

FIS Graduation Speech

2025: Time to Shine!



Good afternoon and welcome FIS parents, family and friends who are gathered here, both in person and virtually. My name is Paul Fochtman and I am privileged to be the Head of School at Frankfurt International School. On behalf of our Board of Trustees and FIS colleagues, it is my honor to share a few words with you.

On this special occasion, we are gathered here on our campus from nations across the globe. At FIS, we are proud of our diverse mix of cultures, races, languages, and so much more. It defines us. It strengthens us. It inspires us.

In the news we may read of the bitterness between countries, but in this moment we are gathered here as one FIS Family, and I want to say how fitting it is to see the future sitting before me today. Please join me in recognizing this amazing class of 2025!

I would like to share with you a story from Washington DC that occurred earlier this year. If you just felt a slight panic that I was going to begin by talking politics, you can breathe a sigh of relief. The Washington DC experience I want to share occurred on the night of February 4, at a local pub not far from the Capitol.

Also, don't worry. This isn't a joke that starts with..."A Head of School walks into a bar and..."

Actually, I was in DC for a leadership conference. We had arranged a gathering of FIS alumni from around the region. The space was crowded with 40 or so people. There were alumni attending universities in the area, as well as former students from long ago who had flown to DC to raise a toast to FIS. All were part of the same FIS family, regardless of when they attended the school.

But there was one particular alumna that I want to tell you about today. Her name is Ellen Carter Woodbridge. She was one of the first seven students to attend our school in 1961 when she was enrolled in the fifth grade. Although she was the oldest of the alumni with us that evening, Ellen was one of the youngest at heart. She oozed a youthful energy as she shared the precious FIS memories she had brought with her.

I spoke to her at length that evening and am sharing my reflections on our conversation because her story, as one of the first students to attend FIS, remains in part the story of *all of us* who have been touched by this school.

As Ellen grew into adulthood, she realized more and more that it was her time on our campus that made a lasting impression on her life. It was here at FIS that she realized the world is both a very big place and at the same time, a very small community.

She told me how her relationships with other international students expanded her horizons far beyond the view she had before attending FIS. Instead of distant lands listed on a map, they became places that her friends called home. She listened to their stories and empathized with their longings. The world became bigger as Ellen learned about countries she had never heard of. And yet it also became smaller because she felt a connectedness to those distant places through her friendships and exchanges with fellow classmates.

Ellen attended FIS well before the Berlin wall came down. But when it did eventually fall and she was living on the other side of the planet, she felt a kinship with the German families being reunited. The same can be said for the forming of the European Union or the end of Apartheid. Ellen understood the importance of these global events because her peers at FIS were – like her – citizens of the world. When a major historical event occurred, its relevance wasn't judged by how close it was to her home, because *her* home – like yours and mine – is our shared global community.

There may be one thing that some of you find particularly remarkable; Ellen Carter Woodbridge, a woman who was an FIS student more than 60 years ago, cares about *you*, the graduating class of 2025. This woman, now in her 70s, is concerned about *your* future because she feels connected to *all of you* given her own experience at FIS.

Most people of a certain age have enough on their plate, but not Ellen. We talked about the crazy state of affairs in many parts of the world, but it was clear she was concerned about you in the midst of our troubling times.

I can't speak for Ellen, but I think if she were here, she would draw upon her own experience when faced with a world in crisis. When she was a student at FIS, signs of the physical damage inflicted during World War 2 in Europe and Asia were still visible, and the emotional scars were still raw. On the horizon, the United States was preparing to enter a war in Vietnam that would awaken the moral consciousness of the country.

Ellen might tell you that while these were troubling times, they passed – just as today’s troubles will pass – in large part because you will refuse to allow divisions between nations, or within a nation, to become the norm.

Crossing this stage today will be students who come from parts of the world where there has been great hardship and strife. Some of these challenges are of the most severe nature, where countless lives have been lost amid war and terrorism. These conflicts and the gut-wrenching images that many of us have seen in the media are nothing short of horrific.

But we must also see a resolution to battles of morality and decency that are raging around the world today. Even in cases where not a drop of blood has been shed, individual lives and our common humanity have been impacted nonetheless. These are the conflicts that happen not just between countries, but within nations, neighborhoods and even families.

You may feel that this speech has taken a turn toward doom and gloom. But please hear me clearly: I am overwhelmed with a great sense of optimism as I stand here today. I feel incredibly hopeful because of what I have seen created on our campuses and within our community of over 60 nationalities.

I have watched you support one another on our sports teams, help a classmate with a forgotten line on stage, welcome newly arrived students into our school, and encourage each other through the recent gauntlet of IB exams. Your support of one another was not dependent on your classmates’ passport or religious affiliation. It was not offered or withheld because of a friend’s language, gender, or identity. It was rooted in your own integrity – in your recognition of the equality of all individuals.

You learned when to listen to your heart, instead of merely following rules. Your experience within this community awakened you to the incredible possibilities that can be achieved by embracing and celebrating diversity.

Today we are celebrating this journey of understanding you have been travelling. And you are being sent forth on yet another journey into a world that desperately needs you. From the East to the West, and the Right to the Left, there are countries and communities breaking apart because they believe our differences are liabilities instead of assets. But I believe you are leaving here with a vision that will allow you to lead others toward a brighter reality. It will only be possible if we return to the rules we learned on the playground:

- Everyone deserves kindness and respect.
- Be fair and admit when you’ve made a mistake.
- And, in all things, treat others as you would want to be treated.

In 1969, not long after the time Ellen Woodbridge attended FIS, the first astronauts landed on the moon. The voyage was a testament to the innovation and courage of that time. But beyond the moon rocks and scientific data gathered from this expedition, was the view these astronauts had while looking back at the Earth from that barren lunar landscape. They saw with clarity the majesty of our planet, but also how very small and fragile it is.

A decade ago, Astronaut Daniel Tani addressed our FIS class of 2015 at their graduation. He shared what he found so awe-inspiring in looking back to Earth from space. What he saw was a flowing, seamless planet with no visible borders.

The view Daniel had is not so unlike the one you have been exposed to here at FIS. Whether you came to FIS from somewhere here in the Taunus or travelled half-way around the globe I hope you now see the world differently. You may not have traveled in a spaceship, but I hope the friendships you have made here have allowed you to travel inwardly amid the intricate pathways of our shared humanity. I know they did for Ellen Woodbridge back in 1961 when our school first began.

Class of 2025, this is the reason for my optimism today. You are leaving FIS with far more than a deep understanding of math, science, literature and the arts. You are taking a blueprint for what must be built to secure our world for future generations.

Our school's mission reminds us that FIS is not only about intellect – it's also about INQUIRY - asking the right questions. Questions that center on morality. Questions that consider dignity. Questions that move us toward something better.

I know I speak for your parents and your teachers when I say we have every bit of confidence in you. Class of 2025 – This is your time to shine!