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Updated Interim Guidance for End of Academic Year Celebrations During the COVID-19 State of Emergency

Updated April 12, 2021

This updated guidance from the New York State Department of Health (DOH) supersedes the June 14, 2020 guidance for “Graduation Celebrations during the COVID-19 State of Emergency” and is informed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) [“Guidance for Organizing Large Events and Gatherings,”](#) updated March 8, 2021.

Updated Guidance:

Effective May 1, 2021, in response to New York’s continued efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in alignment with the State’s strategic approach for a phased reopening, this updated guidance provides additional alternative end of academic year celebration options for commencements and graduation ceremonies. Effective June 1, 2021, end of academic year social gatherings organized by educational institutions (e.g., proms and balls) may occur, in accordance with this guidance.

Background:

State DOH and federal CDC continue to closely monitor the COVID-19 outbreak. In recognition of the important milestone that end of academic year celebrations provides for young adults in New York State, particularly in this unprecedented time, DOH is providing this guidance in alignment with the State’s strategic approach for a phased reopening.

While the celebration of graduation is encouraged, it must be done while maintaining public health precautions for COVID-19. COVID-19 primarily spreads person-to-person via respiratory droplets through close contact. As a result, large gatherings present a significant risk to individuals and communities. Attending events and gatherings increases your risk of getting and spreading COVID-19. Event organizers should consider the level of risk when deciding to host an event. By promoting healthy behaviors and maintaining healthy environments, risk will be reduced when large events and gatherings are held.

DOH and CDC continue to recommend that large gatherings be avoided, particularly those in which social distancing cannot be maintained between people who live in different households. Nothing in this guidance would prohibit delaying a graduation ceremony until the risk of COVID-19 transmission has diminished. DOH will continue to monitor public health data and will revise this guidance when appropriate.

Effective May 1, 2021, DOH offers these updated celebration options for colleges, universities, and schools to consider:

Virtual Celebrations

Districts and schools can honor graduating students virtually.

- Virtual ceremonies:
 - Host an online virtual ceremony and consider broadcasting live, if possible.
 - The ceremony can be similar to traditional graduation ceremonies in terms of commencement speakers and acknowledgements of awardees.
 - NOTE: Any in-person filming must adhere to current public health requirements, including limiting in-person gatherings to no more than 100 individuals indoors or 200 individuals outdoors in non-residential settings, ensuring social distancing is maintained, and wearing an acceptable face covering.
- Videos:
 - Pre-record and make available a graduation ceremony, similar to a traditional graduation ceremony in terms of commencement speakers and acknowledgements of awardees.
 - NOTE: Any in-person filming must adhere to current public health requirements, including limiting in-person gatherings to no more than 100 individuals indoors or 200 individuals outdoors in non-residential settings, ensuring social distancing is maintained, and wearing an acceptable face covering.
 - Ask graduates to send individual videos with short messages to their graduating classmates to include in the video.

Celebrations that Maximize Social Distancing

While virtual events are strongly encouraged, allowable in-person graduation events include:

- Drive-in Ceremonies:
 - Students, and family members who reside in the same household, should arrive and remain in cars for the entire ceremony.
 - Ceremonies can be held at drive-in movie theaters, school parking lots, stadium parking lots, or other large parking lot venues that could be exclusively reserved for the graduation event.
 - Cars must be spaced at least 6 feet apart. 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 to be provided alternative accommodations and transportation that complies with social distancing requirements.
- Drive-through Ceremonies:
 - Students, and family members who reside in the same household, should arrive by assigned time and leave after their individual recognition.
 - Individual students may come to the school at prearranged times, may exit the car individually, in their cap and gown if available, to walk across a stage in their cap and gown and have a photo taken. However single-direction flow should be

marked to cross the graduation stage or take a photo, and the standing locations of graduates waiting to cross the graduation stage or take a photo must be clearly marked to ensure all individuals remain at least six feet apart at all times.

- Any high-touch surfaces (e.g. podium, handrail) must be frequently cleaned and disinfected.
- There must not be person-to-person contact during the celebration. Individuals may not shake hands or hug.
- Diplomas, or any other items, can only be handed from one designated individual (e.g. dean, superintendent, principal) to students if both individuals are wearing a face covering and either using gloves or applying hand sanitizer between touching of objects. Otherwise, diplomas, or any other items, should be pre-arranged for students to retrieve them without direct interaction with other individuals.
- Any individual in attendance must wear a mask or face covering at all times, if they are over age two and able to medically tolerate a covering. Individual students may temporarily remove their masks or face coverings while crossing the award area or having their individual photo taken by the district or school.
- These events will require precise scheduling, traffic control, and school safety personnel, etc. and may be appropriate for small to medium-sized graduating classes.
- Students and families without vehicles would need to be provided alternative accommodations and transportation that complies with social distancing requirements.

