



## North Kitsap School District prepares for virtual graduation ceremonies

By Nick Twietmeyer

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As a means of preventing the potential spread of coronavirus, the North Kitsap School District is making preparations to hold a virtual graduation ceremony for its class of 2020.

There are few things that have gone untouched by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Even simple things like grocery shopping and going for a walk have been radically changed by the precautions put in place to keep us all safe. So too, it seems, will a longstanding rite of passage be altered by these unusual circumstances.

Last Friday, North Kitsap seniors returned to the schools they left two months ago, to pick up their caps and gowns. Greeting the students were school staff, decked out in purple and gold (for North Kitsap High School) and crimson and gold (for Kingston High School). The mood of the occasion and the smiles of students belied the fact that in a few short weeks there will be no jubilant stroll, scored by “Pomp and Circumstance,” across the field at Viking Stadium; no chance to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with their classmates and hurl their mortarboards into the air; not for this class, not this year.

In a recent letter to district seniors North Kitsap School District

Superintendent Laurynn Evans broke the news that NK schools would be “holding commencement ceremonies virtually this year.”

“A virtual ceremony means that the speeches, reading of names and certification of your class will be done through a video broadcast,” Evans explained in the letter. “It is a way to celebrate the next chapter together, while we must be apart. We are looking to extend this celebration into our diploma pickups by asking seniors to wear their caps and gowns for a more formal and personalized senior sendoff with some pictures and celebrations.”

In her letter, Evans said the decision had been made following meetings with student leaders about how to move forward with graduations in a post-COVID-19 world. But after the meeting, Mollie Brislin, senior secretary and senator for North Kitsap High School ASB, said she was left feeling like the students voices had fallen upon deaf ears.

“We had our meeting and we all were giving alternative ideas,” Brislin said. “we were really pushing for the drive-in graduation.”

Brislin said after nearly an hour of the students working to creatively problem solve a solution, the meeting took an abrupt turn when they were flatly told that they would be having a virtual graduation.

“Basically all of our ideas got shot down and after 45 minutes, they finally admitted that we were going to do a virtual graduation,” Brislin said.

“I think [Evans] approached this from more of a business point of view, but I think the decision was already made well before the meeting happened,” the senior added. “[The meeting] kind of felt like a publicity stunt to say that she had met with us.”

In a phone interview, the superintendent contended that she had not made a final decision prior to meeting with students, but rather had been following directives by the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

“I was on a call with OSPI the day before and the quote that I took away from that call was, ‘it is virtually impossible to have any kind of in-person graduation.’ ... When I heard that, I cried,” Evans said.

“I know what this means for them and the last thing we want to do is take away that moment from kids,” she continued. “The last thing we want is to have to cancel a major event in the lives of students, but all indicators point to the fact that we are not going to be able to do it live and in-person.”

After speaking with officials at neighboring school districts, Evans said it became clear that NKSD would not be alone in its approach to sending off their senior class.

“Everyone is doing a virtual-type ceremony,” she said, noting that each district would also be organizing other ways of recognizing seniors, in

addition to their commencement ceremonies. “We are working on plans for diploma pick-up to be a little bit more festive and celebratory. But it will be students remaining in their vehicles to come pick up their diplomas.”

“I cannot be more clear about how profoundly I feel the grief of our seniors and how hard this is for them and it’s not a decision that we took lightly and it’s not a decision that I think anyone feels good about,” she added.

While she did not agree with the decision-making process, Brislin did offer praise to the North Kitsap High School administrators for working hard within the boundaries laid out by the superintendent.

“They took what Dr. Evans said at that meeting and they have a bunch of plans for how to recognize seniors,” the senior said. “The school is doing a really good job.”

“I understand that we won’t be able to have the traditional graduation at this point,” she added.

“But I do think that there are some new and interesting ways of recognizing seniors that can come out of this.”

*Editors note: an incomplete version of this story appeared in the May 22 edition of the North Kitsap Herald. Due to an error in page layout, a significant portion of the story was cut off.*







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