

## COVID-19: Guidance on High School Graduation Ceremonies and Related Activities

Updated: April 23, 2020

The outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent school building closures for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year have created questions related to high school graduation and related activities. Understanding the milestone that high school graduations represent in the lives of our students and families, the department has investigated potential solutions for local consideration. It is important that LEAs consider how a graduation ceremony can be held while respecting suggested state and local guidelines.

Below are some frequently asked questions and considerations for how to navigate these concerns at the local level, though not exhaustive.

### **Governor Lee recommended that all school buildings remain closed for the remainder of the school year. May schools still host graduation ceremonies?**

Decisions around whether or not to host graduation ceremonies will remain at the discretion of local school boards and superintendents. We encourage local districts to consult their county or regional health departments on questions related to health and safety in hosting graduation ceremonies.

### **What could a graduation ceremony look like, inclusive of social distancing?**

There are a number of solutions that can be utilized to host graduation ceremonies using social distancing:

- *Football Stadiums or Larger Arenas:* This would include limiting guests to accommodate total capacity, seating families in every three rows in the stadium, and seating graduates 6-feet apart. Multiple ceremonies may also be considered. Weather should be a factor in this decision.
- *Drive-ins or Similar:* Families may arrive, and remain seated in cars, which allows for minimal physical engagement. This can be done at drive-ins, large parking lots (like malls), or similar. Weather considerations related to heat and rain should be addressed, especially as all cars would need to be turned off in order to conduct the ceremony. Safe walking pathways would need to be outlined for graduates to exit the vehicles and safely collect their diplomas. Similarly, large projected screens and sound equipment may be required. Further, students and families without vehicles would need alternative seating and transportation.
- *Increase the Number and Decrease the Size:* Instead of hosting one ceremony, host a series of smaller ceremonies in the same venue. This would be conducted similar to a traditional school day, where students would have six blocks of classes, for example. This would allow smaller cohorts of the graduating class to participate in a ceremony, with that ceremony repeated 2+ times to accommodate all high school graduates and any permitted guests. For example, a high school could host a graduation in a multipurpose room or gym that may allow for groups of 25 – 50 seniors at a time (with limited guests, spaced-out in the stands). That ceremony would be repeated to accommodate the full size of the graduating class. For very large classes, this could mean 6 – 12 ceremonies. Schools may want to

create consistency by pre-recording speeches and students walking across the stage, and then asking for support to splice those videos together into one, comprehensive keepsake ceremony video.

- *Individualized Ceremony*: Schedule students to arrive in waves that allows them to walk in front of the school and families to walk on the sidewalk or drive-by in cars to take pictures. See below for staging information. This would require precise scheduling, traffic control, etc. and may be appropriate for smaller graduating classes in less trafficked areas.

### **What are other ways we can honor seniors?**

- Ask seniors to send individual videos with short messages to their graduating classmates. This, with the traditional filmed speeches by invited speakers, creates a longer film highlighting the graduates' high school experiences and provides a long-term memento.
- Highlight seniors on social media each day with special hashtags that allow for family, friends, and community members to congratulate individual students (who agree to participate) with photos and messages.
- Schedule a graduation parade where graduates decorate their cars, line-up and drive a prescribed route. Community members may socially distance along the parade route and cheer graduates as they drive past. There could be a specific place where each car stops, allowing the school or district official to pose with the car and hand the passenger or driver the diploma.
- Secure a digital billboard and display messages directly from graduates to his or her class. Expand that to include messages from families and friends to graduates as well.
- Work with local city or county officials to block off a road. Allow the senior and 1-2 family members to stand along the road (socially distanced) and have school or district personnel present the diplomas. Timing, size of class, and environmental contexts should be considered.
- Postpone the graduation (and subsequent proms) until later this summer or fall, or host them in one year as an "early reunion."

### **What are additional safety measures we should consider?**

- Mark the standing locations of graduates waiting in line to collect their diplomas.
- Position any graduate seating at appropriate distances, so that chairs are distanced from one another in all directions.
- Consider the processional and support required to maintain acceptable distance.
- Consider whether masks will be suggested or required.
- Consider how diplomas will be collected when a student's name is called. Staff may consider placing the diploma on a table for the student to collect. Students may choose to walk across the stage, collect the diploma from the table, and pose for a picture individually or appropriately distanced from a school/district official.
- Set expectations, policies and guidelines in advance, and reiterate those before the ceremony day and at the start of the ceremony, to ensure overall health and safety.
- Consider timing of when ceremonies take place:
  - If ceremonies are held outdoors over the summer, sun exposure and heat should be considered, and appropriate precautions should be taken related to shade, availability of water, etc.
  - If ceremonies are delayed or postponed, appropriate information should be collected to ensure all graduates are informed and able to attend with advanced notice. Consideration could be given to merging graduations in the future.

For any of these solutions, we recommend you consulting your local health county official to ensure it is appropriate for the size of the venue and the number of guests attending.

### **What are topics that our district should consider as we discuss high school graduations?**

Districts should consider a variety of topics related to crowd size and social distancing when hosting graduation ceremonies. These may include:

- If large groups are entering/exiting a space, it will be difficult to manage appropriate distancing.
- It will be important to consider the use of restrooms and access to those facilities. Procedures should be put into place to limit crowding, and arrangements should be made to accommodate crowd size.
- Ceremonies may need additional staff to enforce safety guidelines.
- Spacing should be marked in advance to calculate capacity, number of ceremonies needed, etc.
- Districts and schools may want to limit attendance to 2 guests as a way to control for crowd size, and then broadcast the ceremony (or provide online) for others.
- Expectations and procedures related to photography will be important, in order to limit or prevent guests from crowding near the stage to take pictures. Schools and districts may want to have someone taking multiple pictures of all graduates and providing them free of charge to families in order to reduce concern of missing the important moments.

Districts should also share ideas with one another through their Superintendent Study Councils so that great solutions can be discussed across the state and benefit all of our seniors. This can also be done on social media using #LearninginPlaceTN or #TNGrad2020.

*\*This guidance includes a range of virtual and distance options that districts may consider as they moved forward with graduation ceremony planning, as well as in-person strategies for when public gathering restrictions are no longer in place. The department encourages districts to engage with students and families on the best solutions for their communities. Districts are encouraged to consult with their local board attorneys before moving forward.*