Additional Considerations for Vehicle-based Events

- Consider the timing of when ceremonies take place. For individuals outside of their cars, consider weather conditions, such as sun exposure, heat, and rain. Take appropriate precautions related to weather protection. Consider if cars need to be turned off during the ceremony. Only staff, and for drive through graduations, a limited number of students, may be outside of their cars.
- Single-direction flow should be clearly marked for cars entering/exiting any celebration area.

- Individualized Ceremonies:

- School officials may visit each graduate's home, while remaining outside and at least six feet away, to congratulate and take photos of each graduate in their cap and gown and holding their diploma.
- This type of recognition may need to be conducted over the course of several days depending on the class size.

Celebrations that Maintain Social Distancing

In alignment with the safe, gradual return of congregate social and commercial activities (e.g., [sports competitions](#), [performing arts and entertainment](#), [in-person and catered events](#)), DOH provides the below options based on the location and scale of the events that colleges,

universities, schools, students, and their families want to pursue for in-person gatherings to celebrate the end of the academic year.

Event organizers will need to determine the number of events needed based upon class size and available space to maintain social distancing protocol. If conducting multiple events in the same space, CDC and DOH cleaning and disinfection protocols must be adhered to in between events, including cleaning and disinfection of any shared surfaces (e.g., chairs, podiums, handrails, etc.).

At all events regardless of location or scale, the organizers must ensure that attendees follow these precautions:

- Contact Information for Tracing: One attendee from each attending party/household/family must sign-in before or immediately upon arrival to the event, providing their full name, address, email, and phone number for use in potential contact tracing efforts, if necessary. The sign-in process may be conducted through any means to collect the above contact information, including but not limited to an online form, digital application, e-mail, and/or paper form.
 - The sign-in data must be retained for a minimum period of 28 days and such data made available to State and local health authorities upon request.
- Health Screening: Attendees must receive a health screening questionnaire prior to the event. The health screening shall consist of questions regarding current or recent [COVID-19 symptoms](#) (e.g., temperature in excess of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit), close or proximate contact with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 case(s)¹, recent positive COVID-19 test result(s), and compliance with State's [travel advisory](#).
 - Entry to the event must be denied to any attendee who fails the health screening questionnaire, as well as any members of the attendee's party who may have been in close contact with such patron within the past 10 days (e.g., family members, individuals who share the same residence).
- Social Distancing: Attendees must practice social distancing by maintaining a distance of, at least, six feet from other individuals, except for members of the same immediate party/household/family.
 - Signs, tape, or other materials must be used to demarcate six feet of distance between attendees while standing and walking, and to ensure any seating for different parties of attendees are six feet apart.
 - Diplomas, or any other items, can only be handed from one designated individual (e.g. dean, superintendent, principal) to students if both individuals are wearing a face covering and either using gloves or applying hand sanitizer between touching of objects. Otherwise, diplomas, or any other items, should be pre-arranged for students to retrieve them without direct interaction with other individuals.

¹ DOH advises that close contact is being within 6 feet of an individual for 10 minutes or more within a 24-hour period, starting from 2 days before their symptoms developed or if asymptomatic, 2 days before they were tested. (Close contact does not include individuals who work in a health care setting wearing appropriate, required personal protective equipment.)

- Sharing or exchanging materials of any kind poses an increased risk of transmission of COVID-19 and should be prohibited (e.g., throwing graduation caps, giving gifts).
- Face Coverings: Attendees must wear acceptable face coverings at all times; provided, however, that attendees may remove their face coverings when seated to eat or drink. The face covering requirement applies to any attendee over the age of two and able to medically tolerate such covering.
 - Attendees may also temporarily remove face coverings while presenting or speaking at the event, provided that such attendee maintain 12 feet of social distance, or be separated by an appropriate physical barrier, from other attendees.
 - Students may also temporarily remove their face coverings while crossing an award area or having their individual photo taken.
- Controlled Movement: Event organizers must ensure that the number of attendees is confirmed in advance to ensure compliance with capacity, plan movement of individuals throughout the premises, and prevent unnecessary congregation or foot-traffic congestion in common areas (e.g., entrances, exits, restrooms)
 - Students may walk across a stage or area and pose for a picture individually. However single-direction flow should be marked to cross the graduation stage or take a photo, and the standing locations of graduates waiting to cross the graduation stage or take a photo must be clearly marked to ensure all individuals remain at least six feet apart at all times.

