Information on Novel Coronavirus
June 13, 2020

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COVID-19: Alternatives to Traditional Commencement Ceremonies (Update)

The COVID-19 public health emergency caused unprecedented disruption to the 2019-20 school year. Recognizing that graduation is a major milestone for students and families, Governor Murphy is committed to providing school districts with maximum flexibility to honor graduatin classes while abiding by health and safety requirements and guidelines that continue to evolve based on the latest public health data.

The Department is providing three alternatives to traditional commencement ceremonies for public school districts, charter schools, renaissance school projects and nonpublic schools (collectively "school districts"): (1) virtual, (2) drive-through/drive-in, or (3) modified in-person, outdoor ceremonies. DOE has previously addressed virtual ceremonies, and has provided guidance accessible here. This guidance document provides information on drive-through/drive-in ceremonies, and modified in-person, outdoor ceremonies. Decisions about the most appropriate type of ceremony for each community will be made at the local level in consultation with local officials based on the specific circumstances in each municipality and school district.

Commencement Ceremony Options

- Prior to July 6, 2020, virtual and drive-through/drive-in ceremonies are permitted.
- Beginning July 6, 2020, modified in-person, outdoor ceremonies are permitted.
- Indoor ceremonies should not be considered.
- Modified in-person commencement ceremonies must:
  - Take place outdoors (i.e., no indoor ceremonies allowed); and
  - Meet the relevant capacity limitation on in-person gatherings in place at the time of the ceremony.

Critical Factors to Consider for Commencement Ceremonies

- School Districts that plan to hold a modified in-person ceremony must certify to the Department of Education, via an online submission form that will be made available on https://covid19.nj.gov/, that their planned ceremony will comply with applicable requirements for gatherings, including those addressing social distancing. The form must be submitted no later than seven days prior to the scheduled date of the ceremony. The online submission form will be accessible on June 5, 2020. Districts should keep municipal officials, including the local Office of Emergency Management, local law enforcement, first responders, and local health officials informed of their plans for ceremonies.
- Always prioritize the health and safety of students, staff, and other community members. Confer with local health officials to determine the applicability of any other rules or restrictions in addition to those outlined below that might be necessary to ensure the public health, such as whether it is necessary to restrict attendance or provide any additional protections for high-risk individuals. Prospective attendees should be advised to follow current guidelines from the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding high-risk categories and necessary precautions.
- Individuals who are sick should be encouraged not to attend – see CDC guidelines for what individuals should do if they are sick and to see a list of possible COVID-19 symptoms. Consider posting signage discouraging anyone from attending if they or anyone in their household is experiencing symptoms of respiratory illness or if they have been in close contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days.
  - Institutions should also consider conducting temperature screenings with non-contact thermometers of everyone entering the venue. Where such screenings are conducted, any person with a temperature of 100.4 °F or greater should be excluded from the event.
- Ensure that graduation ceremonies are inclusive and accessible for *all* students and families. Consider making livestreams available for those individuals who are excluded from the event.
- Limit the number of staff members to only those required to facilitate your planned commencement ceremony.
- Districts should not hold graduation ceremonies on Primary Election Day, which has been moved to July 7, 2020 pursuant to Executive Order 120.

Consider equity issues, such as access to vehicles to participate in drive-through/drive-in ceremonies.

Virtual Ceremonies

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Virtual Graduation Ceremonies offer a number of ways to celebrate this year's graduating class. From airing graduation messages on local network stations to designing virtual graduations on gaming platforms, virtual graduations offer districts an opportunity to involve the community in planning and facilitating a memorable ceremony.

- DOE recommends that districts take full advantage of virtual ceremonies, which are the safest alternative graduation ceremony at this time.
- Consider accessibility to technology for those who may be participating/viewing the virtual graduation.
- As stated above, DOE's full guidance on virtual graduation ceremonies can be found here.

