

School officials still working on graduation ceremony solution

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School officials are still working to get some form of graduation ceremony for this year's seniors in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

At their regular meeting Thursday, the Del Norte Unified School District trustees asked Superintendent Jeff Harris to write a letter to the county public health officer about holding an in-person graduation for Del Norte High School seniors while observing appropriate safety measures.

Harris said he spoke with Dr. Warren Rehwaldt about graduation and culminating activities such as a dance or band concerts.

Harris said Rehwaldt told him it was indoor events were unlikely. However, an outdoor graduation with appropriate social distancing measures and the use of personal protective equipment was still possible.

"He has not approved the idea of an outdoor graduation for Del Norte High School as of yet, but he was more comfortable with that because it is outdoors, because of the extreme distancing the high school has proposed," Harris said. "The configuration would potentially be half of the school graduating at one time and the other half graduating a few hours later with students being able to sit on the track with two to four family members."

Harris said Rehwaldt would have to vet any plans with the California Department of Public Health.

In the state's four-stage plan to reopen, Del Norte is in a variance approved accelerated version of Stage 2. Under the variance, schools may plan to reopen, though additional details are forthcoming. However, under the state's guidelines, mass gatherings are not allowed until Stage 4.

Trustee Charlaine Mazzei said that although she preferred an outdoor in-person graduation, she expressed her concerns about the culminating activities, specifically how social distancing could be maintained in a band or a dance concert.

“If you couldn’t really have an audience, then it’s a dress rehearsal — it’s not really a performance,” Mazzei said. “I don’t have a problem with sending a letter to Dr. Rehwaldt and asking him to work with us. I would want to see what the plan was for any of those kind of culminating performance-type things before I would say let’s go ahead with them.”

Del Norte High School senior Elizabeth Ward, the school board’s student representative, said the dance class wouldn’t have a full concert. However, seniors have been discussing creating a music video and finding a way to broadcast it.

“We all know we can’t have a show, but we finished this piece and we worked really hard on it,” Ward said. “Through social distancing, I think it will be something worthwhile. It’ll be worth the risk for the seniors.”

Music teacher Sara Rogers said via Zoom the DNUSD cannot currently afford to recreate other districts’ innovative ways to hold concerts.

“It is a financial issue to do it,” Rogers explained. “As a team we are working our butts off to find a way for all of our instrumentalists, all of our vocalists, to be back in the community because we are huge. We pack auditoriums for concerts. We are working on that, but it’s just not possible without a budget to do that, and we have bigger needs than to ask for a huge chunk of money for that right now.”