

COVID-19: Guidance on Graduation Ceremonies and Related Activities

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The question of if, and how, graduation ceremonies might happen here in Maine has been a frequent topic during our ongoing meetings with administrators and educators, who are faced with this exceptionally challenging decision. Based on the many questions, scenarios and suggestions provided by SAUs, families and students, and the timelines of pending graduation dates, The Department of Education prioritized the requests for graduation guidance.

Understanding the milestone that high school graduation represents in the lives of our students and families, Maine DOE has assembled a group to explore and make recommendations on ways in which we can honor the Class of 2020 while taking into consideration public health concerns, social distancing recommendations, and government-issued restrictions on social gatherings.

Decisions around whether to host graduation ceremonies will remain at the discretion of local school boards and superintendents and must be conducted in accordance with Governor Mills' "Stay Safer at Home Orders." As we remain in a state of civil emergency, planners of important events are urged to consider the fact that regulations and recommendations are subject to change, due to the dynamic nature of this situation.

The following guidelines must be taken into consideration when planning events:

- June-August, 2020, social gatherings will be limited to no more than 50 people. (In May, the limit is no more than 10 people). Physical (social) distancing of at least 6 feet must be maintained at all times.
- Cloth face coverings must be used in all public settings. (Exceptions: Cloth face coverings are not required for children under age 2, a child in a child care setting, or for anyone who has trouble breathing or related medical conditions, or who is otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance).
- A 14-Day Quarantine is required for all individuals entering or returning to Maine prior to going out in public.
- Some municipalities have additional requirements and guidelines that must be followed.

In-Person Outdoor or Indoor Ceremonies:

Beginning in June, when group sizes of up to 50 will be permitted, there are some options available for very small graduating classes (or for larger classes, broken into smaller groups through multiple ceremonies) while maintaining social distancing. The following guidelines should be followed to ensure a safe event:

- Limit the number of participants, staff, and guests to fewer than 50 people, in total.
- Seat graduates 6 feet apart in all directions.
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- Require use of cloth face masks.
- Develop accommodations, with increased distancing and precautions, for those with underlying health issues.
- Mark the standing locations of graduates waiting in line and during processional at 6 foot intervals.
- Ensure additional staff support to monitor and maintain acceptable distance.
- Utilize one-way direction of movements and use separate entrances and exits if possible.

- 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 walk across the stage, collect the diploma from the table, and pose for a picture individually or appropriately distanced from a school/district official.
- Communicate expectations and guidelines in advance to ensure understanding and compliance.
- Develop plans for use of restrooms and access to soap and water for hand washing with marked waiting spaces at 6 foot intervals to avoid crowding at bathroom stalls or sinks. Arrange for a custodian to monitor and replenish soap/paper towels.
- Provide hand sanitizer in multiple areas.
- Contact your local law enforcement to help with planning and crowd control.
- Consider designating a single person to take an official photo/video of each graduate receiving their diploma and prohibit others from approaching the area to take their own pictures or video.

Drive-In Options:

- Before planning a drive-in ceremony, please consider the needs and rights of families who do not have access to a vehicle and make equitable arrangements.
- Maine drive-in movie theaters have been granted permission to open, as long as they meet a set of criteria and follow certain guidelines. Schools may contract with a drive-in movie theater operating within those regulations.
- If a school wishes to plan a “drive in” ceremony outside of an approved, open, theater, there are many precautions that should be taken:
 - Work with local law enforcement to get approval for use of a field or parking lot, and to support traffic flow and crowd control.
 - Measure out parking spots that are spaced a minimum of 6’ apart.
 - Communicate rules ahead of time regarding the need for all participants to stay inside the cars with the doors closed and to wear cloth masks if windows are down.
 - Allow one student at a time to leave the family’s vehicle to pick up a diploma, using the guidelines above for in-person ceremonies.

Other options for honoring graduates:

- Virtual Ceremonies or video tributes: Ask seniors to send individual videos with short messages to their graduating classmates. This can be compiled with more traditional speeches that can be done by video or livestream to create a keepsake video.
- Hashtag Campaigns: 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.
- Postpone the graduation ceremonies until it is safe to gather in large groups once again, or host them in one year as an “early reunion.”

Developed with valuable input from:

- Maine Principals Association
- Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention
- Emily Poland, MPH RN School Nurse Consultant, Team Leader, Coordinated School Health, Maine Department of Education
- Melissa Condon, Maine Department of Education
- Becky Bell, RN School Nurse, Casco Bay HS and PATHS

- Melissa Brewer, BSN, RN, Winthrop Grade School Nurse
- Kelly Brown, RN, FNP-BC, Kennebunk Elementary School Nurse
- Beth Coombs, RN Mountain View School Nurse
- Jen Dorr, RN, BSN, Massabesic Middle School Nurse
- Jen Dow, RN, Bonny Eagle High School
- Sue Heeschen, RN, Dyer Elementary School
- Lisa McKenna, MSN, RN, NCSN, MSAD #1 Health Services Office
- Tina Veilleux, RN, Portland Public Schools Nurse Coordinator, Reiche Elementary School

Additional Guidance:

With additional input from Department of Public Safety and Department of Health and Human Services, SAUs are strongly advised against the inclusion of concession stands, food trucks, fireworks, or parades as a part of their graduation ceremonies.