



COVID-19: Guidance on High School Graduation Ceremonies

Issued: May 1, 2020

The COVID-19 public health crisis and the closure of school facilities as instructional settings for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year have created questions related to high school graduations. Understanding the milestone that high school graduations represent in the lives of our students and families, the North Carolina Departments of Public Instruction in consultation with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, and the Governor's Office provide the following guidance and the important reminder of our responsibility to abide by requirements of Executive Orders to maintain the safety of students, families, staff members, and the public.

CONSIDERATIONS

Decisions around whether or not to conduct graduation ceremonies will remain at the discretion of local school boards and superintendents. Districts and schools are encouraged to engage with students and families on the best solutions for their communities. Plans should include consultation with local public health officials on current state and local public health requirements and other questions related to health and safety. Additionally, districts and schools should seek guidance from their local board attorneys and local law enforcement during the planning process. **If local school leaders elect to hold graduation ceremonies, then those ceremonies must comply with requirements of applicable Executive Orders in effect at the time of the event.**

NORTH CAROLINA EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 121

[Executive Order No. 121](#) issued on March 27, 2020 directs individuals to physically stay at least six (6) feet apart from others and bans gatherings of more than ten (10) people.

EXAMPLES OF POTENTIALLY PERMISSIBLE GRADUATION CEREMONIES (as of May 1, 2020)

Local school officials may consider a number of solutions and non-traditional venues to host graduation ceremonies that fulfill social distancing and mass gathering requirements. School districts should consult with their local health departments and local law enforcement in developing plans for these types of graduation ceremonies.

Drive-in: Families may arrive and remain seated in cars, which allows for minimal physical engagement. This can be done at movie drive-ins, large parking lots (like malls), or at other similar venues. 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 should be outlined for graduates to exit their vehicles and safely collect their diplomas. Similarly, large projected screens and sound equipment may be required. Consideration should be given for students and families without access to vehicles.

Drive-through: Similar to above, families may arrive and remain seated in cars, which allows for minimal physical engagement. A pre-recorded or live ceremony could be broadcast (which will require sound, broadcast, and/or radio equipment). At the conclusion of the ceremony, cars would proceed through a predetermined course that allows the graduate to drive-through and collect the diploma. Students could either remain in the vehicle or exit the vehicle and follow an outlined path to safely collect their diplomas.



Individualized Ceremony: Schedule students to arrive in predetermined and specifically timed waves to enter the building and collect their diplomas. Currently, no more than ten (10) individuals are permitted to gather. This strategy requires district or school officials to identify the number of individuals from the school who will present the diplomas, take photographs/video, and how many guests can accompany the graduate into the facility. This strategy requires precise scheduling and traffic control to facilitate entering and exiting the building in order to comply with mass gathering regulations.

Hybrid/Video: Districts or schools deploy one of the strategies listed above while also recording the graduates receiving diplomas. Video is spliced and the entire graduation is provided on-demand or aired at a predetermined time.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES TO HONOR GRADUATES

- Ask seniors to send individual videos with short messages to their graduating classmates. This, with the traditional filmed speeches, 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.
- Coordinate with local officials and 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.
- Provide yard or window signs to be displayed at the homes of graduates.
- Postpone the graduation until later, or host them in one year as an "early reunion."

NECESSARY SAFETY MEASURES & TIPS

- COVID positive individuals and those with symptoms should not attend as graduates, family, or support staff.
- Clearly mark entry, exit, and standing locations of graduates when collecting their diplomas.
- Consider whether face coverings will be suggested or required.
- Consider how diplomas will be distributed. Create a process for diploma distribution that meets social distancing requirements. Staff should place the diploma on a table for the student to collect. The table should be periodically cleaned.
- Frequent and routine environmental cleaning and disinfection of rest rooms and high touch areas with EPA approved disinfectant (<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>).
- 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 prior to the ceremony and at the beginning of the ceremony, to ensure overall health and safety.



- If ceremonies are delayed or postponed, collect appropriate information to help ensure all graduates are informed and given the opportunity to attend with advanced notice.
- It will be important to consider the use of restrooms and access to those facilities. Careful consideration must be given to limiting the number of individuals congregating in order to comply with mass gathering requirements.
- Ceremonies may need additional security and/or school staff to enforce safety guidelines.
- Expectations and procedures related to photography will be important, in order to limit or prevent guests from crowding to take pictures. Schools and districts may want to identify several individuals tasked with taking multiple pictures of all graduates. If school personnel are responsible for photography, clearly communicate with graduates how photos will be distributed. If a private company is providing a fee-based photography, review expectations of social distancing.
- Consider timing of when ceremonies take place:
 - If ceremonies are held outdoors, sun exposure and heat should be considered, and appropriate precautions should be taken related to shade, availability of water, etc.
- District and school leaders should create an option/approach for students who are medically fragile or otherwise unable to attend.

SUMMARY

High school graduation is an important milestone. Districts and schools are urged to engage families, local public health officials, and local board attorneys as ceremonies are planned. Social distancing and mass gathering requirements issued through North Carolina Executive Order and reinforced by public health officials must be integrated into plans and enforced to protect the health and safety of students, families, staff, and the public.