

NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE

June 16, 2020

Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor
State of New York
Executive Chamber
State Capitol Albany, New York 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We appreciate this opportunity to contact you directly to once again urge an immediate reconsideration of your recent decision to limit in-person high school graduation ceremonies in New York State to no more than 150 attendees.

As you know, local government leaders and school district administrators from across the Southern Tier region have recently requested that you allow them to exercise local decision making regarding the size of regional, in-person high school graduation ceremonies.

We fully agree with our local educators and leaders. In our view, the state can and should trust these regional officials to conduct safe in-person graduation ceremonies as they see fit while fully adhering to all of the fundamental distancing and other safety guidelines and recommendations.

In fact, we could not agree more that our local decision makers have proven themselves fully up to this task of responding to COVID-19 and are fully capable of exercising graduation planning and oversight.

For example, in a letter this week one of our local superintendents requests that you “increase the number of attendees at in-person graduation ceremonies using the same percentage limits being used for other gatherings at beaches, big box stores (Walmart, Lowes, Home Depot) and Grocery stores: 25% or more of the actual venue’s capacity. If this reasonable request were granted, almost all districts in the state could hold one graduation ceremony that includes all graduates, two parents/guests, and the necessary staff on their football fields and meet social distancing requirements.”

We fully agree. Furthermore, if dining indoors at restaurants at 50% capacity with no masks and peaceful protests en masse with no social distancing are being permitted, it seems reasonable as well that our schools can safely conduct an outdoor graduation ceremony with recommended physical distancing and other safety guidelines.

We encourage you to acknowledge that regional leaders have all along over the past several months done an outstanding job of public outreach and diligent adherence to state guidelines to an extent that the Southern Tier’s COVID-19 healthcare data and metrics are positive and continue to move in the right direction.

In early June, you took a step in the right direction by permitting in-person ceremonies of up to a total of 150 people in attendance. Nevertheless, this limit still leaves a number of school districts that we represent unable to conduct a collective gathering for their graduating school community.

Allowing our high school seniors to celebrate their accomplishments and bring much-needed closure to their high school careers has, in our view, become increasingly important in 2020 – the beginning of a new and promising decade in their lives which, unfortunately and through no fault of their own, is off to a difficult and troubling start.

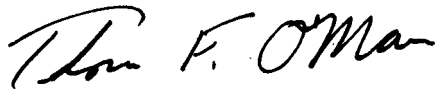
Beginning this month, we are presented with a chance to help reframe the narrative for these graduating seniors. Amidst all of the ongoing public health, economic, and social pain, uncertainty, and unrest impacting all of us, a traditional in-person graduation ceremony, involving the full school community, offers the opportunity for our young New Yorkers to celebrate community, family, unity, achievement, and hope for the future. We know you value these very ideals and principles and, consequently, we hope you will agree.

We believe it would be extremely meaningful and important this year. We believe they deserve it. We believe they have earned it.

In short, we urge you to once again consider the overriding value of high school graduation ceremonies at this time and place in New York State, and open the door to allow our local decision makers to continue moving forward on in-person graduations in the disciplined, responsible and successful manner they have demonstrated in many other ways throughout this public health crisis.

As always, thank you and please contact us if we can provide additional information or be helpful in any other way.

Sincerely,



Thomas F. O'Mara
58th Senate District



Philip A. Palmesano
132nd Assembly District



Christopher S. Friend
124th Assembly District