

## Graduation Q & A

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been committed to providing traditional graduation ceremonies for our 2020 seniors. We would like to provide you with a timeline of the planning process for determining our graduation plans.

In mid-April, when it became apparent that the CDC guidelines would be remaining in effect for the next several weeks, I began meeting with the four high school principals and members of my district leadership team (three of whom have graduating seniors themselves) to develop a plan. We met multiple times throughout April and in early May to determine the safest course of action that would still allow our seniors to experience a graduation ceremony. On May 4, members of my leadership team and I met with representatives from the Florida Department of Health to discuss CDC guidelines currently in place, and how we could continue with our graduations and be in compliance with those requirements. The health department representatives also recommended reaching out to the Department of Education for guidance. The following day, I had a phone call with DOE representatives who communicated DOE's opinion relating to graduation. Based on this guidance, the principals, leadership team, and I met again on Wednesday, May 6 and Thursday, May 7 and further refined our plan. This plan was finalized and released to the School Board members at approximately 6:00 p.m. on Thursday evening, and to the public and media on Friday at 9:00 a.m. We know that there are questions regarding graduation plans, so we would like to answer some of those for you here.

### **Why are the graduates limited to only 4 tickets when Memorial Field will hold thousands of people?**

Current CDC guidelines limit the size of outdoor gatherings to 250 people in areas with minimal to moderate levels of COVID-19. This number includes guests, the graduates themselves, faculty, school officials, videographers, law enforcement, EMS personnel, etc. Every person in attendance, regardless of their role in the event, must be counted as part of the 250.

### **Why are graduations being held at Memorial Field rather than the individual schools?**

There are multiple reasons for this choice of location:

1. Memorial Field is the largest outdoor venue in the county that is ADA compliant and offers adequate seating and parking. Our schools' outdoor areas/fields offer very limited seating, and do not have enough parking to accommodate the number of guests. Those areas are not accommodating to attendees who may have difficulty walking or use walkers or wheelchairs. Use of those areas will not meet risk assessment guidelines set forth by our insurance carriers.
2. Memorial Field allows us to expand the number of tickets given to each student if guidelines are further relaxed. If the number of people allowed at public gatherings increases, we can offer additional tickets for guests.
3. Using one location allows us to pool resources so that we can offer some additional enhancements to our graduations, such as live streaming and professional videography. We are having an internet connection installed at Memorial Field so that we can offer the streaming. Our schools' athletic fields do not offer that capability, nor is it feasible (or in some locations possible) to add it.

### **Why does Holmes County High School have to be split into three ceremonies?**

We would love nothing more than to have one ceremony so that all HCHS graduates can be together. The decision was made to split the class into multiple ceremonies so that each graduate can still have 4 tickets and have some of their family members in attendance, and still fall under the 250 person limit for gatherings.

### **Why can't we wait and see what things are like in July?**

We have no guarantees that restrictions will be gone in July. We will likely still be limited on the number of people who can gather, both indoors and outdoors. We also want to be sure that ALL of our graduates are able to participate in their graduation ceremonies. Postponing until July increases the likelihood that some of our graduates will not participate. These seniors have been in limbo since mid-March. They are ready to graduate so that there will be some closure to their high school careers. Our principals discussed both June and July options, and ultimately, chose June.

### **What if the CDC guidelines have changed at the time of graduation?**

If the guidelines are relaxed, we will certainly work to revise these plans so that as many people as possible can attend. We want nothing more than to have our graduations at our school sites with a packed house, just as we have for years. However, these are times like no other in our history, and we must adapt, often on a daily basis, to meet changing requirements. We will continue to adapt, and are cautiously hopeful that we may be able to accommodate additional guests.

### **I heard \_\_\_\_\_ school is going ahead and having graduation as normal. Why can't we? Nobody in the community or from the CDC is going to come and shut it down!**

We are a government agency, and we are going to follow the guidelines set forth by the Governor and the CDC. If we as a school district only abide by the guidelines that we agree with, how can we expect our students to follow the rules we set for them? What kind of example are we setting? Non-compliance with state guidelines could also affect our funding.

### **Why are we having senior parades if we're still having graduation?**

Our seniors have lost so much of their senior year. We want to do everything we can to make this time in their lives as special as possible. Because we are limited in the number of people who can attend the actual graduation ceremonies, the parades will give other family members, friends, and the community the opportunity to celebrate with and show support for our graduates. At the parades, no one will be getting out of their cars or staying on premises, so we are able to fall below the 250 person limit. This gives our students and their families something special on their original graduation date.

**Please remember that this is "Plan A". This plan is the most restrictive based on current CDC guidance. We are ready to adjust these plans if the restrictions are lifted or eased. The principals, district staff, and I are committed to making this a special time for our students even under these trying circumstances!**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terry L. Mears".

Terry L. Mears  
Superintendent

**Reference: CDC Guidance for Mass Gatherings**

**[https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/Mass-Gatherings-Document\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/Mass-Gatherings-Document_FINAL.pdf)**