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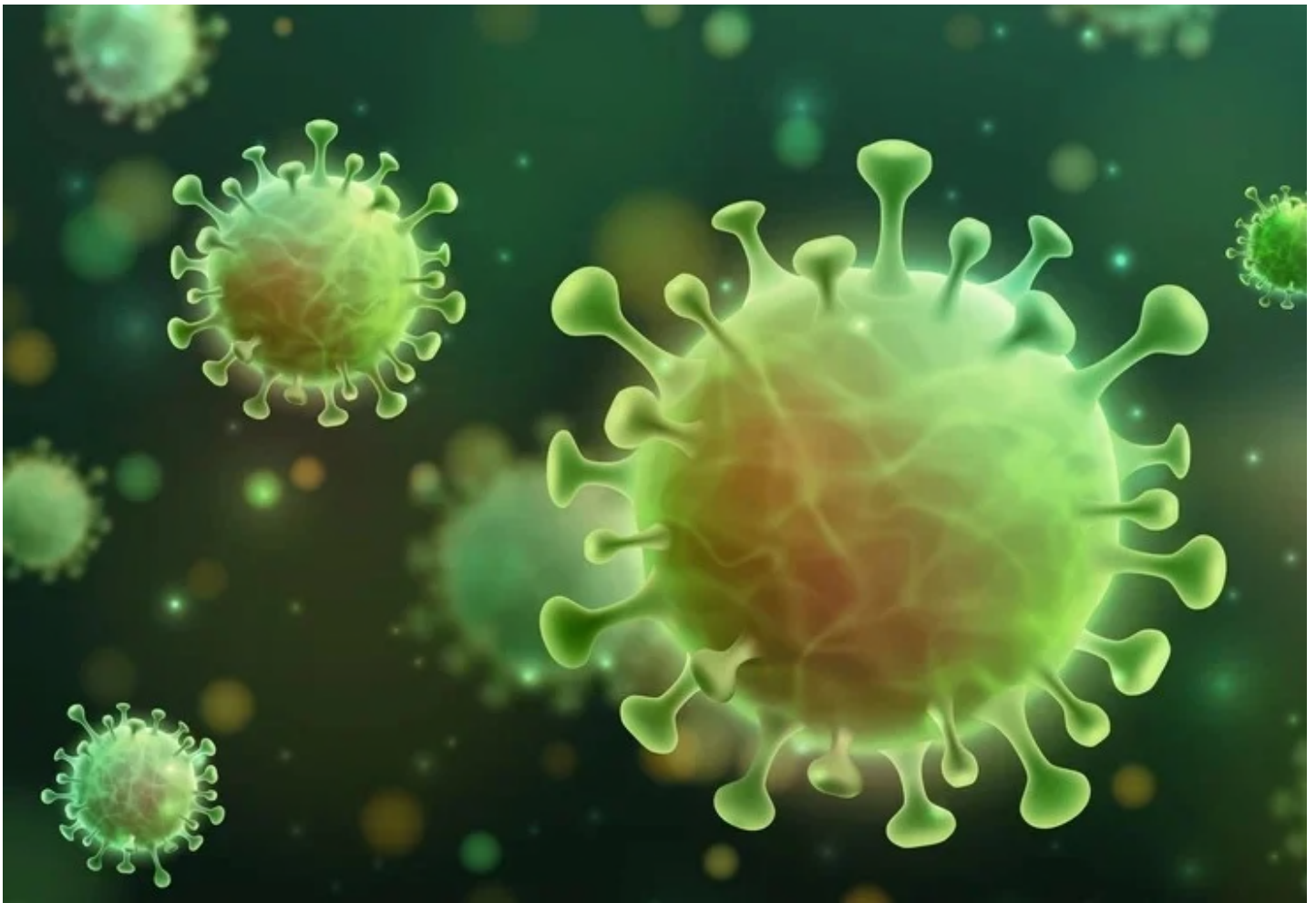
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## With Michigan schools out, businesses grapple with productivity woes

CHAD LIVENGOOD  

Larry Peplin for Crain's Detroit Business

### COMPLETE COVERAGE



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The closure of public and private school buildings **through June** for 1.61 million Michigan schoolchildren will likely wreak continued havoc on workplaces and productivity as parents will be doing double duty as someone's employee and their child's teacher.

