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# School boards work with public health and safety officials on graduation plans

From drive-in ceremonies to car parades in the park, school officials must consult with local health, fire and police officials when planning high school graduation ceremonies next month.

Local school officials are putting the finishing touches on plans that would allow students to celebrate while preventing the spread of COVID-19. After a series of conference calls with state education officials, Wallingford School Superintendent Salvatore Menzo issued a notice to district parents Sunday evening outlining the graduation restrictions.

“We did receive written guidance from the Commissioner of Education on Thursday and through a conference call on Friday,” Menzo wrote. “In that guidance, group gatherings of more than five people are not permitted under the Governor’s Executive Order 7X.”

In a conference call with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education Friday, State Education Commissioner Miguel Cardona and Dr. Richard Melchreit — from the state Department of Public Health’s Infectious Disease Section — were asked about the potential for in-person graduations later in June and over the summer.

“Based on this information, all proposed plans must be reviewed collaboratively with local officials in the health, fire, and police departments,” Menzo wrote. “We have been meeting with them to discuss alternatives we have received from students and parents. As each scenario is reviewed, public health and safety guidelines are applied to determine the viability ... Again, each decision must honor the Executive Orders … We are not taking this lightly, and we do appreciate the many volunteers who are willing to support whatever is decided.”

The rules governing high school graduations also hold for elementary and middle school graduations, Menzo said.

Melchreit told officials that graduation ceremonies won’t return to “normal” until a vaccine is available, which is not expected this year and might not be available next year.

A virtual graduation with students and families connected via streaming software is the safest option, Melchreit said. One hybrid option includes students parked in cars who get out only to walk to a stage where they are greeted by five or fewer mask-wearing officials positioned six feet apart. A photographer, more than six feet away, can take pictures of the graduates to avoid overcrowding at the stage area. Valedictorian and other speeches could be recorded ahead of time and viewed on a large screen during the ceremony. Diplomas could be mailed instead of handed out onstage.

“This is not your typical normal graduation,” Melchreit told school board members. “Under Executive Order 7X, social gatherings are no more than five people. The more people in proximity, the more you’re increasing the chance of passing the virus.”

*"We are not taking this lightly, and we do appreciate the many volunteers who are willing to support whatever is decided. We appreciate the support and genuine concern shared by so many in the community for the Class of 2020."

-Salvatore Menzo*

Melchreit also advised officials to track ceremonies and gatherings in the event there are outbreaks in the weeks following graduations.

In Meriden, principals and advisors at Platt and Maloney high schools have worked with students and families on potential ideas for ceremonies. Some of these included a car parade through Hubbard Park, a drive-in program and an all-virtual graduation. Board of Education President Robert Kosienski Jr. said final plans will be announced in the next several days.

Graduation is currently scheduled for June 12.

School officials in Southington and Cheshire are surveying students and parents to gauge their preference on different options, which include virtual ceremonies, drive-thru events and traditional celebrations that would take place in early August.

Southington High School’s traditional ceremony was to take place on the high school football field June 16, said School Superintendent Tim Connellan. Now, officials are looking at convening a large drive-thru ceremony at the Farmington Polo Grounds. Officials had also looked at possibly having a traditional ceremony in early August. But the constantly fluctuating situation remains too uncertain for school officials to be able to guarantee an in-person event in a few months.

The polo grounds seems like a event that officials could pull off.

“It’s fairly large, a student and their family would drive there. We could do big speeches,” Connellan said.

Students and their families would stay in their cars for the ceremony, with students exiting the vehicles only to turn their tassles.

Staff reporter Michael Gagne contributed to this story.

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<https://www.ctinsider.com/news/coronavirus/nhregister/article/Connecticut-school-districts-work-around-15276326.php?sid=5baaacf52ddf9c545d7367da&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=CT_NHR_Insider>

# CT schools juggle coronavirus costs amid budget reductions

[Jo Kroeker](file:///%5C%5Cwww.ctinsider.com%5Cauthor%5Cjo-kroeker%5C) May 17, 2020 Updated: May 17, 2020 4:37 p.m.

1of4King Robinson Principal Joseph Johnson gives parents paperwork to fill out as they take home laptops from school during a building closure on March 23, 2020 in New Haven. Connecticut schools spent thousands to distribute technology for distance learning, and school leaders project technology expenses are among the coronavirus expenses that Photo: File /

2of4Superintendent of Stamford Public Schools Dr. Tamu Lucero discusses the 2020-2021 budget proposal in her office at the Government Center in Stamford, Conn. Tuesday, Jan. 14, 2020. She is facing recommendations to keep the fiscal year 2021 budget the same as the fiscal year 2020 budget, and has less than two weeks to figure out where $15 Photo: File /

3of4New Haven Public Schools CFO Phil Penn and interim Superintendent of Schools Iline Tracey on Feb. 19, 2020. Penn predicts that the $10 million he will have to find in reductions to next year’s budget will require unpopular cuts. This year, New Haven has saved $1 million from school closures, which will go toward the district’s deficit, which Photo: File /

New Haven Public Schools CFO Phillip Penn recently bought something he never thought he would have to: a pallet of 20,000 face masks.

He said he is also working on buying electrostatic foggers, which disinfect airborne virus and bacteria particles with electrostatic charges.

New Haven Public Schools, like many districts in Connecticut, is working through how to operate schools come fall while enforcing social distancing. Complicating this logistical task is a recent request from the city government to find a total of $9.8 million in savings, and many other districts are facing similar directives.

Districts created their budgets in a pre-coronavirus world, but governments are reviewing the requested increases through the lens of an economy impacted by COVID-19. Without months of local revenue, and pledges to keep mill rates down, towns are asking school districts to reduce, or completely flatten, their budget increases.

