



COVID-19 Emergency Guidelines for Graduation Ceremonies and Related Year-End Activities

April 30, 2020

As the end of the school-year approaches and school buildings remain closed, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) knows districts and schools are contemplating how best to handle traditional activities like commencement and honors ceremonies while complying with state and local public health guidelines.

Local education agencies (LEAs) must create a delicate balance between appropriately honoring students, while still managing the challenges and realities amid the COVID-19 pandemic and state of emergency in Kentucky. Schools and districts have options and there is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

KDE encourages districts to engage with students and families on the best solution for your community. The following process and guidelines will help you determine what plan is best. This will help you assess the needs and challenges, and possible solutions.

You may get creative while staying within social distancing guidelines, but for any plan, consult with your school board attorney. It is recommended you also consult with local public health officials to ensure you have not missed any important considerations, given cases in the community. In addition, be sure to check the [daily actions and orders issued by Gov. Andy Beshear](#) and keep in mind that starting May 11, 2020, [every Kentuckian should be wearing a mask when out in public](#).

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) document "[Implementation of Mitigation Strategies for Communities with Local COVID-19 Transmission](#)" provides more specific guidance.

Also, you will need to consider your budget when determining your plan and have your financial director or chief financial officer complete a budget analysis for the remainder of this school year to determine affordability.

As mentioned during our [April 28 Superintendents Webcast](#), KDE recommends the following in coming up with a plan:

STEP 1: Examine each year-end event as it relates to your district or school's mission and values

Critically examine and rank each of your year-end events on how central it is to your district or school's mission and how important it is to keep with tradition. For those that rank highest, determine whether there is a way for you to effectively deliver the event through a virtual or other creative format, or if it must be held in person.

If an event is not "mission critical," considering the public health emergency, cancel it this school year.



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STEP 2: Consider alternate scenarios for each mission-critical event

Once you have decided which events to preserve this school year, create alternate scenarios for each.

Remember that Gov. Andy Beshear's [executive order \(Executive Order 2020-215, directives of March 19, 2020\)](#) prohibited mass gatherings and requires any gathering, to the extent possible, to comply with guidance from the CDC.

Here are some options that comply with those directives that you might choose to examine:

OPTION A: 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 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 will work, but here is a summary:

- 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: the Pledge of Allegiance; recognition of valedictorian and salutatorian; speeches; senior video; etc.
- Each segment will be professionally edited and put together in 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



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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.

- Caps and gowns:
 - Seniors will 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 will be given a day and time to report for their ceremony. They will turn in their cap and gown after they walk across the stage.

Note: If this model is used, the office of Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear requires staff and students to wear personal protective equipment (PPE). According to the Kentucky Department for Public Health, cloth masks are sufficient in this case.

There are other models to use as guidance as well:

[Honoring and Celebrating the Class of 2020](#) by the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals is a resource for ideas on how to hold a virtual graduation.

Another example is [this three-day event at North Kansas City Schools](#).

There are also platforms for virtual ceremonies that you might want to research. You could seek out local partners to help, [as this Frankfort radio station is](#) doing with a downloadable virtual yearbook where high school graduates can share photos, video, audio, achievements, messages and memories. The station also will host a virtual prom on May 15, which a station DJ will MC – taking requests and dedications.

The National School Public Relations Association also has some suggestions on [how to celebrate the Class of 2020](#) and other helpful links.

As you can see, 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.

Gov. Beshear has said he is not opposed to drive-in services as long as vehicles stay at least 6 feet apart and contain no more than a single family that lives together. He also has said no one should leave the car and no one should 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.



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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.

OPTION B: Reschedule the event for summer when campus could reopen

Districts or schools could delay in-person events until mid-June or July, when campus could reopen. Keep in mind the COVID-19 situation is still fluid and officials could need to change timelines for reopening buildings based on public health. Crowd-size limitations also are expected to continue to apply.

If ceremonies are delayed or postponed, future contact information will have to be collected to ensure all graduates are informed if they want to attend.

Virtual participation options will need to be made for those unable to attend, keeping in mind any potential travel restrictions.

If you typically host your event at an offsite location such as a theater, arena or church, you will need to contact the venue to place a hold on alternate dates and follow the same protocol with caterers or other third-party vendors you have secured. If original locations or vendors are not available, you will need to find others.

Consideration also could be given to merging the 2020 graduation with one in the future, although remember some restrictions may last into next year.

OPTION A OR B: 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.



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Masks and temperature checks

Public health officials recommend that masks be worn. Cloth masks will suffice in this situation, according to the Kentucky Department for Health. By May 11, 2020, Gov. Andy Beshear has stated masks should be worn by all Kentuckians in public spaces.

Schools also must take the temperature of staff before any interaction with students and guests. If someone has a temperature of more than 100 degrees, they are considered to have a fever and must return home.

Temperatures of students and guests can be taken before entering, but this could be a time-consuming procedure that is not possible for all schools due to the number of students.

No one should come to a graduation event if they are experiencing any symptoms of respiratory illness, including fever or cough.

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. Currently, groups larger than 10 are prohibited, according to guidance from the CDC. 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

Districts and schools will want to limit attendance to two guests due to crowd size limitations and broadcast the ceremony or provide it online for those who cannot attend.

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 six-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.



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- Consider other factors such as the use of restrooms and access, and how those using them will be spaced.

An “entrance door” and an “exit door” is recommended for any event.

Handing out 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

Consistency will need to be created 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.

OPTION C: Reimagine the event entirely

If it becomes necessary to push an event into fall or beyond, you might want to reimagine it entirely.

For example, you could virtually confer diplomas during the summer months, with a graduation celebration hosted during the 2020 holiday break when college students return home for vacation. Keep in mind that restrictions may last some time.

STEP 3: 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.

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 4: Be flexible and understand your plan might still need to change as the pandemic evolves



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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.

DURING YOUR PLANNING

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, and that creativity can be applied to graduation and other end-of-year events. Like many things in life, 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.

Some ideas to get your 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.

NOTE

Some guidance adapted from Independent School Management and the Tennessee Department of Education.

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