



**Sharon High School**  
181 Pond Street  
Sharon, MA 02067  
(781) 784-1554 Fax: (781) 784-1550



Dr. Jose Libano, Principal  
Mr. William Klements, Assistant Principal  
Ms. Mary Trahan, Assistant Principal

Mr. Timothy J. Farmer, Superintendent of Schools  
Mr. Glenn Brand, Assistant Superintendent of Schools

February 17, 2014

Dear SHS Community:

A recent decision by the Class of 2014 to adopt a single-colored gown at graduation has resulted in my awareness of some sad, hurtful, and disappointing behavior by a small number of our students, as well as by anonymous individuals not necessarily affiliated with Sharon in any way. Most of the behavior has manifested itself in commentary found on Facebook, Twitter, and other social network sites.

As you may know, it's a traditional practice in many high schools for boys and girls to wear different colored graduation gowns. This practice, however, is being scrutinized in many communities across the country as a result of revisions to anti-discrimination laws. In fact, an amendment to M.G.L. c. 76, § 5 that was adopted on July 1, 2012 prompted the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to advise school districts on the potential impact of this change. The document is titled, *Guidance for Massachusetts Public Schools: Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment*.

Earlier this school year I was approached by members of our student body about the possibility of adopting a single-colored gown. I brought this to the attention of the elected student representatives for the Class of 2014 and encouraged dialogue. After several weeks of discussion, research, and debate within these forums and others, I was invited to a meeting where I was informed by the elected student representatives for the Class of 2014 that they had reached consensus that wearing a single-colored gown was the right decision to make and would be a strong symbol of unity and inclusiveness for the class and the school.

Proud and supportive of the thoughtful decision to make a change, to support their peers, and to demonstrate the kind of empathy, tolerance, and perspective that our community values, I asked the elected student representatives to write a letter to their classmates which would accompany a ballot for the selection of the color by the Class of 2014. In the interim, the student newspaper, *The Talon*, published a front-page feature on the issue that raised further awareness.

Yesterday, following the distribution of the ballots to every member of the Class of 2014, an anonymous and unfortunate online post brought our school and greater community under needless attack, from outside and from within over religious affiliation, sexual orientation, race, and gender identity. Sadly, these actions have overshadowed a positive student initiative and honorable change.

None of what's occurred can be undone. Events such as these, however, can serve as powerful learning opportunities for all of us. Earlier today, in my absence, Ms. Trahan addressed the senior class about what transpired over the last two days and the very harmful effects that those posts have had on individual members of our community, as well as on our school and community at large. Available faculty stood in solidarity with Ms. Trahan as she delivered a brief but important message about the choices we make and the care and consideration we owe each other as neighbors and fellow citizens.

Tonight and in the days ahead I encourage you to take advantage of this unfortunate set of events and to use them as an opportunity to engage in some important conversations about respect, cultural and lifestyle differences, handling change, ethical use of social media, honest and informed contributions to debate, and the safety, dignity, and well-being of all. Among others, here are two possible conversation starters:

- In what ways can we help each other acknowledge and appreciate differences in our school and community?
- How do we create an atmosphere where it is safe to take risks and stand up for what you believe?

Thank you for your attention to this matter, for reflecting, and for inspiring everyone to improve our world!

Sincerely and respectfully,

*Jose Libano*

Jose Libano, Ed.D.  
Principal

#### **SHS Mission Statement**

Sharon High School is a safe and supportive community that provides relevant and diverse opportunities for all students to become active learners and responsible citizens. By fostering a climate of respect, honesty, and accountability, Sharon High School empowers students to apply academic skills, take creative risks, strive for excellence, and achieve their highest potential.

**Sharon Public Schools**  
**Administration Offices: 75 Mountain Street, Sharon, MA 02067 Tel 781-784-1570 Fax 781-784-1573**