At events where the number of attendees will exceed the State's gathering limits (i.e., 100 people indoors or 200 people outdoors in non-residential settings, as of April 12, 2021), event organizers must also require and ensure that public-facing employees, event staff, and attendees have received a negative diagnostic test result for COVID-19 using a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or DOH authorized polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or other nucleic acid amplification test (NAATs) of comparable analytical sensitivity performance that was performed on a specimen (e.g., swab) collected within 72 hours of the event. Responsible Parties may also accept negative test results for COVID-19 from an FDA authorized antigen test performed on a specimen collected within 6 hours of the event. Alternatively, individuals may provide proof of having completed the COVID-19 vaccination series at least 14 days prior to the date of the event.

- Individuals must present proof of the recent negative diagnostic test result or proof of completed immunization (e.g., mobile application, screenshot, image, paper form) to designated employees or event staff prior to, or immediately upon, arrival to the event.
- Individuals who have fully recovered from a lab-confirmed case of COVID-19 in the last 3 months and who do not have any recent or current symptoms are not required to produce a recent negative diagnostic test result but must provide proof of illness and recovery (e.g., proof of a prior positive test result or completed order of isolation within the last 90 days).
- Any individual who fails to present a negative diagnostic test result or proof of immunization, as required, must be denied entry to the event. (Proof of recent negative

diagnostic test result or proof of completed immunization does not need to be retained by the event organizer.)

Additionally, at events exceeding the State’s gathering limits, event organizers must notify the respective county health department or local public health authority by submitting event details to the local health authority, at least 5 days in advance of the event date, and such details shall include but not be limited to the (1) Responsible Parties’ contact information, (2) event name or function, (3) event address, (4) event date and time, (5) event duration (including loading and unloading times), (6) expected number of event attendees, (7) expected number of event staff, and (8) location on premises (e.g., indoor, outdoor) indicated by description and/or on event floor plan. Events may be subject to inspection by State and local health authorities to ensure compliance with all provisions of the guidance.

The following tables provide options for outdoor and indoor events based upon their location and scale. Outdoor events are strongly encouraged by DOH and are defined as an open-air space designed or used for the viewing of an event (e.g., open-air theaters with ancillary facilities, fixed seating amphitheaters, flexible seating amphitheaters, pavilions, bandshells, grandstands), which may have a temporary or fixed cover (e.g., awning, roof) so long as such cover has at least two sides open for airflow. For a side to be open for airflow, at least 50% of the area of such side must be open whenever events are being conducted or when attendees are on the premises.

OUTDOOR EVENTS	Capacity	Proof of Recent Negative Test or Immunization	Examples	Notes
Residential • Homes	Up to 25 people	No	Party, Reception	Outdoor residential gathering limit is 25 people
Small Scale • Event Venue • Catering Hall • Performance Space	Up to 200 people or two attendees per student, up to 50% capacity	No, optional	Reception, Prom, Graduation	Outdoor social gathering limit is 200 people
Medium Scale • Event Venue • Catering Hall • Football Field	201 to 500 people, up to 33% capacity	Yes, required	Prom, Graduation, Commencement	Catering capacity is 50% in NYC and 75% outside of NYC
Large Scale • Stadiums or Performance Venues with 2,500+ capacity	Over 500 people, up to 20% capacity	Yes, required	Graduation, Commencement	

INDOOR EVENTS	Capacity	Proof of Recent Negative Test or Immunization	Examples	Notes
Residential <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homes 	Up to 10 people	No	Party, Reception	Indoor residential gathering limit is 10 people
Small Scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Event Venue Catering Hall Gymnasium 	Up to 100 people or two attendees per student, up to 50% capacity	No, optional	Reception, Prom, Graduation	Indoor social gathering limit is 100 people; catering capacity is 50% in NYC and 75% outside of NYC
Medium Scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Event Venue Catering Hall Performance Space 	101 to 150 people, up to 33% capacity	Yes, required	Prom, Graduation, Commencement	Catering capacity is 50% in NYC and 75% outside of NYC
Large Scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arenas or Performance Venues with 1,500+ capacity 	Over 150 people, up to 10% capacity	Yes, required	Graduation, Commencement	

