



State of Utah

SPENCER J. COX
Governor

DEIDRE M. HENDERSON
Lieutenant Governor

Utah Department of Corrections Communications Office

BRIAN REDD
Executive Director

KAITLIN FELSTED
Communications Director

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Kaitlin Felsted
Communications Director
kefelsted@utah.gov
(801) 560-7608

Yándary Chatwin
Salt Lake City School District
Executive Director, Communications and Community Relations
yandary.chatwin@slcschools.org
(801) 682-0816



38 students recognized at Utah State Correctional Facility's inaugural high school graduation

Salt Lake City, UT - Utah State Correctional Facility's (USCF) inaugural high school graduation saw 38 incarcerated students, ranging in age from 22 to 56 years old, earn their high school diplomas during an event Monday hosted by the Utah Department of Corrections (UDC) and Salt Lake City School District.

The graduation took place at the facility's main visiting area, with families of the incarcerated and leadership from Salt Lake City School District, the Utah State Board of Education, and UDC in attendance. Students were allowed to visit with family members after the event, with a box lunch provided. Not all students were able to be in attendance today, as some have returned to their communities or transferred to different sites within the UDC to complete other programs.

Chris Sullivan, Principal at South Park Academy, the school at USCF, noted it was the first time since 2019 the school was able to have a graduation ceremony due to the pandemic and a prison move from Draper to Salt Lake City.

“With all these changes and uncertainty, there were so many opportunities for our students to give up hope,” he recalled. “And yet, when the teachers came calling, the students started showing up.”

Students participated in high school education classes throughout the year in both the mens and womens facilities. Four provided remarks during Monday’s event.

Graduate Jose Rios-Mojica noted he was “happy” to be there – not a statement usually made in a prison setting.

“Maybe you don’t understand why I have this feeling,” he said. “It is not sadness, but it is joy.

“It has given me an opportunity like today to be a better person.”

Cesia Ortiz thanked her teachers for helping her push through both school and a treatment program.

“When I first began school, I had little to no interest in furthering my education,” she said, noting her release was contingent upon completing programming, not high school. “I realized that to be truly successful on the outside, I had to graduate.”

Salt Lake City Board of Education President Nate Salazar thanked the graduates for choosing the path that brought them to the ceremony this day, noting that their education will always be theirs.

“And while today is a day of firsts,” he added, “don’t let today be the last accomplishment, but one of the many more yet to come.”

In order to allow broader participation in graduation ceremonies moving forward, South Park Academy will be holding graduation twice a year: in June and December. This will allow more students to be present for their own graduation ceremonies prior to being paroled or continuing to other programs.

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