



Considerations for Spring Activities

Kentuckians have much to be thankful for as the end of the school year approaches, with decreasing COVID-19 case numbers and increasing opportunities for vaccinations against COVID-19. Still, schools and districts must continue to be cautious because the virus is still circulating and the impact of the new variants of the virus is still unknown. This document provides guidance to schools and districts to assist in determining how best to handle traditional spring activities like commencement, proms and honors ceremonies while complying with state and local public health guidelines.

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General Considerations

Local education agencies (LEAs) must maintain a delicate balance between appropriately honoring students while managing the challenges and realities created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools and districts have options, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) encourages districts to engage with students and families to determine the best solution for their community.

When planning for spring activities, schools and districts must continue to adhere to the health and safety expectations outlined in the [“Guidance and Safety Expectations and Best Practices for Kentucky Schools \(K-12\), Updated Dec. 7, 2020.”](#) This includes appropriate social distancing, the use of cloth face coverings, screening, sanitization efforts and contact tracing.

As springtime activities often include the community at-large, it is recommended you also consult with local public health officials to ensure all of the appropriate COVID-19 mitigation strategies have been considered.

Districts also will need to consider the budgetary implications and added expenses of hosting springtime events. A district’s financial director or chief financial officer should complete a budget



analysis for the remainder of this school year to determine affordability.

Create an Action Plan

KDE recommends the following steps when creating an action plan:

Step One: Examine each year-end event as it relates to your district or school's mission and values.

Critically examine each year-end event, and think about how important it is to keep with tradition. Determine whether there is a way for the event to be effectively delivered through a virtual or other creative format, or if it must be held in person. Schools and districts also should consider developing a hybrid option for those who are uncomfortable with an in-person event.

If an event is not “mission critical,” consider canceling the event this school year due to the current public health emergency.

Step Two: Consider alternate scenarios for each mission-critical event.

Once you have decided which events to preserve this school year, create alternate formats for each event. Here are some options you might choose to examine:

Virtual or Drive-in Ceremonies

Diplomas, awards or honors can be conferred **virtually** or by way of a **drive-in ceremony**. For both virtual and drive-in ceremonies, you will have to determine how you will handle distribution of any pre-ordered graduation merchandise, such as cords and caps and gowns.

Virtual Ceremony

This option would be easiest in keeping with social distancing guidelines.

The Gulfport School District in Mississippi came up with a great plan last year that closely mirrors a traditional graduation ceremony. You may choose to model your plan after theirs, as it keeps with social distancing guidelines while allowing students to share the experience with family.

This [two-page guidance document](#) explains in detail how the Gulfport plan worked, but here is a summary:

- Seniors pick up caps and gowns beforehand from the main entrance of the school during a window of time on a set day. While there, they are given a day and time to report for their ceremony. They turn in their cap and gown after they walk across the stage.
- During a set week, each senior and up to four family members report at a set time to the auditorium. Each senior will have a picture in their cap and gown taken by a professional photographer. They will then take the traditional walk across the stage to receive their



diploma, which will be captured on video.

- On their scheduled day/time, the student (already dressed in cap and gown) will pull into the main entrance and assistants will be in the parking lot to indicate where to park. The student will stay in the car until an assistant lets them know when to come into the building.
- Also recorded will be segments that would have been included in a traditional graduation, such as: the Pledge of Allegiance; recognition of valedictorian and salutatorian; speeches; senior video.
- Each segment will be professionally edited and put into a video that showcases each senior in a traditional ceremony.
- The video will be aired online on the day and time of the original graduation. Before it airs, students will receive their picture and graduation program in the mail. Students will be able to watch their own graduation for the first time with their family, and out-of-town family, friends and the community can watch online at the same time.

Note: Students and staff are required to use cloth face coverings whenever they are gathered together in person.

While the Gulfport model was popular, there are other models that may be used as well:

- The Kentucky Department of Education hosted a [virtual tribute](#) for the Class of 2020.
- [Honoring and Celebrating the Class of 2020](#) by the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals has ideas on how to hold a virtual graduation.
- Another example is this three-day graduation event at [North Kansas City Schools](#).
- There also are platforms to host virtual ceremonies that you might want to research.
- Seek out local partners to help; this [Frankfort radio station](#) provided a downloadable virtual yearbook where high school graduates shared photos, video, audio, achievements, messages and memories. The station also hosted a virtual prom on May 15, 2020, with a station disc jockey as master of ceremonies, taking requests and dedications.
- There are lots of examples out there. Have some fun and determine what works best for your students and community.

Drive-in Ceremony

A drive-in ceremony would allow for students, families, faculty and staff to celebrate in the same location, while keeping with social distancing guidelines. Individuals and families should stay in their cars and should not pass anything between cars.

Students and families could arrive and remain seated in cars, allowing for minimal physical engagement. This could be done in a large parking lot or other open area.

