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## Remote learning kits allow Triad school supplier to increase revenue, bring back workers

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A more than 90-year-old supplier of classroom materials for grade school, high school and college level settings is charting a modern course for remote learning.

Carolina Biological Supply Co. in Burlington has unveiled a new science kit line called the Carolina 3D Flex program. There are several models available for specific courses such as chemistry, biology, etc., that can be used either remotely or in the classroom while complying with social distancing requirements.

The new product rollout is in direct response to the pandemic. The company saw a need in the market it was capable of helping to fill and it needed an injection of revenue after a difficult spring.

“We converted. Remember that we sell almost exclusively to schools and colleges. And when schools and colleges all closed, our traditional sales declined quite a bit,” said Jim Parrish, CEO of Carolina Biological Supply Co.

The transition is timely. Gov. Roy Cooper gave the go-ahead this month for [North Carolina schools to reopen in August](#), with the caveat that individual school districts are to offer remote learning to students whose families choose it.



CAROLINA BIOLOGICAL SUPPLY CO.

With a pre-Covid workforce of about 500 employees, the shuttering of schools and colleges forced the company to lay off about a quarter of its workers.

Public records show the company did, however, vow to retain 485 workers as part of its obligation to receive between \$5 million and \$10 million in federal funding through the Paycheck Protection Program.

The bailout notwithstanding, Parrish said the new product line and schools working to reopen have allowed Carolina Biological Supply to bring back about two-thirds of those employees who were sidelined earlier this year.

Production of some of the new product lines will require different skills than the company required before so not all those who were let go will be returning. There will instead be new jobs created in the process, he said.

“We are in the process now of adding another shift as well for the fall. So we are increasing our capacity and increasing our ordering to try to continue to meet that demand,” Parrish said.

Aden Dauchess is campaign manager for CBS, leading the launch of the new Flex line.

Several months worth of market research conducted in just a few weeks through consultants and school districts across the country helped solidify the product for its target audience, he explained.

As of Friday, in a 24-hour span, more than 50 school districts -- some in North Carolina -- had inquired about the use of the product.

“So there is a demand. We sort of knew it would happen but we wanted to be in the right position for this. We wanted to understand it as a company first, and then build on (it),” Dauchess said.

Because some schools will open using in-person instruction models and others will either operate remotely for the first nine weeks at least -- and there are hybrid models and contingency plans for remote instruction in the event of an outbreak -- there are two tiers for the Flex brand.

There is the standard, which is a box containing all the materials required for science experiments and investigations. And then there is Flex Lite, an all-digital platform that allows a student to conduct his or her experiments remotely or at a safe social distance from other students.

With the digital version, the materials are not included for the investigations and either the teacher or the school district will have to obtain those. Many times those materials can be purchased separately from Carolina Biological Supply.

Dauchess conceded that pricing the Flex kits was a balancing act between the cost of production and what school districts already burdened before the pandemic and now in more dire straits, might be able to afford.

“We worked with districts and consultants to find the right (pricing) that we think will work. We also obviously had our cost of goods that we knew ahead of time,” he said.

The new product line will likely not solve all of CBS’ financial concerns but is at least a stopgap.

The ability to forecast sales and bring back workers is a return on investment Parrish and CBS are satisfied with for the time being.

“Whenever you lose revenue as a business, it puts you in a tight spot fairly quickly. So it has been a real positive for us to have these capabilities, and it has made it so that we could bring back, recall a lot fo the people that we laid off this spring,” Parrish said.

“I feel so good about having an innovative program like this that is making a very significant contribution, even if it is not 100% of the lost revenues.”

**John Joyce**

Reporter

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