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COVID-19 Press Information

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New Jersey Department of Education Provides Guidance on Commencement Ceremonies

TRENTON– The New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) today [released guidance](#) regarding commencement ceremonies to honor 2020 graduates during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

The guidance outlines three options for K-12 school commencement ceremonies: 1) virtual; 2) drive-through/drive-in; or 3) modified in-person, outdoor ceremonies. Decisions about the most appropriate type of ceremony for each school community will be made locally, in consultation with municipal officials. At this time, only virtual ceremonies are permitted. Beginning July 6, 2020, drive-through/drive-in and modified in-person, outdoor ceremonies will be permitted subject to the requirements set forth in the guidance. These ceremonies must comply with the social distancing protocols and the limitations on in-person gatherings that are in place when the ceremonies are held.

Some critical factors for districts to consider if they are holding either a drive-in/drive-through or a modified in-person ceremony include:

- **Staff limits:** Schools should limit the number of staff members to only those required to facilitate the commencement ceremony;
- **Sick individuals:** Sick individuals should not attend. NJDOH and CDC guidelines can provide direction for those experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. Districts should discourage attendance if a visitor or someone in their household is experiencing symptoms of respiratory illness or if they have been in close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days. Schools should

- consider screening visitors upon arrival with non-contact thermometers and excluding any person with a temperature exceeding 100.4 °F;
- **Equity:** Districts are encouraged to ensure that graduation ceremonies are inclusive and accessible for all students and families. Accommodations should be made for families that may not be able to attend in-person;
 - **Certification to the DOE:** School districts that plan to hold a drive-in/drive-through or modified in-person ceremony must certify to the Department of Education, via an online submission form that will be made available on June 5, 2020, 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.

Modified In-Person Graduation Ceremonies

In addition to the above considerations, the DOE guidance addresses a number of factors for districts to consider in the planning of modified in-person graduation ceremonies, including:

- **Local review:** School districts should plan ceremonies in consultation with municipal officials (local law enforcement, local health officials, etc.);
- **Location:** Modified in-person commencement ceremonies must take place outdoors. Indoor ceremonies are not permitted. Open-air rain tarps, tents, and other outdoor structures may be used only to protect against foul weather or for shade;
- **Attendance:** Schools may consider limiting the number of guests or holding student-only commencements. Ceremonies must meet the relevant capacity limitation on in-person gatherings in place at the time of the ceremony;
- **Social distancing:** Attendees must remain six feet apart at all times, excluding immediate family members, caretakers, household members, or romantic partners. Schools should consider using tape or other materials to demarcate six feet of distance between students and attendees while standing and walking, and ensure that all seating for students, guests and staff allows for six feet of distance between persons;
- **Multiple ceremonies:** Districts should consider class size and available space to determine the number of ceremonies needed. Districts should follow CDC and NJDOH protocols for cleaning in between ceremonies and consider holding ceremonies over the span of several days;
- **Duration:** Districts should consider limiting the length of ceremonies to shorten the time students and attendees are exposed to each other. Districts should also limit speakers and live performances and avoid the sharing of microphones or other equipment that may pose a health risk;
- **Entrances/exits:** Districts should assign staff to monitor entrances and exits to prevent congregation and consider staggering arrival times to ease crowds at access points. If possible, districts should utilize multiple entrance and exit points;
- **Face coverings:** In accordance with CDC recommendations, attendees should wear face coverings (except for children under 2 or in cases that would inhibit a person's health); and

In addition, to limit person-to-person contact, districts should provide diplomas and caps/gowns to students in advance of graduation ceremonies. Programs, maps, and other documents can be emailed or mailed to families before the ceremony. Sharing or exchanging materials of any kind poses an increased risk of transmission/spread of COVID-19 and should be avoided. Chairs and other equipment should not be shared and should be sanitized before and after use.

Drive-Through and Drive-In Commencement Ceremonies

Drive-through and drive-in commencement ceremonies can be held in school parking lots, drive-in movie theaters, stadium parking lots, or other large parking lot venues that 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.

Some of the major factors involving drive-through and drive-in ceremonies include:

- 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 families without vehicles to participate while adhering to social distancing protocols;
- If allowing access to restrooms, take appropriate measures to prevent congregation and consult with health officials on disinfection protocols;
- Multiple ceremonies may be needed depending on class size;
- Consider potential broadcasting of the ceremony or otherwise making a livestream available for family members unable to attend; and
- Organizers or others assisting with the event, and who are not in closed vehicles, must follow all applicable Executive Orders and Administrative Orders and must wear face coverings, except where doing so would inhibit that individual's health.

Virtual Ceremonies

The DOE has previously provided [guidance](#) regarding virtual ceremonies, which may be held at any time. The DOE notes that virtual ceremonies are the safest alternative graduation ceremony at this time.

The DOE's full [guidance on virtual ceremonies](#) is online.