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Will graduations be different this year?

Prepare to be outdoors

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy



Conant High School graduate Kelly Gregory holds a likeness of herself during a send-off parade for seniors at Boomers Stadium in Schaumburg last spring. This year, several suburban districts are exploring having in-person outdoor ceremonies for graduates.



Graduate Sanjana Rastogi smiles as her family drives by a long line of teachers and staff as Hoffman Estates High School holds a senior send-off parade for its Class of 2020 in the school's parking lot. Several suburban districts are exploring having in-person outdoor ceremonies for graduates this spring.



Olivia Seitz elbow bumps principal Tom Koulentes during Libertyville High School's modified graduation ceremony at the school last spring.



Geneva High School senior Sarah Day steps on the stage for a photograph during the school's drive-through graduation event last June. In-person outdoor ceremonies might be the norm this year.

Parking lots, football stadiums and athletic fields will serve as graduation venues this spring as school districts adapt to ever-evolving pandemic limitations.

Several suburban schools are preparing for drive-in or in-person ceremonies with social distancing and other safety precautions — a welcome shift from mostly virtual and drive-by ceremonies forced into use last school year in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many others still are formulating plans to comply with new health guidelines, which eased this week with state officials revising requirements for in-person learning aimed at encouraging a return to classrooms.

Face coverings still are required, but social distancing rules have been relaxed from 6 feet to 3 feet for students and fully vaccinated school employees, according to the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois Department of Public Health.

“Decisions regarding whether to host safe and socially distanced events outside of school, such as open houses, registration, prom, graduation ceremonies, and other extracurricular events, will remain at the discretion of local school boards and superintendents in consultation with local public health departments,” IDPH spokeswoman Melaney Arnold said.

Schools can hold in-person events, indoors or outdoors, in compliance with health guidelines for the use of face masks, capacity limits, social distancing, contact tracing, increased cleaning and disinfection, and limits on gatherings and seating, she added.

In **Elgin Area School District U-46**, which shifted to virtual graduation ceremonies last June, a daylong commencement celebration is planned for May 29 for seniors from all five district high schools. It will be in the parking lot of the NOW Arena — formerly the Sears Centre — in Hoffman Estates.

“It’s really the only way we are going to be able to offer a graduation ceremony based on our current (health) guidance,” Superintendent Tony Sanders said.

Each school will have a separate hourlong drive-in ceremony. Graduates will remain seated in cars with their families and walk onto an outdoor stage to receive diplomas from school principals and administrators when their names are called. Several large screens will be set up at

various points in the parking lot for families to watch the ceremonies. Each school will develop a slideshow of its graduates to be shared online in May, officials said.

Sanders said high school teams also are planning senior end-of-year activities.

“As we receive updated guidance from our health departments, we will ensure all safety protocols are communicated to (parents) and adhered to during our drive-in graduation and all senior activities,” Sanders wrote in a note to families.

Planning is underway for in-person, outdoor ceremonies, at several other suburban districts, including Northwest Suburban High School District 214, Maine Township High School District 207, Indian Prairie Unit District 204, and St. Charles Unit District 303.

Maine East, South and West high schools’ graduations will be May 22, at the school’s football stadium or field, and the ceremonies will be livestreamed and recorded. District 204’s graduations have been at the Northern Illinois University Convocation Center for years, but will move this year to each high school’s stadium May 28. St. Charles East and St. Charles North graduations that in past years have been held inside NIU’s Convocation Center will be outdoors May 24 at the university’s Huskie Stadium.

School leaders say they are trying to figure out ways to make the observances more meaningful for seniors despite pandemic challenges.

“We want to recognize our graduates in the most personal way possible while adhering to safety guidelines,” said Peg Mannion, spokeswoman for Glenbard High School District 87. “Although administrators are still discussing options, they anticipate holding these ceremonies on our campuses. Multiple abbreviated ceremonies will likely have to take place to adhere to safety guidelines.”

Despite limitations on pomp and circumstance rituals, school leaders are striving to observe some traditions, such as having students walk a stage to receive diplomas and allowing senior prom festivities. Some districts are taking a more intimate approach with smaller graduation events to accommodate safety concerns.

“At this time, given the gathering size limitations, it is not reasonable to plan for one large gathering with the entire graduating class at one time,” said Christina Salonikas, spokeswoman for Glenbrook High School District 225.

Glenbrook North and South high schools’ graduations will be held June 6 on campus. Officials are exploring various options for smaller ceremonies “giving each student an opportunity to walk across a stage and receive a diploma,” Salonikas said.

While Palatine-Schaumburg High School District 211 is trying to finalize plans, officials also are working with student and parent groups to craft “creative, safe and enjoyable ways” to celebrate customary end-of-year events, such as award ceremonies, proms and graduations.

“We will do all that we can to make these activities in-person and memorable experiences for our students and their families,” spokesman Tom Petersen said.

---Press Clippings---03/14/2021
There are no U-46 related news stories.

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