



## Ashton Kutcher didn't give the graduation speech at a W.Va. school, but the words sure were familiar





Ashton Kutcher delivered a well-received speech at the 2013 Teen Choice Awards. The actor's words found their way into a West Virginia principal's commencement address. (Larry Busacca/Getty Images)

By **Jenna Glatzer**

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At Parkersburg High School's commencement ceremony in West Virginia, Principal Kenneth DeMoss took to the stage to deliver an inspiring speech to the 2019 graduates and their families. There was just one problem: He plagiarized large swaths of it from Ashton Kutcher's 2013 Teen Choice Awards acceptance speech.

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It was an odd choice if he hoped to avoid getting caught: Kutcher's speech was widely praised in the media and shown more than 3.5 million times on YouTube, which meant students in his audience easily recognized it.

"After graduation, we have a party at the YMCA for all the graduating seniors," said Abby Smith, president of the school's thespian troupe and a speech and debate team captain. "Someone mentioned it in passing, and when I looked it up, I was shocked."

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Over the next few days, she compiled a video showing back-to-back clips of DeMoss's speech and Kutcher's address, and posted it to [social media channels](#). In it are several near-verbatim sections:

Kutcher: "I've never had a job in my life that I was better than. I was always just lucky to have a job. And every job I had was a steppingstone to my next job, and I never quit my job until I had my next job. And so opportunities looked a lot like work for me."

DeMoss: "I never had a job in my life that I was better than, that I was too good for. I was always lucky to just have a job. And every job I had was a steppingstone to my next job, and I never quit my job until I had my next job. And so opportunities for me look like hard work."

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One notable word received a G-rated makeover.

Kutcher: “So it’s really three things. The first thing is about opportunity, the second thing is about being sexy, and the third thing is about living life.”

DeMoss: “It’s really three things I want to share. . . . The first thing is about opportunity, the second thing is about being intriguing, and the third thing is about living life.”

When Kutcher talked about his past jobs, DeMoss used the same format and ideas, but substituted his own previous jobs.

As soon as the spliced video started attracting attention, DeMoss wrote to implore Smith to remove it, claiming that what he did was not plagiarism because he added his own experiences, and “ideas are meant to be free.” When Smith declined, he blocked her on social media and instead asked a teacher to persuade her to remove it, Smith said.

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She said her motivation in posting the video was to show members of the school community what had happened in hopes they would take it seriously. “If I am held to a standard, I believe that my administrators and faculty should also be

held to the same standard,” she said.

The school’s English department has a [written policy](#) about plagiarism and its consequences.

Parkersburg High had 1,707 students, including 390 seniors, in the 2016-2017 school year, the most recent year for which federal figures are available.

DeMoss initially sent a letter to parents and seniors, also copied to Facebook, attempting to explain his choices.

“I have heard and seen many similar speeches at coaching and leadership clinics and at professional development that many of you have not. The format of Ashton’s speech I liked the most, because it had the most impact on me. The order of the main points I should have done differently,” the principal wrote. “Being intriguing was completely my word.”

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He went on to write that because he received “no money” or “academic credit” for the speech, he was “not as specific as I should have been” in citing his source.

He has since deleted his explanation from Facebook and issued an apology during a meeting of the Wood County Board of Education. The board voted 4 to 1 on June 11 to suspend DeMoss for five days without pay. Two months earlier, the

board had presented DeMoss with the West Virginia Association of Student Council 2018-2019 Principal of the Year award.

Wood County Schools Superintendent William Hosaflook released a statement after the suspension vote: “As superintendent of Wood County Schools, it is my responsibility to ensure all employees adhere to the employee code of conduct established by Wood County Schools and the West Virginia Department of Education. In this case, Mr. DeMoss is not disputing the mistake he made. He fully accepts responsibility for his actions and was disciplined appropriately. As Mr. DeMoss said tonight, he would never purposefully bring shame to his alma mater or our school system.”

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DeMoss did not respond to a request for comment.

Rick Tennant, vice president of the school board, said board members have dealt with the issue and “moved on.”

Kutcher weighed in with a lighthearted tweet:

“‘Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness.’- Oscar Wilde. \* cite your sources kids and faculty.”

DeMoss is not the first principal to plagiarize. In 2018, a Connecticut principal

apologized after sending parents a letter he later acknowledged was plagiarized; he received a three-day suspension. In 2017, a Staten Island principal plagiarized from the HuffPost in an essay he emailed to teachers welcoming them back to school. And in 2014, a Long Island principal even left the incorrect school's name in his yearbook message to graduates, which was plagiarized from a California principal.

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One such case had a more serious outcome: A Colorado principal resigned after admitting that he copied more than half of his graduation speech from the book "Lean In" by Sheryl Sandberg.

Smith's whistleblowing sparked an online backlash from parents who failed to acknowledge what the principal had done wrong and who openly insulted her for "snitching" or "being vindictive."

Smith said she had no intention of harming her school.

"In fact, I wear a bracelet with 'Once a Big Red, Always a Big Red' . . . written on it every day," she said, referring to the school's alumni motto. "I just believe I know the difference between right and wrong."

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