



A MESSAGE FROM THE  
**OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS**

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**Governor & First Lady are Guest Speakers at DJJ Spring Graduation  
90 Grads Earn Diplomas at Georgia Preparatory Academy**

**(ATLANTA – GA)** Georgia's First Lady Sandra Deal was the invited Commencement Speaker and Governor Nathan Deal was a surprise addition to the graduation program as the Georgia Preparatory Academy held its annual spring commencement exercises in Forsyth, Georgia last Friday.

Families and friends crowded into Roberts Chapel at Tift College to witness the matriculation of youth who have distinguished themselves with perseverance, hard work, and academic accomplishments while in state custody. The graduating youth were joined by a large audience of dignitaries including DJJ Staff and School Board Member Dr. Thomas L. Coleman. DJJ Commissioner Avery D. Niles proudly declared the event as one of the largest DJJ graduation classes to date.

As the daughter of educators and a retired school teacher herself, key note speaker Sandra Deal has dedicated her life to supporting childhood education with a special focus on Georgia's Department of Juvenile Justice. **“..You may have made a mistake,”** encouraged the First Lady, **“And you may feel like you'll never get over that, and it may be a scar that holds you back a little bit, but in some ways it will make you stronger because most of us become stronger from the things that we learn when we are going through the hard times. So you can rise above it,”** she told the DJJ graduates.

DJJ Commissioner Avery Niles and Associate School Superintendent Audrey Armistad awarded ninety diplomas to the combined group of graduating 2016 seniors, including GEDs and Technical Certificates of Credit (TCCs). Sixty-one young men and women represented Georgia Preparatory Academy schools from six Georgia Youth Development Campuses (YDCs) in Atlanta, Augusta, Eastman, Macon, Muscogee, and Sumter; the Metro and Gainesville Regional Youth Detention Centers (RYDCs); the Chatham Educational Transitional Center (ETC), and the Intensive Treatment Unit (ITU) in Milledgeville.

Commissioner Avery Niles told the graduates, **“A dream written down with a date becomes a goal. A goal broken down into steps becomes a plan -- and a plan backed by action makes your dreams come true. Life is about that, the choices you make,”** Niles said. Commissioner Niles is already looking ahead to the next Georgia Preparatory Academy graduation in December 2016.

**(MORE MORE MORE)**  
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Governor Deal addressed the graduates with abundant pride and encouragement. ***“This is important,”*** Governor Deal said. ***“It’s important to each of you that received diplomas and certificates today. The importance of it may not have totally sunk in for you, but this is a milestone that will be a springboard for the rest of your life in a positive way if you will allow it to be.”***

Governor Deal explained, ***“The entire membership of the Georgia General Assembly -- all 180 members of the Georgia House of Representatives and all 56 members of the Georgia State Senate -- voted unanimously to approve the reforms for juvenile justice of which you are a part. You have confirmed that the hard work a lot of us have done to put these programs in place is going to work,”*** the Governor said.

***“Our Governor believes in a quality education, he believes in you,”*** said DJJ Commissioner Niles. ***“Everything he’s done over the term he has been in office is about the quality of care for our kids, our state,”*** Commissioner Niles said.

Photos of DJJ’s graduation ceremonies for news media use with this release are posted on the agency’s “News & Views” webpage at <http://www.djinewsandviews.org/2016gpaspringgraduation/>.

***The Georgia Preparatory Academy is Georgia’s 181<sup>st</sup> School District and has dual accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and from the Correctional Educational Association (CEA). The mission of the Georgia Preparatory Academy is to provide a comprehensive educational program which will facilitate the successful integration of each student into the community and workplace.***

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