

## Workforce Planning – What To Do When Schools Are Virtual

For working parents, August usually triggers the end of summer, taxiing kids to sports practice and back-to-school shopping. With COVID-19 cases on the rise, the back-to-school routine looks quite different this year. Parents are anxiously awaiting word on how schools will reopen this fall, whether remote, in-person or a combination of both. Both parents and employers alike are thinking about the effects this will have on work schedules, productivity, and meeting business goals.

Employers should take the following steps to plan and prepare:

- 1) **Assess the Overall Impact.** Employers should assess their workforce to gain a better understanding of the number of employees who may be disrupted this fall because their school-aged children are attending classes virtually. Managers could facilitate one-on-one discussions with employees to understand the impact, or employers may consider sending out a survey to obtain a quick snapshot of the overall impact. MRA has developed a [brief survey](#) with sample questions that can be used for this purpose.
- 2) **Audit EFMLA Utilization.** Employers covered by the Families First Act are required to provide eligible employees with up to 12 weeks of leave under the Emergency Family Medical Leave Expansion Act (EFMLA). Many employees used all, or a portion, of their EFMLA time this past spring when the school year ended with virtual classes. For employees who are impacted by remote schooling this fall, employers should review what EFMLA benefits remain available to each employee through December 31, 2020.
- 3) **Consider Workplace Accommodations.** Employers are encouraged to work with employees on accommodations to allow continued employment, balanced with fulfilling home-schooling responsibilities. This may be difficult, however employers are encouraged to look creatively at options such as: remote work, leaves of absences, reduced schedules, different shifts, compressed workweeks, flexible schedules, job sharing, and weekend work in order to retain good employees.
- 4) **Mitigate Risk.** Unfortunately, some employers may be faced with making tough decisions, such as implementing permanent reductions-in-force or ending employment due to an employee's need to focus on family. Before proceeding, ensure that decisions are based on legitimate business needs. Some states have laws that prohibit discrimination based on familial status, and other laws such as the Families First Act provide employee protections.

### Develop a Strategy

Proactively developing a strategy is essential for employers to address this new development. A great place to start is to consider the actions taken at the beginning of the pandemic. What worked well? What lessons were learned? Upon completing this review, develop contingency plans for meeting business needs in the coming months. This may include hiring additional staff, cross-training current employees, creating new work schedules, and implementing new technology.

Don't forget to consider the impact on employees who do not have school-aged children and may need to take on extra shifts to cover the workload. Will overtime pay or additional incentives be warranted? How will morale, engagement, and productivity be affected and what can be done to address concerns?

The pandemic has forced employers to change and adapt at a fast pace. The months ahead are likely to bring more of the same, so now is the time to prepare. Having a thoughtful plan in place can give overall guidance and clarity for navigating these challenges. Remote schooling is becoming a longer-term reality for many parents, so employers need to consider longer-term solutions to assist in adapting to the new normal.