



## Graduation Ceremonies: Celebrate Safely

As of February 4, 2021, every EMS Region of the state has re-entered Phase 4 of the Restore Illinois plan. The relaxing of restrictions on activities has brought renewed optimism for the return of more normal high school experiences, such as interscholastic sports, and even graduation ceremonies. Administrators at middle schools, junior highs, and high schools are excited, if not a bit anxious, about planning a celebration of not only academic achievement, but perhaps, perseverance on the part of students, families, and staff.

When planning a graduation ceremony that is still months off, during pandemic conditions that may shift in the wrong direction due to new virus variants, relaxed restrictions, and fatigue by the masses, administrators should remember: Hope for the best, but plan for the worst.

Assuming Phase 4 holds, the following restrictions and requirements apply:



**Indoor Ceremonies:**

Capacity limits of  $\leq 50$  people per space.  
Social Distancing between individuals of 6 feet.

**Outdoor Ceremonies:**

Group limits of  $\leq 50$  people per group.  
30 feet between groups. Social Distancing between individuals of 6 feet.

**Face Coverings:**

Regardless of whether the ceremony is indoors or outdoors, ALL participants (including spectators) must wear face coverings at all times.

**Hand Sanitizer:**

Hand sanitizer should be readily available to all participants.



The capacity/participant limits discussed above, make an outdoor ceremony a more attractive alternative. But planning an outdoor ceremony will still require back-up plans to account for bad weather. Even in late-May and early-June, Illinois weather can be stormy. Outdoor planning should include “rain dates.” Ultimately, if the rain dates are unavailable due to continued bad weather, the school may need to pivot to multiple smaller indoor ceremonies, virtual ceremonies, or cancellation.

Other considerations for promoting the safety of the ceremony include:

## 1 Capacity & Social Distancing

**Limit the dignitaries on the dais.** Everyone likes to be part of a celebration, but given social distancing restrictions, consideration of limiting the number of people on the dais to the superintendent, principal, and a board member.

**Limit the number of spectators if necessary.** Many large high schools already do so, but may consider further limits. No one wants to miss an important event like graduation, but social distancing requirements and facility capacity limits may dictate the need for such restrictions. Also, the school needs to be able to plan on the number of persons attending. Social distancing will need to be required between different households.

**Consider limiting number of faculty at the ceremony this year.** Many districts rightfully believe that all faculty must be present as a show of commitment and support to the new graduates. But due to capacity limits this year, reducing the number of faculty may help accommodate the attendance of more family members. There should be a faculty presence, but consider limiting to 8th grade teachers for a middle or junior high school graduation, and senior level course or transition program teachers or department chairs for high school ceremonies. Ask teachers not attending the ceremony to record congratulatory video messages to be broadcast as part of the ceremony or at another time.

## 2 Gathering and Movement

**Consider having the graduates stand at their seats** when their name is called, rather than walking to the dais. Given that the graduates’ seats will be spread out, loved ones watching from the stands will be able to easily see them. Because graduates will not be marching to the dais to retrieve a diploma, this protocol has the added benefit of not needing the graduates to arrange themselves in alphabetical order for the entrance processional, which would otherwise cause graduates to unnecessarily gather.

**No gathering for photos or cap throwing tradition.**





### 3 Manage Duration

**Find ways to limit the length of the ceremony.** Graduation ceremonies already have a propensity to be lengthy. Limit the number of speakers where appropriate. Ask speakers to adhere to time limits. Consider handing out special awards at separate ceremonies or virtually.

**Prepare video presentations ahead of time.** These can be shown at the ceremony, or will be useful in the event of the need to pivot to a virtual ceremony due to weather or pandemic restrictions.

### 4 Avoid Unnecessary Contact

**Email ceremony programs ahead of time** so you do not have to distribute at the ceremony. If your school insists on graduates walking across the stage, avoid contact with them. **No handshakes or hugs.** Consider **placing the diploma on a table for the graduate to pick-up themselves.**

### 5 Other Mitigations

**Food and drink should be limited,** especially indoors. So, if it is a hot day – keep the ceremony on a quick pace. **Ask all participants to self-certify that they are not experience COVID-19 symptoms.** If your district conducts surveillance testing, consider asking all participants and their attending family members to test the day before the ceremony.

### 6 The Prom Dilemma

Prepare for the Prom Dilemma. Parents and students are already starting to inquire about holding prom this year. The significance of a prom as part of the end of high school celebration has only been enhanced after last year’s cancellation. If you “must” hold a school-sanctioned prom, only do so in accordance with applicable Restore Illinois restrictions, in consultation with the local health department, and scheduled with enough time before the graduation ceremony to allow for quarantine and isolation. This may prove difficult with applicable capacity limits. With current social distancing guidelines, an appropriate theme might be “Welcome to Bomont.” Parents will undoubtedly plan “private proms,” having not learned the lessons of last May and June. As a practical matter, schools cannot control these private gatherings, but can ask parents to plan them to take place after the graduation ceremony.