

the HR DOCTOR

with Philpot
& Winkler

Back to school. As a kid, that idea filled you with excitement or dread. Across the country, the first day of school can be as early as July or as late as September, depending on where you live. This year, as kids return to school while the pandemic intensifies all over again due to the Delta variant, the staggered starts allow us to see the impact of COVID-19 on another school year. According to an Indianapolis Star article from August 4, “just one week into the new school year and COVID-19 is already disrupting learning for Hoosier students. Three dozen positive cases in schools were reported to the state last week and already several school districts have had to send dozens of students home to quarantine after just the first few days of class.” According to King5, the NBC affiliate in Seattle, on August 4, “COVID-19 cases among children force Washington childcare centers to temporarily close.”

The reports of COVID’s resurgence are also impacting employers plans to return employees to the workplace. According to CNBC on August 5, Amazon corporate employees won’t return to offices until January 2022, after previously planning a return after Labor Day. So now, employees who were anticipating their return to the office are thrust into additional uncertainty, their plans and preparations changing as the Delta variant makes us once again pivot.

Employees have experienced much change over the last year and a half, personally and professionally. The rising COVID-19 cases and return of masks may feel like a setback when people were just seeing light at the end of the tunnel. With a return to school uncertain and vaccines for children and childcare unavailable, employees with children have many factors weighing on them. Even if kids return



Back to the Office?

to school, will the schools remain open? Employees with family members who work in healthcare and small businesses worry once again. These latest changes may challenge our patience, but we’re not through with this yet.

So now what do we do about returning to work?

Like the start of a school year, return to work dates are not uniform. Many employers have gradually brought employees back over the summer as restrictions eased and others have planned a return on the Tuesday after Labor Day. How do employers and employees navigate this latest change together?

First, much of the country is in substantial and high transmission again, meaning the CDC guidelines recommend everyone, regardless of vaccination status, wear masks while indoors. If your county has reinstated (or never revoked) mask requirements and other mitigation strategies, it is at least a change that employees have traversed successfully within the last year. While disappointing, the change is less severe because it is familiar. We know how to successfully wear masks, socially distance, meter lobbies and telework as needed.

Second, as employees receive COVID-positive test results, are departments being notified? Previously, some or-

ganizations sent messages to department staff to notify them of a positive test in the department so employees could get tested and to quickly respond, knowing contact tracing was working beyond its limits and vaccines were unavailable. Now, is department notification necessary? Contact tracing is currently able to keep up with demand in many communi-

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ties, although that may change quickly. Also, CDC recommendations involve mask-wearing, social distancing and vaccination. Department leadership will need to weigh the pros and cons of notifications, with part of the consideration being the size of the team, what the positive employee has shared with co-workers, and operational needs.

Third, will your organization require vaccinations? In several states, governors or state legislatures have preempted counties from enacting vaccine requirements. If a vaccine requirement is still an option for you, you will still need to contend with what that means

for your employees. The federal anti-discrimination laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and similar state laws may require exceptions in certain cases. In those cases, you may consider requiring regular testing or other mitigation strategies, as a substitute.

Fourth, if vaccines are not going to be required, can they be incentivized? On Thursday, August 5, the White House held a webinar on vaccine incentives and while that webinar focused on incentives for citizens and communities, some employers are considering doing the same for employees. Will employees be able to “double dip,” possibly receiving an incentive from both the city or state in which they live and their county employer? Or are you providing an incentive to both employees and citizens? It’s worth considering just how effective incentives are. A recent NPR article titled “Get \$100 For a Vaccine? Cash Incentives Work for Some, Others Not So Much,” suggested while there is some impact, it is limited and will likely not reach those strongly opposed to vaccines.

Throughout the pandemic, flexibility has been the key to success. Clearly, the shifts in the pandemic are neither entirely predictable nor linear. Employers will need to continue to embrace flexibility to

support their employees, serve their residents and simultaneously help their community get through this. To prevent reverting all the way back to closing county buildings, it may also help to give employees time off work to get their vaccinations. Or offer additional sick leave to ensure employees are not coming into county buildings while they’re feeling sick, have had a direct exposure or are having to care for someone who is sick.

Back to work? County public servants have been working diligently to serve others all through the pandemic. How and where citizens receive service could still change several times as we navigate continuous change and acknowledge the continuous change residents are also experiencing. It is important to reflect on all of our success and how adaptable we have been for over a year. Utilization of employee assistance programs, flexibility and understanding are as important as ever. We will look back at this time with relief and awe at all we accomplished. We will realize the end of this pandemic together, with dedication, teamwork, communication and public service. That’s what we do and that is who we are. **CN**

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