



## Interim Guidance for Graduation Celebrations During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency

*June 4, 2020*

The New York State Department of Health (NYS DOH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continue to closely monitor the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. In recognition of the important milestone that a graduation ceremony provides for young adults in New York State, particularly in this unprecedented time, NYS DOH is providing this guidance in alignment with Governor Cuomo's strategic approach for a phased reopening.

While the celebration of graduation is encouraged, it must be done while maintaining public health precautions for COVID-19. COVID-19 is thought to primarily spread person-to-person via respiratory droplets through close contact. As a result, large gatherings present a significant risk to individuals and communities and continue to be prohibited. Therefore, NYS DOH offers these alternative graduation celebrations for school districts to consider:

**Nothing in this guidance would prohibit delaying a graduation ceremony until later in the summer. NYS DOH will continue to monitor public health data and will revise this guidance in July 2020 to reflect any changes to the restrictions on large, in-person gatherings.**

### Virtual Celebrations

Districts and schools can honor graduating students virtually.

Examples include:

- Virtual ceremonies:
  - Host an online virtual ceremony and consider broadcasting live, if possible.
  - The ceremony can be similar to traditional graduation ceremonies in terms of commencement speakers and acknowledgements of awardees.
    - NOTE: Any in-person filming must adhere to current public health requirements, including limiting in-person gatherings to no more than 10 individuals, ensuring social distancing is maintained, and wearing an acceptable face covering if social distancing (being at least 6 feet apart) is not possible at any point during the ceremony.
- Videos:
  - Pre-record and make available a graduation ceremony, similar to a traditional graduation ceremony in terms of commencement speakers and acknowledgements of awardees.
    - NOTE: Any in-person filming must adhere to current public health requirements, including limiting in-person gatherings to no more than 10 individuals, ensuring social distancing is maintained (being at least 6 feet

- apart), and wearing an acceptable face covering if social distancing is not possible at any point during the ceremony.
- Ask graduates to send individual videos with short messages to their graduating classmates to include in the video.

### **Celebrations that Maintain Social Distancing**

While virtual events are strongly encouraged, allowable in-person graduation events include:

- Drive-in Graduations:
  - Students, and only immediate family members who reside in the same household, should arrive and remain in cars for the entire ceremony.
  - Ceremonies can be done at drive-in movie theaters, school parking lots, stadium parking lots, or other large parking lot venues that could be exclusively used for the graduation event.
  - Cars must be spaced at least 6 feet apart. Multiple ceremonies may be needed depending on the class size.
  - Large projected screens and sound equipment may be required.
  - Students and families without vehicles would need to be provided alternative accommodations and transportation that complies with social distancing requirements.
- Drive-through Graduation:
  - Students, and only immediate family members who reside in the same household, should arrive by assigned time and leave after their individual recognition.
  - Individual students may come to the school at prearranged times, may exit the car individually, in their cap and gown if available, to walk across a stage in their cap and gown and have a photo taken. However single-direction flow should be marked to cross the graduation stage or take a photo, and the standing locations of graduates waiting to cross the graduation stage or take a photo must be clearly marked to ensure all individuals remain at least six feet apart at all times.
  - Any high-touch surfaces (e.g. podium, handrail) must be frequently cleaned and disinfected.
  - There must not be person-to-person contact during the celebration. Individuals may not shake hands.
  - Diplomas, or any other items, can only be handed from one designated individual (e.g. superintendent, principal) to students if they are wearing a face covering and either using gloves or applying hand sanitizer between touching of objects. Otherwise, diplomas, or any other items, should be pre-arranged for students to retrieve them without direct interaction with other individuals.
  - Any individual in attendance must wear a mask or face covering. Individual students may remove their masks or face coverings while crossing the award area or having their individual photo taken by the district or school.

- These events will require precise scheduling, traffic control, and school safety personnel, etc. and may be appropriate for small to medium-sized graduating classes in less trafficked areas.
- Students and families without vehicles would need to be provided alternative accommodations and transportation that complies with social distancing requirements.
- Individualized Ceremony:
  - School officials may visit each graduate's home, while remaining outside and at least six feet away, to congratulate and take photos of each graduate in their cap and gown and holding their diploma.
  - This type of recognition may need to be conducted over the course of several days depending on the class size.

Any in-person event, must adhere to the following:

- Any in-person event is limited to the non-essential gatherings in-person limit set forth in any currently effective Executive Order. As of June 4, 2020, in-person gatherings are restricted to 10 individuals.
- Schools must notify individuals attending the event, including graduates, their immediate household, or school personnel, that any individual who (1) displays symptoms consistent with COVID-19, (2) has tested positive for COVID-19 within the last 14 days, or (3) within the last 14 days was a close or proximate contact of an individual who had symptoms of COVID-19 or tested positive for COVID-19, is not permitted to attend the ceremony.
- Districts and schools should, when possible, ensure students receive diplomas and caps and gowns in advance through the mail or delivery, so they can arrive dressed and with their diplomas in hand to avoid exchanging of items in-person. Students or families may also collect these items at the school during personal item/locker clean-out or meal distribution, so long as social distancing and guidelines are followed.
- Any in-person celebration must occur outdoors, or in a well-ventilated covered area.
- Consider the timing of when ceremonies take place. For individuals outside of their cars, consider weather conditions, such as sun exposure, heat, and rain. Take appropriate precautions related to weather protection. Consider if cars need to be turned off during the ceremony. Only staff, and for drive through graduations, a limited number of students, may be outside of their cars.
- Districts and schools should consider available space in order to calculate capacity and determine the number of ceremonies needed. Consider limiting attendance and broadcasting the ceremony via a livestream platform and recording the ceremony to provide access to those not in attendance.
- Single-direction flow should be clearly marked for cars entering/exiting any celebration area.
- There should be restricted restroom access and no refreshments provided to prevent areas of congregation and additional areas to monitor. Students and families should be

advised in advance that restroom facilities will be limited and refreshments will not be available.

- There should be no sharing of food or beverages between individuals unless they are members of the same household.
- Ensure that facilities are accessible to persons with disabilities and provide all necessary accommodations for students with special needs.
- Clearly communicate expectations and procedures related to photography, and ensure all students and families are aware of and adhere to photography policies. Districts and schools may provide a photographer to take multiple pictures of all individual graduates and provide the photos to families in order to reduce concern of missing these important moments.
- Set expectations, policies, and guidelines in advance, ensure all students and families are aware of and adhere to established policies, and reiterate those before the ceremony day and at the start of the ceremony, to ensure overall health and safety.
- Any individual (e.g. student, family, faculty, staff) must wear a face covering when in attendance. As noted above, students may momentarily remove their face covering for pictures provided that they maintain appropriate social distancing from other individuals.

Districts should consult with local public health departments, law enforcement, and legal counsel when planning any in-person events.

NYS DOH joins all New Yorkers in congratulating all the graduates and their families and wishes everyone a safe, healthy and celebratory graduation.

### **Additional Resources**

- [NYS DOH COVID-19 Webpage](#)
- [CDC COVID-19 Webpage](#)
- [CDC COVID-19 Guidance for Gatherings & Community Events](#)