For any in-person event, event organizers must consider the following:

- Strongly encourage limiting the length of ceremonies to shorten the time the individuals are exposed to each other.
- Limit group performances and speakers, and ensure that individuals do not share microphones or other equipment, unless it is appropriately cleaned and disinfected between use.
- Assign staff to monitor entrances and egresses to prevent congregation. Consider staggering arrival times to ease crowds at access points.
- Implement limits on the number of guests that are permitted to attend the ceremony, in accordance with the above capacity restrictions by location, or consider holding student-only commencements.
- To the extent practicable, 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 to avoid exchanging of items in-person. Students or families may also collect these items at the school during personal item/locker clean-out or meal distribution, so long as social distancing, staggered clean out times, and other guidelines are followed.
- To the extent practicable, there should be reduced restroom occupancy and no refreshments provided to prevent areas of congregation and additional areas to monitor. Students and families should be advised in advance that restroom facilities will be limited, and refreshments will not be available.

- Prohibit sharing of food or beverages between individuals unless they are members of the same household.
- Ensure that facilities are accessible to persons with disabilities and provide all necessary accommodations for students and family members or guests with special needs.
- Clearly communicate expectations and procedures related to photography, and ensure all students and families are aware of and adhere to photography policies. Universities, colleges, and schools may provide a photographer to take multiple pictures of all individual graduates and provide the photos to families to reduce concern of missing these important moments.
- Set expectations, policies, and guidelines in advance, ensure all students and families are aware of and adhere to established policies, and reiterate those before the ceremony day and at the start of the ceremony, to ensure overall health and safety.
- Each individual (e.g., student, family, faculty, staff) must wear a face covering while in attendance. As noted above, students may momentarily remove their face covering for pictures provided that they maintain appropriate social distancing from other individuals.

Effective June 1, 2021, Considerations for Proms and Balls

Activities traditionally associated with proms and balls, such as eating and dancing, present additional risks for viral transmission of COVID-19. To mitigate the risk of spread, proms and balls that involve eating and/or dancing, regardless of venue, must comply with the following restrictions in addition to the above venue and capacity restrictions, which shall take effect on June 1, 2021:

- Event organizers must ensure that attendees are not congregating, except when seated at their assigned table. Attendees should only be standing when necessary (e.g., enter/exit, restroom, use of staffed buffet), when essential to the event (e.g., entrance), or, when permitted under the below circumstances.
- Event organizers may provide cocktail receptions for attendees where standing is permitted with strict adherence to social distancing; provided, however, that attendees only remove their face coverings to consume food and beverages while seated. Further, attendees must not remove their face covering and must not consume food and beverage if members of different parties are within six feet.
- Event organizers may permit live music, entertainment (e.g., DJ), and/or dancing within the following parameters, which will be revisited by the State as the public health condition continues to change:
 - Live music performers and other entertainers, particularly if unmasked or playing a wind instrument, must be separated from attendees by either 12 feet or an appropriate physical barrier.
 - Attendees may dance with members of their same party in designated and clearly marked dancing areas that allow for appropriate social distancing between members of different parties and any tables (i.e., at least, six feet apart). Attendees must wear face coverings while in the dancing area.
 - Event organizers can consider creating dance zones for tables, assigning parties to different times on dance floor, alternating which tables of attendees can dance or be seated, setting and enforcing capacity limits

for dance floors, and/or other measures to ensure appropriate distancing between attendees.

- Event organizers should consider staggered intervals for food service at staffed buffets to allow attendees to maintain social distance while waiting in line.
- Event organizers should consider serving any passed foods (e.g., hors d'oeuvres) in containers that limit touching of any shared surfaces (e.g., platters) by attendees.
- Events are subject to inspection by State and local health authorities to ensure compliance with all provisions of State-issued guidance.

Additional Resources

- [DOH COVID-19 Webpage](#)
- [New York Forward Reopening Webpage](#)
 - [Higher Education](#)
 - [Pre-K to Grade 12 Schools](#)
 - [Professional Sports Competitions with Fans](#)
 - [Small & Medium Scale Performing Arts and Entertainment](#)
 - [Large Scale Performing Arts & Entertainment](#)
- [CDC COVID-19 Webpage](#)
- [CDC COVID-19 Large Gatherings](#)
- [CDC COVID-19 Guidance for Organizing Large Events and Gatherings](#)