

THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL



POLICY DOCUMENT 78 – APPROVED 06/05/2021

GUIDANCE FOR STAFF ON THE USE OF EMAIL/ONLINE CONDUCT

Vision Statement

*We, the staff and governors, aspire
to ensure that all our students,
irrespective of ability
and regardless of anyone's doubts,
achieve their potential in full;
and we aspire in this way to make Thomas Mills High School
the best in the country.*

1. Introduction

- 1.1.1 Email is accepted as one of the primary methods of communication used in school on a daily basis. Email may even be the best way to communicate a particular message, but in an age of digital information 'overload', all staff should be mindful of the impact of an excessively email driven culture and make smart choices about what, when and how to communicate with others.
- 1.1.2 With many individuals now accessing emails across multiple personal and work devices, it is increasingly important to use email appropriately in a way that fosters professionalism and effectiveness whilst enabling staff to manage a reasonable work life balance.
- 1.1.3 It is also important that staff are aware of how best to use emails to enhance instead of hinder working practices and relationships with others.
- 1.1.4 Staff should be mindful of the principles and practice in this policy when using other online facilities such as chat functions and social media.

2. Guidance aims

- 2.1.1 This guidance covers all staff and sets out what is considered acceptable behaviour in relation to the use of emails between staff and others. This includes colleagues, parents, volunteers, trustees, contractors and other agencies.
- 2.1.2 This guidance focuses on email behaviour and etiquette and does not attempt to outline the technical requirements of email usage or other online facilities.

3. Guidance principles

- 3.1.1 Email communication is highly beneficial for speed, minimal cost and convenience. They are a formal written form of communication which is covered by a number of laws in the UK, meaning they can be used for legal purposes (e.g. an employment tribunal or court of law as evidence where it is deemed necessary).
- 3.1.2 Although it is often regarded as such, email should not be considered an informal method of speaking with others when dealing with School business, despite it being a fast and easy way of communicating. It is also important that it is recognised by all staff that intensive or overuse of email can result in negatively impacting recipients in a number of ways.
- 3.1.3 Excessive or inappropriate use of email, or emails with an excessive amount unnecessary content, can result in 'information overload', where an individual feels overwhelmed by the volume of emails received. This can lead to a number of negative outcomes such as stress, anxiety, miscommunication, indecision or poor decision making, procrastination and other counter-productive avoidance behaviours, though this is not an exhaustive list.
- 3.1.4 Staff should use their school accounts when administering or communicating school business. These accounts are not designed for personal use. Equally staff should not use personal email accounts for school business.

4. Fostering good working relationships

- 4.1.1 When sending emails, senders should be aware of their audience at all times.
- 4.1.2 What one may consider a reasonable tone may easily cause offence to another. Staff should ensure that care and attention is taken with email correspondence, just as it would be with a written letter, to reduce the chance of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.
- 4.1.3 The 'bcc' option should generally not be used in the interest of disclosure and full transparency of communications to all parties, both the sender and recipient.
- 4.1.4 If staff are receiving a high frequency of emails from one individual; or are receiving inappropriate emails they should seek advice from a member of SMT

5. Emails out of hours

- 5.1.1 One way of fostering good working relationships is being conscious of email use out of hours.
- 5.1.2 Owing to the nature of some roles at the School, and the range of locations these may be undertaken, emails sent outside school opening times will sometimes be both normal and necessary. For many other roles across the School, out of hours emails should be the exception rather than the rule.
- 5.1.3 Emails sent outside of working hours can alleviate the sender's workload, particularly as teaching loads and/or other intensive periods of meetings and commitments are predominantly set within working hours or can be convenient where travel is required. With technology allowing staff to access emails via mobiles, tablet and laptops while on the move, the boundary between professional and personal arenas can also become increasingly blurred.
- 5.1.4 Whilst it is the prerogative of the sender to send an email whenever they choose, it is also the recipient's prerogative to choose when to read their incoming emails (i.e. normally within working hours), provided this is in line with the accepted levels of professional behaviour and aligned with the expectations of their role responsibilities. There should be no general expectation that staff will read emails out of hours. It is also advised where an urgent response is needed, a follow up by telephone may be more appropriate rather than a "chaser" email.
- 5.1.5 Senders should also be mindful of the impact on others when sending lots of emails out of hours, even if the sender does not expect a swift response. Arriving to work to a full "inbox" unexpectedly can be a stressor to recipients who may be deluged by emails both inside and outside of working hours.
- 5.1.6 During short or prolonged periods of School Closure, staff should still check emails as important information can be given.