Statewide, many districts — each at a different point in the budgeting process — are facing little to no budget increases for the 2020-2021 fiscal year, according to a Hearst Connecticut Media analysis. And, they are running out of time to figure out how not to spend millions of dollars.

Danbury Public Schools is potentially facing a reduction of $8.75 million to its requested $10 million increase. Stamford Public Schools, [Greenwich Public Schools](https://www.greenwichtime.com/local/article/Greenwich-s-BET-approves-3M-in-school-budget-15228787.php) and [Wilton Public Schools](https://www.wiltonbulletin.com/news/article/Wilton-finance-board-proposes-flat-school-and-15272757.php) are facing requests to keep their budgets flat. These districts had initially requested $18 million, $3 million and $1.65 million increases, respectively.

**RELATED:** [Stamford budget may require job losses, loans, service cuts](https://www.ctinsider.com/local/stamfordadvocate/article/Stamford-budget-may-require-job-losses-loans-15242367.php)

Penn said he does not fault New Haven’s board of alders, but the economic situation will catch up with the city, as well as the state, which is incurring debt from lost sales tax revenue, and the nation, which is printing money it does not have.

The CFO said he feels bad for the stressed families, who face circumstances that pull them away from watching the budget process unfold. With $10 million in reductions coming, he said people will be unhappy.

“I’m not sure that parents are as aware of how much stress this is having on school districts and the potential implications for next year,” he said. “You want parents to be vocal and involved in the process, but I can appreciate that they’re distracted about other things.”

Danbury Public Schools CFO Courtney LeBorious said the task in front of her is daunting.

Aside from the coronavirus, Danbury faces increasing enrollment, particularly among students receiving special education services, free or reduced-price lunch and English-language learning supports, and overcrowded buildings. Previous budgets have not kept pace with that growth, she said.

**RELATED:** [Overcrowded Danbury schools work to add learning spaces](https://www.ctinsider.com/local/newstimes/article/From-closets-to-classrooms-Overcrowded-Danbury-15260344.php)

“I feel comfortable as a finance director to do my job,” she said. “But is it easy? No.”

While deadlines are approaching to find savings and brace for coronavirus costs, leaders said town and city governments are helping.

“All the city boards are working together to try and come up with a solution to a very unusual problem,” said Stamford Public Schools CFO Ryan Fealey, who started on the job when schools closed.

Here are some areas that districts say they have been seeing and will be seeing more spending:

Technology

With kids learning at home, many districts had to distribute technology as soon as they could get in shipments of devices. Spending on technology is likely to continue as devices break and schools find students in need.

Fairfield Public Schools Superintendent Mike Cummings said in an email they are considering the possibility of a hybrid at-home, at-school learning model this fall, which means more spending on devices and online programs.

Already, New Haven Public Schools has purchased $700,000 worth of Chromebooks to get devices into the hands of some kids in the district. Some still do not have devices.

The district needs to invest $3 to $4 million in devices so that every child has one, Penn said. New Haven plans to buy those laptops through the $8.5-million relief package the district will get [through the federal CARES Act](https://www.ctpost.com/news/education/slideshow/news/coronavirus/article/See-how-much-coronavirus-money-Connecticut-school-15269784.php?src=posthpcp).

Danbury Public Schools spent $1.5 million to buy Chromebooks, and used grant money to get hotspots for families who needed them, LeBorious said.

She said the district could receive $2.2 million in CARES money, which will fund technology and social-emotional supports.

Stamford had to reallocate money in its current budget to buy devices and 1,000 hotspots. The school also received a donation of laptops for high schoolers.

While the district is closer to one device per child, Superintendent Tamu Lucero said, some CARES money will fund technology purchases to finish closing the gap.

The rest of the $2.7 million in aid would benefit summer school and social-emotional supports, she said.

Sanitation

Before the closures, districts paid custodians overtime to clean high-touch points daily and deep clean. Leaders are waiting for more guidance from state health officials, but anticipate sanitation could eat up their budgets.

Danbury bought $100,000 worth of personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies and has spent $20,000 on custodial overtime. While the district had to deal with backordered products last month, LeBorious said supplies are shipping on time now.

Stamford is currently spending $50,000 to $75,000 to clean buildings, although they are at limited capacity.

“We’re assuming that is probably going to double our budget going into next year,” Lucero said, adding that it could be $50,000 to $75,000 a month, depending on what the guidelines are for cleaning.

With every district and government vying for supplies, from electrostatic blowers to masks, Penn said he worries about surging prices hurting everyone.

“There has to be a better way to approach purchases so that we’re not driving up prices as we do this,” he said.

Sudden savings

The coronavirus has brought unexpected financial relief to many districts that were projected to end the year in the red.

Statewide, district leaders said the closures have saved them a few million dollars that would have gone to utilities, supplies, overtime, healthcare withdrawals, transportation and substitute teachers.

Greenwich had a $1 million overage to the special education budget, which could be closed by coronavirus savings. Similarly, Stamford had a projected deficit of $2.3 million, associated with special education costs.

“That seems to be an area that people struggle with, across Fairfield County, the state of Connecticut and the country,” Lucero said.

She added that Stamford saved about $12,000 to $15,000 a day for substitute teachers, and ultimately, it is projected to finish the year with $200,000 left, she said.

New Haven had a deficit of $9 million this November, which Penn and his staff have dropped down to $2.6 million. The $1 million that the district has saved from coronavirus closures will go toward closing the remaining gap.

LeBorious and Lucero said their districts are not making as many healthcare payments as staff are not visiting doctors as regularly.

The lower healthcare costs are a one-time blip, LeBorious said. Danbury is setting up a reserve to prepare for an influx in withdrawals when people feel comfortable going to the doctor’s office again.

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