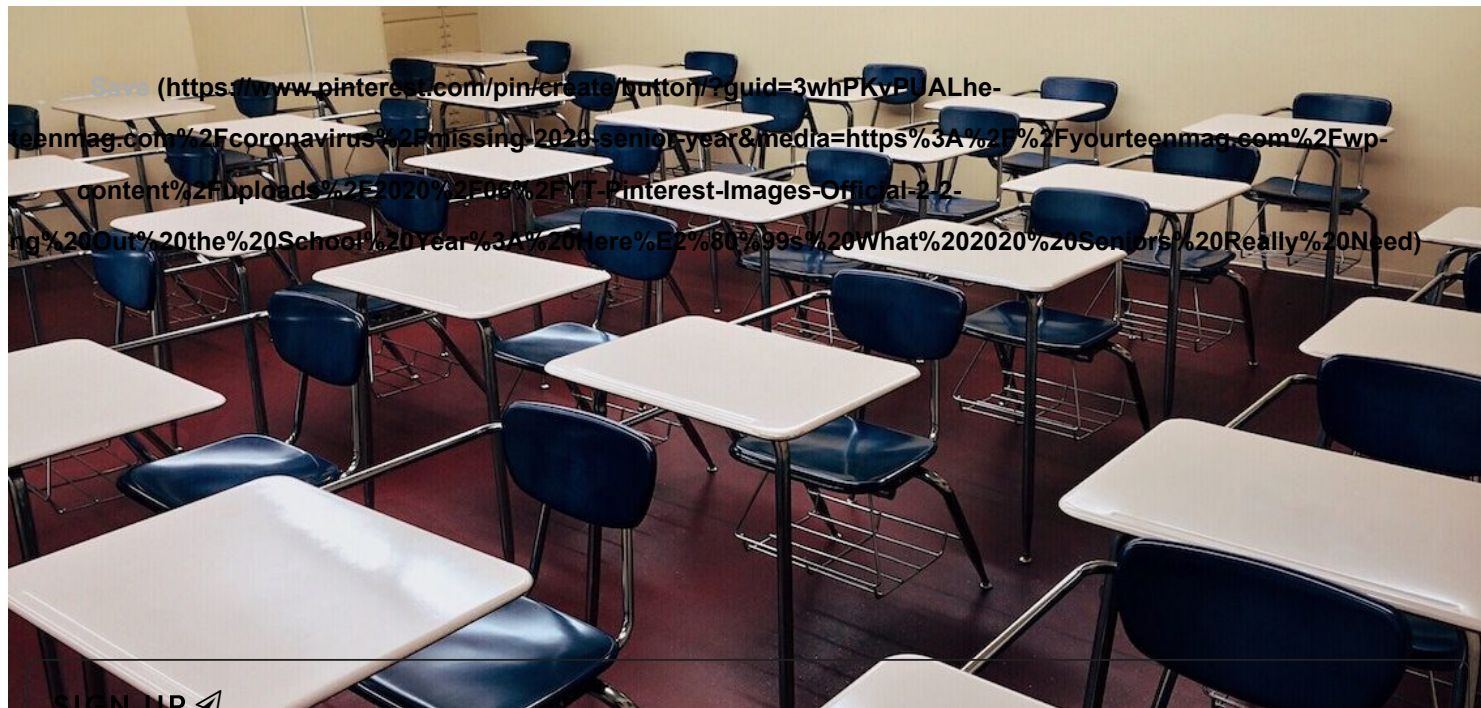
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Closing Out the School Year: Here's What 2020 Seniors Really Need



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By Patti Woods

When I met with the guidance counselor my junior year of high school, I thought I was being clever, that I was doing the smart thing. A little-known loophole tucked into the student handbook stated if you fulfilled all your requirements by December of your senior year, you could take early graduation and still have the opportunity to walk in the ceremony. "Perfect!" I thought. I could use the rest of that year to work and save up money for college, and I would still be able to celebrate with my friends in June.



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So I filled out the necessary paperwork, made sure all of my requirements were fulfilled and bragged to my friends that I was outta there on December 23.

That last week of December, I packed up my locker, popped in to say goodbye to a few favorite teachers, returned my library books and then I left. No pomp and circumstance, no balloons or confetti. I just got in my junky old car and drove away.

I felt a bit deflated, but things didn't really hit me until January. While my friends were going back for their last two marking periods, I was headed off to my job at the local drugstore.

I hadn't stopped to consider that my daytime co-workers would be very different from the evening shift employees I used to work with. Instead of discussing the latest episode of 90210 with the other cashiers, I was stuck with two women, both in their 70s, who didn't really care to discuss Brenda and Dylan. I was bored and lonely and often found myself wondering what hijinks my friends were up to in school.



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Now, of course, I can't help but think about this year's senior class. With virtually no warning, they were told they'd be out of school for a little while. Days turned into weeks and, for most of the country, the last day of school has already happened by default. Plans are in the works for virtual graduation ceremonies and parties later in the summer, but the reality is that these young adults are now adrift in these final months.

There's sadness that **all the major events** (<https://yourteenmag.com/coronavirus/senior-athletes-i-hope-you-know>)—prom, awards ceremonies, senior trips—are canceled, and parents are working to rectify that. They're planning proms and graduations and parties in August, or whenever we're allowed to congregate again. But it's not the events that necessarily matter; it's all the time in between.

For this year's seniors, there's no closure to the past 12 years.

They've climbed the peak of the roller coaster, their anticipation and excitement growing, only to have the power cut off at the top. Sorry folks, ride over.

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There's no question in my mind that the members of the Class of 2020 will live with this emotional untethering for the rest of their lives. To this day, I still have nightmares that I didn't really graduate and I need to go back to homeroom and talk to the teacher. Did I make the wrong decision? It certainly wasn't worth the pitiful amount of money I saved up. The memories and experiences with friends would have been so much more valuable.

In my situation, I had a choice, but the Class of 2020 doesn't.

Their lockers sit undisturbed, perfect time capsules of the "Day Before Corona". The "fun" classes they waited three years to take will remain a mystery.

All the little in-between moments are where the real memories are made.

Eating lunch with friends. Meeting up at the lockers. Deciding to cut class to enjoy the perfect spring day. Those moments can't be recreated in a virtual format. This class of students will survive and they'll be all the more resilient as they approach adulthood. But we can't deny that part of them will never be the same.

The fact is, there's not much we can do to **soothe their souls**

(<https://yourteenmag.com/coronavirus/coping-during-a-pandemic>). The virtual celebrations will be wonderful, and they will go on to make new friends and new memories. But this group of teens left part of themselves in their schools the day they walked out. We must acknowledge that they are grieving a loss. Yes, we can celebrate and have the balloons and cake, but first, we must mourn. Before the car parades, there must be a memorial service, a symbolic gesture of this loss.

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(<https://yourteenmag.com/coronavirus/senior-music-and-drama-kids>)

How do we do this? Light a bonfire in the backyard and burn the old notebooks that are no longer needed. Look through old pictures from the past four years. Send sympathy cards as well as cards of congratulations. The sadness and loss shouldn't be swept under the rug. It should be acknowledged and respected. And then, after the tears have dried, *then* it will be time to celebrate.

Patti Woods

Patti Woods is a freelance writer. Her work has been seen in many publications including The Boston Globe, Christian Science Monitor, Health, The Week, and Today's Parent, and she's also the author of Lost Restaurants of Fairfield. She lives in Connecticut with her husband, son, two cats and a tortoise.

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