

# Guidance for Graduation Ceremonies during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The safety, health, and well-being of our students, staff, and their families is our top priority. The Department of Health is providing the following guidance for public and private K–12 schools to consider for graduation ceremonies during the COVID-19 pandemic. These guidelines clarify graduation celebrations in accordance with Governor Inslee’s emergency proclamation that prohibits large gatherings using a Safe Start Washington approach.

Decisions to host safe and socially distanced graduation ceremonies will remain at the discretion of local school boards and superintendents, as long as they do not contravene the Governor’s prohibitions on holding gatherings in each of the time phases in the Safe Start plan.

Districts and schools may choose to postpone graduation ceremonies. It is not known when large-scale in-person events, not allowed until [Phase 4 of Safe Start](#), will be able to be safely held.

## Graduation Models that Meet Social Distancing Guidelines

### IN HOME

#### 1. Virtual Ceremonies

Schools can hold an online virtual ceremony similar to traditional graduation ceremonies. Commencement speakers and awards acknowledgements held virtually will allow graduates and families to view the ceremony from their homes. Viewing information should be disseminated to graduates and their families.

#### 2. Videos

Ask graduates to record and submit individual videos or pictures with short messages to their graduating classmates. Together with recorded speeches by invited speakers, a graduation video highlights the graduates’ school experiences and provides a long-term memento.

#### 3. Social Media

Highlight graduates 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.

## OUT OF HOME

Before planning a ceremony outside the home, consider the following:

- The safest option right now is for everyone to stay home.
- Given the importance of the graduation milestone, having an event outside the home may encourage people in high-risk groups (particularly older adults and people with underlying health conditions) or ill individuals to attend rather than stay at home.
- What accommodations need to be made to ensure equitable participation (e.g., students and families without access to a vehicle).

### 4. Gallery Drive

Schools or districts may print and post large yard signs with pictures and names of graduates in a specified location and allow people to drive by these signs slowly at will or at specified times. All people, including students, must remain in their cars. Traffic control may be necessary.

### 5. Drive-through (*Safe Start Phase 2+ Only*)

Students, and only their immediate family members who are staying at home together, should arrive in waves and leave after their individual recognition. Students must remain in the car and should be in the passenger seat. The school may arrange to call the students name over an outdoor audio system and/or have a photo taken of students as they go by. These events will require scheduling, traffic control, school safety personnel, etc. and may be appropriate for small- to medium-sized graduating classes in less trafficked areas. No more than five people, including the school staff and any photographers or videographers, should be present at the drive-through location, and each must stay at least six feet apart.

### 6. Drive-in (*Safe Start Phase 2+ Only*)

Only students, and only their immediate family members who are staying at home together and who are not sick, may arrive in the same vehicle.

- (a) All persons attending the ceremony must drive up in an enclosed vehicle and remain in that same vehicle during the entire ceremony. Individuals should not get out of their vehicle during the ceremony for any reason.
- (b) Vehicle windows, sunroofs, and convertible tops must remain closed during the entire ceremony unless the vehicle is parked more than six feet from any other vehicle.
- (c) No more than 10 people may be in a single vehicle.

These ceremonies can be done at drive-in movie theaters, school parking lots, stadium parking lots, or other large parking lot venues that could be exclusively used for the graduation event. Multiple ceremonies may be needed depending on the class size. Large projected screens and sound equipment may be required. Students and families without vehicles would need alternative accommodations and transportation that complies with social distancing requirements.

### **7. Recorded or Livestreamed Individualized Ceremony at School (*Safe Start Phase 2+ Only*)**

Individual students may come to the school at prearranged times to walk across a stage in their cap and gown and have a photo/video taken. This may also be coordinated with time for students to pick up any personal belongings at the school. All efforts must be made to ensure physical distancing of six feet or more and avoid congregating among students. This effort requires *precise* scheduling and ample time. For ceremonies at schools, students must walk across a stage or area and pose for a picture individually. No more than 5 students may be waiting in the same area at any one time. Students should wear a cloth face covering while outside of their vehicle. Mark the standing locations of graduates waiting in line to ensure students remain at least six feet apart at all times and mark safe walking pathways for students exiting cars. Students may remove their cloth face coverings immediately before walking across the stage or having their individual photo taken. They should put their face covering back on as soon as they complete their individualized ceremony. Operate the ventilation system with the maximum amount of outside air. No more than five total people (including the student, staff, and photographer/videographer) should be present in any room at one time. Ensure the ventilation system is operating to bring in the maximum amount of outside air.

