

The head of the State Police clarified on Monday that graduation, birthday and other drive-by "wave parades" are permitted under New Jersey's coronavirus outbreak lockdown rules, but schools can't organize central meeting points where people may get out of cars.

Acting Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan made the comments a day after it was reported he sent a letter to local school districts that suggested "wave parade" processions violated Gov. Phil Murphy's executive order and should be canceled. "What I was hearing was that they were all going to be assembled at a school, at a town hall, and a football field, which would be in violation," Callahan said during Gov. Phil Murphy's coronavirus briefing Monday. "They would be getting out of their cars to wave at people. People who are out of their cars, that was the issue."

Callahan's letter caused many to express concern that popular drive-by parades held while normal birthday, graduations and other gatherings are banned were suddenly also not permitted.

"We could not prevent vehicles driving by - let's say it's a senior, him or her on their front porch, with parents," Callahan said. "Those vehicles can go by."

Callahan said "a wave parade that does not summon students or individuals to one location" is fine.

Many first-responders, police and other community members in New Jersey have honored birthdays and other milestones with drive-by parades. Critics have argued these parades draw people out of their homes and into groups, a violation of social distancing mandates.

"It's a great gesture to give that sense of solidarity," Callahan said. "But when there are 50 people standing on top of each other on the curb of a hospital or in front of a high school, that's where the problem comes in."

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The guidance was issued after he said police received questions about how schools could celebrate graduations during the lockdown orders, Callahan said. He sent the letter after hearing of efforts to organize students in one location to begin the parade process — which would violate the order.

In a letter from the state Department of Education, Assistant Education Commissioner AbdulSaleem Hasan said, "only virtual graduation ceremonies can be planned at this time."

"We recognize that this sudden disruption to the normal operating procedures could be jarring for school communities at all levels," Hasan wrote. "The resilience and adaptivity required to thrive in the face of unprecedented situations are characteristics embodied by the Class of 2020."

The clarification was made the same day Murphy announced New Jersey has now lost at least 9,310 lives to the outbreak as the total number of cases continued to climb to 139,945.