

Address by Commissioner Joe Schmidt delivered to 2007 graduating class of Young Offenders Program at Spring Creek Correctional Center in Seward:

Good afternoon. By now you all understand that a high school diploma is more than just an academic learning experience. Completing a High School or GED program is a commitment.

I'd like to talk about the importance of the commitment it takes to pass the courses and complete this program – and the commitment of the staff who works to make the program a success.

Superintendent Turnbull, who as an Assistant Superintendent was in charge of developing the program, remains committed to the program and enthusiastic about its potential positive impact. There's Mr. Young, the principal, who's office is literally a prison cell, and Sergeant Faust, who oversees the day to day operations and is involved in every aspect of the program. And there's the Unit Team which meets every week and considers the individual needs of students, and how the program can best serve its purpose.

This group of staff believes in change, and believes in your commitment, or they would not put forth the effort. I hope all of you as students appreciate their commitment to your program.

The department of corrections is expected to "correct." Programs like this one give offenders one of the best chances at success, and I'd like to thank all of the staff who works hard to make it happen.

To pass this course, you have to be able and willing to learn. And you have to be able and willing to commit.

As you go forward, and find yourself talking to people about some of the facts you have learned while studying, you will soon realize that while the facts and figures are important, they represent a commitment.

When you talk to a prospective employer, the academic knowledge will prove useful, but an employer will be just as interested in your willingness and ability to commit yourself to a task -- and your ability to complete a task.

As you build relationships with your family, or your employer, or your peers, you may now carry with you a sense of accomplishment. People will sense this about you, whether you know it or not. When they come to know that you completed this course, they will know that when you set out to accomplish something, you are able to do it.

Even if it is a hard task, they will know that you don't run away from a challenge.

You were all motivated to enter this program for a variety of reasons. You may have been told to come in. You may have felt challenged to finish something you started some years ago. Or you may have simply wanted to occupy your time. For whatever reason, you entered.

Some of you likely entered the program lacking confidence that you would pass all of the classes -- and may have been afraid to admit it. Some of you may have entered with an abundance of confidence and found the course was harder than you thought -- and may have been afraid to admit it.

Either way, you all came through together, and this diploma is likely the single most important document that a person can earn. When a person sets out to increase their chances in life, this document is the most important one to have.

When you began this program, you set out to change yourself. You may not have been thinking about change when you entered, but in the end, you all changed yourselves when you increased your knowledge. You all changed yourselves when you persevered, and stayed with the commitment that you made. And you all changed when you succeeded.

You changed because you now carry with you academic knowledge that you did not have before. You changed because you now carry with you knowledge about yourselves that you did not have before. Now, you all know that you can and will finish what you start.

You can and will make change in your lives.

This is an important step in the walk to living a life free of crime. You should all see this accomplishment as the beginning of a new era in your lives ... see it as momentum, and try to keep it going.

It doesn't matter if you are in jail for one more day, or many more. If you can make this change, you can make another one if you want to.

Currently, our department processes more than 33,000 bookings a year. Over 60 percent of them were released from custody within the last three years. And the greatest number of bookings are young men ... 18 to 24 year old men are the largest group to recidivate, and therefore face the greatest challenges upon release.

This is the group that needs to commit to change, and commit to increase their chances at success. Just like all of you have done.

This ceremony today is testament to that change, and to that commitment to success. Through this process, you have all learned, no doubt, that not every day is a good day. Some days present challenges where you didn't do as well. Life is full of successes and of failures ... Sometimes you will win, and sometimes you will lose.

How you win and how you lose...how you succeed and how you fail will speak volumes of your character as a person. You must do both gracefully.

Today, you know that you can finish what you start, and this knowledge should bring you confidence. When life throws one your way that isn't going well, this confidence...this knowledge that you are able to succeed when you put your mind to it, will help pull you through. It will guide you through easy times, and it will help you through tough times.

You now have a new set of recourses within you ... Academic knowledge, commitment, and most importantly, knowledge about yourselves. A high school diploma is not an easy task for any student, in any school system.

For whatever reason each of you didn't complete this task in your younger years. This may have lead some of you to believe that you couldn't do it. And now, you all now know that you can.

The public expects the Department of Corrections to reform offenders behavior -- and they expect offenders will not recidivate when they are discharged.

We have the responsibility to give offenders a variety of tools to use after incarceration, but the choice will always be yours. This program shows an offenders commitment and his ability and willingness to make a change.

The most important thing however, is not what it shows. The most important part of this program is who it is shown to -- the student.

Completion of this program shows you about you. Take every piece of this with you, and use it every day.

Congratulations on your accomplishment, you should all be very proud.