

THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL

Explanatory Note on the School's Policy Regarding so-called "Early Entry to GCSEs."

A few parents have recently contacted us about their concerns after finding a DfE statistical report on "Early entry to GCSE examinations" (November 2011) which is highly critical of the practice. This has obviously caused them to question the new TMHS KS4 curriculum.

This paper has been prepared in order both to indicate why the report is not really applicable to our circumstances and policy and to give some Thomas Mills statistics that tell a very different story.

Points to bear in mind if reading the DfE Report.

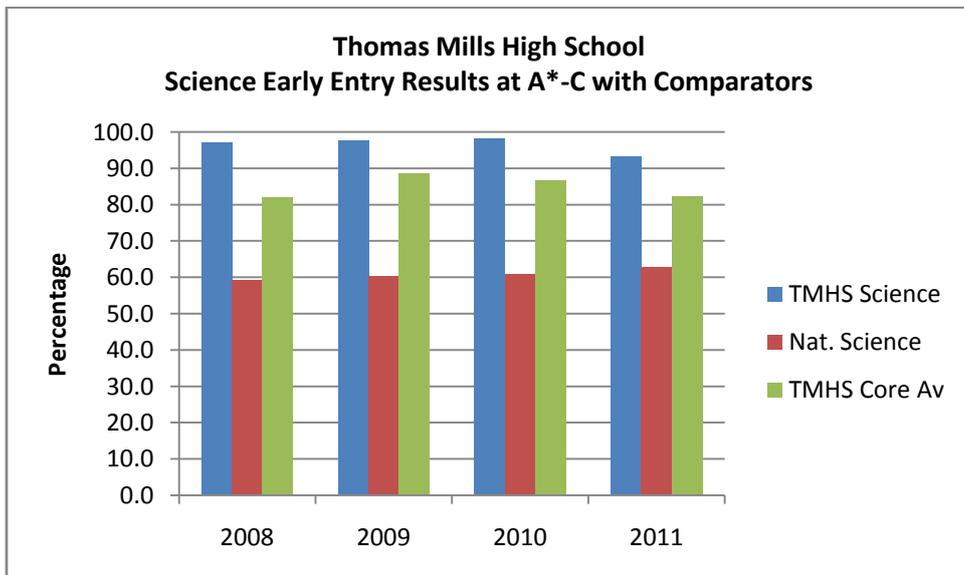
DfE document	Comment by TMHS
<p>The document does not adequately define "early entrants."</p>	<p>It is clear from reading the report that the early entries included in the DfE document are being made after a shortened GCSE course; many of them are January entries in Year 11 to give pupils a second go in June of Year 11. This implies that just enough of the specification may have been taught to try to get pupils through their exams.</p> <p>This is not the system we have or would ever wish to have at Thomas Mills. We agree that it would be educationally indefensible. All TMHS pupils will be entered for exams after the full amount of teaching time. We are just spreading the teaching of KS4 over three years rather than two, allowing pupils to choose more options and have more chances to succeed. That is a very different system from what is being employed in most of the schools from which the DfE data is drawn.</p> <p>The report also refers to some pupils taking GCSEs as early as year 7 with the clear implication that this must be a bad thing. There are some very exceptional mathematicians for whom early GCSE entry in maths to allow them to progress at an appropriate rate is necessary. We have had some in recent years where the pupils would have been held back and bored; instead, they have taken GCSE maths and gained A* in year 8 or year 9 before going on to start early A Levels. This is good educational practice. It is also quite different from other forms of early entry referred to. It is difficult to see how it can be rationally criticised for the very small number of individuals concerned.</p>
<p>"Lower attaining schools are more likely to have early entrants."</p> <p>"In English and mathematics, early entrants overall perform worse than pupils who do not enter early."</p>	<p>The paper compares the results of early entrants with those from pupils entering at the end of Year 11 and then seeks to draw rather sweeping (and misleading) conclusions. It is an obvious criticism of the methodology to point out that if most entries being used in the "early entrants" data set are from schools which are traditionally</p>

	<p>lower attaining institutions, then fewer pupils are likely to gain higher grades whether or not they sat the exam early.</p> <p>In short these conclusions <u>do not</u> follow logically from the data presented. They are also <u>not supported</u> by experience at Thomas Mills (a high achieving school and therefore unlike the majority of schools to which the DfE is referring) – <i>see below</i>.</p>
<p>“A large proportion of pupils who achieve a grade D or worse in their early attempt go on to retake the subjects. In 2010 68% of early entrants in mathematics went on to retake at the end of year 11, only 45% of whom achieved a higher grade at retake.”</p>	<p>The report here ignores the fact that a different government report last year introduced a policy of continual retakes post 16 for all those who do not achieve a grade C in English and maths by the age of 16. If the DfE is really so critical of retakes this would seem to be rather an expensive folly for them to be imposing on all students and post 16 institutions. The point also continues the logical fallacy referred to above: since many of the early entrants were from lower attaining schools one would expect the need for a large number of retakes. In addition, the report ignores the possibility that many of the 45% who improved their grade on retake in Year 11 would have had to do exactly the same thing post 16 if they had not had the benefit of an early entry. For many individuals, the policy of early entry might well have had a highly beneficial effect – the DfE cannot know from these figures and so ought not to be presenting what should be impartial and truthful data as if it indicates there is a problem when it may well do nothing of the sort.</p>
<p>“Only a minority of the high attainers who achieved a grade A in their early attempt were allowed to retake (even though they would have been expected to achieve A*).”</p>	<p>The first question here is, who expects them to achieve an A* and on the basis of what evidence. The second point to consider is that like all grade boundaries 1 mark may separate an A from an A* and some parents and pupils may decide that a retake is not necessary to convert one to the other. It is always more necessary at the C/D border because peoples’ life chances are affected greatly by the difference there but at the boundary between other grades there is a judgment that has to be made – as there is for pupils just below a particular grade boundary at the end of year 11. Pupils, parents and teachers should make those judgments not DfE statisticians, in our view.</p>

The Thomas Mills Approach and Experience.