## **Guidance for Safe Ceremonies**

**The following guidelines must be employed as appropriate for any out of home ceremonies (Phase 2 Options Only):**

- High risk populations should stay home.
- People who have COVID-19 or who are in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, must remain at home in isolation or quarantine.
- People must stay home if they feel sick.
- Each vehicle may contain only members from a single household who are not sick (no comingling of families or friends within a vehicle).
- There may be no person-to-person contact during any ceremony. Individuals may not hand students diplomas, or any other items, or shake graduates' hands.
- Districts and schools should, if possible, ensure students receive diplomas and caps and gowns in advance through the mail or delivery so they can arrive dressed and with their diplomas in hand. Students may also collect these items at the school during packet pick-up, meal distribution, or locker clean-out. Please use careful scheduling and ensure social distancing guidelines are followed.
- Clearly communicate expectations and procedures related to photography. Please ensure students and families are aware of photography/video policies.
- Consider available space in calculating capacity to determine the number of ceremonies needed. Consider limiting attendance and broadcasting the ceremony via a livestream platform and/or recording the ceremony to provide access to those not in attendance.

- Consider the timing of when ceremonies take place. Consider weather conditions, such as sun exposure, heat, and rain. Take appropriate precautions related to weather protection. Vehicles should be turned off during the ceremony. Only staff may be outside of their cars.
- There should be no refreshments to prevent areas of congregation and additional areas to monitor. Restroom access will be limited and available for *emergency use only*. Anyone waiting in line must be six feet or more apart from others. Schools or districts should ensure proper cleaning of facilities. Students and families should be advised in advance that refreshments will not be available and restroom access limited to emergencies only.
- Ensure facilities are accessible to persons with disabilities and provide all necessary accommodations for students with special needs.
- Set expectations, policies, and guidelines in advance, and reiterate those before the ceremony day and at the start of the ceremony to ensure overall health and safety.
- Districts should consult with local public health departments, law enforcement, and legal counsel in planning any drive-in, drive-through or recorded in-person events.

**In-Person ceremonies with audiences are not safe whether indoors or outside.** Ceremonies held outside in stadiums or football fields are not allowed, regardless of ability to social/physically distance. In-person social gatherings with people from multiple households, even in situations where ample space between attendees could be accommodated, does not comply with the prohibition on gatherings. Gathering increases the potential for transmission of COVID-19. Likewise, indoor graduations/commencement ceremonies will not be permitted.

**We congratulate all graduates and their families and wish everyone safe, healthy, and happy graduation ceremonies.**

## **Addendum from Washington State Department of Labor and Industries:**

### **Safety and Health Requirements for Staff Participating in In-person Ceremonies**

All school districts operating during Phase 2 have a general obligation to keep a safe and healthy facility in accordance with state and federal law, and comply with the following COVID-19 worksite-specific safety practices, as outlined in Governor Jay Inslee's "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" Proclamation 20-25, and in accordance with the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries [General Requirements and Prevention Ideas for Workplaces](#) and the Washington State Department of Health Workplace and Employer Resources & Recommendations at <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Coronavirus/workplace>.

School districts must specifically ensure operations follow the main L&I COVID-19 requirements to protect workers, including:

- Educate workers in the language they understand best about coronavirus and how to prevent transmission and the employer's COVID-19 policies.
- Maintain minimum six-foot separation between all employees (and customers) in all interactions at all times. When strict physical distancing is not feasible for a specific task, other prevention measures are required, such as use of barriers, minimize staff or customers in narrow or enclosed areas, stagger breaks, and work shift starts.
- Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, goggles, face shields and face masks as appropriate or required to employees for the activity being performed. Cloth facial coverings must be worn by every employee not working alone on the jobsite unless their exposure dictates a higher level of protection under Department of Labor & Industries safety and health rules and guidance. Refer to [Coronavirus Facial Covering and Mask Requirements](#) for additional details. A cloth facial covering is described in the Department of Health guidance, <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/ClothFacemasks.pdf>.
- Ensure frequent and adequate hand washing with adequate maintenance of supplies. Use disposable gloves where safe and applicable to prevent transmission on tools or other items that are shared.
- Establish a housekeeping schedule that includes frequent cleaning and sanitizing with a particular emphasis on commonly touched surfaces.
- Screen employees for signs/symptoms of COVID-19 at start of shift. Make sure sick employees stay home or immediately go home if they feel or appear sick. Cordon off any areas where an employee with probable or confirmed COVID-19 illness worked, touched surfaces, etc. until the area and equipment is cleaned and sanitized. Follow the [cleaning guidelines set by the CDC](#) to deep clean and sanitize.

A site-specific COVID-19 Supervisor shall be designated by the employer at each job site to monitor the health of employees and enforce the COVID-19 job site safety plan.

A worker may refuse to perform unsafe work, including hazards created by COVID-19. And, it is unlawful for their employer to take adverse action against a worker who has engaged in safety-protected activities under the law if their work refusal meets certain requirements.

Employees who choose to remove themselves from a worksite because they do not believe it is safe to work due to the risk of COVID-19 exposure may have access to certain leave or unemployment benefits. Employers must provide high-risk individuals covered by Proclamation 20-46 with their choice of access to available employer-granted accrued leave or unemployment benefits if an alternative work arrangement is not feasible. Other employees may have access to expanded family and medical leave included in the

Families First Coronavirus Response Act, access to use unemployment benefits, or access to other paid time off depending on the circumstances. Additional information is available at <https://www.lni.wa.gov/agency/outreach/paid-sick-leave-and-coronavirus-covid-19-common-questions>.