This might be possible for a small school, but much more difficult for larger schools. Multiple ceremonies with smaller groups might have to be held to accommodate all students. However, this



option will pose the most logistical challenges:

- There would have to be a planned route of parked cars.
- Large projected screens and sound equipment might be required.
- Students and families without vehicles would need alternate transportation.
- Weather considerations such as heat and rain would need to be addressed, as all cars would need to be turned off to conduct the ceremony.
- As this will be an emotional and sentimental moment for many students and families, districts and schools will need to consider how they would enforce the directive to stay in vehicles should students or families get out.

Considerations for Events Held In-person

If a district or a school chooses to hold an in-person event, several factors must be considered.

Be sure to convey expectations to protect health and safety in advance and reiterate those before the start of the ceremony. Ensure you have enough staff or other support to enforce policies if needed. Develop a creative plan to assure that those students/families that are not comfortable to attend the event have a way to experience the event remotely, i.e., live-stream or recorded.

Masks and Screening

At the recommendations of officials with the Kentucky Department for Public Health (DPH), Gov. Andy Beshear has issued a mandatory executive order that masks should be worn by all Kentuckians in public spaces. Cloth masks will suffice in this situation, according to the DPH.

Anyone exhibiting symptoms of illness should self-monitor and should not attend the event or enter school property. If symptoms occur during the event, the participant should isolate immediately. Transportation home should be arranged. The individual should consult with their healthcare provider for further instructions.

Crowd Size

It is expected that some form of social distancing will need to be observed for the foreseeable future, and crowd size will be limited. Therefore, depending on the number of students, you will likely have to hold more than one event in the same venue to decrease the size of the crowd.

The ceremony would need to be repeated as many times as necessary to accommodate all graduates and permitted guests. Keep in mind that for very large classes, this could mean many ceremonies.

Guests

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Districts and schools will want to limit attendance due to crowd size limitations and broadcast the ceremony or provide it online for those who cannot attend. Again, refer to the limit of venue capacity currently determined by Gov. Beshear’s executive order.

Spacing

Remember that social distancing will need to be observed for health and safety. Graduates, guests and staff will have to be adequately spaced out in all directions.

You will need to:

- Calculate capacity in advance for 6-foot spacing between people.
- Mark the standing locations of graduates waiting to collect their diplomas.
- Limit or prevent guests from crowding near the stage to take pictures. To reduce concern about missing important moments, you might have someone take pictures of graduates and provide them free of charge to families. Setting expectations on photography in advance will be important.
- Consider other factors such as the use of restrooms and access, and how those using them will be spaced.
- A designated “entrance door” and “exit door” is recommended for any event.

Distributing Diplomas

You will need to consider how diplomas will be collected when a student’s name is called.

For example, staff could place the diploma on a table and the student could walk across the stage, collect the diploma from the table, then pose for a picture individually or appropriately distanced from a school official.

Consistency is Key

Consistency will be needed so all students have the same experience. This could be accomplished by pre-recording speeches and recording students as they walk across the stage. That footage could then be merged into one, comprehensive keepsake video.

Step Three: Develop a communication plan.

Ensure you consider in your plan the needs of all parties – students, families, faculty, staff and the community. You will need to determine who needs to be involved in the decision making, and how best to involve all parties and ensure transparency in the process.

Once the plan has been determined and you have discussed it with local public health officials, communicate it to all as soon as possible. Consider how best to do this.

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As you communicate your plan, ensure you convey that school leaders are committed to honoring students and celebrating their achievements, while also protecting public health and safety. Have empathy – as we know, these milestones are extremely important to students and their families.

Step Four: Be flexible and understand your plan might still need to change as the trajectory of the pandemic could change over the spring months.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators to be flexible and innovative in addressing the unexpected. In time, your Plan B might not be possible – it might have to become Plan C, D or E.

You will need to re-evaluate your plan weekly at least and make adjustments as necessary while prioritizing the needs of students and their families.

Planning Considerations

Get creative and see this as an opportunity rather than a disappointment!

Faculty and staff have had to come up with innovative ways to teach students during the pandemic, both remotely and in person, and that creativity can be applied to graduation and other end-of-year events. As we have learned this year, what seems negative at the time can have a silver lining. So, try to come up with the most creative, meaningful and enjoyable ways you can to give students and their families some positive memories as the school year ends.

Many of the ideas below can still be done even if in-person events take place. 2021 events will not be the same as pre-COVID-19 events, so add something special to the experience.

Some ideas to get you started:

- Hold a graduation parade where graduates decorate their cars, line up and drive a prescribed route. Families and community members can socially distance along the parade route and cheer graduates as they drive past.
- Ask seniors to send individual videos with short messages to their graduating classmates. Put them together with the traditional filmed speeches by invited guests and create a film highlighting the graduates' high school experiences to provide a long-term memento.
- Highlight individual seniors on social media each day with photos and messages, and include special hashtags that allow for family, friends and community members to congratulate them. (*Ensure those you highlight agree to participate.*)
- Host an “early reunion” in late spring or summer of 2021.

If you have questions about this KDE guidance document, you can call (502) 892-6968 or [send us an email](#).