

Graduation in July? Some N.J. schools won't do it even with Murphy's blessing.

By [Adam Clark | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#) Today 8:33 AM



Old Bridge High School's 2019 graduation ceremony at the PNC Bank Arts Center in Holmdel. Andrew Miller | For NJ Advance Media

The celebration at Andrew Niebuhr's house lasted less than two hours.

It began shortly before 11 a.m. Tuesday when Niebuhr, the father of a Delaware Valley Regional High School senior, heard Gov. Phil Murphy will allow [outdoor, in-person graduation ceremonies](#) beginning July 6.

It ended at precisely 12:35 p.m., when the school district announced it won't be changing its plans for a June 12 drive-thru ceremony.

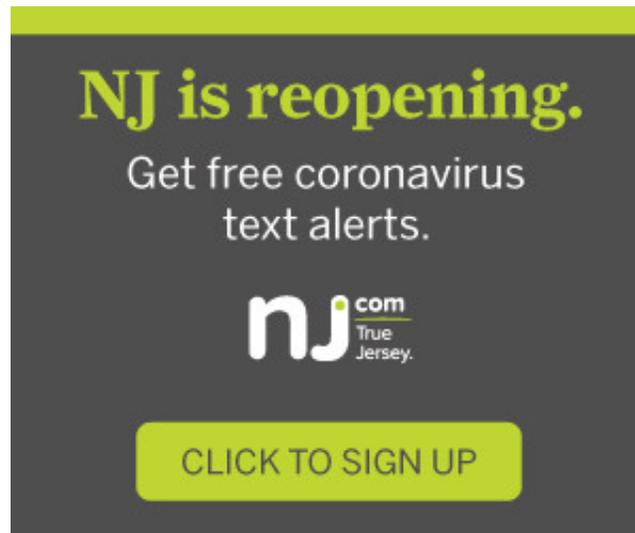
"Everyone is disappointed," Niebuhr said. "We have all been holding out hope that we could hold some sort of graduation ceremony, more than just the virtual classroom that they have been living in for the past three months."

Despite the governor's blessing for July graduation ceremonies as the state rebounds from [the coronavirus pandemic](#), some New Jersey districts say they won't host them for health or logistical reasons. Instead, they plan to stay the course with the virtual or drive-thru ceremonies districts invested time and money in planning after Murphy himself warned last month he [couldn't see schools having in-person graduations](#).

"While I appreciate the sentiment, July graduation brings with it a myriad of legal and liability issues for the district," Delaware Valley Superintendent Daria Wasserbach wrote in an email to students. "In consultation with our attorney and insurance advisor, this is not advisable for the district."

Wasserbach wrote that current seniors are no longer considered Delaware Valley students after June 30. She added the state has given no guidance for what schools should do if an outdoor ceremony must be moved indoors, where a gathering the size of a graduation may not be allowed under Murphy's precautionary order.

Murphy said he would announce details on in-person ceremonies Wednesday afternoon.



The Delaware Valley district plans to deliver caps and gowns to every senior and conduct a drive-thru graduation ceremony June 12, followed by a graduation parade led by firetrucks and police cars. A video tribute will be released later in the day, Wasserbach wrote.

"As you can imagine, we have discussed countless possibilities and exhausted numerous options," wrote Wasserbach, who did not respond to NJ Advance Media's request for comment. "We've lost count of the number of man hours dedicated to graduation planning for 2020."

Parents, students and politicians have made graduation ceremonies [a major flash point](#) in reopening the state, especially after watching milestones such as prom lost to Murphy's near-lockdown measures to contain the virus.

The governor's decision to allow July ceremonies was celebrated by many seniors eager to salvage at least one rite of passage. But its timing also created more challenges for school superintendents who have already spent weeks preparing for a dizzying number of graduation scenarios, said Scott Taylor, superintendent of Highland Park School District.

Taylor's instinct is to maintain the district's June car parade and virtual ceremony, for which it has already signed vendor contracts totaling close to

\$3,000, he said. But more importantly than the money, he's worried moving the ceremony to a large stadium event could prevent some students or family members from attending.

Highland Park, like many communities, is divided on how quickly the state should reopen and how safe it is to attend a graduation, even with required social distancing, Taylor said.

"I have got to weigh the concerns of the community against the benefit of having an outdoor ceremony," he said.

In Teaneck, once the epicenter of New Jersey's COVID-19 outbreak, the school district quickly notified families Tuesday that it won't host a July ceremony. School officials think a June 22 virtual ceremony is best for the health and safety of students, their families and staff, Superintendent Christopher Irving wrote in a message to students.

Schools would have an easier time planning this year's graduation if the state had given a singular directive for what every district should do, Taylor said. Regardless of what districts now decide, he expects they will be criticized by parents and students who prefer the approach a neighboring school district is taking.

"Superintendents are feeling the pressure to do what their peers might be doing because they are accommodating their community's interest," Taylor said. "As much as we all want to get on the same page, we all have different communities."

Indeed, just 15 miles from Highland Park, the Carteret School District plans to host a July ceremony, Superintendent Rosa Diaz said.

There will be challenges, such as asking staff to volunteer to work

graduations in the summer. And there will be limitations, such as a likely limit on the number of guests per students.

But Diaz promised students she would do everything she could to host a ceremony, she said.

"This is what we have been hoping for," Diaz said. "We are excited about it."

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