



# THOMAS MILLS HIGH SCHOOL

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Dear Parents

27<sup>th</sup> January 2021

## **Headteacher's Update 2020/2021 – Letter 17 (of 17)**

As always, I trust that this letter finds you and your families well. I know that for many of you, there are a lot of demands to balance at the moment. Education continues to dominate the news – particularly stories about the possible return to face to face education in school as well as vaccinations being brought forward for the teaching workforce. However, these are 'unknowns' so let me update you on what we do know.

## **Consultation on how GCSE, AS and A Level grades should be awarded in summer 2021**

Following on from my last letter I would recommend that parents especially of Year 11 and Year 13 look at the joint consultation by the Department for Education and Ofqual. In summary they *“propose that in the summer 2021 a student's grade in each subject will be based on their teachers' assessment of the standard at which the student is performing. In the absence of exams, teachers are best placed to assess the standard at which their student is performing. This consultation seeks views on our proposal, including how teachers should be supported to make their assessments fairly and consistently.”*

There is a lot more focus on evidence. There is also discussion on providing teachers with training and guidance. The outline timeline for the arrangements includes:

- Students should continue with their education during this academic year
- Students would be assessed by the teachers in a period beginning in May into early June
- Teachers would submit grades to the exam boards by mid-June
- External quality assurance by the exam boards would be ongoing throughout June
- Results would be issued to students once the QA process is complete, most likely in early July
- Student appeals could be submitted immediately following the issue of results and would first be considered by schools and colleges

At this stage, the consultation raises as many questions as answers. From a students' point of view, will there be different weightings attached to different assessment evidence? From a teachers' point of view, how will the demands of the additional assessment undertaken in May be balanced with other workload requirements?

Teachers are adept at assessment and differentiating this from potential. Furthermore, in recent decades there had been a well organised system in managing coursework and moderation with significant input from the Examination Boards. In other words, there should be experience within the teaching profession and the Examination Boards to make this work.

As the consultation states, *“Qualification grades indicate what a person who holds the qualification knows, understands and can do, and to what standard.”*



There is, in my view, a debate to be had about qualifications in 2022 but I accept that this may not be a Government priority at this time. Long term, there is also a debate to be had about using a range of assessment evidence in reaching qualifications (if it is good enough for the generations in 2020 and 2021, why not future cohorts?).

Thank you to parents who have submitted responses, we will keep you updated with the progress of the proposals. The deadline for responses is Friday 29<sup>th</sup> January.

### **Update on Learning Support**

Further to my last letter, I am pleased to announce two temporary staffing appointments. Jane Wheeler is Associate Head of Learning Support and, also on a part-time basis, will be assisted by Sue Smith.

### **OFSTED Parent Survey**

It may be helpful for all parents to complete the ongoing OFSTED Parents' View. This can be accessed at: [Welcome to Ofsted Parent View | Ofsted Parent View](#)

### **February Half-Term**

The Department for Education have made a number of announcements relating to the February half-term:

- "Schools will close as usual over February half-term and are not expected to remain open to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers during that week."
- Schools do not need to provide lunch parcels or vouchers. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme is being run by local authorities.
- Schools will still assist with contact tracing.
- There will be no regular testing of staff and this will resume after half-term.

### **Microsoft Teams/Remote Learning**

As the weeks progress, our online remote learning offer continues to embed. Some common questions have arisen:

- *Why are some schools only doing live lessons?*
- *What is the expectation for work outside of the timetabled day?*

As you know, we have kept to the structured use of the timetable and our chosen platform of Microsoft Teams. We do know that some students are having to engage with their learning outside of the normal timetabled day. The preference is for more and more live lessons as the socialisation, engagement, motivation, feedback and therefore the learning that arises from that interaction, is important. However, the key, as with all teaching and learning is for there to be a variety of approaches. In any case, the interaction with the teacher is essential and the lessons must provide opportunities for the consolidation of learning. I hope this briefly explains our approach and Mr Wheeler, Mr Ward, Mr Heath and Miss Lambert continue to lead developments and best practice with the staff on a regular basis. From my point of view, I don't want to see a return to the old-fashioned teaching method of 'teacher talk' and the assumption that learning would follow. Variety is the spice of life.

Although our approach could mirror 'homework,' there is a risk that students do not have a break and spend too long in front of the screen. Teachers are being encouraged to provide time limits. However, I support parents with their own judgements as to when 'enough is enough.' All topics and skills are revisited at all stages in education. With half-term in our sights, I am actively proposing that no homework is set and strongly encourage everyone to plan a different week, within the limits established by the Government. If you have any concerns across subjects, your Head of Year will be able to advise you.

Further information about our Remote Learning Provision has been posted on the school website and is available at:

[remote-education-provision-information-for-parents-21126120414.pdf \(thomasmills.suffolk.sch.uk\)](https://www.thomasmills.suffolk.sch.uk/remote-education-provision-information-for-parents-21126120414.pdf)

### **Calendar**

My main planning focus at the moment is whether lockdown and school closure will continue after half-term. The media is implying that the return will be later. I know all families will be thinking about all possibilities.

Looking ahead it is likely that many events planned for the Summer Term will be cancelled. This certainly includes residential trips and the Year 10 Work Experience for example.

On a related theme, we have started arrangements to re-fund the paid money for February's ski-trip even though the company are to make a final decision about the go ahead the week before!

### **Summary**

Hopefully from my letter you have identified some known facts although there are many 'unknowns' for all of us. I've yet to decide who knows more – the media, the scientists, or the politicians?

Many parents may recall the then United States Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld saying back into 2002 that "we also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are somethings we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know."

Other parents may recall the 1980s BBC Comedy *Yes Minister* which contained some insightful dialogue:

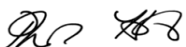
**Sir Humphrey:** Bernard, Ministers should never know more than they need to know. They can't tell anyone. Like secret agents; they could be captured and tortured.

**Bernard:** [shocked] You mean by terrorists?

**Sir Humphrey:** By the BBC, Bernard

Anyway, I will keep sharing what we know, and occasionally what we don't know. In the meantime, I trust you all stay safe and well. Pace yourselves.

Yours sincerely



P J Hurst  
Headteacher