

Interim Considerations for End-of-Year School Events Spring 2021



DPH is offering this guidance document for high school administrators to provide some strategies to consider as part of their planning activities for proms during the spring semester, as well as for K–12 school and university administrators planning for graduation ceremonies. These strategies are intended as recommendations and should not be viewed as representative of current or future requirements nor as an exhaustive list of all considerations that should be included in planning and implementation for these events.

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For students in Connecticut schools or institutions of higher education, spring semester activities like proms and graduation ceremonies are rights-of-passage and represent significant and important life events, not only for students, but also for their families and friends. As important as these experiences are, the risk of spread of COVID-19 among school staff, students, and their families participating in these activities during the pandemic remains significant. Without appropriate mitigation strategies and comprehensive planning, large events with multiple interactions between individuals may make contact tracing very challenging. Leadership planning these events, and all attendees, will also have to consider the potential downstream consequences of hosting or attending large events with limited control over the movement and interactions among attendees, which could include quarantining an entire class of students if a single case of COVID-19 is present at an event.

With the continuing spread of more contagious virus variants and other unknown variables still in play, the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) continues to urge individuals and organizations to take a cautious approach to event planning. Individuals and organizations should assume the continued need for inclusion of many of the standard public health protective measures that have been in place throughout the pandemic. Some of those measures include:

- mask wearing by all individuals engaging in large group activities (regardless of vaccination status);
- social distancing whenever possible;
- limiting the number of people (cohorting) and duration of close contact with others;
- excluding symptomatic or quarantined individuals from gatherings;
- providing hand sanitizer stations for frequent cleaning of hands; and
- signage and markings to remind individuals about the mitigation strategies in use and to assist with compliance.

Additionally, depending on when these events are scheduled, restrictions on gathering sizes may still be in place, including percentage capacity limitations and/or allowable attendance caps for any single event. School districts and event organizers should remain aware of the State's capacity limitations in place for graduation ceremonies, private event venues, outdoor gatherings, etc. during the course of their planning and be prepared to adjust their operations according to current and updated rules posted on the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) [website](#).

Below are several other design and operational strategies to support substantial and memorable end-of-year experiences while also reducing COVID-19 transmission risks. Schools may want to consider including one or more of the following key strategies in their operational plans for end-of-year activities.

Location

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most consistent messages has been that outdoor activities are safer than those occurring indoors. Schools choosing to host in-person graduation ceremonies and associated activities such as “grad nights” should consider:

- holding events outdoors, which provides the lowest-risk environment possible for attendees;
- utilizing larger outdoor spaces, which will allow for potentially larger capacities with appropriate spacing;
- holding “open air” events, rather than using tents with sides, or other enclosed/confined outdoor spaces;
- developing contingency plans for inclement weather by having one or more alternative “rain dates”; and
- if moving graduation activities indoors is unavoidable, planners should be prepared to significantly reduce capacity, including further restricting the number of guests allowed per student, depending on available indoor space and the need for appropriate distancing.

Timing

As the summer approaches, it is anticipated that community COVID-19 transmission rates will likely improve. As such, schools should consider that:

- scheduling the traditional timing of proms and prom related activities (e.g., pre-prom pictures, group travel, after-prom gatherings) later in the school year or after the school year ends can limit the effect of any potential COVID-19 exposures or expanding outbreaks on in-person learning opportunities, AP testing, or other end-of-year academic activities;
- with vaccines becoming available to everyone 16 years old and older on April 1st, delaying proms may have the added benefit of allowing more Connecticut high school juniors and seniors an opportunity to get at least one dose of vaccine, if not fully-vaccinated, to further protect them from severe disease in the event of an exposure at prom;
- hosting a more controlled, outdoor, time-limited event for prom photos at the school in early spring may assist in the district’s ability to operationalize a more casual and open outdoor prom event held toward the end of the semester; and
- combining traditional proms with other events such as “grad nights” into one larger event later in the school year reduces the risk involved with group gatherings by eliminating separate exposures over multiple events.

Testing

As more individuals become fully vaccinated, the need for COVID-19 testing is significantly decreased and more testing resources are available. Additionally, the turnaround times for the receipt of test results can be much shorter than earlier in the pandemic. As part of their event planning, DPH strongly recommends that school districts and event organizers incorporate testing strategies into their end-of-year event planning, specifically:

- work with community testing providers or the mass testing sites located around the state to require proof of a negative COVID-19 test (e.g., within 72 hours) prior to admission to proms, “grad nights”, or other end-of-year group activities, for those students who are not fully vaccinated (i.e., 14 days after their final vaccine dose) or have not recovered from a known COVID-19 infection in the prior 90 days;
- use PCR testing rather than or in addition to antigen tests, as the effectiveness and reliability of antigen testing is not likely to be adequate when used for the purpose of a one-time screening;

- have resources in place for rapid contact tracing and be prepared to quarantine and exclude any friends or other individuals who are determined to be close contacts should one or more students test positive in advance of an event;
- require pre-event registration to determine planned capacities and assist with post-event contact tracing, if necessary;
- restrict event participation to those students currently attending their school in order to have greater control over testing, contact tracing, and isolation/quarantine of individuals both before and after the event, if necessary; and
- communicate with students the importance of staying away from social or other gatherings while test results are pending so that they or their friends/classmates are not impacted by quarantine and exclusion should someone in their group receive a positive result.

Movement

For proms or other similar events, times when masks are removed to eat or drink represent the period of highest risk for the spread of potentially infectious respiratory droplets. In order to design events in as safely as possible, organizers should consider the following:

- eliminate food and drink at events altogether;
- restrict movement and interactions between individuals if/when meals are to be served;
- operationalize meal periods to occur at one dedicated time during the event in order to prevent repeated removal of masks throughout the duration of the event; and
- allow “mask breaks” to occur in dedicated and controlled areas to increase the likelihood that masks will remain in place during those times when individuals are gathered together outside of these areas; have designated “mask break” areas with dedicated seating with increased spacing, at least 6 feet apart, or open standing areas with adequate space available where individuals may temporarily remove their masks at events like proms, where high-energy activities like dancing are expected.

Alternatives

Even with mitigation strategies in place, some students and families may not be comfortable with the risk level associated with large gatherings in indoor settings. Just as the relative isolation of the past year can have effects on mental health, returning to larger gatherings and bigger crowds may result in anxiety. Schools may want to consider providing alternatives such as:

- sponsoring one or more smaller alternative events either in place of, or in addition to, the traditional prom, “grad night”, or other similar gatherings;
- allowing and providing access for virtual participation by students and families for graduations; and
- providing alternative ceremonies for students to receive their diplomas and allow them to capture the traditional photo receiving their diploma without the interaction involved with a large crowd.

The strategies listed above are not intended to be an exhaustive list of considerations for reducing possible COVID-19 risks associated with end-of-year events and activities. At the very least, these should be used as a starting point for school administrators, local health departments, students, teachers, and families to engage in discussions and planning together. Engaging all stakeholders is the best way to support memorable end-of-year experiences, while also reducing COVID-19 transmission risks associated with these activities.