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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Plan your school recognitions and celebrations

Recognition of achievements, promotions and, especially, graduation, is an essential part of any student's school experience. The pandemic has turned the school experience upside down. While the systems and routines are different, some things remain the same. It is as important as ever to recognize and honor the hard work and achievements of students, especially the culmination of 12 years of hard work at graduation.

Celebrate your graduates

The last year has been an experience of insecurity, uncertainty, fear, lack of motivation and connection. Students who are graduating this year are experiencing higher rates of mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. They are graduating into a difficult environment where entry-level employment may be harder to obtain and the normal college experience will be disrupted.

Graduation is a tremendous accomplishment. Let's send them off with the very best wishes and as much support for their future as possible.

Traditionally or virtually celebrating

Schools can create a positive graduation experience for students regardless of their operational status for in-person, hybrid or remote learning. Now in the middle of year two of this pandemic, we can at least look to socially distanced celebrations from last year as a guide for the Class of 2021.

In-person

Traditional ceremonies may be an option for schools that have been open for in-person activities. If your school has been operating in-person, it will be important to continue following COVID-19 safety guidelines for your ceremony.

Be sure to follow district guidelines for school activities and remind parents about the rules. Limiting attendance to immediate families or splitting ceremonies into more than one event may suffice. If disappointed family members express opposition to the limitations, be sure to publicize the official rules for events, including the CDC list of Frequently Asked Questions for Event Planners. This list includes guidance for the number of guests, how to respond in the event of an outbreak, cleaning recommendations and more. <http://bit.ly/30aTAUo>

Virtual or socially distanced

Virtual activities do not replace personal connections, but they can substitute for normal events if done thoughtfully — and people are getting used to them now. Here are some ideas for honoring graduates from a distance:

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(Over)

Live stream the graduation ceremony, combined with embedded, pre-recorded video messages from the board chair, music performances, valedictorian, etc. The ceremony could still include speeches and recognitions from the principal, superintendent and a few board members, but it can be scripted to include graduate speeches, graduate names with photo screenshots, and even cap tossing. Try to be interactive, inspiring and briefer than in-person events. Personalizing the event is key. Trade off reading names of graduates as their photos flash on screen. Ask students or parents to send them in. Make a photo gallery available on the school website. Offer to send links of the recording.

Deliver diplomas personally. Last year, some principals or superintendents brought diplomas to students at home. Students wore caps and gowns and posed for a photo as they received their diplomas. This works well for schools with smaller enrollments. Larger schools could consider dividing the lists of graduates into smaller groups assigned to all administrators and school board members. Consider posting photos online or mailing a hard copy to each student.

Celebrating the rite of passage

To help your students feel recognized, consider public or community recognition:

- Print posters with class photos if the graduating class is not too large.
- Send a Facebook frame to parents: “Proud to be the parent of a 2021 graduate.” Make frame files in photo editing software or using Facebook’s Frame Studio app (www.facebook.com/help/347754702253981).
- Make lawn signs for your graduating seniors stating, “Home of a South High School Graduate, Class of 2021.”
- Work with local businesses to offer promotions or discounts to graduating seniors.
- Buy an ad or partner with the local paper to print a gallery or list of graduates.

Send ideas to parents for at-home celebration ideas:

- Organize a car parade. Announce a drive-by of seniors. Have them decorate their cars and drive through their neighborhood honking and celebrating. Be sure neighbors know so they can line the street waving.
- Decorate your front door with messages of congratulations and photos of your senior.
- Don’t forget to send graduation announcements. This traditional practice is still an important way to announce this happy occasion and celebrate seniors.
- Plan a virtual graduation party. Send formal invitations, dress up for the video chat, and toast and plan fun activities, including food, dancing, karaoke, etc.

Resources

Schools often generously share resources and ideas. Be sure to check out the activities from colleagues to ensure that students get sufficient recognition to feel honored and ready to close out this chapter of their lives and prepare for what’s next. Here are some examples:

Five ideas for a pandemic-proof graduation

www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/five-ideas-for-a-pandemic-proof-graduation/2020/05

High School Seniors Are ‘Making Lemonade out of Lemons’ With Graduations Online, at Drive-Ins and on Racetracks

<https://time.com/5836369/high-school-graduation-coronavirus>

The Class of COVID-19

www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/17/us/wellesley-college-graduation-coronavirus.html