

APR 8, 4:56 PM

D.C. Sets Limits On Crowd Sizes At Graduation Ceremonies



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Students and schools are dealing with an unprecedented situation: How to celebrate graduations when people can't get together.

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Schools and universities may plan for in-person graduation ceremonies this spring as long as attendance sizes are limited and physical distancing is observed, Mayor Muriel Bowser said Thursday.

For outdoor ceremonies, pre-K to grade 12 schools, colleges, and universities must limit crowds to 25 percent of a venue's capacity or 2,000 people, whichever is smaller, according to [new guidance](#) from [D.C. Health](#).

Indoor ceremonies are limited to 25 percent of capacity or 250 people, whichever is smaller. After May 1, indoor gatherings may host up to 500 people if a venue does not reach more than one-fourth of its capacity.

The guidance comes as planning for spring commencement festivities across the District is well underway. Last academic year, many ceremonies were canceled, held online, postponed, or drastically modified because of the coronavirus pandemic.

This year, city health department officials set a number of strict guidelines, including requiring face masks, maintaining at least six feet distance between audience members, and restricting groups of guests to six people or fewer.

No more than 10 people will be allowed on stage at a time, according to the guidance. Students may cross a stage for their diplomas but must maintain physical distancing from one another. Food and beverages cannot be sold during graduation ceremonies.

All plans for in-person graduation ceremonies [must be approved](#) by the D.C. government.

American University officials are scheduled to host virtual commencement, [as they did last academic year](#), and are still developing [possible plans for in-person festivities](#). Howard University officials said they will [host an in-person commencement](#) for the class of 2020 and 2021, provided the city approves the university's plans.

High schools have also spent months making arrangements for graduation. At Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School in Congress Heights, administrators are planning to hold an outdoor ceremony that will resemble a traditional commencement.

Students will likely sit spaced apart under a tent, says Stacey Stewart, the director of student affairs. Families will have assigned seating. The school has also tried other ways to make the end of year special for the more than 70 students who are expected to graduate, including waiving costs for caps and gowns and yearbooks.

Stewart says it's particularly important for students to celebrate the milestone in person after a school year that has largely taken place online.

“A lot of us have not seen each other in a year,” she says. “Not everybody is going in the same direction post-high school, so this might be their last time to celebrate and be together.”

Administrators at Washington Latin Public Charter School in Brightwood Park are also set on commemorating graduation in person, principal Diana Smith says. The school is planning to hold its ceremony in the lot of a drive-in theatre outside Baltimore, replicating the commencement it held last school year.

Families will watch the ceremony from their vehicles and students will be projected on the outdoor movie screen as they cross the stage to retrieve their diploma.

“We were determined not to have a virtual ceremony,” Smith says.

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