Drive-Through and Drive-In Commencement Ceremonies

Drive-through and drive-in commencement ceremonies may be held in school parking lots, drive-in movie theaters, stadium parking lots, or other large parking lot venues that can be used exclusively for commencement ceremonies, and which provide sufficient space to accommodate event attendees arriving in their cars. Projection screens or sound equipment may be used to allow school staff to call student names, display photos or videos, and provide other audio-visual support.

- Drive-through and drive-in commencement ceremonies must comply with all requirements of Executive Order 142 (2020), or the rules or requirements for vehicular gatherings that are in place at the time of the ceremony.
- Accommodations should be made to allow students and families without vehicles to participate while observing proper social distanci… protocol;
- Weather conditions might affect attendees' health, safety, and comfort, particularly if cars will need to be turned off during the ceremo…
- If allowing access to restrooms, take appropriate measures to prevent congregation such as marking standing locations and assigning staff to monitor these areas, and consult with health officials on disinfection protocols;
- Multiple ceremonies may be needed depending on class size; and

If there are individuals organizing or maintaining the gathering, and who are not in closed vehicles, such individuals must follow all applicable Executive Orders and Administrative Orders and must wear cloth face coverings or more protective face coverings in any settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain, except where doing so would inhibit that individual's health.

Modified In-Person, Outdoor Commencement Ceremonies

In accordance with the above, in-person commencement ceremonies persons are permitted only on or **after July 6, 2020** and must occur **outdoors**. These ceremonies must meet the relevant capacity limitation on in-person gatherings in place at the time of the ceremony. Depending on the social distancing requirements in place at the time of the ceremony, varying restrictions will apply.

- The ceremony must take place outdoors, and all attendees must remain outdoors at all times during the gathering, with the sole exception of restroom use.
- Open-air rain tarps, tents, and other outdoor structures shall be allowed solely for the purpose of protecting against foul weather or for shade.
- All attendees at the gathering are required to remain six feet apart from other attendees at all times, excluding immediate family members, caretakers, household members, or romantic partners. Consider using tape or other materials to demarcate six feet of distance between students and others while standing and walking, and ensure any chairs for students, guests and staff are six feet apart.
- Consider class size and available space in light of social distancing protocol to determine the number of ceremonies needed. If conducting multiple ceremonies, follow CDC and NJDOH-recommended cleaning protocols in between ceremonies.
- There should be limited contact between attendees, excluding immediate family members, caretakers, household members, or romantic partners. To limit person-to-person contact, districts should consider contact-less measures for providing students with diplomas and caps/gowns, such as mailing materials to students' homes. Programs, maps, and other documents can be distributed electronically in advance of the ceremony or mailed to students and families.
    - Sharing or exchanging materials of any kind poses an increased risk of transmission/spread of COVID-19 and should be avoided. (Throwing graduation caps, "Sign-in" practices, gifts, flowers, etc.)
    - If chairs and other equipment are provided, they should not be shared and should be sanitized before and after use.
- Students may walk across a stage or area and pose for a picture individually.
- Strongly encourage limiting the length of ceremonies to shorten the time the crowd is exposed to each other.
- Limit group performances. Districts should limit speakers and ensure that individuals do not share microphones/ megaphones or other equipment that may pose a health risk.
- Clearly communicate expectations and procedures regarding photography in order to limit crowding. Consider utilizing school staff to take photos and make them available to all families free of charge to minimize the need for families to gather around staged areas to take photos.
- If allowing access to restrooms, take appropriate measures to prevent congregation such as marking standing locations and assigning staff to monitor these areas and consult with health officials on disinfection protocols.
- Similarly, districts should assign staff to monitor entrances and egresses to prevent congregation. Consider staggering arrival times to ease crowds at access points.
- Strongly encourage all individuals at the gathering to wear face coverings, in accordance with CDC recommendations, except where doing so would inhibit the individual's health or where the individual is under two years of age, and remind attendees that they must we… face coverings when required by an Executive Order.

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- Schools may want to consider limiting the number of guests that are permitted to attend the ceremony or holding student-only commencements.

If you have questions regarding commencement ceremonies, contact your respective County Office of Education.

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Guiding the Education Community Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

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