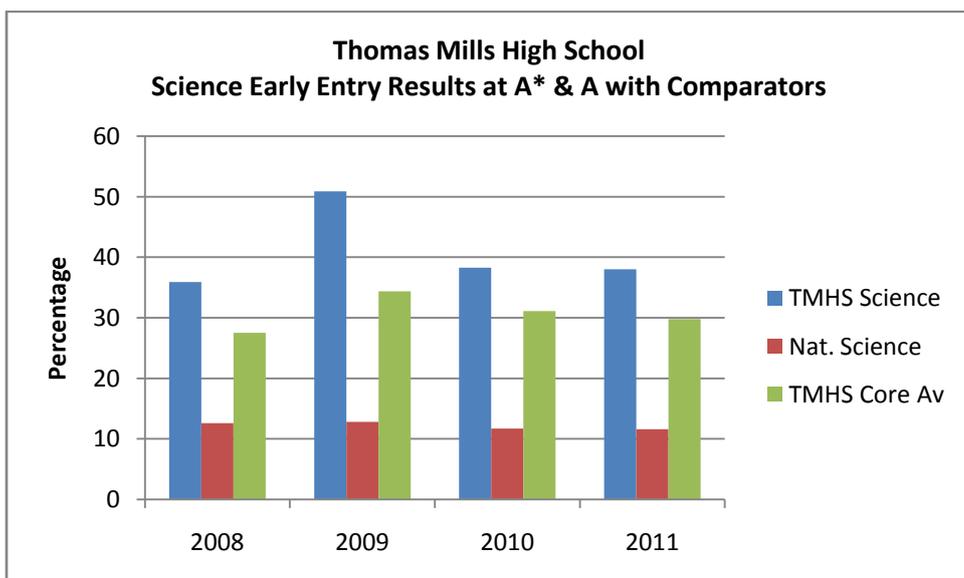
Thomas Mills is not a low achieving school seeking to raise itself up in the league tables. We are a very successful school trying to find ways to improve further the education we offer. Our system is designed to open new opportunities for all our pupils.

We have experience already of “early entry” and it is very different from the picture painted in the DfE document. We have for several years entered pupils early for GCSE Science. The graph here compares GCSE Science results at grades A*-C since 2008 with (a) national results in the subject for that year group and (b) results in other core GCSE subjects which were taken by the same TMHS pupils at the end of Year 11:



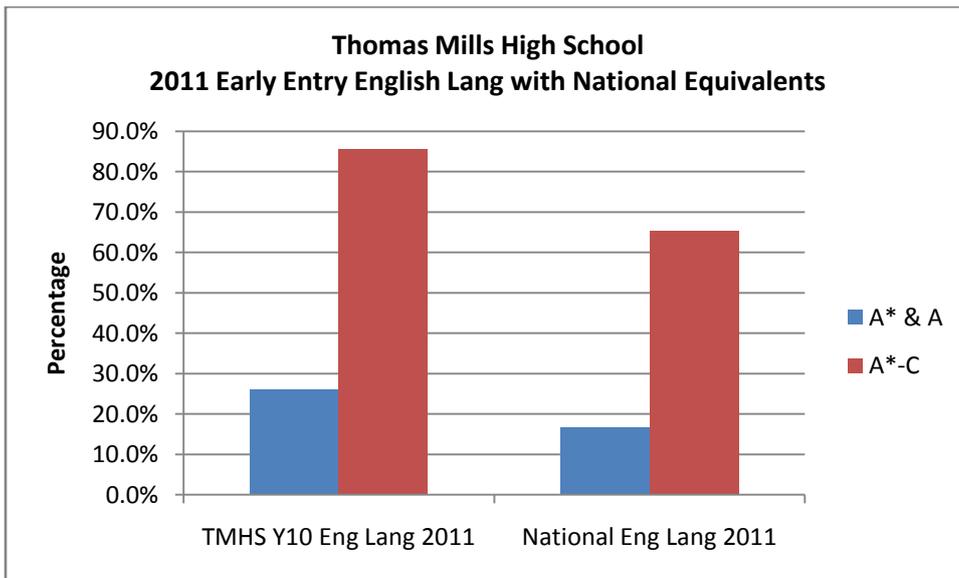
Clearly, there is no evidence here to support the conclusions offered in the DfE report – quite the contrary in fact.

But, of course, some worry that the more able are disadvantaged in order to drive up the A*-C rate. The next graph gives the same information for pupils achieving A* and A grades:



These graphs clearly show that TMHS experience has been very different from the picture in the DfE report and the experience of Thomas Mills pupils, taught by Thomas Mills teachers is surely more compelling evidence than data drawn from many different schools, mostly in very different circumstances.

Last summer TMHS pupils were entered for English Language for the first time in Year 10. The graph below shows how they fared at A*-C and A*/A compared to the national picture and again it is clear that our experience does not support the argument or data put forward by the DfE:



□ In conclusion, we do not think that the DfE document indicates in any way that our policy is misguided and we invite parents to draw the obvious conclusions.