And that's only if they can perform their job remotely from home.

The deadly coronavirus pandemic that's forced Michigan workers with nonessential jobs like selling mortgages for Quicken Loans Inc. or doing accounting work for Little Caesars Pizza has upended the traditional corporate headquarters work setting.

The specter of manufacturing employees being unable to return to work in May or June because of a lack of child care will make resuming production "a little more difficult," said John Walsh, president and CEO of the Michigan Manufacturers Association.

"It's going to be a real challenge for any employer to be able to produce their products or services moving forward when part of their workforce is taking care of the children," Walsh said. "There will be some adjustments internally because people want to accommodate their good employees. It's going to be a process, and there's just not an easy answer to it."

One of the unanswered questions is when businesses can resume normal operations. Whitmer's stay-at-home order remains in place until April 13, and she has signaled it will be extended because **new scientific modeling shows** Michigan's COVID-19 outbreak may not peak **until early May**.

For the past three weeks, the virus has forced most white-collar workers to do their jobs from their kitchen tables or a new makeshift basement office instead of an office cubicle.

**Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's decision** to keep school buildings closed for the rest of this school year will force companies to find ways to accommodate employees with kids at home, said Maureen Rouse-Ayoub, an employment attorney in Varnum Law's Novi office.

"Employers are going to have to be creative and proactive," Rouse-Ayoub said.

Companies may have to rearrange work schedules and job duties for employees who can work from home but are exempted from Family and Medical Leave Act benefits to take a partially paid leave of absence, Rouse-Ayoub said.

"It's going to be important during this time, especially after the stay-at-home order is over, for businesses to get back to producing and being productive," she said. "But we're also going to

take into account the employees' needs because we don't want to lose creative and talented resources because of work-from-home situations."

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act passed by Congress expanded FMLA, adding two weeks emergency paid leave and 10 weeks of paid leave at two-thirds of an employee's pay up to \$200 daily and \$2,000 each week, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

The expansion of FMLA is limited to private employers with fewer than 500 employees and at least 30 employees. Those businesses will get federal income tax credits to offset the expanded FMLA costs, Rouse-Ayoub said.

But the extended FMLA leave of absence benefit only covers employees who can't perform their jobs at home, such as a CNC machinist at a manufacturer not deemed an essential business or the store manager of a mall retailer that's been shut down by the governor's [stay-at-home order](#).

Companies with workers at home also may need to shift more technical resources to their employees' new home offices, such as upgrading computers, internet connections or even relocating company printers to their employees' homes, Rouse-Ayoub said.

There also are worker safety and cybersecurity issues to consider, such as protecting the confidentiality of customer information and proprietary information in a home office setting, she said.

"There's a lot of things to think about so you can make sure this is a productive relationship," Rouse-Ayoub said. "Because obviously, there's just going to be a concern about the loss of productivity and meeting deadlines."

## **Uncertainty ahead**

Under Whitmer's order keeping school buildings closed for the next three months, public K-12 schools are still going to be required to deliver some form of distance or online learning through using broadband internet or telephonic connections.

Detroit Public Schools Community District won't have its distance learning model ready to launch until April 14, Superintendent Nikolai Vitti said.

Complicating matters is access to online learning in urban, suburban and rural areas of the state won't be equitable because "not every child has access to a device" or broadband internet connection, Whitmer said.

Robert Shaner, superintendent of Rochester Community Schools, said working parents and their employers are going to need to be patient as it remains unclear how long the coronavirus pandemic will last.

"This is going to play out over the long run," Shaner said. "If we look at the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 ... if we use that as a predictor, that doesn't bode very well for us."

### Inline Play

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