

Student Essential Workers

Teen essential workers practice resilience while juggling school and work during a global pandemic.

The term ‘essential worker’ is yet another phrase that has been used regularly during life in a pandemic. The first thing that comes to mind tends to be adult employees such as doctors, nurses, or even restaurant owners. However, working high school students have found themselves under the essential worker umbrella, whether it be working in their local grocery store, restaurant, or nursing home. But now with Governor Reynolds’s actions to transition all schools to 100% in-person learning, how does that impact student “essential workers”?

With large class sizes, it is difficult for social distancing to take place in the classroom once everyone came back in the building. Junior Logan Kleese works as a dietary aid and server at a senior living facility called Edencrest and has concerns about returning to in-person class full-time.

“Going back to school five days a week means having more chances of getting Covid and taking it to work with high risk people. Earlier we did get Covid in the building and had residents pass from it. The hardest part for me was not being able to have family members there with the residents. Everyday I’m at school passes a risk of me getting and giving Covid to somebody who isn’t strong enough to survive it,” Kleese said.

While contracting the virus can be extremely critical, junior Kadee Collier believes that high schoolers are the best candidates to be working right now.

“I know it can be a risk but with college coming up its necessary to save up as much money as you can, and just try to be as safe as possible. I think of all people, it might be safer for teens to work right now. Although we’re not bullet proof, it is more likely that we’ll live through Covid,” Collier said.

The transitions from virtual, to hybrid, to in-person learning has affected work schedules and time management. Senior Amber Hagler found virtual school to be more accommodating for her work schedule.

“To be completely honest, working during the pandemic was really good for me. Although there was an obvious health concern, working allowed me to get out of the house and socialize with people other than my family. It was a great way to make money and still provide a sense of normality. I’ve always been good at balancing school and work, but virtual school made it easier for sure. Not having to go from school to home to work cuts down a lot of unnecessary time. But I also just make sure I get my work done either before I go to work or that I have enough time to do it after,” Hagler said.

Along with major changes in schools, many student employees are also experiencing a lot of change within their job. Places of business and public spaces have all adapted to a new normal of safety precautions and protocol to ensure the safety of the staff and customers.

“We have to wear masks now and it is required that all of our customers wear one as well. In a food place, we had a lot of the same safety precautions such as washing hands every 30 minutes and

putting dividers between tables,” Collier, who is an employee at the Panera in West Des Moines, said.

Hagler has worked in the Customer Service Department at the Windsor Heights Hy-Vee for almost two years and experienced a big shift once the pandemic hit.

“My job has changed a ton since Covid started. The initial changes were massive cleaning efforts and wearing a mask of course. Cleaning was increased and done more often than ever before. They also installed plexiglass “barriers” in front of cashiers. The entire atmosphere changed as well. Working at a place that was so oriented toward customer service, the separation between customers and employees distanced more than ever,” Hagler said.

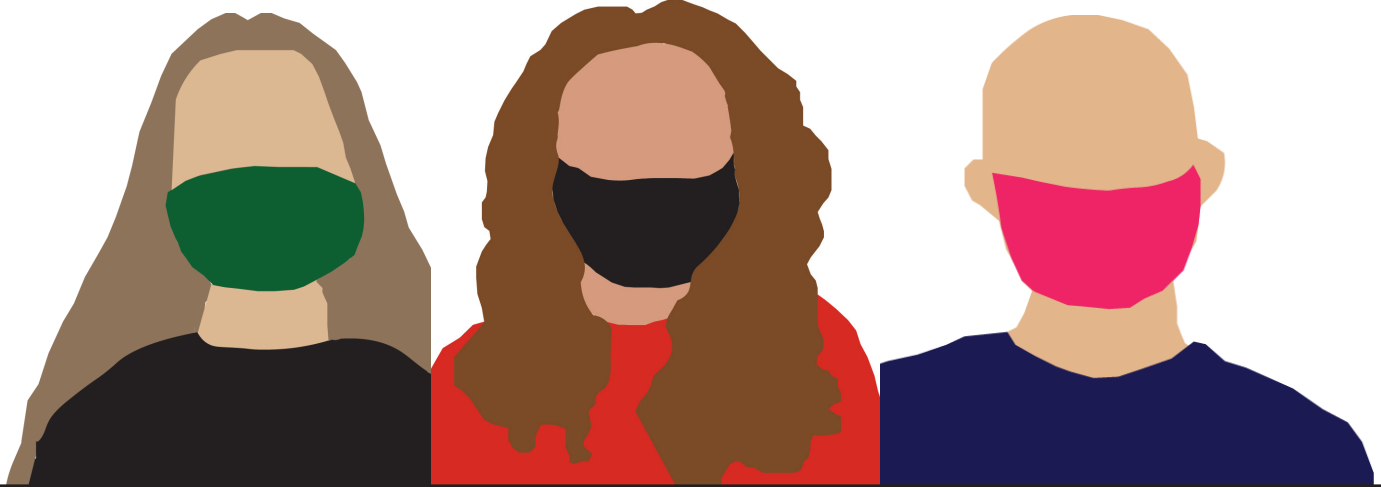
As well as public spaces, senior living facilities have also had to adjust meal protocols and cleaning

procedures. A facility with higher risk residents calls for extreme safety measures.

“During the beginning and middle chunk of Covid, our dining room was closed, and we would do meals as room service on disposable plates, silverware, and cups. We’ve also not allowed any visitors in the building. We all wear standard PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] and packages that come have to be sprayed down and kept in the vestibule for 24 hours before going to residents,” Kleese said.

Though working during this time has brought many fears, Kleese still find the joy in her job and is looking forward to the future.

“I love working with the residents because the future goal for me is to be a nurse. This is helping my path towards that because it’s taking care of people,” Kleese said.



Kadee Collier, Junior
Panera

Amber Hagler, Senior
Hyvee

Logan Kleese, Junior
Edencrest

Featured Employees

STORY, GRAPHICS, AND
DESIGN BY SAGE JOHNSON,
COPY EDITOR IN CHIEF