6. Email communication with Parents

- 6.1.1 Email can be a useful form of communication with parents. In many cases Heads of Department, Heads of Years, Subject Teachers and Tutors may email directly. In other

cases, parents may send an email to 'inmail' and a member of staff will be allocated to deal with the query. If you are unsure about how to respond to a parental email or concerned by any aspect, seek advice from your line manager or a senior member of staff.

7. Email communication with Pupils

7.1.1 Teachers need to ensure that email contact is professional and should use official school email addresses only. You **must** also copy in the child's tutor to any reply. You **must** adhere to the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.

If you are unsure how to respond to a pupil email or concerned by any aspect, seek advice from your line manager or a senior member of staff.

8. Tackling problems

8.1.1 Where staff feel that colleagues are not making efforts to abide by the contents of this guidance it is reasonable to:

- Speak with the person who sent the email - ideally in person or by phone - reminding them about the principles within this guidance and encouraging them to follow its advice. All staff should aim to support and remind each other of the importance of respecting boundaries and working in a professional and efficient manner. However, entering into email discussion about appropriateness of emails is rarely to be encouraged.
- Speak to your line manager in the first instances for a second opinion on email content and further advice if necessary, if you feel it to be inappropriate.
- Try applying a degree of professional empathy to the message sent and consider whether you could be 'reading too much into it'. Feedback to the sender may still be necessary but taking a step back and considering whether the issue is typical in your experience of an individual may separate a 'one-off' from a more serious issue.

9. 'Rule of Thumb' email guidance

In terms of what is currently considered good practice:

- a) Consider whether an email is the most effective method of communicating your message. It may be more productive to have a quick face to face meeting or phone call followed up with one summary email to confirm discussions (if necessary).
- b) Remain respectful, treating others with dignity at all times.
- c) Write all email messages in a professional manner. Whilst the written style may sometimes differ, the general content of a work email should be consistent to other forms of written communication.
- d) Keep emails short and to the point wherever possible.

- e) Re-read emails before sending from the perspective of the recipient(s).
- f) Do not leave the subject line blank.
- g) Ensure appropriate use of cc. and whether all participants of an email need to continue to be cc. ed or included in an email trail when the topic deviates to another issue.
- h) Be extremely cautious in the use of bcc. ensuring that decisions to do so would meet the standards of integrity and transparency.
- i) Try to minimise the use of graphics, different fonts, and formats stored within a document when sending it as an attachment to an email.
- j) Be extremely careful when sending emails containing personal or confidential information.
- k) Check the recipient's name, especially if there is more than one person with the same name.
- l) Before commencing writing an email on a sensitive topic, consider talking confidentially in person or by phone instead. If there is a possibility that the email will be misconstrued, misunderstood or intercepted, it is probably best avoided.
- m) Do not expect others to wade through extensively long email trails to pick up important information you wish them to be aware of.
- n) Avoid using uppercase text unless completely appropriate and necessary for particular emphasis (e.g. acronyms or initials of names), as this is often interpreted as electronic "shouting".
- o) Be careful when using humour or sarcasm within an email as this can be easily misinterpreted.
- p) It is accepted that emails may be prepared and sent outside of normal school timetable hours, however, replies should not be expected before the next working day commences.
- q) Automated 'out of office' notifications can be used to manage expectations for both the recipient and sender of emails (e.g. by explaining the time of return to work following a period of time off work, period of back-to-back meetings, exam times etc.). Where possible it is helpful to ensure an appropriate signposted alternative is suggested.
- r) Apart from emails to the office regarding attendance for example, emails should not be written or sent during registration or lessons. It is also inappropriate to look at emails during meetings.