Tending the Flock

Responding to employees’ many concerns and needs has required an immense level of skill and foresight during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While everyone in our schools has been working extremely hard, HR professionals have borne a particularly heavy load throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Laws and regulations regarding leave and accommodations that impact core operations have shifted quickly, while employees have tendered a bevy of questions and requests with implications on budget and program. In this piece, HR and operations leaders share issues they’ve encountered, lessons learned and strategies that have worked. As many of these responses discuss sensitive situations, all responses are presented here anonymously.

READING THE ROOM

We’ve done four pulse check surveys of our faculty and staff from the spring and the onset of the pandemic through the fall to get a sense of what our community is feeling and their top concerns. The first pulse checks were anonymous, and the last couple have asked people to disclose their names so the school administration could reach out and address concerns.

Before the school year began, we discovered through one of these surveys that several teachers had concerns about how to care for their own children who couldn’t attend school in person while they were asked to teach on campus. We had hoped to be able to provide an on-campus care option for them, as we usually do, but this proved too difficult with our small cohorts model. We determined the best solution was to provide a subsidy to these teachers so that they could arrange their own childcare. We asked the board if they would support this effort, and they responded positively. It’s really helped calm teacher anxieties.

MITIGATING FACULTY ANXIETY ABOUT ON-CAMPUS TEACHING

Our earliest learners, preschoolers through kindergarten, returned to campus early in the fall, while older grades are preparing to return in a hybrid model a couple months later. While the on-campus learning has gone very well thus far, many teachers in older grades are highly anxious about the return to classrooms.

To help them, we’ve scheduled an employee assistance program (EAP) meeting for soon-to-return employees with a medical clinician so they can answer questions and hear the latest research. School leadership is not attending so that employees can ask questions freely and have an open forum with this expert and their peers.

We’ve also developed a medical advisory committee with our school nurses, parents with epidemiological and medical expertise, and individuals with medical expertise not associated with our school. While the group primarily has helped us plan our COVID response, we’ve done some Zoom meetings with the committee for any employee that wants to attend, so colleagues can learn from these experts and hear what is on each other’s minds. We’ve shared as much as we can regarding the school’s adherence to CDC, state and local guidance, and distributed literature on self-care strategies.

Another strategy that has given our teachers more peace of mind is regular COVID testing. We started after the school year began and have been doing this for three weeks. We share results with families, faculty and staff on a school dashboard. The schedule of testing is posted, so everyone knows what to expect. We use the nose swab test, which is uncomfortable, but haven’t gotten any pushback except in the case of a few small children. When that happens, we contact the parents, and they bring the child home until they comply.
WHEN AN EMPLOYEE TESTS POSITIVE
We had an employee test positive for COVID-19 after they had been sharing on social media information that suggested they were not socially distancing as the school and health authorities have advised. Fortunately the employee has recovered and no one else on campus was infected, but we now have to consider how the employee will be received by their peers upon return to campus. That employee has expressed sincere regret and remorse for their actions and promised to change their behavior, but the question remains, will colleagues accept this fellow employee as they once did?

Our current strategy is to have our COVID response team meet with other employees ahead of the recovered employee’s return to answer questions about transmission and hear their thoughts and feelings. We will share the recovered employee’s concerns and ask for theirs. It could turn out that this employee will be a partner to everyone because, according to the research at this time, they should have immunity for at least some months. But we just don’t know how exactly it will go over. It’s something to prepare for.

SOCIAL DISTANCING LAPSES IN THE CLASSROOM
An employee at our school posted photos to social media that showed a classroom in which social distancing policies were not being followed. Because the photos were associated with activities under school jurisdiction, we determined it was necessary to contact the employee and request the photos be removed as well as reiterate the proper protocols on COVID-related safety. We viewed this as a personnel performance issue since it directly violated school policies.

The employee responded quickly to remedy the concern. I believe our ability to react quickly helped prevent this social media post from spreading to the larger community and causing concerns among parents and students. It also provided us with another opportunity to reinforce to our faculty and staff how important it is to take COVID precautions seriously.

TEACHERS’ RETURN TO CAMPUS
We opened in August in an all-virtual environment for the students (teachers were required to teach from campus). A handful of teachers had an accommodation letter from their doctor, and they were allowed to teach from home while the students were virtual. It was made clear that once the students returned to campus they would be required to teach from school. When students started a hybrid model in September, a few teachers who did not feel comfortable returning to campus went on FMLA leave. One teacher without a doctor’s note resigned.

It’s been a challenge to fill that position. We’ve had teachers from neighboring independent schools express interest, but pursuing those candidates would damage our relationship with our peer schools. Some teachers have been able to cover extra periods, for which we’ve paid them an additional stipend. The mostly positive outcome has stemmed from clearly communicating our strict policies and our parents’ adamant expectations that we resume in-person learning. It helped that we began virtually and have brought groups back incrementally. Teachers had some time to get the year going before taking on the extra layers of precautions that come with on-campus learning. They also saw all the safety measures we were taking, how we’d spaced out the classrooms and had a strict mask policy, among other changes.

UNEXPECTED TEACHER SHORTAGE
During the summer, we asked our teachers to confirm whether or not they would return in-person in the fall. We had been successfully operating a summer camp, and the protocols we used for that served as the basis for our back-to-school plans. In our letter to teachers, however, we did not disclose many details regarding our plans for in-person learning and the teachers’ safety. Every one of our teachers replied that they would be returning in-person.

About two weeks before the start of the school year, we confirmed that faculty and students would be returning to campus on time, and what that might look like from a teacher’s perspective. We then started hearing pushback ranging from complaints about our leave policy, our safety plans, and other new teaching and supervisory expectations being placed upon the staff to manage our new learning model.

After distributing a clear leave policy, a clear COVID contact flowchart, and sharing videos and photos of our COVID safety measures on campus, most teachers were back on board. A handful chose not to return at all. Some were not confirmed until the week that school was to begin, and we scrambled to fill those roles.

I think the primary problem was the lack of communication among our administrators. Had we worked better together to communicate earlier and more clearly with our teachers, we likely would have avoided most of our issues. Our returning staff likely would have been more comfortable and bought in from the start, which would have also eliminated most of the friction that has lingered as the community has returned to campus. If faculty had been in the loop and able to share their feedback sooner, the necessary adjustments that we have continued to make would likely be received better as the year proceeds.

Even if better communication didn’t result in us retaining the staff who chose not to return for health reasons, better timing in our communication would have better positioned us to find suitable replacements in a timely manner.

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